

THE RECEPTION OF WESTERN LITERATURE IN STALIN'S RUSSIA: DANTE ALIGHIERI'S *DIVINE COMEDY* AND MIKHAIL BULGAKOV'S *THE MASTER AND MARGARITA*

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Abstract

The Italian medieval author Dante was extremely popular in the literary circles of which Mikhail Bulgakov was a member, and the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* present interesting analogies. However, a comparative analysis of these two works has rarely been attempted in the past. This thesis explores the connections between them by using a framework which combines two elements: close reading, and the study of the historical and political contexts in which Bulgakov wrote his novel. In doing so, the thesis intends to push the boundaries of Bulgakov scholarship, which since the 1990s has mainly focused on the writer's biography as an instrument for literary interpretation, and has not sufficiently engaged with the historical and social context in which Bulgakov's literary activity was embedded. Particular attention is dedicated to examining the reception of the *Divine Comedy* by the Soviet government between 1921 and 1940. Crucially, the thesis looks at how the *Divine Comedy* was read and interpreted in the Soviet press by focusing on a few case studies that have not been analysed by Western criticism before. In doing so, this research intends to shed new light on Bulgakov's approach to literary classics and to make an original contribution to scholarship on the reception of Dante in Russia.

Declaration

The author declares that that no portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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Note on References, Transliteration and Translations

All quotations and English translations from the *Divine Comedy* used in this thesis were taken from Robert Hollander and others, [The Princeton Dante Project \(2.0\)](#) (1997-1999) [accessed 06 March 2022], which follows the Petrocchi text of the poem. All excerpts from Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master i Margarita* are from Mikhail A. Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita. Polnoe sobranie chernovikov romana. Osnovnoi tekst*, ed. by Elena Iu. Kolysheva, 2 vols (Moskva: Pashkov Dom, 2014). Translations of the same excerpts are taken from Mikhail A. Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita. Translated from the Russian by Michael Glenny. With an Introduction by Simon Franklin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992). Translations from other works are mine except where otherwise indicated. Excerpts from Russian and Soviet literary texts, in prose and poetry, are reported in the original, followed by a translation into English. For all other types of texts (for instance, excerpts from Soviet and Western literary criticism) only the English translation is provided. Russian names, words and titles are transliterated according to the US Library of Congress (ALA-LC) system, with the exception of -ий, which is transliterated -y rather than -ii (for example, 'Троцкий' is transliterated 'Trotsky' rather than 'Trotskii'). In those cases where the most popular transliteration of a Russian name differs from the ALA-LC system, preference is given to the most common transliteration of the name (thus, for instance, 'Толстой', 'Гоголь' and 'Горький' are transliterated 'Tolstoy', 'Gogol' and 'Gorky', rather than 'Tolstoi', 'Gogol'' and 'Gor'kii').

Introduction

Mikhail Afanas'evich Bulgakov started working on his novel *Master i Margarita* (*The Master and Margarita*) in 1928. What is now probably Bulgakov's most famous literary accomplishment underwent a series of rewritings until 1940, when work on the final draft was interrupted by the premature death of its author. As such, the years in which Bulgakov worked on his masterpiece coincided with a particularly significant phase in Iosif Stalin's regime. One of the most important cultural events in the period between the 1928 Cultural Revolution and the start of the Great Patriotic War in 1941 was certainly the introduction of Socialist Realism, which became the only artistic method approved by the Soviet government in 1934. Writers who chose not to abide by its requirements were relegated to the margins of the Soviet literary world, and often paid a huge price to maintain their integrity. Scholars have frequently discussed the influence of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* on these writers (see Chapter Five). Nevertheless, as will be discussed in the final section of this introduction, to date a comparative analysis of Dante's *Commedia* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* has rarely been attempted. This thesis aims to address this lacuna by using theories of intertextuality and the analysis of the 1930s Soviet cultural context to highlight similarities between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. The next sections will focus on why a comparative analysis of these two works may be fruitful although, for reasons that will be explained in due course, extremely complex. They will also briefly introduce the methodology for this research, which combines detailed textual analysis with the observation of the social and historical context in which Mikhail Bulgakov composed *The Master and Margarita*. A more detailed explanation of this methodology will be the subject of Chapter One.

By looking at the context in which Bulgakov worked on his novel, this study concentrates on a specific aspect: it assesses the reception of Dante in Soviet Russia during the period of Stalin's government stretching from the Cultural Revolution of 1928 until the Great Patriotic War in 1941. In order to reconstruct interpretations of the *Divine Comedy* at this stage in Soviet history, this thesis draws on a series of Soviet press materials which have never before been analysed by Western scholarship, with the purpose of using this comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* as a point of departure for a broader investigation. In doing so, this study not only provides a window into an aspect of the reception of Dante which is still largely unknown, but reaches broader conclusions about the reception of Western European classics in the first half of the Stalin era, and aims to encourage a more general reflection on how, depending on the reader and their necessities, literary classics were used either to challenge or legitimise twentieth-century political regimes.

1. The *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*: Texts from a 'Pre-Gutenberg' Era

It is well-known that no original manuscript of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*) has survived until this day. Composed between ca. 1308 and 1321, the earliest surviving copies of the poem were produced around the mid-1330s, roughly fifteen years after the author's passing.¹ Nevertheless, as John Ahern has convincingly argued, it is possible to make hypotheses regarding the shape in which the first versions of the poem may have circulated.² Investigating the material aspect of the work is not only possible: it is also remarkably interesting. Divided into three canticas, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* (*Purgatory*) and *Paradiso* (*Paradise*), each one distinguished by its own specific poetic style, Dante's most famous creative achievement famously challenged Western preconceptions about medieval literature with its encyclopaedic scope and blend of different genres and styles.³ What is perhaps less known, however, is that there is another aspect of the *Commedia* which could be considered surprising: the means of its physical circulation.⁴ Patrons, to whom Dante dedicated and sent copies of individual parts of his work, seemingly played an important role in the early dissemination of the poem. According to Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante initially distributed the *Commedia* in instalments to anyone who requested them.⁵

¹ These versions of the poem are known as Ashburnham 828 [1935 or later], Landiano 190 [1336] and Trivulziano 1080 [1937]. See John Ahern, 'What Did the First Copies of the Comedy Look Like?', in *Dante for the*

Students of European literature, who will probably be familiar with the voluminous editions in which the three canticas of the *Commedia* are now normally presented, may find it hard to imagine that this work, which has for centuries been considered part of the Western canon, initially circulated in small notebooks. However, there is another context, more remote in geographical terms, but much closer to this day in time, where circulating literature through notebooks was not an anomaly, but was, in fact, a regular occurrence. In the Soviet 1920s and 1930s notebooks and other unorthodox stratagems were often the only tools that Stalin's literary opponents could use to spread their ideas. There can be no doubt that Iosif Stalin's rule, from the end of the 1920s until his death in 1953, imposed significant changes on the political, social, economic and cultural landscape of the Soviet Union. With regards to the art field, in 1932 the Union of Soviet Writers became the sole official literary association allowed to operate within the country. Therefore, membership of the Union was a necessary prerequisite for any writer who wanted to be published. In 1934 Socialist Realism became the only artistic method supported by the government, which meant that in order to be part of the Union of Soviet Writers every author was required to adapt to the guidelines of Socialist Realism. At the 1934 meeting of the Union of Soviet Writers that proclaimed Socialist Realism as the only artistic method sanctioned in the USSR, the Soviet Communist Party leader and cultural ideologist Andrei Zhdanov defined this method as 'a combination of the most matter-of-fact, everyday reality with the most heroic prospects'.⁶ In practice, this meant a romanticisation of the reality of Stalin's Russia.⁷ A refusal to respect these terms would result in the impossibility for a literary work to reach publication.

New Millennium, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and H. Wayne Storey (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 1-61 (p. 1).

² Ibid.

³ For recent scholarship on the *Divine Comedy*, see *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. by Manuele Gragnotati, Elena Lombardi and Francesca Southerden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

⁴ Ahern, p. 1.

⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio in *ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶ Andrei A. Zhdanov in Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 34.

⁷ Katerina Clark in *ibid.*

Following the implementation of these rules, two parallel literary worlds emerged within the same country: the first gravitated around the Union of Soviet Writers and was the only one to have access to traditional means of publishing; the second was the realm of those writers who did not apply the Socialist Realist method, and therefore resorted to unusual strategies to find an audience for their art, including circulating drafts of their works within a restricted circle of friends. This situation is best described in the words of one of the main actors in this environment, Nadezhda Mandel'shtam. Her husband Osip Mandel'shtam, one of the most notable literary personalities of the time, paid for his opposition to Stalin's regime with his life. When government surveillance on literary production increased, Mandel'shtam often resorted to notebooks to compose his poems. Reflecting on these circumstances, Nadezhda wrote:

We always associate the word 'book' with printing, and think of it in terms of format and typographical convenience, but such mechanical criteria do not apply to notebooks, whose beginning and end are determined only by the unity of the poetic impulse which gives birth to a given series of poems. In other words, a notebook is the same as a 'book' [...]. The only difference was that M. [Mandel'shtam] did not have to stick to some particular length or structure - often artificial - which is required for a published book. But the word 'notebook' [черновик] itself, as I have said, arose in our usage quite accidentally, owing to the fact that we were forced to write in school exercise books. [...] The only thing in its favor is that it faithfully reflects the way in which we had been thrown back into a pre-Gutenberg era.⁸

Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's testimony is significant for various reasons. It establishes an opposition between the 'book', subject to the constraints of publishing guidelines (and, more in general, to the political pressures that came with being involved in the Soviet literary establishment), and the 'notebook', exclusively dependent on individual inspiration (and free from State control). It is also interesting that Nadezhda Mandel'shtam perceived a sort of kinship between the context in which the works of her husband circulated and the centuries that preceded the invention of print. In Nadezhda's words, the notebook was a device from a 'pre-Gutenberg era': in spite of enormous discrepancies, Dante Alighieri's time (fourteenth-century Italy) and Mandel'shtam's time (Stalin's Russia) were brought closer by the material shape of their most representative literary works.

Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's reference to 'pre-Gutenberg' times is not coincidental or superficial. There is extensive evidence that part of the Soviet literary world was especially

⁸ Nadezhda Ia. Mandel'shtam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir. Translated from the Russian by Max Hayward, with an Introduction by Clarence Brown* (New York: Atheneum, 1983), pp. 191-192.

drawn to Dante during the Stalin era. Works like *Dante* (1936), by Anna Akhmatova, or *Razgovor o Dante (Conversation About Dante, 1933)*, by Osip Mandel'shtam, express the kinship felt by their authors towards the Italian poet. The biography of Dante, who especially in the *Commedia* mourned the experience of being a political exile from his hometown of Florence, clearly resonated with writers who lived on the margins of the Soviet literary world.⁹

Similarly to Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova, Mikhail Bulgakov's writing and personal convictions often led to conflict with the Soviet establishment.¹⁰ However, while Dante's influence on Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova has been recognised on many occasions, little has been written about the possibility that the *Divine Comedy* may have partly inspired *The Master and Margarita*. The next section offers a brief overview of existing scholarship in this field.

2. Bulgakov and Dante: Literature Review

Discussions around the relationship between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* started with an article published by Marietta Chudakova in 1974.¹¹ In her study Chudakova focused on a selection of books available in Bulgakov's library and highlighted their possible influence on the novel. One of the most interesting examples she examined was Pavel Florensky's *Mnimosti v geometrii (Imaginary Numbers in Geometry, 1922)*, a mathematical treatise containing a chapter about the treatment of time and space in the *Commedia*.¹² According to Chudakova, Bulgakov was inspired by this chapter to devise one of the most innovative features of his work: the time-space architecture, a structure of temporal connections which allows the coexistence of two plotlines, one in Moscow and

⁹ For more on this, see Chapter Five of this thesis.

¹⁰ Developments in the relationship between Bulgakov and the Soviet government have often been discussed by interpreters of the writer's work. One of the most notable events in this history is certainly the letter Bulgakov sent to the Soviet Government in March 1930, which Iosif Stalin himself followed up with a phone call to Bulgakov a few days later. After this phone call, Bulgakov, who had been marginalised by the Soviet literary establishment, found employment at the Moscow Art Theatre in Moscow. This, however, was not the end of his troubles with the Soviet government. More on this will be said in Chapter Five. For more information, see also Mikhail A. Bulgakov, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: A Life in Letters and Diaries*, ed. by Julie Curtis (London: Harvill, 1992).

¹¹ Gunnar Lenz, '„Io, che al divino dall'umano, All'eterno dal tempo era venuto“ – Bulgakov, Dante und die Zeit', in *Texturen – Identitäten - Theorien: Ergebnisse des Arbeitstreffens des Jungen Forums Slavistische Literaturwissenschaft in Trier 2010*, ed. by Nina Frieß and others (Potsdam: Univ.-Verl, 2011), pp. 83-99 (p. 86).

¹² Marietta O. Chudakova, 'Usloviia sushestvovaniia', *V mire knig*, 12 (1974), 79-82 (p. 80).

one in Jerusalem.¹³ In this sense, Bulgakov's novel offers a peculiar example of what Mikhail Bakhtin described as an element common to all works of literature: the interconnection of time and space. For Bakhtin, in a work of fiction not only are time and space interdependent, but the chronotope (literally, 'time-space') relies also on how time and space are judged from a particular perspective. Therefore, the author's assessment of the setting of their narrative is a fundamental component of the chronotope.¹⁴ In *The Master and Margarita* two chronotopes, the Moscow one and the Jerusalem one, interact in ways which will be explained in due course. Meanwhile, it is worth exploring Pavel Florensky's possible influence on the development of this structure.

Pavel Florensky's essay represented a most distinctive reaction to early twentieth-century scientific developments. At the beginning of the twentieth century Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and other scientific discoveries brought artists and writers to question the traditional ways of representing reality in art. In the wake of these changes, Florensky, a theologian and a mathematician, provided a geometrical analysis of complex numbers.¹⁵ According to his theory, just as complex numbers were made of a real and an imaginary part, space was also double, made of a real and an imaginary dimension. In honour of the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death, Florensky concluded his research by showing how his theory, combined with Einstein's theory of relativity, could be used to analyse space in the *Divine Comedy*.¹⁶ Florensky focused, in particular, on *Inferno XXXIV*, the canto which concluded the first part of Dante's tripartite poem. The canto is set in the final circle of Hell, where Lucifer resides, having been thrown down from Paradise into the centre of the Earth. Since the only way out of Hell is the hole in which Lucifer is stuck, Dante and Virgil have to climb down the Devil's body in order to access Purgatory. Having finally got through the passage, Dante looks upwards, expecting to see Lucifer's feet point towards the ground, but, with great surprise, he finds that the Devil has his feet up in the air. The only explanation for this, Florensky argued, is that, while climbing down Lucifer's body, Dante and Virgil must

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World. 2nd Edition* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 150.

¹⁵ Pavel A. Florensky, *Mnimosti v geometrii: Rasshirenje oblasti dvukhmernykh obrazov geometrii (Opyt novogo istolkovaniia mnimostei)* (Moskva: Editorial URSS, n.d.), p. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 44-53.

have flipped head-to-toe.¹⁷ According to the mathematician, this scene illustrated the transition into an imaginary geometrical space. In other words, Dante described the bending of time and space which occurs when a body is travelling at the speed of light, thus anticipating Einstein's theory of relativity:

The region of the imaginary is real, reachable, and in Dante's language is called the empyrean. We can imagine all space as double, composed of real and of imaginary Gaussian coordinate surfaces coinciding with the real ones, but the transition from the real surface to the imaginary one is possible only through the breaking of space and the turning inside out of a body through itself. Yet, we imagine that the only way to accomplish this process is by increasing speed [...]. Thus, tearing apart time, the *Divina Commedia* unexpectedly turns out to be, not behind, but ahead of our contemporary science.¹⁸

This paragraph seems to have attracted Bulgakov's attention more than any other passage in Florensky's work. As Marietta Chudakova pointed out, in his copy of the essay Bulgakov had heavily underlined this excerpt and highlighted the last sentences with exclamation marks.¹⁹

References to *Imaginary Numbers in Geometry* in *The Master and Margarita* have since been investigated on numerous occasions. Bruce A. Beatie and Phyllis Powell, for instance, have analysed the discrepancies between 'narrated time' and 'narrative time' in the novel and have conjectured that unnatural accelerations and pauses in the narration might be explained with post-Einsteinian physics.²⁰ Beatie and Powell start their article by situating Florensky's essay within the broader landscape of non-Euclidean geometry, and explain how 'Florenskii uses the journey of Dante and Virgil in the *Divina Commedia* not only as a metaphor explaining his own conception of the imaginary, but as an indication that Dante had anticipated ideas which became common stock only with the development of relativity theory early in this century'.²¹ They then proceed to explain how this 'pseudo-relativistic model' may have influenced the time-space architecture of *The Master and Margarita*. For example, Florensky's idea that all space is double may have provided the foundation for the

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 46-47.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 53. Translation by Powell in Bruce A. Beatie and Phyllis W. Powell, 'Bulgakov, Dante, and Relativity', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 2-3 (Summer-Fall 1981), 250-70 (p. 252).

¹⁹ Chudakova, p. 80.

²⁰ Beatie and Powell, pp. 255-256.

²¹ Ibid., p. 251.

correspondence of time and events between the Moscow and the Jerusalem chapters in Bulgakov's novel.²²

Following on from Beatie and Powell's article, Laura D. Weeks convincingly argued that the chapter dedicated to Margarita's flight may have been inspired by Florensky's study of the theory of relativity. In Chapter 21 of the final version of *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov writes:

Мargarита сделала еще один рывок, и тогда все скопище крыш провалилось под землю, а вместо него появилось внизу озеро дрожащих электрических огней, и это озеро внезапно поднялось вертикально, а затем появилось над головой у Margarиты, а под ногами блеснула луна. Поняв, что она перевернулась, Margarита приняла нормальное положение и, обернувшись, увидела, что и озера уже нет, а что там, сзади за нею, осталось только розовое зарево на горизонте. И оно исчезло через секунду, и Margarита увидела, что она наедине с летящей над нею слева луною. Волосы Margarиты давно уже стояли копной, а лунный свет со свистом омывал ее тело. По тому, как внизу два ряда редких огней слились в две непрерывные огненные черты, по тому, как быстро они пропали сзади, Margarита догадалась, что она летит с чудовищною скоростью, и поразилась тому, что она не задыхается (II, p. 706).

Margarita gave another jerk, at which the sea of roofs disappeared, replaced below her by a sea of shimmering electric lights. Suddenly the sea of light swung round to the vertical and appeared over Margarita's head whilst the moon shone under her legs. Realising that she had looped the loop, Margarita righted herself, turned round and saw that the sea had vanished; behind her there was now only a pink glow on the horizon. In a second that too had disappeared and Margarita saw that she was alone with the moon, sailing along above her and to the left. Margarita's hair streamed out behind her in wisps as the moonlight swished past her body. From the two lines of widely-spaced lights meeting at a point in the distance and from the speed with which they were vanishing behind her Margarita guessed that she was flying at prodigious speed and was surprised to discover that it did not take her breath away (p. 271).

The surroundings of Margarita's flight, the lights, the roofs, the moon and their respective position, are described with a precision that leaves little doubt as to Bulgakov's interest in contemporary physics. More specifically, the progression of the flight, with Margarita's body flipping upside down at 'monstrous speed', is reminiscent of Florensky's interpretation of the trajectory followed by Dante and Virgil in their transition from Hell to Purgatory.²³

In his study of *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (1989) David M. Bethea also mentions Florensky's influence on Bulgakov, noting how 'the way time is constantly conflated and "pierced" in Bulgakov's text points directly to the viewpoint "from beyond"

²² Ibid., p. 253.

²³ Laura D. Weeks, "What I Have Written, I Have Written", in *The Master and Margarita: A Critical Companion*, ed. by Laura D. Weeks (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), pp. 3-67 (pp. 31-32).

advocated by the author of *Imaginaires*'.²⁴ According to Bethea, this piercing of space and time applies not only to the scene of Margarita's flight, but has important consequences also for the epilogue of Bulgakov's novel, since 'the Master's unique ability to *unwrite* history and *free* Pilate from his bondage to a Manichaean prison of good and evil harks back to Florensky's description of the reversal of the laws of causality that takes place at the speed of light [...]'.²⁵ Bethea therefore hints that Florensky's essay may have had an influence on the destiny of the characters in Bulgakov's novel. This study of how the apocalyptic theme is developed in *The Master and Margarita* concludes with a thorough analysis of the novel's ending which highlights the Book of Revelation as one of the main 'subtexts' (or, to use the terminology that will be explained in Chapter One and used throughout this thesis, intertexts) in Bulgakov's epilogue. Bethea does not however investigate whether the *Divine Comedy*, besides the Book of Revelation, may have been a source of inspiration for Bulgakov's epilogue. Chapter Five of this thesis complements Bethea's analysis by showing how Dante's idea of *contrapasso* can be used as a key to interpret the destiny of the novel's main characters.

While Beatie and Powell and Bethea have investigated Florensky's influence on Bulgakov, comparatively less attention has been devoted to the possibility of a direct connection between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy*, without the mediation of Florensky. There are, of course, notable exceptions. Igor' Belza's article 'Dantovskaia kontsepsiia 'Mastera i Margarity' (1989), for example, represents an early attempt to examine parallelisms in the structure and the philosophical outlook of both works.²⁶ In this article Belza focuses extensively on how, in his view, medieval heresies helped shape Dante's worldview in the *Divine Comedy*, and proceeds to examine the influence of this worldview on *The Master and Margarita*. In doing so, he moves on from discussing Bulgakov's knowledge of Pavel Florensky's essay (only mentioned very briefly in his article) to highlight analogies between Bulgakov's and Dante's idea of the afterlife. For example, he argues that towards the conclusion of Bulgakov's novel, before ascending towards the light, the Master and Margarita need to spend a certain amount of time in an intermediate area,

²⁴ David M. Bethea, *The Shape of Apocalypse in Modern Russian Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), pp. 204-205.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

²⁶ Igor' F. Belza, 'Dantovskaia kontsepsiia 'Mastera i Margarity'', in *Dantovskie chteniia 1987*, ed. by Igor' F. Belza (Moskva: Nauka, 1989), pp. 58-90.

and interprets this as an analogy with the *Divine Comedy*, where souls have to go through the different circles of Purgatory before being admitted into Paradise.²⁷ However, given the paucity of material evidence to support Dante's direct influence on Bulgakov (an aspect which will be discussed in more depth in section 4 of this chapter), these similarities may appear coincidental and not entirely convincing. For this reason, while acknowledging Belza's contribution in bringing this issue to the attention of scholars, this thesis seeks to complement his approach by looking at the historical and social context in which Bulgakov wrote his novel, an aspect which was left out by Belza's discussion of the topic.

Only a few years after the publication of Belza's article, Mikhail Andreev provided a more convincing example of a comparative analysis of *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy*. In his article 'Beatrice Dante i Margarita Bulgakova' (1993), first presented as a paper in 1990, Andreev argues that scholars at the time were only just beginning to study *The Master and Margarita* in relation to the literary canon, and argued for the necessity of a systematic analysis of the novel's connection with past literary tradition.²⁸ Andreev describes the *Divine Comedy* as the first example of text in European literary history where the narration is conducted on two levels at the same time: 'sacred and secular, universal and individual, symbolic and historical'.²⁹ As will be explained in Chapter One, the idea of the *Divine Comedy* as a work existing simultaneously on two different planes and combining subjectivity with universality has been a long-standing tenet of the reception of Dante at least since nineteenth-century German Romantic readings of his work. Andreev also contrasts the similarities with Dante's poem with the Faustian subtext in *The Master and Margarita*: while the presence of the latter is fairly obvious in Bulgakov's novel, as it often manifests itself through direct quotations, the analogies between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* are much more subtle, because they are connected to the time-space architecture of the novel, or, as Andreev writes quoting Bakhtin, to its chronotope.³⁰ The article also focuses on the salvific mission of the main female character in both works, thus drawing a parallel between Margarita and Beatrice. In a way that is similar to Andreev's study, Chapter Five of this thesis explores the analogies between chronotopes in Bulgakov's

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Mikhail L. Andreev, 'Beatrice Dante i Margarita Bulgakova', in *Dantovskie chteniia 1990*, ed. by Igor' F. Belza (Moskva: Nauka, 1993), pp. 148-155.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 149.

³⁰ Ibid.

novel and Dante's poem, focusing in particular on how the Easter theme and the idea of divine justice are developed in both works. However, while Andreev sees Margarita as a modern Beatrice, this thesis espouses Stenbock-Fermor's interpretation of Margarita as a female version of Faust,³¹ and shows how this theory can illuminate a particularly significant episode in one of Bulgakov's notebooks, involving a character called Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant.

This specific episode was analysed by Andrei Margulev in his article "“Tovarishch Dant” i “Byvshii Regent”" (1991), where Margulev uses his knowledge of Bulgakov's biography to interpret the sketch.³² For example, he notices that Bulgakov had attended a writers meeting where he was hoping to be assigned a flat only a few days before drafting the episode, which is centred on a character named Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant who receives an apartment under very similar circumstances (an excerpt from this episode is available in Chapter Three of this thesis).³³ As further discussed in Chapter Three, he also highlights the physical resemblance between Beatrice Dant and the poet Anna Akhmatova, who was often compared to Dante by her contemporaries.³⁴ This thesis will suggest an alternative interpretation of this episode which will take into account the status of pre-revolutionary literary classics in the Soviet cultural debates of the late 1920s. By looking at how Dante was represented in the Soviet press of the time, Chapter Three will move away from Margulev's biographical interpretation of this episode and discuss how the character of Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant was used in Bulgakov's notebook to denounce the utilitarian use of literary classics promoted by the Soviet government and its cultural institutions.

A further contribution on Bulgakov and Dante was published in 1995 by Vladimir P. Kriuchkov. Drawing on both Andreev and Belza, Kriuchkov's article '*Master i Margarita i Bozhestvennaia Komediia*' looks at Dantean references in the epilogue of Bulgakov's novel, which, according to Kriuchkov, is divided into three phases: the first one, where the Master and Margarita achieve 'peace' ('покой'), the second, where the two characters ascend towards the light, and the third, where the fate of Bezdomny after his encounter with

³¹ Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, 'Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita and Goethe's Faust', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 13.3 (Autumn, 1969), 309-25.

³² Andrei I. Margulev, "“Tovarishch Dant” i “Byvshii Regent”" (1991), <http://samlib.ru/m/margulew_a_i/bulgakov.shtml> [accessed on 24 September 2021].

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Woland and the Master is revealed.³⁵ These aspects will be analysed in more detail in Chapter Five. A particularly interesting element in Kriuchkov's study is his analysis of Korov'ev, one of the characters in Bulgakov's novel, and his destiny: in Kriuchkov's view, like Dante placed himself in the circle of souls who need to expiate the sin of pride before they are admitted into *Paradise (Purgatory XII)*, Bulgakov may have portrayed himself in Korov'ev, who made an 'ill-timed joke' about 'darkness and light' (p. 427). According to this idea, the allusion to Korov'ev's 'joke' may be a reference to *The Master and Margarita* itself, a theory which would imply that Bulgakov's novel is, in Kriuchkov's words, 'the Divine Comedy of the twentieth century'.³⁶ This hypothesis is explored in more detail in Chapter Five.

While the majority of the scholarship produced on the topic focuses on Pavel Florensky's discussion of Dante and its impact on Bulgakov, more recent works, including a doctoral dissertation by Thomas F. Keenan, have set out to investigate Dante's direct influence on *The Master and Margarita*.³⁷ In his article on the use of time in Bulgakov's novel, for instance, Gunnar Lenz has argued that parallels between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* become far more convincing when looking at the direct links between the texts themselves.³⁸ Lenz looks for example at how the Dantean principle of *contrapasso* may be used to interpret the novel's famous chapter set at Satan's ball.³⁹ As earlier mentioned, this thesis explores this aspect in Chapter Five. The article also establishes a parallel between Dante, who is himself a character in the *Divine Comedy*, and the Master: like Dante is the author of a 'poema sacro' ('sacred poem', *Paradise XXV, 1*), the Master is the author of a novel based on a retelling of the Gospels.⁴⁰ While this is not the primary focus of his article, Lenz also investigates Florensky's reflections on Dante and Einstein's theory of relativity by putting them in the context of Bulgakov's more general interest in experimenting with time throughout his literary career, noting that, for example, two of his plays, *Blazhenstvo (Bliss, 1934)* and *Ivan Vasil'evich (1936)*, which is largely a rewriting of

³⁵ Vladimir P. Kriuchkov, 'Master i Margarita i Bozhestvennaia Komediia', *Russkaia Literatura*, 3 (1995), 225-30 (p. 227).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

³⁷ Thomas F. Keenan, 'Dante Alighieri and *Master and Margarita's* Italian Ancestor' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Yale University, 2017). This publication was unfortunately under embargo at the time when this research was conducted.

³⁸ Lenz, pp. 88-89.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 91-94.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Bliss, are centred on time travelling. Lenz therefore provides valuable close reading analysis of excerpts from Bulgakov's novel while investigating a potential Dantean influence on them. His analysis, however, does not venture into exploring Bulgakov's general attitude towards literary classics and how this stood in contrast to wider phenomena in the Soviet cultural world of the time. Chapter Three of this thesis addresses this gap in Lenz's analysis.

Interest in Mikhail Bulgakov is now more alive than ever, as the recent publication of Julie Curtis' *Mikhail Bulgakov* (2017) and *A Reader's Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita* (2019) shows.⁴¹ In *Mikhail Bulgakov* Curtis draws on previously overlooked historical materials, letters and diaries to shed new light on Bulgakov's autobiography and literary career. Her *Reader's Companion to The Master and Margarita* is an extremely useful tool to complement this biography. Published two years after her biography of the writer, this work zooms in on Bulgakov's last novel, providing an in-depth analysis of several aspects: writing process, publishing history, structure (particularly the connection between the Moscow- and the Jerusalem-narrative), Good and Evil, biblical themes, political satire, relationship between author and narrator and English translations. Through its exhaustiveness, this companion is the definitive guide to *The Master and Margarita* both for new and more experienced readers. While providing an excellent example of literary criticism by using close reading and underlining the aspects of Bulgakov's biography that were most significant to the development of his writing, this work could be complemented by exploring the reception of literary classics in Stalin's Russia and the unquestionable influence of this phenomenon on *The Master and Margarita*. This thesis is intended as a contribution to this field.

This study also intends to show how some of the most ambiguous elements in Bulgakov's novel can be interpreted with the help of a world literature framework. Olga Voronina's recent *Depicting the Divine: Mikhail Bulgakov and Thomas Mann* (2019) offers a good example of how a comparative framework can be applied to Bulgakov studies.⁴² By analysing divine presences in Bulgakov's novel, Voronina addresses a gap in previous Bulgakov scholarship, which has often been centred on demonic themes and characters in

⁴¹ J. A. E. Curtis, *Mikhail Bulgakov* (London: Reaktion Books, 2017).

J. A. E. Curtis, *A Reader's Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita* (Boston, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2019).

⁴² Voronina, Olga G., *Depicting the Divine: Mikhail Bulgakov and Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019).

the novel. To explore depictions of the divine, she chooses to look at Bulgakov's novel in connection with Thomas Mann's *Joseph und seine Brüder* (*Joseph and His Brothers*, 1933). This decision appears particularly convincing in view of the similar circumstances that surrounded the composition of the two novels, both of which explored biblical themes and were written in political contexts where those themes were regarded highly unfavourably: Stalin's Russia and Hitler's Germany. This study offers a convincing analysis of the ambiguity in the representation of Ieshua in Bulgakov's work and Yahweh in Mann's novel, thus offering an interesting perspective on the use of myth in works written under totalitarian regimes. In a similar way, Chapter Four of this thesis will expand the comparative analysis of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* by comparing the reception of literary classics in Stalin's Russia and Fascist Italy.

This thesis intends to complement previous literature in this field by presenting a comparative study of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. The focus of the study is extended by situating the analysis within the broader phenomenon of the reception of Dante in the Soviet press between the 1920s and the 1930s. By doing so, this thesis endeavours to shed light upon an aspect of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* that is still largely unaddressed by scholarship. The next section describes key similarities between the *Commedia* and *The Master and Margarita* and offers some hypotheses as to why these analogies have rarely attracted the attention of scholars.

3. A Comparative Analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*: Why? Born in Kiev in 1891, Mikhail Bulgakov moved to Moscow to begin his literary career in 1921, and his relationship with the Soviet government and its literary institutions was conflicted and ambiguous ever since. His last novel *The Master and Margarita* is in many respects a typical product of the literary world that was fighting for its survival outside the radar of the Soviet political establishment. Between notebook and typewritten copies, it is possible to count seven versions of the novel, composed between 1928 and 1940, when revision on the latest version was interrupted by Bulgakov's death.⁴³ The novel can be

⁴³ Two of the most notable Bulgakov scholars who have researched this topic propose diverging theories on how to count the different versions of *The Master and Margarita*: Lidiia Ianovskaia maintained there are six different versions of the novel, whereas Marietta Chudakova counted eight. A good summary of both theories is provided by Elena Iu. Kolysheva in Mikhail A. Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita. Polnoe sobranie chernovikov romana. Osnovnoi tekst*, ed. by Elena Iu. Kolysheva, 2 vols (Moskva: Pashkov Dom, 2014), I, pp. 7-9. This thesis

considered a very good example of Soviet underground literature, first, for its satirical depiction of Soviet Moscow and its criticism of the climate of suspicion and terror created by Stalin's regime. Secondly, the text makes ample use of biblical themes (one of the two plotlines in the novel is entirely dedicated to retelling the Gospel narrative of Jesus' arrest and crucifixion) and tropes from the fantastic genre (demons, inexplicable disappearances, and more). Both are hardly reconcilable with the canons of Socialist Realism and were therefore sufficient grounds to relegate the novel into underground circulation.

Bulgakov's novel shares another fundamental similarity with other works produced outside the Union of Soviet Writers: a difficult publishing history. Following the death of her husband, Elena Bulgakova carried on working on the corrections and, after many twists and turns, obtained permission for an expurgated version of the novel to be published in the literary journal *Moskva* in two instalments: November 1966 and February 1967.⁴⁴ While complete editions were already circulating abroad from the end of the 1960s, the first official unabridged version of the novel to be published in the Soviet Union came out in 1973. Julie Curtis described the excitement this caused among the Soviet reading public: 'people passed well-thumbed copies of the book from hand to hand and even copied the entire text out on their typewriters, with carbon copies, in order to share it around as widely as possible in the heyday of *samizdat* activity'.⁴⁵ There are, therefore, curious analogies between the modes of circulation of Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, two works which seemingly could not be more removed from each other in time and space.

The similarities do not stop here. Both the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* were the last creative efforts before the deaths of their respective authors, and are now widely regarded as their greatest literary accomplishments and the final testament to their ideas. This is hardly surprising, as both works are centred on eternal questions surrounding life and death, Good and Evil, albeit in very different ways. In the *Divine Comedy*, the

espouses Kolyseva's theory that there are seven versions of the novel, and does so in recognition of the scholar's tremendous work in publishing the first unabridged edition of all the existing versions of the novel in 2014. Kolyseva's edition of *The Master and Margarita* is also the source of all quotations from Bulgakov's work used in this thesis.

⁴⁴ A detailed account of the work's path to publication can be found in J. A. E. Curtis, *A Reader's Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita*, pp. 41-48.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

afterlife is orderly arranged in three different realms, where every soul is secure in the place to which they were rightfully assigned. In *The Master and Margarita*, the arrival of the Devil in 1930s Moscow brings retribution, but also unveils the primordial chaos that had been lurking under the surface of what appeared to be a perfectly organised society. Although the two works present very different scenarios, each sprang from the intellectual labour of a writer striving to come to terms with the notion of divine justice and its implications for the destiny of humanity. Related to this is also the commentary on the political situation of the time, an activity in which both literary works engage. While Dante openly names real people and the place they occupy in his vision of the afterlife, Bulgakov presents to the reader a series of types from the Soviet intellectual world (although he leaves little doubt that many of them were modelled on his acquaintances).

As far as the connections between the main characters are concerned, both the *Commedia* and Bulgakov's novel rely on dynamics that had long been codified in Western literature. Both works revolve around a master-pupil relationship: Dante and his various guides, prime among them Virgil on one hand, Ivan Bezdomny and the Master on the other. Both works present a female character charged with a salvific mission: in *Inferno*, Beatrice asks Virgil to save Dante from the three beasts that are blocking his passage in the dark wood where his journey in the afterlife begins. She then replaces Virgil as Dante's guide once Dante reaches the entrance to Paradise. In Bulgakov's novel, Margarita strikes a pact with the Devil to liberate her lover, the Master, from a mental hospital and be reunited with him. She then becomes his companion in the afterlife, when the Devil delivers them to their final resting place.

It is clear that there are fascinating points of contact between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Commedia*. Therefore, one may wonder why, with only very few exceptions, this similarity has not been analysed in detail before. Part of this probably has to do with the fact that a direct Dantean influence on Bulgakov is difficult to assess. According to the first director of the Bulgakov Museum in Kiev, Anatoly Konchakovsky, Mikhail Bulgakov possessed a copy of the *Commedia*, illustrated by Gustave Doré, in his personal library.⁴⁶ Differently from writers like Mandel'shtam, however, there is little information about the

⁴⁶ Anatoly P. Konchakovsky, *Biblioteka Mikhaila Bulgakova. Rekonstruktsiia* (Kiev: PC World Ukraine, 1997), p. 93.

extent of Bulgakov's engagement with Dante. As already noted, previous studies have explored the possibility that Dante may have influenced *The Master and Margarita* through the mediation of other works, like Pavel Florensky's *Imaginary Numbers in Geometry*. An account of these studies is given in Chapter One. Generally speaking, it may be concluded that establishing beyond doubt that the *Commedia* was one of the direct sources of *The Master and Margarita* is rather difficult, not only for the lack of material evidence, but also because the relationships between Dante's and Bulgakov's sources are extremely complex. For instance, the epigraph to Bulgakov's novel ('...Так кто ж ты, наконец?/- Я – часть той силы, что вечно хочет зла/и вечно совершает благо.', 'Say at last - who are thou?/'That Power I serve/Which wills forever evil/Yet does forever good.') is a quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust* (1808-1831). The influence of Goethe's play on *The Master and Margarita* has been convincingly analysed on numerous occasions, as discussed in Chapter Four and Five of this thesis. It must be remembered, however, that one of Goethe's most important sources of inspiration was, in turn, the *Divine Comedy*. Consequently, when looking at Bulgakov's novel, it can be quite challenging to tell Dantean and Goethean references apart. Similarly, it has been mentioned that one of the two plotlines of Bulgakov's novel was inspired by the Bible, which is, of course, one of the major subtexts of the *Divine Comedy*. Certain analogies between the *Commedia* and *The Master and Margarita*, therefore, may originate not so much from a direct influence from the former on the latter, but from the fact that the texts may sometimes share the same sources. For these reasons, the network of relations between the two works is sometimes hard to untangle.

This scenario clearly demonstrates that a study of the connections between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* needs, first and foremost, to be rooted in a strong theory of intertextuality. The lack of irrefutable evidence to show the extent of Bulgakov's knowledge of Dante's work makes it necessary to distinguish between the categories of 'influence' and 'intertextuality', the second being more applicable to this case study. After the decline of the idea of 'influence' in literary studies, many definitions of 'intertextuality' have been formulated, proving that this concept can be a very productive instrument for textual analysis. Chapter One of this thesis presents a brief history of this concept by looking at a variety of theories and definitions, many of which have characteristics that make them

viable means to investigate the links between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Commedia*. However, a comparative analysis of these works presents a series of issues, and, in order to address them, theories of intertextuality, which mostly focus on close reading, need to be complemented with other approaches. The next section illustrates the main issues connected to examining the connections between Dante and Bulgakov, and shows how a framework which combines intertextuality with the analysis of the historical and political context of Stalin's Russia can help overcome these obstacles.

4. Studying Bulgakov and Dante: Challenges and Solutions

Problems that may arise from a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* can be divided into two main categories: some are specific to engaging with Bulgakov's works, and others pertain to the broader realm of Dantean intertextuality. The first issues are partly associated with Mikhail Bulgakov's general approach to literature. One example is that Bulgakov rarely referenced his fiction in his private writings. Differently, for instance, from the case of Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, scholars who were to look to Bulgakov's diaries or letters in the hope of finding clues to guide their interpretation of his literary works, would probably end up being a little disappointed. This, however, should not suggest that analysing the writer's diaries and, even more so, his wife Elena's journals, is a fruitless occupation. On the contrary, these documents provide very useful information to address another issue connected to the study of *The Master and Margarita*: identifying the target audience and the first readers of the novel.

As mentioned earlier, in her memoir Nadezhda Mandel'shtam raised an interesting point: be it a 'book' or a 'notebook', in the mind of its author the work always preserves its creative unity. The material aspect of a literary work, however, can significantly affect the response of the general public. Analysing the perception of the reader, therefore, is essential for interpreting works with an unusual history of circulation. In the case of writers like Bulgakov, however, examining this aspect can be challenging, simply because texts like *The Master and Margarita* reached publication long after they were written. In the specific case of this novel, this can partly be compensated by Elena Bulgakova's diaries. From these private accounts it is possible to infer that her husband read parts of his novel to fellow intellectuals during private gatherings at their flat. Similar testimonies can help discover who was

present at these readings and find out more about these initial reactions to Bulgakov's novel.

Elena's diaries also show that, despite knowing that chances of seeing his work published during his lifetime were very slim, Bulgakov was constantly engaged in a battle to gain an audience. Inevitably, as was the case for many writers in his condition, this involved striking a balance between maintaining their ideological integrity and compromising with the authorities. This delicate dynamic rendered it necessary to find ways to escape government surveillance of literature and open a channel of communication with the reader. This is another issue that further complicates the analysis of a text like *The Master and Margarita*. Rather than voicing their opposition to the current political situation explicitly, writers like Bulgakov were forced to use 'Aesopian language', a complex of strategies and techniques like ambiguity and circumlocutions, to get their message across. According to Lev Loseff, 'from the era of Peter the Great on, the entire history of Russian literature is to a significant degree also the history of Russian censorship'.⁴⁷ It may be added that consequently the history of Russian literature is also to a great extent a history of attempts to elude censorship. The aesthetic strategies used to bring content to the reader without raising suspicions among censors are what constitutes Aesopian language. In literary criticism it is possible to use this expression to indicate cases where the author of a text, in full awareness of the mechanisms that regulate the work of censors, decided to prevent censorship intervention by communicating meaning through hints and periphrasis, rather than through direct statements.⁴⁸ While the use of 'Aesopian language' in Russian literature did not begin with the Stalin era, knowledge of this phenomenon is sometimes essential to understand literary works produced during that period, when literature was under particularly close surveillance. Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* was no exception. However, it is important to note that authors like Mandel'shtam and Bulgakov used references to other works of literature not only as Aesopian stratagems, but also to preserve the memory of past literature for future readers. For them, intertextuality was not only an instrument for playful erudition or to challenge the status quo, but had a precise ethical purpose. More on this will be said in Chapters One and Five.

⁴⁷ Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (München: Sagner, 1984), p. ix.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

By looking at some of the peculiarities that complicate the interpretation of *The Master and Margarita*, like the impossibility of reaching a target audience within the lifetime of the author, and the use of Aesopian language, it becomes clear that close reading cannot be the only strategy to be deployed in a comparative analysis of Bulgakov's novel and the *Divine Comedy*. Research directed towards this goal should necessarily combine two elements: textual analysis, and the analysis of the historical, social, and cultural context in which the connections between the two literary works are embedded. This involves not only looking at the reception of Dante in Stalin's Russia, but analysing the factors that contributed to the development of Russian readings of Dante over time. Furthermore, while there is a passage in Bulgakov's notebooks where it is possible to talk about a direct reference to the *Divine Comedy* (as discussed in Chapter Three), in the majority of cases this thesis looks at what can be described as analogies between the two works (for example, the way punishments and justice are administered within the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*). For this reason, close reading alone needs to be complemented with other approaches. More on this will be said in Chapter One.

As Chapter Two of this thesis shows, one of the starting points for mapping the evolution of the reception of Dante in Russia is establishing when the text started to circulate among Russian readers and what kind of readers it reached. It becomes immediately evident that this study involves at least two broad geographical areas, Western and Eastern Europe, and that exploring the reception of the *Divine Comedy* is a question of uncovering networks, rather than focusing on locations as if they existed in a vacuum. As a consequence, studying the reception of Dante in Russia is connected to examining how the work was read in both Western Europe and Russia. This is not to suggest that scholarly work on the Russian reception of Dante must be seen as subordinate to Western readings of the poem. It is, however, necessary to acknowledge the expectations that European readers inherited from centuries of engagement with Dante, and see how these compare to Russian interpretations of his work. Through this process, it becomes clear that, although certainly shaped to a great extent by European perceptions of the poem, there are issues and phenomena which are unique to the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

For the purposes of this research, mapping the reception of Dante in Russia in its chronological development means observing its evolution from the beginning (which,

according to the majority of studies in the field, must be placed in the late eighteenth century) until the first decades of Stalin's regime, the context in which Bulgakov drafted *The Master and Margarita*. At this stage, it is already known that the *Divine Comedy* was a rather popular work in the literary circles that were critical of Stalin's rule. Contrastingly, little is known about the reception of the work within those circles that aimed to represent the official stance of the Soviet government on literature. However, just as exploring the Western reception only enhances the originality of Russian readings of the work, the reception of Dante by writers like Bulgakov or Mandel'shtam becomes even more interesting when compared to the interpretation of the poem actively promoted by the authorities. It has already been argued that the material circumstances in which Bulgakov worked impacted on his creative choices, and that this must be reflected in the research on his novel, which needs to consider the historical and social context surrounding the writer's literary activity. Since analogies between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy* are the main focus of this study, part of reconstructing this context necessarily involves examining the reception of Dante by Soviet cultural institutions.

While the literary circles that opposed Stalin's regime have been studied widely, readings of the *Divine Comedy* promoted by the Soviet government and the Union of Soviet Writers have not. As a consequence, approaching this subject may engender several questions. For instance, it is evident that, with its division into three canticas, each one corresponding to a different realm of the afterlife, Dante's *Commedia* is the product of a strong Christian mindset. Various studies have enquired to what extent this outlook is indebted to the official doctrine of the Catholic Church and, to the contrary, how much of it arose from Dante's original thinking. It is reasonable to wonder how the poem was received in a militantly atheistic country like Stalin's Russia. Was it considered a direct emanation of the Catholic Church, and, if so, did this lead the regime to oppose it? Or did the government value the aspects of the work that did not strictly adhere to the dogmas of the Church? In order to answer these questions, this research draws on a corpus of materials published by the Soviet press between 1921, the sixth centenary of Dante's death, and 1939, when Bulgakov's final illness interrupted his revision work on *The Master and Margarita*. A selection of case studies from this corpus, which includes sources as varied as school and university textbooks, reviews, articles and scholarly works, the majority of which has never

been previously analysed by scholars, is used not only as a means to answer these questions, but also to assess the impact of the Russian Revolution on the reception of Dante.

Soviet readings of the *Divine Comedy* did not exist in a vacuum. A necessary component of this research is to uncover continuities and discontinuities between pre-revolutionary, Early Soviet and Stalinist reception of the work. Through this endeavour, this study aims to address the most critical aspects of Soviet Dantean intertextuality. This, combined with attention to the specific challenges of Bulgakov studies, provides the necessary foundation for a comparative analysis of the *Commedia* and *The Master and Margarita*.

Conclusion

Although a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* has rarely been attempted in the past, analogies between the two works and the popularity of Dante in the literary circles of which Bulgakov was a member constitute the basis for a deeper engagement with this subject. This research focuses on the connections between the two works by using a framework which combines textual analysis with the study of the historical and political context in which Bulgakov's literary career unfolded. Particular attention is dedicated to examining the reception of the *Divine Comedy* by the Soviet government between 1921 and 1940.

Chapter Outline

1. Chapter One: Theory and Methodology

Chapter One is divided into three parts. The first describes the methodology of the thesis, which focuses on a comparative analysis of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. The methodological framework of this research includes two aspects: a close-reading component, which relies on theories of intertextuality, and a study of the historical and political context in which Mikhail Bulgakov was writing. The second part of the chapter explores the reception of Dante in Western Europe, and looks in particular at how the *Divine Comedy* acquired its position in the European canon. In doing so, it highlights the specific aspects of the work which often endangered Dante's presence in the canon.

The aim of this chapter is to address the following research questions:

- What theories of intertextuality can be used to conduct a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*? What are their limitations and how can they be addressed?
- How did the *Divine Comedy* become part of the Western canon, and what were the main reasons why its presence in the canon was often disputed?

2. Chapter Two: The Reception of Dante in Russia from the Eighteenth Century to the 1930s

Chapter Two maps out the history of the reception of Dante in Russia. It focuses on aspects of his work which caused debate in Europe, such as aesthetics and ethics, and analyses Russian reactions to them. It is divided into four sections: the introduction analyses the role of religion and politics at the beginning of the Russian reception of Dante; the first section explores the influence of French and German literature on the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy*. The second and third sections trace out the nineteenth-century reception of the *Commedia*, by contrasting the appropriation of the work by the radical intelligentsia with late nineteenth-century tendencies to detach Dante from politics; finally, the last section explores the legacy of these phenomena in the first years of Bolshevik rule.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- Was the *Divine Comedy* as controversial in Russia as it was in the West? If yes, did controversy in Russia arise from the same aspects of the work that were questioned in the West?
- How did the Bolshevik Revolution affect the reception of Dante in Russia? What continuities/discontinuities are there between pre- and post-revolutionary Russian reception of Dante?

3. Chapter Three: Reading Dante in Stalin's Russia: Uses of the *Divine Comedy* in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*

Chapter Three focuses on the reception of the *Divine Comedy* from Stalin's consolidation of power (1928) until the beginning of the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945). The first section describes changes taking place in the Soviet literary field on the eve of Stalin's Cultural Revolution (1928-1932). The second focuses more specifically on the Soviet reception of the *Divine Comedy* in the late 1920s-early 1930s by looking at a series of case studies never

analysed by Western scholarship before. Finally, the third highlights references to the *Divine Comedy* in *The Master and Margarita*, and analyses continuities and differences between Bulgakov's reading of Dante and the attitude of the Soviet cultural establishment towards the Italian poet in the Stalin era.

Chapter Three analyses the use of intertextuality in *The Master and Margarita* from a general perspective. Before focusing on the specific case of Dante, this chapter explores the role of references to European culture in the novel. In doing so, it also sets out to investigate what kind of reader Bulgakov had in mind for his novel. One of the most challenging aspects of this thesis is the necessity to identify at least two groups of readers that may or may not overlap: readers of Bulgakov, but also readers of the *Divine Comedy*. According to the definition given by Damrosch, in order to be considered 'world literature' a work needs to have two characteristics: it must circulate outside its culture of origin and it must have readers.⁴⁹ For this reason, this project takes into account various categories of readers: readers of Bulgakov, but also Russian readers of Dante. This last group is particularly interesting for at least two reasons: because, as foreign readers, they were likely 'to impose domestic literary values on the foreign work',⁵⁰ and because they can be divided into different social groups. The anthologies on Dante analysed in Chapter Three, aimed at different kinds of audience, can provide valuable insights into the reception of the *Divine Comedy* within different target audiences, and into how the State actively tried to influence this reception.

To sum up, this chapter addresses the following research question:

- To what extent do Bulgakov's views on Dante reflect the attitude of the Soviet cultural establishment towards the Italian poet?

4. Chapter Four: Literary Classics and Social Critique: Uses of Intertextuality in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*

After looking at intertextuality in Bulgakov from a general perspective, the two final chapters of the thesis concentrate more specifically on the analogies between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. Chapter Four starts by exploring the conflict between realism and modernism in Soviet culture of the 1930s and the reception of

⁴⁹ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Western classics in the same period; it then moves on to examine an example from Bulgakov's text where a direct reference to Dante is used for satirical purposes. Chapter Four examines references to European culture in *The Master and Margarita*, and highlights the role played by intertextuality in the relationship between the author of the novel and his readers. The chapter is divided into three parts: similarly to Chapter Three, the first part focuses on changes in the Soviet cultural establishment between 1928 and 1941, but, rather than focusing exclusively on the reception of Dante, it provides a general overview of the Stalinist cultural establishment. The second part looks more generally at the reception of Western classics in the Soviet 1930s, and compares Soviet uses of literary classics with the reception of Dante by the Italian Fascist regime. The third is centred on the specific case of Mikhail Bulgakov and analyses the particular role played by intertextuality in *The Master and Margarita*.

This chapter addresses the following research question:

- What does Bulgakov's relationship to Dante reveal about the use of literary classics in totalitarian regimes?

5. Chapter Five: Writing Dante in Stalin's Russia: The Ethics of Intertextuality in Dante Alighieri and Mikhail Bulgakov

Chapter Five focuses on the reception of Dante in so-called 'literature for the drawer', a phrase describing works of literature which did not conform to Socialist Realism, and therefore lay hidden for decades before they reached publication. In doing so, it analyses parallels in ideas of justice and retribution as they are applied in the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. Chapter Five analyses how the literary circles which were most critical of the government used intertextuality to question the transformations characterising Soviet society and culture during the 1930s. Drawing on the work of Clare Cavanagh, for reasons which are extensively explained at the start of the chapter this research prefers to employ the term 'literature for the ashtray', rather than 'literature for the drawer'. Of all the works of literature produced in Stalin's Russia that fall within this definition, this thesis focuses in particular on Osip Mandel'shtam's *Conversation about Dante*, Anna Akhmatova's *Dante*, and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. The last section focuses more specifically on analogies between Bulgakov's novel and the *Divine*

Comedy by examining them within the framework of ‘literature for the ashtray’ and looking at examples of Aesopian language in *The Master and Margarita*.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- How do Bulgakov’s uses of Dante compare to examples of Dantean intertextuality from the so-called ‘literature for the ashtray’?
- What does Mikhail Bulgakov’s use of Dantean references and literary classics reveal about the Soviet author-Soviet reader relationship?

As a contribution to the Dantean centenary of 2021, this thesis intends not only to open new perspectives in the field of Bulgakov and Dante studies, but also to illuminate fascinating aspects in the role of literary classics under repressive regimes. Chapter One represents the first step of this journey. The first part offers a critical assessment of major theories of intertextuality, combined with elements from a world literature and a translation studies framework. The second part examines the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Western Europe. It highlights specific elements in the work which provoked debate in the West, and sets the goal of uncovering how Russian audiences reacted to them. It therefore encourages a shift in the attention of reception studies from the most canonical to the most controversial aspects of literary classics.

Chapter One

Theory and Methodology

Introduction

The heterogeneous nature of Dantean references in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is the main reason why a comparative analysis of Bulgakov's novel and the *Divine Comedy* necessitates a multifaceted approach. A direct reference, like in the case of a character named after Dante's Beatrice, mentioned in one of Bulgakov's notebooks (Chapter Three), requires a close-reading approach. In other cases, however, it is only possible to observe more indirect analogies (Chapter Five), which have more to do with the general outlook of the works (the Easter motif, themes of judgement and retribution, and so on). These need a more encompassing method, more centred on highlighting the connections between the two texts, rather than focused on analysing specific passages within one text. The present chapter, therefore, will examine these two approaches and describe how they combine to shape the framework of this research.

As mentioned in the Introduction, the environment in which Mikhail Bulgakov's literary activity unfolded is also a source of complexity. Given the constraints imposed by the Stalinist terror, the author of *The Master and Margarita* only had two options to conduct his literary activity. The first one involved writing either 'for the drawer', keeping written works hidden in the hope that they would finally reach readers in the future, or 'for the ashtray', memorising their works with the help of friends before destroying them. The second possible strategy was to try to get those works published by using 'Aesopian' techniques to conceal aspects that would be deemed unacceptable by Soviet censorship. Chapter Five will provide examples of these two stratagems and explain how they are applied in *The Master and Margarita*. The purpose of the present chapter, instead, is to describe the methodology used in the course of the thesis to analyse these phenomena. The methodology described in the next sections situates *The Master and Margarita* within the social and political

atmosphere where it was written. It also offers an opportunity to analyse the reception of Dante in the same context, an aspect that can only be addressed after uncovering the earliest evidence of the circulation of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia (late eighteenth century) and exploring how the reception of the work subsequently developed until the first decade of the Stalin era.

The methodology proposed in the next section encompasses all the different facets of this project. As earlier mentioned, it has a close-reading component which has its foundations in several theories of intertextuality. However, as David Damrosch put it, 'no single way of reading can be appropriate to all texts',¹ and it will soon become clear that each theory of intertextuality presents limitations when applied to the specific case study of this thesis. To address these issues, this project combines close reading with the analysis of the historical and political contexts surrounding the reception of Dante in the Soviet Union. Particularly relevant to this thesis is also Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, which provides a useful framework to analyse the Soviet anthologies of Western literature examined in Chapter Three.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first is the one most directly centred on presenting the methodological framework of the thesis: it offers a critical history of intertextuality while integrating elements from world literature and translation studies. The second part examines the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Western Europe and provides insights into the process that led to the canonisation of the work in the West. In doing so, the second section functions as a premise to Chapter Two, which explains how Russian audiences reacted to Dante's work, and therefore addresses the research question regarding the canonisation of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia: Was the *Divine Comedy* as controversial in Russia as it was in the West? If so, did controversy in Russia arise from the same aspects of the work that were questioned in the West? The second section of this chapter provides the necessary background to further explore these matters in the course of the thesis.

¹ Damrosch, p. 5.

To sum up, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

- What theories of intertextuality can be used to conduct a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*? What are their limitations and how can they be addressed?
- How did the *Divine Comedy* become part of the Western canon, and what were the main reasons why its presence in the canon was often disputed?

1. Defining Intertextuality

1.1. Premise: Distinguishing Between ‘Influence’ and ‘Intertextuality’

The concept of ‘intertextuality’ was first introduced by Julia Kristeva in *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1966), where she described the ‘literary word’ as ‘an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point [...], as a dialogue among several writings’.² For the purposes of this study, intertextuality is understood as an instrument with a double function: it challenges authority and it situates a given literary work within a tradition of literary classics. To highlight the main peculiarities of this definition, it is necessary to distinguish it from previous theoretical approaches. This is particularly useful in this case, since, as argued in the Introduction, it may be tricky to demonstrate that Dante had a direct ‘influence’ on Bulgakov. The current state of research on this issue is summarised in the final section of this chapter. Meanwhile, the following section summarises the differences between ‘influence’ and ‘intertextuality’ and explains why the latter is more applicable to this research.

The word ‘intertextuality’ entered the vocabulary of literary criticism in the second half of the twentieth century, and since then it has been frequently counterposed to ‘influence’, a key concept of nineteenth-century criticism.³ The term ‘influence’ started affirming itself in literary scholarship in the late eighteenth century, an era marked by the dawn of Romanticism, which had originality and genius among its primary concerns. As a consequence, in their analysis of artistic products critics started looking for references to

² María Jesús Martínez Alfaro, ‘Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept’, *Atlantis*, 18.1/2 (Junio-Diciembre 1996), 268-85 (p. 268).

³ Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, ‘Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality’, in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. by Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), pp. 3-36 (pp. 3-6).

previous works, as a way of guarding the authors against influences which would lessen their claim to originality.⁴ The popularity of the term reached its peak during the nineteenth century and remained stable through the first half of the twentieth century, when scholarly debates focused on distinguishing between genuine influence and the transmission of literary commonplaces.⁵

A different attitude towards the concept gradually emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, as the emphasis traditional criticism laid on literary predecessors was called into question. Connected to this was the demand that attention be reallocated from the authors who exert influence to the ones who experience it. This request prepared the ground for the decline of 'influence' and the rise of 'intertextuality',⁶ a concept introduced for the first time by Julia Kristeva in *Word, Dialogue and Novel* (1966) and further developed by Roland Barthes.⁷

What follows is a critical evaluation of Julia Kristeva's and Roland Barthes' theories of intertextuality. Although this point is still subject to discussion, there is a general consensus that Kristeva's approach was greatly indebted to Mikhail Bakhtin.⁸ Before looking at Kristeva's approach, therefore, the following section focuses on how Bakhtin challenged Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language and on how, in doing so, he paved the way for his own theory of the novel and subsequent developments in the theorisation of intertextuality. Starting this excursus with de Saussure also allows to clarify a concept that lies at the centre of this brief history of intertextuality: the distinction between 'signified' and 'signifier'.

1.2. Theories of Intertextuality

1.2.1. Precursors: Saussure and Bakhtin

In his 1915 *Course in General Linguistics* Ferdinand de Saussure described the linguistic sign as a combination of a signified (concept) and a signifier (a sound or image). The meaning of the relation between signified and signifier did not coincide with an object in the world, but

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 7-12.

⁷ Michael Worton and Judith Still, 'Introduction', in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 1-44 (p. 1).

⁸ Hans-Peter Mai, 'Bypassing Intertextuality. Hermeneutics, Textual Practice, Hypertext', in *Intertextuality*, ed. by Heinrich F. Plett (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), pp. 30-59 (p. 33).

was conventionally sanctioned.⁹ Therefore, meaning did not originate from a supposedly referential purpose of the language, but existed because it functioned within a synchronic linguistic system. Based on these premises, Saussure aimed at the creation of semiology, a new discipline which would study 'the life of signs within society'.¹⁰ Drawing on Saussure's conclusions, from the 1950s onwards a critical, philosophical and cultural movement known as 'structuralism' sought to revolutionise analysis of human culture by redescribing it in terms of sign systems. This tendency is now commonly referred to as the 'linguistic turn' of human sciences and is regarded as one origin of the theory of intertextuality. In analogy to Saussure's linguistic system, structuralism represented literature as a synchronic system, and referred to the author as a figure working with at least two systems: language and literary tradition.¹¹

Differently from structuralism, Mikhail Bakhtin saw language as 'a ceaseless flow of becoming'.¹² According to Bakhtin, language was the site of an ongoing struggle between monologic and dialogic utterances, where 'monologic utterance' represented the state power's attempt to repress this 'dialogism', which Bakhtin considered intrinsic to all language.¹³ He therefore indicated dialogism as a constructive element of all language, foregrounding class, ideological and other conflicts, divisions and hierarchies within society. This emphasis on situating language within historical and social constraints is the key difference between Bakhtin's and Saussure's theory of the language and, ultimately, the reason why Bakhtin's dialogism is seen as the starting point of modern theories of intertextuality. As María Alfaro put it: 'while Saussure is interested in language as an abstract and ready-made system, Bakhtin is interested only in the dynamics of living speech. [...] And whereas Saussure dichotomizes the individual and the social, Bakhtin assumes that the individual is constituted by the social, that consciousness is a matter of dialogue and juxtaposition with a social "other"'.¹⁴

When applied to his theory of the novel, Bakhtin's dialogism was not equivalent to the dialogues between the characters. Rather, it described a world-view, unique to each

⁹ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 8.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-22.

¹⁴ Alfaro, p. 273.

character: according to Bakhtin, characters in a novel were distinguished by the mode of speech, ideological and social positioning they expressed through language. In other words, the author of a novel did not construct a character, a type or a temperament, 'but rather the hero's discourse about himself and his world'.¹⁵ However, it is important to note that Bakhtin never came to theorise the full disappearance of the authorial figure:

there is no unitary language or style in the novel. But at the same time there does exist a center of language (a verbal-ideological center) for the novel. The author (as creator of the novelist whole) cannot be found at any one of the novel's language levels: he is to be found at the center of organization where all levels intersect.¹⁶

Bakhtin's definition of dialogism is an effective tool in the analysis of Aesopian language, one of the main concerns of this thesis. According to Loseff (1984) Aesopian language was a 'systemic alteration of the text occasioned by the introduction of hints and circumlocutions',¹⁷ employed to avoid censorship and to convey a message to the reader. Aesopian devices may include metaphor, allegory, parody, periphrasis, ellipsis, quotations, tags and nicknames, but also shifts in places and historical contexts.¹⁸ An Aesopian text is by definition ambivalent: an Aesopian device is at the same time a 'marker', aimed at communicating a message that awaits deciphering from the reader, and a 'screen', intended to conceal the Aesopian content from the censor.¹⁹ In staging the conflict between the official ideology of state power and dissent, Aesopian language therefore represented the perfect embodiment of what Bakhtin described as the essential dialogism of language. Mikhail Bakhtin's critique of Saussurean structuralism and the pre-eminence he accorded to discourse over the author paved the way for the 1960s French theories of intertextuality, which were inspired by, but also critical of Bakhtin's theory of the novel.

1.2.2. Is the Author Dead? A Critical Assessment of Kristeva and Barthes
Structuralism drew on Saussure's language studies to assert that texts were made of signifiers existing in a synchronic system which provided them with determinable signifieds. As a consequence of this stable correlation, structuralists claimed that a scientific approach

¹⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. by Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 53.

¹⁶ Mikhail M. Bakhtin in Alfaro, p. 274.

¹⁷ Loseff, p. 6.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 34-42.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 50-52.

could be deployed to analyse cultural texts.²⁰ This assumption, already questioned in Mikhail Bakhtin's works, was further challenged by Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes, who considered the idea of a steady connection between signifiers and signifieds a means employed by dominant ideology to suppress unorthodox thought.²¹ Julia Kristeva fostered this thesis in *Word, Dialogue, and Novel* (1966), elaborating on Bakhtin's theorisation of the struggle between monologic and dialogic tendencies in language. However, Kristeva's stance towards textuality did not completely coincide with Bakhtin's. On one hand, she agreed that texts contained the ideological structures and struggles expressed in society through discourse, and could therefore not be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they were constructed. On the other hand, while Bakhtin focused on discourse in society, in *Word, Dialogue, and Novel* Kristeva favoured the more abstract notions of text and textuality:²²

The writer's interlocutor [...] is the writer himself, but as reader of another text. The one who writes is the same as the one who reads. Since his interlocutor is a text, he himself is no more than a text rereading itself. The dialogical structure, therefore, appears only in the light of the text elaborating itself as ambivalent in relation to another text.²³

In the same work Kristeva introduced into literary criticism the concept of intertextuality; and she theorised that the literary word was not the original product of an authorial subject, but was simultaneously made of a horizontal and a vertical dimension: it belonged to both writing subject and addressee (horizontal dimension) and was oriented toward an anterior or synchronic literary corpus (vertical dimension). The literary word was therefore an intersection of textual surfaces (writer, addressee or character, contemporary or earlier cultural context).²⁴ Kristeva further developed this concept in *The Bounded Text* (1966-1967), reaching the conclusion that authors did not create their texts out of nothing, but compiled them from pre-existing texts. A text was therefore not an isolated object, but 'a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances,

²⁰ Allen, p. 31.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 31-32.

²² Ibid., p. 36.

²³ Julia Kristeva in Alfaro, p. 277.

²⁴ Allen, p. 38.

taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another'.²⁵ The subject of a narrative act was 'lost in writing'.²⁶

Roland Barthes further elaborated on this by combining Kristeva's approach to Bakhtinian dialogism with Jacques Derrida's theories about writing, according to which writing was a 'signifier of the signifier';²⁷ in Derrida's understanding all signifiers referred to signifieds which themselves function as signifiers. In his view, writing was therefore not a stable concept.²⁸ In his theory of the text Barthes argued that the text was plural, not because it had several meanings, but because it was made of a play of signifiers always leading on to other signifiers, where the meaning of each signifier was infinitely deferred. In this interpretation, there was no stable boundary between the inside and the outside of a text, because nothing existed outside the text: only the intertextual play of signifiers was real.²⁹ Most importantly, the notion of authorship lost its function: if a text was made of citations, all of which were anonymous, untraceable, already read, then meaning did not originate from the author, but from language viewed intertextually. The author, Barthes proclaimed, is dead.³⁰

Kristeva and Barthes intended to shift the focus of literary criticism from the writer as an authoritative voice to the relations between texts, thus attributing to the reader an active role in the production of meaning. When applied to the specific case of Dantean references in Mikhail Bulgakov, redefining the roles of author and reader has major consequences. By studying analogies between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy*, it will be necessary to analyse to what extent Soviet readers of Dante were influenced by cultural and ideological commonplaces associated with the Italian writer in Russian culture. For this reason, Chapter Two of this thesis is dedicated to assessing Dante Alighieri's status in Russian and early Soviet intellectual culture.

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, 'The Bounded Text' in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. by Leon S. Roudiez, trans. by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), pp. 36-63 (p. 36).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

²⁷ Jacques Derrida in Allen, p. 61.

²⁸ Allen, pp. 61-63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 66-74.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

While analysing the reception of Dante in Russia, it is also necessary to reconstruct the social and historical context in which Mikhail Bulgakov wrote his novel. In this respect, next to Bakhtin's dialogism and Kristeva's first definition of intertextuality, it may be useful to introduce Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'field'. The constitution of an intellectual and artistic field, Bourdieu maintained, was the end result of a process that brought the network of production, circulation and fruition of symbolic goods to develop a degree of autonomy from all authorities lying outside the network itself.³¹ The freedom from external constraints this system enjoys, however, is limited, and the nature of the external pressures influencing the literary field can create differences between the countries. According to Gisèle Sapiro, 'the situation of the different national literary fields depends on two main factors: the degree of economical [sic] liberalism and the degree of political liberalism'.³² This is not to suggest that a raw materialistic approach is the key to the interpretation of literary texts. Rather, as Bourdieu suggested, it is an encouragement to ponder the influence of these factors on the literary field. For instance, if a country renounces the adoption of a free-market economy and liberal political principles, this may impact on a writer's career, and may sometimes explain some of their creative choices.

Based on these premises, it is safe to say that *The Master and Margarita* was written in a socio-political context (Moscow, between 1928 and 1939) where the autonomy of the literary field faced specific challenges. The progressive centralisation of state control over the production and circulation of art characterising the first decades of Iosif Stalin's government, a topic analysed in more detail in Chapter Three and Four of this thesis, had a deep impact on both Mikhail Bulgakov's activity as a writer, and, more generally, on the reception of foreign literary classics in the USSR. A textual analysis of the points of contact between Bulgakov's last novel and the *Divine Comedy* cannot proceed without situating the writer's work within the broader network of Soviet literary production. It is true that artistic production is not exclusively dependent on material conditions, and these are not the only factors literary analysis should be concerned with. However, combining the focus on cultural and social phenomena with attention to the individuality of the author works as an encouragement to recuperate an idea introduced by Bakhtin: to see the literary text as a

³¹ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Le marché des biens symboliques', *L'Année sociologique (1940/1948-)*, 22 (1971), 49-126 (p. 49).

³² Gisèle Sapiro, 'The Literary Field Between the State and the Market', *Poetics*, 31 (2003), 441-64 (p. 442).

discourse, rather than a monologue by a writer or an external authority, be it the market or the State.

Introducing the concept of 'literary field' also counterbalances limitations that derive from applying Kristeva's and Barthes' intertextual theories to the analysis of Aesopian texts. Although, as Chapter Five of this thesis illustrates, there are elements in *The Master and Margarita* which deviate from Aesopian literature, Aesopian techniques are used throughout the novel, and Aesopian texts demanded that the reader play an active role in decoding the text. For this reason, Barthes's emphasis on the reader as an active participant in the production of meaning³³ may prove useful in the analysis of an Aesopian work of art. However, despite encouraging the reader to step into the production of meaning, the author of an Aesopian text also aspired to convey a message, and therefore needed to orientate the reader in the interpretation of the text as much as the political circumstances of the time allowed. Contrary to what Kristeva and Barthes suggested, therefore, the reader of an Aesopian work was not encouraged to create new meaning from scratch, but rather to unearth the meaning that was already hidden in the text. Further criticism that has been expressed towards Kristeva and Barthes concerns the practical implications of their theory. It has been noted that their approach, although stimulating, may not be an effective tool in the ordinary praxis of literary criticism. Clayton and Rothstein (1991) in particular argued that if every text can be considered an intertext of every other text, as Barthes claims, it becomes hard to draw a line between relevant and irrelevant references.³⁴ In order to address these gaps in French theories of intertextuality, literary critics like Gérard Genette promoted a return to a more structuralist approach to textual analysis.

1.2.3. Gérard Genette's Transtextuality

In his essay *Structuralism and Literary Criticism* (1964) Gérard Genette recuperated Lévi-Strauss' definition of the literary critic as a *bricoleur*, i.e. a figure whose purpose was to rearrange the elements of a literary text to create a new structure that could describe and explain the original structure. The job of the critic was to break down literary works into themes, motifs, keywords, obsessive metaphors, quotations, index cards and references, an idea based on the premise that texts were not original, unique, unitary wholes, but

³³ Mai, p. 44.

³⁴ Clayton and Rothstein, p. 23.

selections and combinations of elements selected out of an enclosed system. Writers composed their works by choosing elements from this system, and, in doing so, they obscured the work's relation to the system itself. The goal of the critic was therefore to illuminate this relation.³⁵ Contrary to Kristeva and Barthes, who claimed that no critical procedure could restore the elements of a text to their full signifying relations, according to Genette's new structuralism the meaning of a text or corpus of texts could be circumscribed and fully explicated by fleshing out their elementary units and uncovering the systematic and recurrent relations between them. Genette developed this idea in a series of groundbreaking studies of the nature of narrative discourse, particularly narrative fiction.³⁶

In *The Architext* (1979) and *Palimpsests* (1982) Genette revisited the history of poetics with the aim of establishing a viable and stable poetics of theme, genre and mode. Here he introduced two key concepts of his theory: 'architexts', as a way to define the slowly evolving building blocks underpinning the entire literary system, and 'transtextuality', a term describing an endlessly forming and reforming poetics whose object was the architext. The focus of transtextuality studies was therefore not the text, but the set of general or transcendent categories (types of discourse, modes of enunciation, literary genres) from which each singular text emerged.³⁷

Genette further broke transtextuality down into five categories:

- Intertextuality, which recuperated the term first introduced by Kristeva, but used it to indicate the actual presence of one text within another. In this context, intertextuality must be understood as a synonym for quotation, plagiarism and allusion.
- Metatextuality, which described a situation where a text functioned as a commentary to another text.
- Hypertextuality, or a type of transtextuality describing 'any relationship uniting a text B ([...] *hypertext*) to an earlier text A ([...] *hypotext*) upon which it is grafted in a

³⁵ Allen, pp. 96-97.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 98.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 98-100.

manner that is not that of commentary'.³⁸ In this case the meaning of the literary work depends upon the reader's knowledge of the hypotext, which the hypertext either satirically transforms or imitates for the purpose of pastiche.

- Architextuality, constituted by the complex of the reader's generic, modal, thematic and figurative expectations about a text, and depending on the position of the work in relation to genres, sub-genres or conventions.³⁹
- Paratextuality, intended as a category comprising the elements through which authors directed and controlled the reception of a text. 'Paratexts' normally include a 'peritext' (titles, chapter titles, prefaces and notes) and an 'epitext' (elements outside the text, i.e. interviews, publicity announcements, reviews, private letters, authorial and editorial discussions). It is also possible to distinguish between 'autographic' or 'allographic' paratexts, depending on whether these were produced by the author or by someone other than the author (e.g. editor or publisher).⁴⁰

Although Genette does not recognise this explicitly, translations represent an unusual case in his typology, as they can be regarded both as paratexts of the original text, and as texts in their own right, with their own paratexts. This is particularly relevant to the purposes of this thesis.⁴¹ As further illustrated in Chapter Two, in the early stages of their acquaintance with the *Divine Comedy*, at the end of the eighteenth century, the Russian reading public would often approach Dante's work through translations that not only did not cover the complete poem, but had often been made using French translations as source texts, rather than translating from the original.⁴² Another factor influencing access to Dante in Russian was censorship, as the history of Dmitry Min's translation of *Inferno* shows (Chapter Two).⁴³ State interventions and the peculiar position occupied by translation in Soviet cultural policies of the 1920s and 1930s had a significant impact on Mikhail Lozinsky's translation

³⁸ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln NE; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 5.

³⁹ Allen, pp. 101-114.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Kathryn Batchelor, *Translation and Paratexts* (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 19-22.

⁴² Wilfried Potthoff, *Dante in Rußland: Zur Italienrezeption der russischen Literatur von der Romantik zum Symbolismus* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1991), p. 65.

⁴³ Raisa M. Gorokhova, "'Ad" Dante v perevode Mina i tsarskaia tsenzura', in *Rusko-evropeiskie literaturnye svyazi*, ed. by Pavel N. Berkov, Aleksei S. Bushmin and Viktor M. Zhirmunsky (Moskva, Leningrad: Nauka, n.d.), pp. 48-55.

also, as Chapter Four of this thesis illustrates. These few examples reveal how productive Genette's definition of 'paratextuality' can become when applied to translation and situated within a specific historical and geographical context. As Lawrence Venuti argued, despite endowing literature with an international dimension, translation enhances the aspects of a work considered more appealing in the receiving culture, and is therefore in great measure a reflection of local, rather than universal, values and beliefs.⁴⁴ Moving from these considerations, while using Genette's approach to close reading, this study is mindful of the broader social factors that influenced Dantean intertextuality in Russia.

A further attempt at providing Genette's theories with a more socially oriented outlook was offered by Michael Riffaterre. Although the framework of this thesis relies more on Genette, world literature and translation studies, gaining insight into Riffaterre's theory of intertextuality is still useful, since Riffaterre's studies provided the framework for Loseff's analysis of Aesopian language, which occupies a significant place in Chapter Five. By highlighting the position of a text within the literary system, Genette strove to provide a tool to orientate readers and critics in the network of intertextual references that inform a literary work. Riffaterre's theory of intertextuality further developed these ideas by suggesting that the meaning of a text arose from the transformation of a recognizable element of the socially normative discourse ('sociolect') by means of inversion, conversion, expansion or juxtaposition. To recognize this process it was necessary to discover the *matrix*, i.e. a word, phrase or sentence unit which did not necessarily exist in the text, but represented the kernel upon which the semiotic system of the text was based. Once the matrix was recognised, the text's apparent 'ungrammaticalities' became understandable because they could be referred back to a structure.⁴⁵

In his study of the Aesopian language Loseff (1984) relied on Riffaterre's assumption that every literary text contained hints that could only be interpreted by resorting to an intertext.⁴⁶ According to Riffaterre's definition, an intertext was 'a corpus of texts, textual

⁴⁴ Lawrence Venuti, 'World Literature and Translation Studies', in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Theo D'haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 180-193 (p. 180).

⁴⁵ Allen, pp. 114-19.

⁴⁶ Michael Riffaterre, 'Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive', in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 56-78 (p. 58).

fragments or text-like segments of the sociolect that share a lexicon and, to a lesser extent, a syntax with the text we are reading [...].⁴⁷ For a text to be understood it is therefore necessary that author and reader share the same sociolect. This principle is particularly relevant for Aesopian texts, where the reader is asked to fill gaps in the text to uncover a hidden message. Riffaterre's notion of sociolect complements Genette's theory by orienting its focus towards the social context surrounding the text, rather than limiting the observation towards the literary context.

1.3. A Working Definition of Intertextuality: Reception and Adaptation

Bakhtin, Kristeva and Barthes employed intertextuality as a tool to challenge given assumptions and state-imposed ideologies. In this respect, intertextuality can be an effective device to study Aesopian texts and their potential to evade censorship and convey messages that challenge the status quo. This is, however, only a partial explanation of the role intertextuality can play in this kind of literature. This project intends to analyse the *Master and Margarita* as an example of text where intertextual references were put in place not only to convey a forbidden message to the reader, but also as a way for the author to position himself within a cultural tradition predating the social and political upheavals of twentieth-century Russia. In *Ulysses, Order, and Myth* T. S. Eliot argued that the use of the *Odyssey* in James Joyce's *Ulysses* served the purpose of 'controlling, ordering, giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history'.⁴⁸ Drawing on Eliot's reflections, this research focuses on how Bulgakov's references to Dante and other literary classics represented not only a challenge to Soviet propaganda, but a means to construct links between pre- and post-revolutionary Russian literature and culture. Intertextuality is here therefore intended not only to subvert hierarchies, but also to establish continuity.

To highlight this duality means to explore the historical and social context in which Bulgakov worked before and after the Revolution, that is the 'context of creation and reception' where his literary production was embedded.⁴⁹ Particularly important is to uncover the

⁴⁷ Michael Riffaterre, 'Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse', *Critical Inquiry*, 1.11 (1984), 141-62 (p. 142).

⁴⁸ Thomas S. Eliot, 'Ulysses, Order, and Myth (1923)', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), pp. 175-178 (p. 177).

⁴⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 27.

writers that had the most significant influence on Bulgakov and explore their relationship to the *Divine Comedy*. A means towards reaching this goal is offered by Linda Hutcheon's work on adaptations. Hutcheon (2006) described adaptation as a process where a narrative is transposed to 'new material and cultural environments'.⁵⁰ This definition allows for the use of Hutcheon's approach in the analysis of Dantean references in *The Master and Margarita*, despite the novel not being an adaptation of the *Divine Comedy*. This possibility relies on the opportunity, described by Hutcheon herself, to see adaptation as a 'form of intertextuality'. Adaptations as described by Hutcheon (2006) are highly intertextual: they are connected not only to their direct source text, but also to other texts that can be associated to the source text by means of analogy. These works, or, as Hutcheon calls them, these 'intertexts', function as filters between the author of the adapted text ('adapter') and the source text.⁵¹ In line with Hutcheon's theories, this project places great emphasis on identifying the 'intertexts' that influenced Mikhail Bulgakov's knowledge of Dante.

According to Hutcheon, adaptations are also distinguished by their capacity to thrive 'by virtue of mutation' in a new cultural and linguistic context.⁵² In order to be adapted, the source text frequently needs to be transposed to an environment that differs from the original one in terms of language, culture, and political and social assets. This is another characteristic that belongs to the intertextual nature of adaptations. While conducting a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy*, a poem produced in medieval Italy, and *The Master and Margarita*, a novel written in the 1930s Soviet Union, changes in language, culture, and political and social contexts absolutely need to be considered.

Based on the importance Hutcheon placed on the context surrounding adapters and adaptations, the first stage of this project focuses on reconstructing the 'ideological, social, historical, cultural, personal and aesthetic' context surrounding Bulgakov's relationship to Dante's work.⁵³ This preliminary part of the research is divided into two phases: the first one aims at mapping the reception of Dante in Russia and the Soviet Union; the second one focuses on gathering the elements that contributed to shaping Bulgakov's image of Dante. Although the first phase has a broader historical scope, whereas the second appears to be

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 84.

⁵² Ibid., p. 32.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 108.

more focused on Bulgakov's personal experience, the two points are strongly connected. Highlighting the commonplaces that pre- and post-revolutionary literary intelligentsia associated with Dante and his work is vital to the understanding of Bulgakov's personal reading of the *Commedia*. For this reason, after looking at the broader history of the reception of Dante in Russia between the late eighteenth century and the early 1920s in Chapter Two, Chapter Three of this study covers a range of materials on Dante published in the Soviet press between the end of the Civil War (1921) and the start of the Great Patriotic War (1941). This diverse list, which includes articles, monographs, literary anthologies and more, many of which have never been analysed by scholars before, gives a sense of the main distinctive traits of the reception of Dante at this stage of Soviet history. Particularly fascinating is the case of literary anthologies, since they often responded to the necessity to make Dante's text accessible to the most inexperienced readers, and can therefore be analysed as an example of adaptation in Hutcheon's definition of the word.

While exploring the history of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia and the USSR will be the subject of Chapter Two and Three, the second section of the present chapter provides an overview of the most significant studies of the reception of Dante in Western Europe. This is especially useful for two reasons: first, these studies highlight a few milestones of the European, mainly French and German, reception of Dante whose echo was heard in the Russian context as well; secondly, they exemplify how aesthetics and ethics became the main factors behind the (in)stability of Dante's position in the Western canon, a dynamic that was partly replicated in the Russian context, as Chapter Two will show.

2. Dante and Intertextuality

2.1. Dantean intertextuality in Western Europe

Studying the history of the reception of Dante in Western Europe entails assessing the writer's place in the literary canon. The word 'canon' is here used to indicate a body of texts 'that have stood the test of time and enjoy general acclaim among readers, critics and academics alike.'⁵⁴ Dante's position in this corpus was frequently disputed and not always as stable as it may appear nowadays. According to Pich (2011), over time the discussion

⁵⁴ Elke Brems, 'Canonization', trans. by Jack McMartin, in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*, ed. by Mona Baker and Gabriela Saldanha, 3rd edn (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 52-56 (p. 52).

concerning whether the *Divine Comedy* belongs in the Western canon has centred around a few main points, some of which are still considered divisive in contemporary literary criticism. While looking at these questions, it will become apparent that the reception of the *Divine Comedy* as a work of art cannot be easily detached from the significance of Dante himself as a human and intellectual figure, as a model of individual that came to embody a whole series of political and mystical motifs.

Pich (2011) highlighted a series of problematic aspects connected to the canonisation of the *Commedia*. For reasons of simplicity, the next section will start with examining the aesthetics of the work and will then move on to discuss issues related to the content.

2.1.1. Style

When discussing the issues raised by commentators about Dante's stylistic choices, Pich (2011) talked of the 'anti-classical 'strangeness' of the *Divine Comedy*. In the eyes of the cultivated readership of Dante's time, the *Commedia* was 'strange' in both language and genre.⁵⁵ As far as language was concerned, what aroused perplexity among Dante's contemporaries was the use of the vernacular. The decision to write the *Commedia* in Tuscan rather than Latin provoked mixed reactions: on one hand, there was a general conviction that Latin would have been a more appropriate choice, given the theological content of the work; on the other hand, the necessity to address the needs of an expanding audience seemed to justify the use of the vernacular.⁵⁶ Besides writing in Tuscan, Dante also alternated between different registers, choosing a 'lower' register for *Inferno*, a 'medium' register for *Purgatory*, and a 'sublime' one for Paradise. Dante scholars generally agree that the coexistence of high and low registers in the *Divine Comedy* accounted for the work's initial exclusion from the canon. In his overview of the Dantean commentary tradition Hollander (2007) established that Pietro Bembo's stylistic judgements, centred on the dismissal of the *Commedia* and the praise of Petrarch as the great master of Italian poetry,

⁵⁵ Federica Pich, 'Dante's 'Strangeness': The *Commedia* and the Late Twentieth-Century Debate on the Literary Canon', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti and Fabian Lampart (Wien; Berlin: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 21-36 (p. 21).

⁵⁶ Nick Havely, *Dante* (Malden MA; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 226-227.

led to a decline in Dante's popularity among scholars, as testified by the lack of major expert commentary about the *Commedia* between 1570 and 1732.⁵⁷

From 1732 onwards it was precisely a reconsideration of Dante's linguistic choices that led to the revaluation of the writer's work. According to Vallone (1981) what distinguished the eighteenth-century views concerning Dante from those expressed in previous times was the different attitude towards his language. Critics like Giulio Perticari and Antonio Cesari, who worked between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, did not accuse the poet of lacking clarity and refinement, but engaged in more balanced research on his use of language.⁵⁸ Although later in the nineteenth century the discussion proceeded to cover Dante's themes as well, the way to the Italian writer's inclusion in the canon was opened up by the eighteenth-century reassessment of his style.

By using different registers Dante not only challenged linguistic conventions, but pushed the boundaries of traditional hierarchies and distinctions between literary genres.⁵⁹ The coexistence of different genres within the *Divine Comedy* engendered a discussion that paralleled the debate on the work's language and style. The difficulty in coming to terms with the 'strangeness' of the *Commedia* was famously summarised in Voltaire's judgement of the work. In his *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations (An Essay on Universal History, the Manners, and Spirit of Nations, 1756)* Voltaire famously described Dante and the *Divine Comedy* in these terms:

The Florentine Dante had already illustrated the Tuscan language with his poem entitled *Commedia*, a bizarre poem, but full of natural beauties; a work where in many details the author elevated himself far above the corrupt taste of his age and his subject, and full of parts that were written with as much purity as if they belonged to the times of Ariosto and Tasso.⁶⁰

What is particularly interesting about this excerpt is that Voltaire did not see Dante as a representative of medieval culture, but rather as a forerunner of the Renaissance, as the

⁵⁷ Robert Hollander, 'Dante and His Commentators', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 270-280 (p. 275). Although the *Commedia* seemingly disappeared from the radar of scholarly commentary for two centuries, recent research has explored the popular reception of the work. See for instance Ahern, pp. 214-39. For an analysis of the reception of Dante by non-specialists in Britain during the Victorian period, see Federica Coluzzi, *Dante Beyond Influence: Rethinking Reception in Victorian Literary Culture* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

⁵⁸ Aldo Vallone, *Storia della Critica Dantesca dal XV al XXI Secolo*, 2 vols (Padova: Vallardi, 1981), I, pp. 716-17.

⁵⁹ Pich, p. 21.

⁶⁰ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations. Tome III, Œuvres de Voltaire. Nouvelle édition, avec des notes et des observations critiques par M. Palissot*, 55 vols (Paris: Stoupe, Serviere, 1792), XVIII, p. 30.

reference to Ariosto and Tasso underlines. Dante's supposed estrangement from medieval culture and affinity with the following generation of Italian poets has been a recurring argument throughout the whole history of the reception of Dante, and was a common trope also in the Marxist reception of the *Divine Comedy*, as will be shown in due course.

Voltaire discussed the *Divine Comedy* also in an article written for the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (*Philosophical Dictionary*) in 1764 titled *Le Dante*:

[...] he [Dante] composed his comedy of hell, purgatory and paradise; this hotchpotch has been regarded as a beautiful epic poem. [...] Is all this written in a comic style? No. Does it belong to the heroic genre? No. In what taste was then this poem written? In a bizarre taste. But there are verses that are so happy and naïve that have not aged a bit over four hundred years, and that will never age.⁶¹

This last judgement by Voltaire can be considered a good example of what Pich (2011) described as the 'anti-classical 'strangeness' of the *Commedia*. For a great part of the eighteenth century Dante's non-conformity to classical models for language and genre alienated educated commentators from his work. In the nineteenth century this neoclassical attitude was challenged by Romanticism, which rediscovered the *Divine Comedy* through a renewed interest in medieval culture, a phenomenon which also piqued the curiosity of the Russian public, as Chapter Two will show. As earlier mentioned, however, criticism of the *Divine Comedy* was not only connected with stylistic aspects, but involved matters of content as well, with particular reference to the moral outlook of the work.

2.1.2. Content

A further characteristic of the *Divine Comedy* that has engaged and divided critics throughout the centuries is its philosophical, political and theological message, a subject that concerns the relationship between literature and other realms of human experience.⁶² To illustrate this topic, Pich (2011) examined the contrasting opinions on the *Divine Comedy* expressed by Harold Bloom and Edward Said.⁶³

In *The Western Canon* (1994) Bloom claimed that the *Commedia* could not be considered an imitation of life because its characters do not evolve. Moreover, he warned that the connection between the *Divine Comedy* and the theological and philosophical tradition, or

⁶¹ Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique. Tome II, Œuvres Complètes de Voltaire*, 52 vols (Paris: Garnier, 1878), XVIII, pp. 313-314.

⁶² Pich, p. 21.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

between the work and the real world it represented, should not be the basis for assessing Dante's greatness. In his view, both perspectives reduced the *Divine Comedy* to a mere exercise of mimesis and ignored what Bloom claimed should be the main concern of literary criticism: the aesthetic challenge posed by the *Commedia*.⁶⁴

A diametrically opposed position was taken by Edward Said in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004). Following in Erich Auerbach's footsteps, Said saw the relation between life and afterlife as a key concept of the *Commedia* and affirmed that, though oriented towards the eternal, Dante's masterpiece is even more convincing when it deals with human reality.⁶⁵ The controversy between Bloom and Said as illustrated by Pich (2011) is particularly relevant to this project, as it highlights one of the key problems literary criticism has faced when confronted with the *Commedia*: Is it possible to understand or read Dante without interrogating his morals? And, if yes, is it the duty of a literary critic to do so?⁶⁶

These questions have engaged readers of Dante for centuries. In late sixteenth-century England, for instance, a gradual politicisation of the *Commedia* started emerging in the Protestant intellectual environment, which used Dante as a weapon against Roman papal power. However, as David Wallace has noted, part of the same environment seemed to display a certain caution in approaching the Italian poet, as it was felt that part of the *Divine Comedy's* content would not be approved by the monarchy. A telling example of this was Edmund Spenser, who never mentioned Dante by name in his writings, despite being well-acquainted with Italian literature.⁶⁷ Almost a century later, Dante's emphasis on the necessity of separating Church and State power was developed by John Milton into a critique of English absolutism.⁶⁸ However, in the eighteenth century the popularity across Western Europe of the French dismissal of the *Commedia* silenced these early attempts at a politicisation of the text.⁶⁹ The already referenced *Essay on Universal History* by Voltaire, in particular, described the *Divine Comedy* as a 'perpetual allegory', thus denying any

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 23.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 25.

⁶⁷ David Wallace, 'Dante in English', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 281-304 (p. 285).

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 286.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 289.

connection between the work and human experience.⁷⁰ From these early instances it seems clear that the reception of Dante revealed aspects that would subsequently become specific concerns of intertextuality: was the *Commedia* a 'perpetual allegory', a signifier of a signifier, or did it have a clear connection to medieval, and, possibly, contemporary reality? This second aspect is probably what best distinguished the nineteenth-century re-evaluation of Dante's work.

The nineteenth-century renewal of the *Divine Comedy's* political perspective may be due to a slow discovery of the work's potential beyond theology and religion. In this sense a major role was played by Schelling, who argued that Dante was a master in representing the universal through the particular. In *Über Dante in Philosophischer Beziehung (On Dante in Philosophical Relation, 1803)* the German thinker argued that what rendered the *Commedia* universal was exactly its specificity:

and since universality belongs to the essence of poetry, its necessary requirement is that the individual becomes universal again through the highest peculiarity, absolute again through the most perfect particularity. It is precisely because of the pure individuality, the absolute incomparability of his poetry that Dante is the creator of modern art, which cannot be thought without this willing necessity and necessary will.⁷¹

This idea was further developed by Hegel, whose *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik (Lessons in Aesthetics, 1835)* described the *Divine Comedy* as a work that universalised the earthly world:

Instead of a single occurrence it [the poem] has the eternal act, the absolute final goal, the divine love in its everlasting happening and its unalterable circles as its subject. It has hell, purgatory and heaven as its local, and it immerses the living world of human acting and suffering, and more precisely of individual actions and destinies, into this unchanging being. Here everything which is unique and peculiar about the human interests and goals disappears before the absolute magnitude of the final goal and purpose of all things, but at the same time everything which is otherwise most ephemeral and transitory about the living world is objectively explored to the core, it stands perfectly epic in its worth and unworthiness, arranged through the highest concept, through God.⁷²

Hegel read the *Commedia* as a full exploration of the earthly world, which the poem spiritualised and transported into an epic dimension. This interpretation, although

⁷⁰ Voltaire, *Essay sur l'histoire générale et sur les mœurs et l'esprit des nations, depuis Charlemagne jusqu'à nos jours. Tome Quatrième, Collection complète de ses oeuvres, 17 vols* (s.l. [Genève]: s.n. [Cramer], 1761), XVI, p. 54.

⁷¹ Friedrich Schelling in Potthoff, p. 76.

⁷² Georg Hegel in Potthoff, p. 79.

considering the universalising effort of the work, nevertheless acknowledged the essential contribution of the material world to the spiritual dimension of the poem. The acceptance of the *Divine Comedy* as a work that concerned both a spiritual and a concrete, human dimension was the first step towards the recognition of the work's social and political significance.

Near the end of the century Dante's moral authority was increasingly perceived in the left-wing environment. In his preface to the Italian edition of the *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei* (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 1893) Friedrich Engels argued that 'the close of the feudal Middle Ages, and the opening of the modern capitalist era were marked by a colossal figure: an Italian, Dante, both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times'.⁷³ Engels returned to Dante in his preface to the third volume of Marx's *Capital*, dated 1894, where he presented him as a modern writer, as opposed to Italian literature of the neoclassical era, which he considered a product of the country's subjugation under foreign powers.⁷⁴ The existence of a Marxist reading of Dante shows that a movement towards politicising the image of the Italian writer involved a great part of the European intellectual landscape.

In Engels' reading of Dante, two elements are particularly significant: the idea of a conflict between Dante and 'classical' Italian literature, and the choice of Dante as a symbol to indicate the transition from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance. When examining the Russian context, these key concepts can be found both in readings that preceded the theorisation of Marxism, as the reception of Dante by Aleksandr Pushkin demonstrates, and in readings born on the wave of Marxist interpretations of Dante, as the critical works of Anatoly Lunacharsky and other Soviet cultural figures exemplify. Chapter Two offers a more detailed analysis of this. As a necessary premise to a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*, the next chapter will focus on the legacy of Western European ideas about Dante in Russia.

⁷³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (New York: Cosimo, 2006), p. 37

⁷⁴ Friedrich Engels in Stefano Jossa, 'Politics vs. Literature: The Myth of Dante and the Italian National Identity', in *Dante in the Long Nineteenth Century: Nationality, Identity, and Appropriation*, ed. by Aida Audeh and Nick Havelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 30–50 (p. 47).

Conclusion

Through the use of close reading and the study of the social and political context where Mikhail Bulgakov lived and worked, this research combines theories of intertextuality with a world literature and translation studies framework. The goal is not to conduct a strictly materialist analysis of the writer's creative process. On the contrary, examples of intertextuality and Aesopian language from *The Master and Margarita* analysed in the course of this thesis show how these can become powerful instruments of individual expression in contexts of oppression. The purpose of this project is not to present literary texts as the product of a set of circumstances, but, rather, to expand the focus of Bulgakov studies, often centred around the biography of the writer, to include the analysis of the social and historical context in which his literary career developed. This mixed framework will bring a contribution not only to Bulgakov studies, but also to the study of the reception of Dante in Russia, as it lays the foundations for the analysis of the Dantean appearances in the Soviet press discussed in Chapter Three.

The second part of this chapter has provided insights into the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Western Europe. In doing so, it covered aspects of style and content that were often at the centre of debates on the canonisation of Dante's work. With regards to language, it has been shown how Voltaire described the *Divine Comedy* as 'bizarre' due to its combination of different registers and styles. Concerning content, Chapter One has discussed how German Romanticism not only started a re-evaluation of Dante's language, but, particularly with Schelling and Hegel, also pointed towards ways in which the *Divine Comedy* could be applied to contemporary reality by virtue of its universality. It has also been highlighted how Friedrich Engels considered Dante as an important figure of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Chapter Three, which looks at the reception of Dante in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and 1930s, will show how important Engels' judgement was in shaping the Soviet reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

As Damrosch theorised, world literature is not to be understood as 'an infinite, ungraspable canon of works', but as 'a mode of circulation and of reading'.⁷⁵ In light of this, the next chapter sets out to examine the impact of French and German debates on the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century. Thus, Chapter

⁷⁵ Damrosch, p. 3.

Two will elucidate the main stages of the reception of Dante in Russia in a way that offers a clear picture of the network of literary relations between Russia and Europe.

Chapter Two

The Reception of Dante in Russia from the Eighteenth Century to the 1930s

Introduction

Chapter One has shown how both aesthetic and ethical considerations played an important part in the process that brought Dante to acquire his position in the Western canon. The reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia and the Soviet Union is a further example of how not only style, but also political and ethical elements contribute to shaping a country's literary canon. Laying the groundwork for a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*, this chapter examines the reception of Dante and of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia from the 18th century through the 1930s. In doing so, it investigates whether the *Divine Comedy* was as controversial in Russia as it was in the West, and, if so, whether controversy in Russia arose from the same aspects of the work that were questioned in the West. Secondly, it explores the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution and highlights continuities and discontinuities between the pre- and post-revolutionary reception of Dante in Russia.

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- Was the *Divine Comedy* as controversial in Russia as it was in the West? If yes, did controversy in Russia arise from the same aspects of the work that were questioned in the West?
- How did the Bolshevik Revolution affect the reception of Dante in Russia? What continuities/discontinuities are there between the pre- and post-revolutionary Russian reception of Dante?

1. Dante Arrives in Russia: Religious and Political Implications of the Publication of the *Divine Comedy* in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Russia

Pierre Bourdieu labelled the second half of the nineteenth century as the moment when the autonomy of the literary field reached its peak.¹ However, his observations are not always applicable to autocratic Imperial Russia, where public discourse was limited by censorship. This element cannot be overlooked, as the main domains under the control of Imperial censorship, religion and politics, were also key pillars in the theoretical foundations of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. As a result, when analysing the reception of the *Commedia* in Russia, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of religion and politics in the early circulation of the text. This section offers a brief overview of some of the most significant events in the translation history of the *Divine Comedy* into Russian. Its purpose, however, is not to offer a detailed analysis of the translations, but, rather, to reflect on the religious and political implications that accompanied translation activity around the *Divine Comedy* in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia. For a more thorough analysis of Russian translations of the work, readers may refer to Kristina Landa's recently published monograph on the topic.²

Studies of the circulation of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia generally agree that the beginning of the Russian engagement with Dante has to be set between the late eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth century.³ The argument that is generally used to support this assumption is that the first fragmentary translation of the *Divine Comedy* into Russian (an excerpt from *Purgatory XXVIII*, the first of a series of six cantos which take place in the Garden of Eden and conclude the second cantica of the *Divine Comedy*) was published in 1798.⁴ However, some argue that the discovery of a fifteenth-century copy of the *Divine Comedy* in the library of the Orthodox bishop and educator Lavrenty Gorka (1671 - 1737) may indicate that knowledge of Dante's work had already reached Russia before the end of the eighteenth century, but this knowledge was only limited to theologians.⁵ The reason for

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, 3rd edn (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015), p. 358.

² Kristina S. Landa, «*Bozhestvennaia Komediia*» v zerkalakh russkikh perevodov: *K istorii retseptsii dantovskogo tvorchestva v Rossii* (Sankt-Peterburg: RKhGA, 2020).

³ Charles Isenberg, 'Dante in Russia', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 276-279 (p. 276).

⁴ Potthoff, p. 65.

⁵ Ekaterina D. Lebedeva, 'Polnyi tekst avtoreferata dissertatsii po teme 'Pervye perevody 'Bozhestvennoi Komedii' Dante. Rossiia, Angliia, Amerika' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Institut mirovoi literatury im. A. M. Gor'kogo RAN, 1996), p. 4.

this, according to Lebedeva (1996), may be that, similarly to Western Europe, before the end of the eighteenth century Russia considered Dante a ‘theologian-poet’, or a poet who engaged exclusively with religious matters. His Catholic background therefore alienated him from the Russian Orthodox cultural elite.⁶ Interestingly, here the Russian Orthodox reception seemed to diverge from part of the English Protestant landscape, which sometimes regarded Dante’s religious thought with favour, despite considering him problematic as a political figure (see also Chapter One).⁷

Signs of change started to emerge halfway through the eighteenth century. In 1757 the Venetian typographer Antonio Zatta printed an edition of the *Divine Comedy* commissioned by the count Cristoforo Zapata de Cisneros for the Tsarina Elizaveta Petrovna. The volume contained a portrait of the Empress and a dedication to her in the form of a sonnet penned by the count himself.⁸ The German writer Lebrecht Bachenschwanz later dedicated his own translation of the *Divine Comedy* (1767-1769) to the Tsarina Ekaterina II, also known as Catherine the Great.⁹ It is certainly significant that these editions were addressed to Russian Empresses, a phenomenon which could be read as a sign that the political content of Dante’s work was not considered particularly problematic by the Tsarist establishment.

Further evidence that seems to point in this direction was the publication of the first known Russian translation of an excerpt from canto XXXIII, one of the two cantos centred on Count Ugolino (*Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII). After *Purgatory* XXVIII, the Ugolino-episode (*Inferno* XXXII-XXXIII) is the passage from the work with the longest history of translation into Russian. In these cantos Dante described the stage of his descent to Antenora, the lowest part of Hell, a frozen lake where he encountered Count Ugolino della Gherardesca, a Pisan nobleman who died of starvation along with his sons after being imprisoned by his political rival, Archbishop Ruggieri. The first known Russian translation of this passage by Petr Zheleznikov was published in 1800 in the *Sokrashennaia biblioteka v polzu Gospodam Vospitannikam pervogo Kadetskogo Korpusa* (*Abridged Works of Literature for the Benefit of the Students of*

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Wallace, pp. 285–289.

⁸ Mikhail P. Alekseev, ‘Pervoe znakomstvo Dante v Rossii’, in *Ot klassitsizma k romantizmu: Iz istorii mezhdunarodnykh svyazei russkoi literatury*, ed. by Mikhail P. Alekseev (Leningrad: Nauka, 1970), pp. 6-63 (pp. 8-9).

⁹ Potthoff, p. 59.

the First Cadets' Corp).¹⁰ This literary anthology was intended for the Saint-Petersburg Cadets School and included passages from various Russian and foreign literary works (Figure 1).¹¹

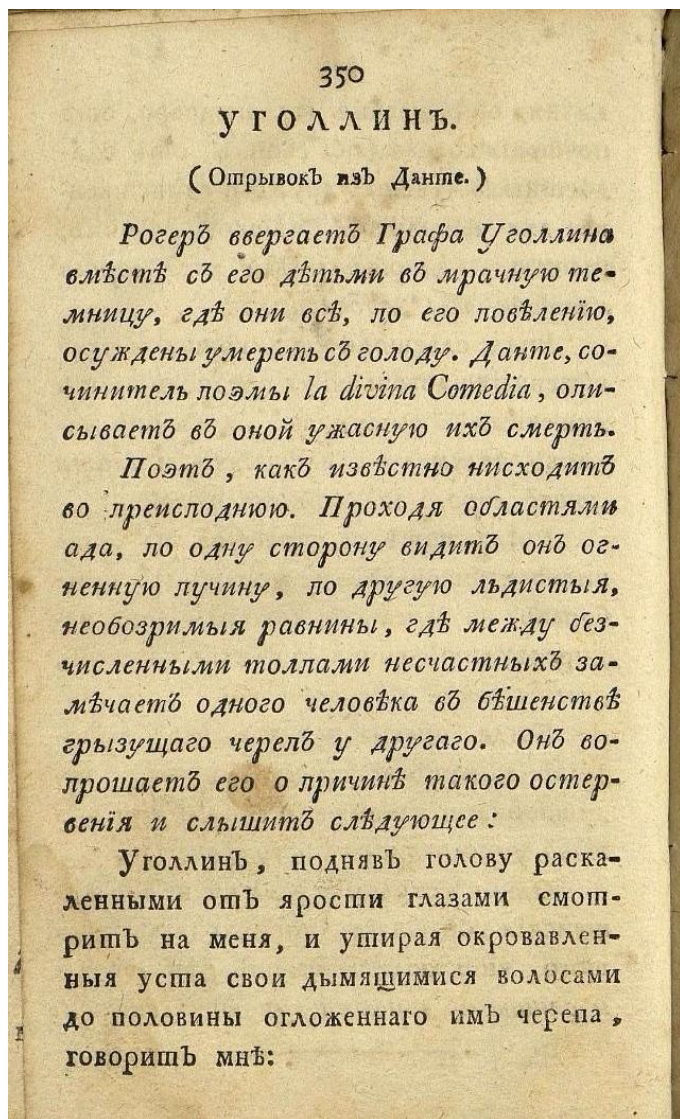


Figure 1: First page of Zheleznikov's prose rendition of Ugolino

Zheleznikov, who redacted the anthology and translated the Ugolino episode for this purpose, taught Russian and literature at the same school. Among his students was the writer and journalist Faddei Bulgarin.¹² A supporter of Tsarist autocracy, in his memoirs

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 66.

¹¹ Petr S. Zheleznikov, *Sokrashchennaia biblioteka v' polzu Gospodam Vospitannikam Pervogo Kadetskogo Korpusa*, 4 vols (Sankt-Peterburg: Tipografii Pervogo Kadetskogo Korpusa, 1800), I.

¹² Boris Garsky, 'Zheleznikov, Petr Semenovich', in *Russky biografichesky slovar' v 25 Tt. / Izd. pod nabliudeniem predsedatelia Imperatorskogo Russkogo Istoricheskogo Obshchestvo A. A. Polovtsova*, ed. by Evgeny S. Shumigorsky and Mikhail G. Kurdiunov (Sankt-Peterburg: Tip. Gl. upr. udelov, 1897), pp. 19-20.

Bulgarin praised the manual for expounding ‘the duties of a citizen and a soldier’ and described it as a ‘guiding star’ for him and his schoolmates.¹³ From these words and by looking at the text itself it is possible to infer that the anthology laid particular emphasis on providing students with models of ethics. Considering that in Dante’s *Inferno* Ugolino is placed in the circle of Hell assigned to those who betray their country, we may also deduce that this passage was included in the manual to warn students against the potential consequences of disloyalty towards the Russian Empire. Russian schools, therefore, seemed to acknowledge the possibility of politicising Dante’s work as a propagandistic tool for the state.

There is, however, evidence to show that the attitude of the Tsarist authorities towards Dante became more ambiguous towards the mid-nineteenth century. A good example of this is the publication of the first complete translation of *Inferno* in Russian. Dmitry E. Min’s full translation of *Inferno* (which followed his translations of *Inferno* V and I published in 1843 and 1852 respectively) was published in 1853, and had a considerable impact, being reprinted in 1855, 1902 and 1909.¹⁴ Completed with the publication of *Purgatory* and *Paradise* in 1907, Min’s full transposition of the poem was considered the Russian standard until Mikhail Lozinsky’s translation (1939-1945).¹⁵ However, the road to the publication of Min’s work turned out to be rather rocky.

Following the revolutionary uprisings in Western Europe in 1848, Tsar Nicholas I had increased the censorship’s surveillance over the press, and in this new climate, Min’s translation of *Inferno* I, published by the journal *Moskvitianin* (*The Muscovite*) in February 1852, attracted the attention of the Moscow censorship board. Although the editor of the journal, Mikhail Pogodin, was notoriously a fervent supporter of Tsarist autocracy,¹⁶ the Moscow board did not reach a final decision on the publication of *Inferno* and, after a long discussion, it was decided that the matter should be deferred to the highest censorship

¹³ Faddei V. Bulgarin, *Vospominaniia F. Bulgarina*, 2 vols (Sankt-Peterburg, 1846), II, pp. 72-73.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of Pogodin’s biography and political thought, see Zdenko Zlatar, “‘For the sake of Slavdom’: M. P. Pogodin and the Moscow Slavic Benevolent Committee: A Collective Portrait of 1870”, *East European Quarterly*, 40.3 (Fall 2006), 255-91.

body in Saint-Petersburg.¹⁷ Min's translation of *Inferno* was delivered to the capital together with a report in which members of the Moscow commission explained their perplexities: the poem was allegedly 'dominated by a mixture of pagan and Christian concepts, by the constant convergence of mythological fictions with the truths of the Christian religion and by the expression of equal faith and equal respect for both'.¹⁸ Interestingly, by order of the then Minister of Education, Platon A. Shirinsky-Shikhmatov, the Saint-Petersburg censorship committee entrusted the responsibility of deciding whether the work was suitable for publication to the censor Nikolai V. Rodzianko, who only a few weeks earlier had denied permission to publish the Russian translation of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).¹⁹ In his report Rodzianko explicitly compared the *Divine Comedy* to John Milton's 'blasphemous' poem, but eventually authorised the publication of Dante's work (with the exception of a few passages).²⁰ The censor described the Italian writer as a 'flawless Christian', who, while 'mixing Christian and pagan concepts', was perfectly capable of 'distinguishing the truth of the former from the delusion of the latter'.²¹ Rodzianko argued that Dante's poem should be considered as 'nothing more than a work of art' and his defence touched also on the *Divine Comedy's* aesthetic value, which in his opinion was so great that the blending of Christian and pagan elements did not constitute sufficient reason to prohibit the publication of 'a poem that has existed for almost six hundred years and constitutes one of the first gems of the history of literature'.²² However, the censor concluded his report with a very significant observation: while the translation of *Paradise Lost* he had recently examined was written in prose, and could therefore, in his view, easily fall into the hands of people from the 'simple class', who could mistake it for a serious theological work, Min's *Inferno* was translated in verse, a form that made it 'more accessible and entertaining to educated readers'. The censor therefore expressed a preoccupation with Dante's religious views, and a desire for the work to remain confined to a cultivated readership. In this respect, the

¹⁷ The following excerpts from the correspondence between the Moscow and Saint Petersburg censorship bodies (in brackets) were translated by me. The Russian originals are quoted in Gorokhova, pp. 48–55.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The complete list of the passages that were excluded from the first published edition of the translation, including Dante's invective against Pope Nicholas III (*Inferno* XIX, vv. 106-115) and his prediction that 'many who think themselves great kings' ('si tignon or là sù gran regi') will 'lie here in the mud' ('qui saranno come porci in brago', *Inferno* VIII, v. 49) can be consulted in *ibid.*, pp. 52-54.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²² *Ibid.*

reception of Dante in Russia revealed a particular purpose of censorship: to control the lower classes' access to literature, a goal that in Tsarist Russia was guided by both political and religious considerations.

It is rather telling that, in a phase of increased control over the press, what caused preoccupation in the *Divine Comedy* was still the religious outlook of the work, rather than the possible political interpretations of the poem. A further example of this was offered by Dmitry Minaev's translation of the *Commedia*, commissioned by the Saint Petersburg publisher M. O. Vol'f with the aim of publishing a Russian edition of the *Divine Comedy* with illustrations by Gustave Doré which would model the complete edition of the *Divine Comedy* in French illustrated by Doré published in Paris in the 1860s.²³ Minaev's *Inferno* came out in 1874, followed by *Purgatory* in 1876 and *Paradise* in 1879. This event was particularly significant not only because the second and third cantica of the *Commedia* were thus for the first time fully translated into Russian, and for the first time the Russian audience became acquainted with Gustave Doré's illustrations of the *Divine Comedy*, but because the Orthodox Church initially hindered the publication of this edition, labelling *Inferno* as 'heretical'.²⁴ After many pleas by the editors, the Orthodox Synod eventually authorised publication, but only on two conditions: that the work would open with a disclaimer stating that what Dante created was a collection of medieval legends, and that the selling price would be high enough to make it inaccessible to the common reader.²⁵ Like in the case of Min's translation, the main preoccupation was to prevent the lower classes from accessing the text, a concern that was becoming increasingly urgent in the 1870s, when changes in Russian society like the 1861 abolition of serfdom brought cultural actors to reflect upon what kind of literature was made available to the increasingly urbanised peasantry. A more detailed discussion of this aspect will follow in due course.

These first observations on the circulation of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia show an interesting dynamic between religion and politics: while Dante's work was at times considered problematic for its Catholic outlook, its political content did not seem to attract the attention of censorship. In some cases, as the first translation of the Ugolino episode

²³ Landa, p. 138.

²⁴ Aram A. Asoian, *Dante v russkoi kul'ture* (Moskva; Sankt-Peterburg: Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2015), p. 15.

²⁵ Ibid.

may suggest, it is even possible to register an attempt, on the part of Tsarist institutions, to use the poem as a propagandistic tool. This did not, however, prevent the rise of anti-autocratic readings of the work. The following sections will focus on the reception of the *Divine Comedy* by the Russian intelligentsia between the 1780s and 1917. This analysis reveals three overlapping tendencies: first, a 'Romantic' image of Dante (popular from the 1810s-1840s) that was strongly influenced by an idealised view of Italy itself; second, a political image of Dante, particularly widespread between the 1830s and the 1870s, connected to his experience of exile and contemporary developments in Russian politics; third, a competing tendency to depoliticise Dante, which emerged in the 1840s until 1917. The final section of this chapter will examine the legacy of these phenomena after 1917. Before analysing the 'Romantic' reception of Dante, however, it is necessary to provide some background on how Western European influences contributed to the formation of a Russian idea of Italy, which then became the ground for the Russian reception of Dante.

2. The Reception of Dante before the 1917 Revolution (1780s-1917)

2.1. 'Classical' Italy, 'Romantic' Dante: The Russian Perception of Italy (1780s-1810s)

The Russian intelligentsia did not build their views on Dante exclusively through direct interaction with his work, but also developed them in connection with ideas about Italy which emerged in response to stimuli from Western Europe. Various studies have shown that, long before Peter the Great's westernising reforms, in the thirteenth and fourteenth century intense relations were established between the Genoese and Crimean trading communities.²⁶ Other studies have shown that an Italian substratum was already present in various realms of Russian culture, from nautical terminology and the influence of Italian librettos on eighteenth-century opera performances at the court of the Tsars, to the collection of letters and works by Italian humanists in the archives of Saint Petersburg's Institute of History.²⁷ This variegated presence subsequently laid the foundations for a

²⁶ James Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 51-70, 84-86.

²⁷ Potthoff, p. 52.

general Italophile tendency that became more explicit in the Russian educated sphere from the mid-eighteenth century and reached its apex in the course of the nineteenth century.²⁸

An important factor in this process was the rising popularity of French travel literature, which attracted the attention of Russian readers in the first half of the nineteenth century. Works such as Charles Dupaty's 1788 *Lettres sur l'Italie (Letters on Italy)*, Madame De Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (1807), and other French intellectuals, like René de Chateaubriand, conveyed to Russian readers an idyllic image of Italy, particularly through their depiction of the 'Campagna di Roma', a phrase which described the countryside surrounding Rome, an area characterised by the interplay of natural elements and ancient architecture which strongly inspired late eighteenth-century French literature.²⁹ On this subject, it is worth looking at a significant passage from Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, where the homonymous protagonist states:

Dante, the Homer of modern times, the sacred poet of our hidden mysteries, the heroic thinker, plunged his genius into the Styx to approach hell, and his soul was as deep as the abysses he has described.

Italy, at the height of its power, lives again to the full in Dante's work. Animated by the spirit of the Republic, a warrior as well as a poet, he fans the flames of action amongst the dead, and his shades are more vibrantly alive than those living today.

[...]

It is as if, banished from his own country, Dante has transported his consuming sorrows to imaginary places. His shades continually ask for news about the living, just as the poet himself enquires about his native land and hell appears to him in the shape of exile.

[...] ³⁰

In *Corinne's* monologue it is possible to notice many of the elements which would characterise the reception of Dante in Russia for many decades: Dante's work is here presented as both relevant to contemporaneity and universally timeless, epic ('the Homer of modern times'). *Corinne* also offers an image of the poet that combines artistic mastery with personal heroism ('heroic thinker', 'a warrior as well as a poet'), an aspect that would emerge with particular intensity in the Romantic and in the Russian radical reception of the *Divine Comedy*. Worthy of notice is also an element of religious mysticism ('the sacred poet of our hidden mysteries'), which would be explored further by Russian Symbolism. Particularly remarkable is also *Corinne's* mention of Dante's experience of exile, an element

²⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁹ For a more detailed examination of this, see Potthoff, pp. 52-54, 68-70.

³⁰ Madame de Staël, *Corinne, or Italy*, ed. and trans. by Sylvia Raphael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 29.

of the poet's biography that would resonate particularly strongly both with the nineteenth-century Russian readership (as examples from Pushkin and Herzen in this chapter will show) and with part of the Soviet literary environment, as demonstrated by the example of Anna Akhmatova (Chapter Five). Extremely interesting is also de Staël's characterisation of Dante as 'animated by the spirit of the Republic', an attempt at giving a modern political interpretation of Dante's figure. This research will highlight similar efforts to politicise Dante's image, with a particular focus on Soviet readings by Friche, Lunacharsky and Kogan, who, differently from de Staël, associated Dante with imperial and monarchic ideologies, rather than republican ones (Chapter Three).

This idealised representation of Italy was strengthened through the Tsarist government's education policies, which for a variety of reasons began to enforce the study of classical languages.³¹ The School Statute introduced in 1804 during the reign of Tsar Alexander I regulated the teaching of Latin in Russian gymnasia.³² In 1811 a reform promoted by Sergei Semenovich Uvarov, then superintendent of the Saint Petersburg educational district and future Deputy Minister of National Education, implemented four-year gymnasia with compulsory teaching of Latin and Greek.³³ The prominence accorded by Tsarist education policies to the study of classical languages is an important factor to be considered in the analysis of the Russian reception of Dante. Among the schools that were founded on the wave of Uvarov's reform was the Imperial Lyceum in Tsarskoe Selo, whose first graduates included numerous writers of the future generation of the so-called Romantic poets, including Aleksandr Pushkin and Anton Del'vig.³⁴ When the *Divine Comedy* started gaining popularity in Saint Petersburg's intellectual circles, for many artists who were part of this environment Italy was the beautiful land of classical literature, a conviction they had inherited from their school years.³⁵

³¹ For more information regarding the enforcement of the study of classical languages in Tsarist Russia, see Patrick L. Alston, *Education and the State in Tsarist Russia* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1969).

³² Potthoff, p. 56.

³³ Ettore Cinnella, *Lo zar e il latino: gli studi classici in Russia tra Otto e Novecento* (Firenze: Della Porta Editori, 2018), p. 7.

³⁴ Potthoff, p. 57.

³⁵ For more information on the influence of Classical literature on early nineteenth-century poets, see also Mara Kažoknieks, *Studien zur Rezeption der Antike bei Russischen Dichtern zu Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts* (München: Sagner, 1968).

The 1780s-1810s reception of Dante in Russia was, therefore, largely coloured by the image of Italy conveyed through Tsarist schools and French literature of the time. To appreciate the power and appeal of this image it is worth considering that the first Russian translation from the *Divine Comedy*, which in all probability was carried out on the basis of a French translation and without reference to the original Italian text, was, as earlier mentioned, an excerpt from *Purgatory XXVIII*, a canto set in the Garden of Eden. The translation was published in *Priiatnoe i poleznoe preprovohdenie vremeni (A Pleasant and Useful Way of Spending Time)*, a Moscow periodical published from 1794 until 1798. The idyllic scenario described in this excerpt certainly appealed to the tastes of Russian eighteenth and early-nineteenth century cultural salons, influenced as they were by the French fascination for Italian landscapes.³⁶ French mediation is, therefore, central to understanding this early interest in *Purgatory*. This preference was, in fact, highly specific to the Russian reception of Dante: studies of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in France, Britain and Germany, by contrast, have established that the first work to be translated was usually *Inferno* rather than *Purgatory*.³⁷

Another relevant aspect of the French reception of the *Divine Comedy* is the polemics surrounding the work's style. In 1762 the journal *Poleznoe uveselenie (Useful Entertainment)*, a literary journal published in Moscow from 1760 until 1762) published an article titled *O stikhotvorstve (On Poetry)*, allegedly authored by S. G. Domashnev, which reported Voltaire's stance on the *Divine Comedy*.³⁸ This article constituted one of the first occurrences of Dante's name in the Russian press.³⁹ It is important to note that by this time various editions of Dante's poem in French had already started to circulate in St Petersburg.⁴⁰ Near the end of the eighteenth century there is evidence of knowledge of Dante in writings by authors Mikhail Chulkov and Denis Fonvizin and by count and director of the Hermitage Museum Dmitry Buturlin.⁴¹ A famous bibliophile, Buturlin also possessed a fourteenth-century manuscript copy of the *Divine Comedy* on parchment, with the emblem of the Italian noble family of Malaspina. It has been claimed that the commentary on the

³⁶ Potthoff, pp. 64-65.

³⁷ For an overview of the history of the reception of Dante in Europe, see Havelly, pp. 213-226.

³⁸ Potthoff, pp. 59-60.

³⁹ Alekseev, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Potthoff, pp. 59-60.

⁴¹ Ibid.

text of this particular copy had been written by Dante himself.⁴² At this stage, however, the Russian acquaintance with Dante appeared superficial and still heavily indebted to French influences.⁴³ Further evidence of this is the 1810 translation into Russian of La Harpe's *Lycée*.⁴⁴ In this essay La Harpe mentioned Dante and Milton as examples of writers that did not comply with traditional artistic conventions, and claimed that if their 'monstrous works' ('ouvrages monstrueux') had attained fame, it was only thanks to a few passages that were indeed constructed according to the parameters of high literature.⁴⁵ La Harpe's judgement was particularly significant because it assigned to the poem a position in the debate on 'classic' and 'modern' literature, which was a major concern in the nineteenth-century Russian intellectual landscape.⁴⁶ This debate characterised mainly the first half of the nineteenth century and was greatly indebted to the increasing popularisation of German literature in Russia, another phenomenon which played an essential role in the reception of the *Divine Comedy*.

2.2. Dante as a 'Romantic' Figure: Dante the Genius (1810s-1840s)

In the Russian reception of Dante the opposition between 'classic' and 'modern' was defined more clearly in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the French-imported vision of Italy was challenged by the reception of German literature, particularly August W. Schlegel and his brother Friedrich, the latter of whom published a definition of what he called 'Romantic poetry' in 1798.⁴⁷ In Friedrich Schlegel's words, Romantic poetry is 'universal': it has a vocation not only to reunite all poetic genres and to connect poetry with other disciplines, but also to fill life with poetry, and poetry with life.⁴⁸ This generation of German Romanticism saw the *Divine Comedy* as the embodiment of the all-encompassing tendency of poetry.

⁴² Aleksandr P. Lobodanov, 'Dante parla russo: Il poeta della Commedia e la cultura russa', in *Izbrannye trudy. T. III. Ocherki iz istorii otechestvennoi ital'ianistiki*, ed. by Aleksandr P. Lobodanov (Moskva: BOS, 2020), pp. 298-310 (pp. 298-299). According to Lobodanov, all manuscripts from Buturlin's library were sold at an auction in Paris in 1839.

⁴³ Potthoff, pp. 60-62.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Jean-Francois de La Harpe, *Licée ou cours de littérature ancienne et moderne par J. F. La Harpe, précédé d'une notice historique par Léon Thiessé*, 18 vols (Paris: Pourrat Frères Editeurs, 1838), I, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Potthoff, p. 62.

⁴⁷ August W. Schlegel and Friedrich Schlegel, 'Fragmente', *Atheneum. Eine Zeitschrift von August Wilhelm Schlegel und Friedrich Schlegel*, 1.2 (1798), 3-146 (pp. 28-30).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Interestingly, in Russia the reception of A. W. Schlegel and other German Romantic thinkers was once again mediated through France. The Schlegels' works on Dante started circulating in Russia after the 1822 publication in the literary periodical *Novosti literaturny (Literary News)* of an anonymous article which in great part constituted a paraphrase of Madame de Staël's essay on German literature *De l'Allemagne (On Germany, 1813)*.⁴⁹ The essay, which had popularised the works of German Romantics among French intellectual circles,⁵⁰ was used by part of the Russian literary world to challenge the dominant French cultural paradigm in Russia.⁵¹ The Russian paraphrase of *De l'Allemagne* mentioned August W. and Friedrich Schlegel's work on the *Divine Comedy* and recommended August W. Schlegel's translations of Dante. In addition to this, in the 1820s the German translations of Dante by A. F. K. Streckfuss, A. W. Schlegel, L. Bode, K. F. L. Kannegiesser and H. Heine were published in Russia, followed by translations by K. Witte in 1832, and Philatete in 1841.⁵² These translations, together with August and Friedrich Schlegel's and Schelling's theoretical work on the *Divine Comedy*, contributed to reinforce the Russian reception of the German interest in *Inferno*.⁵³

One of the most important contributions of German Romanticism to the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy* was the idea that, through his poem, Dante had created his own mythological world, while attaining the highest degree of stylistic excellence.⁵⁴ This demiurgic view of Dante rendered him the perfect example of what may be described as 'Romantic genius'. Particularly influential in this respect was Friedrich Schelling. His vision of the relationship between allegory and history, which he formulated in his essay *Über Dante in philosophischer Beziehung (On Dante in Relation to Philosophy, 1803)*, followed similar reflections proposed by the Schlegels, and argued that characters in the *Divine Comedy* had not only a historical dimension, but also a mythological one, and were therefore universally valid, and not strictly connected to one place or one time.⁵⁵ Although this did not necessarily coincide with the author's intentions, Schelling's theory of a connection between Dante's

⁴⁹ Potthoff, p. 80.

⁵⁰ Andrei Zorin, *By Fables Alone: Literature and State Ideology in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), p. 336.

⁵¹ Potthoff, p. 82.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁴ Ernst Behler, 'Dante in Germany', in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 262-269 (p. 267).

⁵⁵ Ibid. On this, see also Potthoff, p. 76.

poem and the contemporary world would later lead to its modernisation and politicisation by Italian patriotic thinkers and the Russian radical intelligentsia. More on this early politicisation of Dante will be said towards the end of this section.

The modern concept of 'genius', which fuelled the Romantic movement, started developing in the eighteenth century and became popular in the nineteenth century as a result of the idea that originality was a necessary precondition for artistic excellence.⁵⁶ A particularly evocative expression of this theory was Lavater's definition of geniuses as 'Gods in human form'.⁵⁷ Originality, therefore, was divinely inspired, and the *Divine Comedy*, with its combination of myth and poetry, came to be the perfect embodiment of this idea. The appreciation of Dante's aesthetic accomplishments was strongly connected to the conviction, taken mainly from Friedrich Schlegel's works, that, together with Shakespeare and Cervantes, Dante's work signalled the beginning of modern poetry, making him the creator of a writing style which went beyond the limitations of classical poetry. Consequently, Dante was placed directly in the middle of the early nineteenth-century conflict between ancients and moderns.⁵⁸

This positioning of Dante influenced literary debates not only in the West but also in Russia, especially after complete editions of the *Divine Comedy* in French and Italian started to circulate among Russian intellectuals, who thus became acquainted with *Inferno*, the first section of the poem. As a result, prominent personalities in the Russian intellectual world, including Aleksandr Pushkin, began to celebrate Dante, viewing him through the lens of contemporary artistic preferences as a Romantic poet. Pushkin offered an example of this in a letter written at the beginning of the 1830s to the editor of *Moskovsky vestnik* (*The Moscow Herald*, a literary journal published from 1827 to 1830) where he criticised the position of the Russian literary press regarding the distinction between Classical and Romantic literature:

[...] finally, our self-appointed experts unceremoniously put Dante and Lamartine on the same level, despotically divide literary Europe into Classical and Romantic, attributing to the first the languages of the Latin South and to the second the Germanic tribes of the North, so that Dante (il gran padre Alighieri), Ariosto, Lopez de Vega, Calderon and Cervantes have

⁵⁶ David Higgins, *Romantic Genius and the Literary Magazine: Biography, Celebrity and Politics* (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 1-2.

⁵⁷ Johann K. Lavater in *ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵⁸ Behler, p. 267.

fallen into the Classical phalanx, to which apparently victory will undoubtedly belong, given the unexpected help it received from the editor of the *Moscow Telegraph*.⁵⁹

Here Pushkin questioned the way in which Russian literary journals had mechanically assigned all writers from the South of Europe to the field of 'Classical literature,' by suggesting Dante was an example of a writer who, although Italian, would be more appropriately described as a Romantic. Pushkin's interpretation seemed, therefore, to acknowledge Dante as the most significant Italian writer, although his poetry allegedly did not conform to expectations associated with Italian literature, which, in his view, were unduly marred by the influence of French culture. In other writings, Pushkin framed the conflict between Dante and Italian literature as an opposition between 'old' Classical literature and 'new' Romantic literature, using a binary he and his circle often applied to contemporary literature.⁶⁰

Further evidence of this is provided also in another article by Pushkin, *O nichtozhestve literaturny russkoi (On the insignificance of Russian literature)*, written in 1834 but published posthumously:

Romantic poetry was blossoming out richly and majestically in all Europe. Germany had long had its Nibelungen, Italy – its triune poem; Portugal – the *Lusiad*; Spain – Lope de Vega, Calderón and Cervantes; England – Shakespeare [...].⁶¹

Later in the same article Pushkin also openly blamed Dante's unpopularity in Italy on the general hegemony of French literary taste in Europe.⁶² The early nineteenth-century reception of Dante in Russia, therefore, was also part of a general reaction against the dominant French literary influence and a consequence of a newly born interest in the German self-proclaimed Romantics.

Also connected to the creation of a Romantic image of Dante was the enduring Russian interest in the cantos centred around Count Ugolino. After Petr Zheleznikov's translation was published in 1800, translations of this single episode continued to be published in

⁵⁹ Aleksandr S. Pushkin, 'Pis'mo k izdateliu "Moskovskogo vestnika"', in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiatikh tomakh*, ed. by Dmitry D. Blagoi and others (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1962), vi, pp. 280-284 (p. 282).

⁶⁰ For more details on Pushkin's definition of 'old' and 'new' poetry, see also Aleksandr S. Pushkin, 'O poezii klassicheskoi i romanticheskoi', in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiatikh tomakh*, ed. by Dmitry D. Blagoi and others (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1962), vi, pp. 263-266.

⁶¹ Aleksandr S. Pushkin, 'On the Insignificance of Russian Literature', in *Pushkin on Literature*, ed. by Tatiana Wolff (London: Methuen & Co, 1971), pp. 352-359 (p. 353).

⁶² Ibid.

Russia even after the publication of the first complete Russian translations of *Inferno* by E. Kologrivova in 1842 and D. E. Min in 1853, a testimony to the enduring popularity of these cantos among the Russian audience.⁶³ A particularly significant Ugolino-translation was authored by Pavel Katenin, whose partial translation of *Inferno* XXXIII was published in the Saint Petersburg literary journal *Syn Otechestva* (*Son of the Fatherland*, 1812-1852) in 1817, while his translations of *Inferno* I-III were published in 1832.⁶⁴ From a stylistic point of view, Katenin was one of the most prominent theoreticians of archaism in literature: he argued for the necessity of using Church Slavonic and language from folk poetry in literary works.⁶⁵ Katenin's partial translation of *Inferno* XXXIII, which was the first Russian translation of Dante in verse, preceding by nearly thirty years Min's translation of *Inferno* V in 1843,⁶⁶ played a major role in spreading the idea of Dante as a 'rough poet' among the Russian audience.⁶⁷ This, combined with the reception of contemporary German works, contributed to create an image of Dante as the lead cantor of hell, a stereotype that, similarly to what was happening in Western Europe, became an essential component of the Russian Romantic reception of the *Divine Comedy*, and a further element that challenged the idyllic image of Italy inherited from French culture.⁶⁸

Another factor that led Russian 'Romantic' readers to question 'Classical' images of Italy imported from France was the greater awareness of the political situation of Italy and, connected to this, an increasing politicisation of the *Divine Comedy*. A radical vision of Dante was particularly popular among poets who supported the Decembrists, a group of aristocratic officials who attempted a failed revolutionary uprising in December 1825. These writers felt a particular affinity with Dante based on their common experience of exile. Pushkin, for instance, although not having actively participated in the uprising, sympathised with the Decembrist cause. During his own exile to Southern Russia (1820-1824), he developed his interest in Dante and Italian literature, as is testified by his frequent use of Dantean quotes in this period.⁶⁹ The manuscript version of *Ruslan and Liudmila*, 1820, for instance, ended on a quote from *Inferno* V: 'E quella a me: Nessun magior [sic] dolore / Che

⁶³ Potthoff, p. 100.

⁶⁴ Landa, p. 23.

⁶⁵ Lebedeva, p. 6.

⁶⁶ Landa, pp. 5-6.

⁶⁷ Potthoff, p. 108.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 100.

⁶⁹ Asoian, pp. 40-43.

ricordarsi del tempo felice / nella miseria' ('And she to me: There is no greater sorrow / Than to recall a time of joy / In wretchedness').⁷⁰ Soviet Pushkin specialist Dmitry Blagoi, who interpreted Pushkin's works through Marxist-Leninist ideology, remarked that this quote reflected Pushkin's own mental state at that moment, while he was in exile in a remote place which was completely unfamiliar to him.⁷¹

The strong association between Dante and the theme of political exile (which, as the next section will show, would become even more prominent in the 1830s-1870s) was probably borrowed by Pushkin and by the Decembrists from Byron⁷² and was encouraged by a rising interest in the Italian radical intellectuals and the struggle towards the unification of Italy.⁷³ When read through the lens of solidarity with the Italian independence movements, Dante acquired the status of poet of freedom in the Russian literary world. This was made possible also through the mediation of Italian intellectuals like Ugo Foscolo, Antonio Panizzi, Giuseppe Mazzini and Gabriele Rossetti, who lived in exile in England and whose works were known in Russia.⁷⁴ Thus, the genius as a motif connected to Dante soon developed not only aesthetic, but also political implications: Italian patriotic thinkers transmitted a radical vision of Dante which was to influence Russian intellectuals for a long time.

Through the reception of the philosophy of Schelling and other German readers of Dante, and through the lens of the Italian struggle for independence, an anti-autocratic image of Dante was conveyed to the Russian reading public. Aleksander Pushkin, for instance, was aware of Byron's interest in the Italian political situation and was familiar with some of its key actors, like the writer Alessandro Manzoni and the patriot Silvio Pellico.⁷⁵ Silvio Pellico's *Discorso dei Doveri degli Uomini (On the Duties of Men, 1834)*, translated into Russian in 1836, had a great impact on Pushkin and other members of the intelligentsia. Gogol, in particular, expressed interest in Pellico's view that a moral uplift was necessary to fuel a rebirth of Italy, and thought that this idea could be applied to the Russian context.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ Dmitry D. Blagoi, 'Dante v soznanii i tvorchestve Pushkina', in *Istoriko-filologicheskie issledovaniia: Sbornik statei AN SSSR* (Moskva: Nauka, 1967), pp. 237-246 (p. 239).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Asoian, p. 24.

⁷³ Potthoff, p. 93.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 179.

⁷⁵ Potthoff, p. 93.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

Recalling Hutcheon's analysis of adaptations, it is possible to observe how translation was used by educated Russian readers to serve the purposes of their own debates. The reception of German literature on Dante in Russia fuelled the debate around 'classical' and 'modern' literature, and problematised the perception of Italy imported through France. As the case of the Decembrists shows, however, at this stage the hiatus between 'Classical Italy' and 'Romantic Dante' also started to move away from being a strictly aesthetic diatribe. In the mid-nineteenth century, this conflict would acquire strong political connotations, which involved a partisan, anti-tsarist interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*. However, the mid-nineteenth century would also be characterised by attempts to challenge appropriation of Dante by the radical intelligentsia. Both efforts, to politicise and to de-politicise Dante, are described in the next sections, starting with political movements against the Tsarist rule and their interpretation of the *Divine Comedy*.

2.3. The Reception of Dante in Russia from the 1840s until 1917

2.3.1. Dante as a Political Figure: Gogol, Herzen, and the Italian 'Risorgimento' (1830s-1860s)

As discussed in the previous section, political interpretations of the *Divine Comedy* in the nineteenth century were connected to two phenomena: a politicisation of the image of Italy, acquired through the reception of Byron and Italian patriotic literature, and a politicisation of the figure of Dante himself through the influence of contemporary Italian and German writers. This section focuses on how these changes in Russian perceptions of Italy influenced writers such as Nikolai Gogol and Aleksandr Herzen, who rose to prominence between the 1830s and the 1850s. Particular attention is dedicated to observing how the proclamation of Italy as a national state (1861) influenced Russian perceptions of the country. By looking at these writers, it is possible to understand how the initial interest in German-imported Romanticism could gradually lead to political readings of the *Divine Comedy*.

Among the elements which contributed to intensifying the opposition between the idyllic image of Italy imported through French literature (and encouraged by Tsarist education) on one hand, and the Romantic rediscovery of Dante on the other, was the re-evaluation of medieval culture, itself also a consequence of the reception of contemporary German literature. Nikolai Gogol was among the writers who took the first steps in this direction. His

1834 essay *O srednikh vekakh (On the Middle Ages)* represented an attempt to shift emphasis from the millenary and unchangeable Roman Empire to the conflict between traditional Roman culture and new Christian values that marked the years following the end of the empire.⁷⁷ The contrast between Classical antiquity and Christianity was for Gogol the essence of Christian Rome.⁷⁸ Further on, in *Rim (Rome, 1842)* he gave voice to the emotional core of the Russian experience of Italy, as opposed to the antiquarian and purely aesthetic interest which characterised other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russian travel accounts.⁷⁹ In this work Gogol consciously built an opposition between Paris and Rome, where Rome represented the acme of beauty and morality. Through the preference for Rome over Paris, part of the Russian intelligentsia expressed a rejection of the modern French Enlightenment and encouraged a return to old European foundations, a position they would later apply to their observations of Russian society.⁸⁰

Gogol's spiritual connection to Rome anticipated a politicisation of the Russian image of Italy which, in its own way, contributed to the creation of a Dante myth. In 1856 the journal *Sovremennik (The Contemporary)*, a literary magazine published in Saint Petersburg from 1836 until 1866) published a Russian translation of Thomas Carlyle's *Dante and Shakespeare* from the volume *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (1841)*.⁸¹ In this essay, Carlyle argued:

Italy, for example, poor Italy lies dismembered, scattered asunder, not appearing in any protocol or treaty as a unity at all; yet the noble Italy is actually one: Italy produced its Dante; Italy can speak! The Czar of all the Russias, he is strong, with so many bayonets, Cossacks and cannons; and does a great feat in keeping such a tract of Earth politically together; but he cannot yet speak. Something great in him, but it is a dumb greatness. He has had no voice of genius, to be heard of all men and times. He must learn to speak. He is a great dumb monster hitherto. His cannons and Cossacks will have rusted into nonentity, while that Dante's voice is still audible. The Nation that has a Dante is bound together as no dumb Russia can be. We must here end what we had to say of the *Hero-Poet*.⁸²

This judgement touched a chord with the members of the cultural elite who were dissatisfied with the state of Russian literature. According to Marcus C. Levitt, 'Carlyle

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 110.

⁷⁸ Nikolai V. Gogol cited in *ibid.*

⁷⁹ Potthoff, p. 111.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 218.

⁸² Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, ed. by David R. Sorensen and Brent E. Kinser (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 103.

expressed one of the basic antimonies [sic] in Russian intellectual life: the stark opposition between the *state*, formidable in its brute force, and the *nation*, taken to mean the collective and intellectual moral life of the people, as manifested in its poets. [...] For the Russians, it was Pushkin who came to serve as their Dante, as the validator of their national self-worth'.⁸³ As this study underscores, the effects of this tension between state and nation would continue to resonate in the Russian cultural life long after the fall of the Tsarist regime. Meanwhile, the Russian engagement with Carlyle suggests that the implications of the Romantic reception of Dante were not exclusively aesthetic, but also comprised a fascination for the 'heroic', moral stature of the poet, a theme the Russian intelligentsia further developed in the second half of the century. Closely entangled with this heroic image of Dante is also a vision of Italy as a country of heroic, tragic stature. Carlyle's 'poor', 'dismembered', 'scattered asunder', and yet 'noble' Italy is not very different from Gogol's Rome, moulded in the conflict between Christianity and Classical culture. The seeds of this politicisation of the myth of Italy will fully bloom in the works of writers like Aleksandr Herzen.

Similarly to Gogol, in his *Pis'ma iz Frantsii i Italii 1847-1852 (Letters from France and Italy 1847-1852, 1858)*, Herzen expressed his emotional connection to Italy in the opposition between Paris and Rome: while the French capital city was torn apart by class conflict, Rome was the romantic symbol of unity, both on national and popular levels.⁸⁴ Naturally, this phenomenon was connected to the aesthetic experience of Italy which drew on the Italian 'Golden Age', a myth whose foundations had been laid at the end of the eighteenth century, and that would be recuperated by the Symbolist movement towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁵ However, in Herzen's work aesthetic contemplation gradually merged with an approach more oriented towards history: the fourth letter in the collection offered an excursus into the history of Rome and Italy up to the 1850s, with a particular focus on the Italian struggle towards national unity, which started gaining momentum in the 1810s and was reaching its peak in the 1850s (Italy would eventually become a national state in

⁸³ Marcus C. Levitt, *Russian Literary Politics and the Pushkin Celebration of 1880* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 4. It is worth noting that Carlyle was also invited to attend the Pushkin Celebration of 1880 (*ibid.*, p. 69).

⁸⁴ Potthoff, p. 127.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

1861).⁸⁶ The Italian fight for independence and the literature associated with it, known as 'Risorgimento' (resurgence, revival) literature, was already becoming popular in Russia through the mediation of English writers, particularly Lord Byron. However, in the 1850s Herzen had a key role in bringing these issues to the attention of the Russian public, thanks to his contacts with important Italian political and intellectual figures such as Giuseppe Mazzini, Aurelio Saffi and Giuseppe Garibaldi.⁸⁷ Herzen's letters also present a particular use of Dantean references, which will be highlighted in due course.

The interest Russian literary journals manifested in this kind of literature did not die out after Italy eventually became a national state in 1861. Developments in Russian politics and society like the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 fuelled an interest in realist literature in the Russian readership. At the same time, however, commentaries on Italian realist literature in the Russian press testified to the prevalence of an idealistic vision of Italy. While reflecting on writings by Giovanni Verga, Domenico Ciampoli, Luigi Capuana and Grazia Deledda, Russian critics highly praised what they considered a characteristic expedient of their novels: showing a general condition of injustice through the story of oppression of a single character, usually a farmer or a worker who incarnated the supposed spirit of the people.⁸⁸ The reception of nineteenth-century Italian literature by the left-wing Russian press points out also the enduring charm of the Rome-myth: the publication of Giuseppe Garibaldi's novel *Il governo dei preti* (*The Rule of the Monk*, 1870) in *Otechestvennyye zapiski* (*Notes of the Fatherland*, a monthly literary journal published in Saint Petersburg from 1818 to 1884), for instance, was probably motivated by its emphasis on the liberation of Rome and on the fight against the hegemonic power of the Catholic Church, rather than by an interest in the novel's aesthetic qualities.⁸⁹ The publication of Garibaldi's work by this

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 126. After emigrating from Russia in 1847, Herzen spent twelve years in London, from 1852 to 1864, where he maintained a very active political life, intervening on the necessity for the abolition of serfdom in Russia and other social issues through his own London-based publishing house, *Free Russian Press*. During this time he made connections with several Italian political figures who were also in exile in London, like Giuseppe Mazzini and Garibaldi. Although fascinating, this subject is outside the scope of this thesis, but it has potential to become the subject of further research in the near future. Interestingly, Leone Ginzburg also wrote on the subject in 1932, only two years before he was first arrested for antifascist activity under Mussolini's regime (Leone Ginzburg, *Garibaldi e Herzen* (Roma: Lit Edizioni, 2015). More recent contributions on this include Carmen Scocozza, *Aleksandr Herzen e il Risorgimento italiano* (Milano; Udine: Mimesis, 2010).

⁸⁸ Potthoff, p. 137.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

journal provides further evidence of the interest in the Italian Risorgimento by the most progressive sectors in the Russian nineteenth-century intellectual world.⁹⁰

The gradual politicisation of the Russian perception of Italy between the 1830s and the 1860s became apparent not just in Russian engagement with Italian literature of these decades, but also in shifts in the reception of Dante. Evidence of how the early nineteenth-century heroic depiction of Dante as the exiled genius developed in the following decades is provided by the evolution of Dantean references in Aleksandr Herzen's writings from the first into the second half of the nineteenth century. It has already been discussed how his letters convey an idyllic and at the same time extremely politicised image of Italy. His references to Dante display a similar transition from a spiritual to a more social realm. Herzen first approached the *Divine Comedy* during his exile in Viatka, in north-eastern Russia, where he had been exiled in 1835 for attending an event during which anti-tsarist poetry had been recited.⁹¹ His letters of this period, where he frequently compared himself to Dante, his fiancée Nataliia Zakharina to Beatrice, and his friend Nikolai Ogarev to Virgil, demonstrate a remarkable interest for the most mystical aspects of Dante's poetry.⁹² Herzen subsequently described this phase of his life in these terms:

This was the time of Romanticism in my life. Mystical, poetry-filled idealism, love as an all-consuming feeling, which had guided everything in my life. [...] This was the time of *Gemütlichkeit* (lyrism).⁹³

With the passing of time and the increasing awareness of his role as an opponent of Tsarist autocracy, Herzen extended his use of Dantean references from his correspondence to his observations on Russian society. In these writings, aimed at a broader audience, Herzen represented Russia as a re-enactment of Dante's hell:⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *Otechestvennye zapiski*, which between 1839 and 1846 was directed by Vissarion Belinsky (of whom more will be said in the next section) and included Aleksandr Herzen among its contributors, was also responsible for discovering some of the most prominent literary voices of nineteenth-century Russia, including (but not limited to) Mikhail Lermontov, Ivan Goncharov, and Fedor Dostoevsky. For more on this, see Vasily I. Kuleshov, 'Die "Otechestvennye zapiski" in der russischen Geistesbewegung der vierziger Jahre des 19. Jahrhunderts (übersetzt von H. Rymarowicz)', *Zeitschrift für Slawistik*, 5.3 (Jan. 1, 1960), 370-85 and Nikita V. Shevtsov, 'Zhurnal "Otechestvennye zapiski" v istorii russkoi kul'tury XIX veka', *Kul'turologiia*, 3 (2019), 132-42.

⁹¹ Aram A. Asoian, '*Pochtite vysochaishevo poeta...': Sud'ba Bozhestvennoi Komedii Dante v Rossii* (Moskva: Kniga, 1990), p. 87.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Aleksandr I. Herzen in *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Potthoff, p. 140.

This Russia starts from the emperor and goes from gendarme to gendarme, from bureaucrat to bureaucrat, to the last policeman in the remotest corner of the empire. Every step of this staircase, like in the Dantean bolgi⁹⁵ [sic], acquires a new evil force, a new degree of debauchery and cruelty.⁹⁶

Uses of Dante in Herzen's writings seemed to arise from an inner dimension (analogies between the author and Dante) to be projected towards the external (comparison between Russian social structures and *Inferno*). From his early fascination for the mystical aspects of Dante's relationship with Beatrice and Virgil to his comparisons between Russia and Dante's hell, Herzen's writings provide a telling example of how part of the Russian intelligentsia moved from the reception of early nineteenth-century German Romanticism to a more socially-oriented attitude towards literature, which could represent a potential threat to the status quo. His evolution into a socially engaged writer was also part of a more general shift towards socially oriented literary criticism, a tendency which, together with its main representative, Vissarion Belinsky, is the object of the next section.

The first half of the nineteenth century was characterised by an attempt, in some segments of the intelligentsia, to politicise Dante. In the second half of the century, however, this movement, despite being encouraged by intellectuals like Herzen, was also opposed by new phenomena: the first was the emergence of what was perceived as a purely aesthetic reading of Dante, as the debate between Stepan Shevyrev and Vissarion Belinsky shows, while the second was the development of an interpretation oriented towards history which questioned the possibility to modernise Dante's work; the third was the appropriation of Dante by the Russian Symbolist movement. Echoes of each of these tendencies would subsequently arise in Bolshevik debates on Dante.

2.3.2. Voices Against the 'Radical' Dante: Shevyrev, Veselovsky, and Russian Symbolism (1830s-1917)

To gain a clearer picture of how the reception of Dante in Russia developed in the second half of the nineteenth century, it is necessary to situate it in the context of late nineteenth-century Russian culture, which was characterised by the upper classes' preoccupation with a

⁹⁵ In Italian in the original text. The 'bolge' are the circles around which Dante's hell is structured. Each circle is followed by another in a downward spiral, in which each 'bolgia' corresponds to a sin of greater magnitude.

⁹⁶ Aleksandr I. Herzen, 'Russky narod i sotsializm', in *Sobranie sochinenii v 30-kh tomakh*, 30 vols (Moskva: Nauka, 1954), VII, pp. 307-340 (p. 329).

newly born lower class readership, an element which is crucial to the understanding of Bolshevik attitudes towards literature.

Questions regarding what the working classes should read did not start with the Bolsheviks' rise to power, but emerged earlier, in the second half of the nineteenth century. Similar issues preoccupied both the Tsarist government and a great part of the intelligentsia. The issue rose to greater prominence with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 under Tsar Alexander II and the consequently ever-increasing influx of illiterate and semi-literate peasants into the Russian cities.⁹⁷ Here the lower classes gained access to various kinds of popular literature, including news, fiction and popular science.⁹⁸ This phenomenon was met with distrust by the Russian educated classes, who feared that a literature ruled by the market could be detrimental to the moral values of workers and peasants.⁹⁹ However, this was not the intelligentsia's only reservation:

Many educated Russians were committed to a conception of cultural order according to which the lower classes would share in a culture common to all Russians. This culture would be created by educated Russians but would be accessible to all. The proper goals of literacy and education were to enable people of lower-class origins to share in this general culture. The desired character of the general culture differed among educated Russians of different political persuasions, but most were committed to a concept of cultural unity. The development of an autonomous popular commercial literature was inconsistent with these notions of harmony.¹⁰⁰

These considerations spurred different agents of the educated world (activists, philanthropists, political propagandists, but also Church and state officials) to produce literature aimed at the working classes in the city and in the country.¹⁰¹ Among these, the intelligentsia were in a peculiar position: they opposed the State, and aspired to be the voice of the 'narod', the Russian people. At the same time, as a mainly Westernised, cultivated social stratum, they could not have been further away from the illiterate peasantry.¹⁰² To resolve this tension, the intelligentsia aspired to create a culture of universal values, and to bring the 'narod' to share in this culture.

⁹⁷ Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2003), pp. 3-34.

⁹⁸ A detailed picture of Russian pre-revolutionary popular literature is offered in Brooks.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 295-296.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

¹⁰² Levitt, p. 4.

Russian Marxists to some extent also shared this yearning for ultimate cultural harmony. Starting from their interpretation of contemporary society as based on class conflict, Marxists deemed it impossible to achieve cultural unity under present conditions but did all the same buy into the ideal of a universal culture, to be achieved in the classless society of the future.¹⁰³ The idea that it was the duty of the intelligentsia to create a culture which would be shared by all Russians regardless of their social provenance is essential for understanding future Bolshevik attitudes in the debate around pre-revolutionary literature.

Moreover, it is important to underline that in Russian cultural history this era was also characterised by the rise of the *raznochintsy*, a class of intellectuals from humble backgrounds who gained positions of prominence among the Russian intelligentsia.¹⁰⁴ One of the most important such figures was Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848), a *raznochinets* and a towering literary critic, who in the Soviet period would be elevated to the rank of undisputed authority in literary criticism for his socially engaged and fiercely antiautocratic approach to literary analysis. Most importantly for the purposes of this study, Belinsky famously engaged in a long polemic on Dante with Stepan Shevyrev, which would resurface in later Bolshevik debates on literature.

A literary critic and a poet, Stepan Shevyrev authored several contributions on Dante. A reader of Schelling, he shared his idea of the *Divine Comedy* as a mythological creation, and of Dante as the creator of an eternal myth.¹⁰⁵ However, Shevyrev also penned, in 1830, a famous poem which described Dante's poetry in these terms:

Что в море купаться,
то Данта читать:
Стихи его тверды и полны,
Как моря упругие волны!
Как сладко их смелым умом разбивать!
Как дивно над речью глубокой
Всплываешь ты мыслью высокой:
Что в море купаться,
то Данта читать.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Brooks, p. 328.

¹⁰⁴ For more information on this phenomenon and its significance for Soviet literature, see Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 11-18.

¹⁰⁵ Asoian, *Dante v russkoi kul'ture*, pp. 33-34.

¹⁰⁶ Stepan P. Shevyrev in *ibid.*, p. 99.

Reading Dante
is like bathing in the sea:
His verses are solid and dense,
Like the sea's springy waves!
How sweet it is to break them with a bold mind!
How wonderful it is
To float in this deep river with lofty thoughts!
Reading Dante,
is like bathing in the sea.

It is perhaps unfair to suggest that Shevryev promoted an ahistorical reading of Dante, given that he even authored a dissertation on Dante and his time.¹⁰⁷ Regardless of the author's intentions, though, there can be no doubt that for many of Shevryev's contemporaries these verses came to represent a purely aesthetic approach to the *Divine Comedy*, as this statement from Nikolai Kh. Ketcher to Nikolai Ogarev dated 23 April 1843, quoted in a collection of letters by Herzen, shows. In a context that is completely unrelated to the *Divine Comedy*, Ketcher wrote:

[...] and it would be great if you could come as quickly as possible, especially as you can bathe in the sea while reading Dante even in Moscow, just like you bathe in the sea and read Dante there.¹⁰⁸

As Aram Asoian has remarked, the lighthearted sensuousness with which Shevryev described his experience as a Dante reader stood in contrast with the solemnity of Dante's verses and, it may be added, with the more political image of the exiled poet fostered by Pushkin, the Decembrists and Herzen.¹⁰⁹ It is also remarkable how the general atmosphere of Shevryev's verses, with its dominant sea metaphor, is quite reminiscent of *Paradiso* (see for example 'lo gran mar dell'essere', 'the vastness of the sea of being in *Paradiso* I, v. 113). While the Russian so-called Romantic, political reception of the *Divine Comedy* was mainly built on *Inferno*, Shevryev's poem, expressing a more aesthetic attitude to the work, seemed to display a special connection to *Paradiso*. It is not by accident that *Paradiso* was also to become an important source of inspiration for the Symbolist movement. Andrei Bely, for instance, will again use a sea image to describe the Symbolist perspective on art, an aspect which will be discussed towards the end of this section.

¹⁰⁷ Asoian, *Dante v russkoi kul'ture*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁰⁸ Aleksandr I. Herzen, 'Pis'ma 1839-1847 godov', in *Sobranie sochinenii v 30 tomakh*, 30 vols (Moskva: Nauka, 1954), XXII, p. 147.

¹⁰⁹ Asoian, *Dante v russkoi kul'ture*, p. 99.

Shevyrev's sensuous approach to Dante did not go unnoticed. Belinsky, in particular, was extremely critical of Shevyrev, to the point where he quoted his verses on Dante in a comment addressed at poets who, in his opinion, wrote works where:

every word apparently corresponds to a thought, when in fact every word corresponds to a rhetorical flourish, or to a wild association of objects which can't be associated. One of these gentlemen [...] perhaps, squeaks: 'Reading Dante is like bathing in the sea, his verses are springy and dense, like waves in the sea'.¹¹⁰

This was not the only occasion in which Belinsky used Dante as a point of reference in his polemics against Shevyrev. Belinsky's irony towards Shevyrev's love of associations and comparisons was an argument of frequent debates between the two critics, as clearly underlined by the polemics which followed the publication of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842). In his review of the novel, Shevyrev praised 'the wonderful similes, which are often found in *Dead Souls*':

Their perfect artistic beauty can only be attained by someone who studied similes in Homer and in Italian epic poets, like Ariosto and especially Dante, one of the poets of the new world who attained the full simplicity of the Homeric simile and returned them to the round perfection in which it manifested itself in the Greek epic.¹¹¹

Belinsky, on the other hand, was extremely critical of Shevyrev's and other critics' attempts to compare Gogol's novel to 'Homer and the Italian epic poets'. Although he was not opposed to Dante and Homer per se, he argued that exalting the epic dimension of *Dead Souls* inevitably involved toning down the work's criticism of contemporary Russian society.¹¹² For this reason, Belinsky claimed, it was more sensible to compare Gogol to contemporary Russian writers, rather than figures of the past.¹¹³

The strong doubts expressed by Belinsky towards Shevyrev's aesthetic approach to Dante's works, and to literature in general, were to have a strong impact on part of the Bolshevik establishment, who regarded with suspicion any intention of detaching artistic appreciation from politics. This would become evident in reactions to Leon Trotsky's post-1917 defence of an artistic approach to the *Divine Comedy*, as section 4 will show.

¹¹⁰ Vissarion G. Belinsky in *ibid.*

¹¹¹ Shevyrev in *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹¹² Belinsky in *ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

The early nineteenth-century Romantic reception of Dante was challenged not only by aesthetic evaluations of the *Divine Comedy*, but also by new developments in literary criticism. As an example of this, it may be relevant to consider the position taken by philologist Aleksandr Veselovsky. Veselovsky was one of the most important Russian Dante scholars of the 1840s and 1850s, and his works, although partly indebted to Herder's comparative analysis of English and German medieval literature, reflected the shift, characteristic of the second part of the nineteenth century, from the enthusiasms of early Romanticism to a more positivistic approach to literature.¹¹⁴ Although inheriting the Romantic interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* as centred on the representation of Dante as an exceptional individual, Veselovsky did not view Dante as a modern genius, but tried to situate him in the specific historical circumstances which inspired the poet's work.¹¹⁵ According to him, 'Dante was a collector, like Homer, like all the great epic poets of ancient times, who were great because they contained in themselves their whole epoch and a lot from the past'.¹¹⁶ The discourse on Dante seems thus to shift from the Romantic focus on originality to the intertextual dimension of his work.

Veselovsky was particularly critical of political attempts at finding connections between the *Divine Comedy* and the modern world, as his condemnation of the appropriation of Dante by Italian patriotic thinkers clearly shows. Veselovsky explained his thoughts in an article on the celebrations of Dante's six-hundredth birthday that were organised in Italy in 1865. Veselovsky attended these celebrations; and he strongly criticised them for being centred on the poet's putative role in the Italian fight towards national unity, which Italy had finally won in 1861, a mere four years before the Dante celebrations. In his article Veselovsky called the *Divine Comedy* 'an ultra-Catholic expression of the Middle Ages' and, among the various literary works produced to celebrate the Dantean anniversary, he praised those which, in his view, did not 'approach Dante as an ideal type, a political tribune, a representative of Italian unity, but approach him as a man of the thirteenth century, and study the thirteenth century through him'.¹¹⁷ Scepticism regarding the possibility of co-opting Dante for modern political goals would later lead part of the Bolshevik establishment,

¹¹⁴ Asoian, *Dante v russkoi kul'ture*, p. 263.

¹¹⁵ Potthoff, pp. 153-157.

¹¹⁶ Aleksandr N. Veselovsky in Asoian, *Dante v russkoi kul'ture*, p. 269.

¹¹⁷ Aleksandr N. Veselovsky, 'Dant i mytarstva italianskago edinstva: po povody Dantovskago lubileia', *S.-Peterburgskiiia Vedomosti*, 21 Maia (2 liunia) 1865, 2 (p. 2).

in a stretch which was not foregrounded in Veselovsky's thoughts, to conclude that there could be no place for Dante in modern Russia.

In late nineteenth-century Russia this positivist trend was rebuked by a new poetic movement born on the wave of the religious and spiritual revival sweeping over Europe at this stage. Russian Symbolism was initially a primarily aesthetic movement, heavily indebted to contemporary French Symbolism and headed by Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Konstantin Bal'mont and Valery Briusov.¹¹⁸ Towards the end of the nineteenth century, however, a new group of poets inspired by religious philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev founded a current of Symbolism with a more spiritual, rather than exclusively aesthetic, focus.¹¹⁹ Although Bal'mont and Merezhkovsky had also displayed an interest in Dante, the author of the *Divine Comedy* acquired a central position particularly with the second wave of Symbolism, led by Andrei Bely, Aleksandr Blok, Ellis, Sergei Solov'ev and Viacheslav Ivanov.¹²⁰ In his review of the philologist Scartazzini's studies of Dante Alighieri, Andrei Bely argues:

Война символизма, охватившая Европу, выносит нас к вечному морю - к мировым религиозным символам. Данте, оставаясь художником, развил перед нами систему религиозных символов.¹²¹

The symbolist struggle sweeping Europe carries us toward an eternal sea, toward universal religious symbols. Remaining withall an artist, Dante developed for us this system of religious symbols.¹²²

Bely not only again uses the image of the sea to signify an aesthetic experience, (similarly to Shevryev), but also highlights the peculiar interest in Dante expressed by the Russian Symbolist poets. Together with Shakespeare and Goethe, Dante became part of a European pantheon that every Russian Symbolist felt the need to know.¹²³ As Bely explained in his memoir, Dante attracted the interest of the Symbolists because they regarded the relationship between art and life to be the centre not only of his works, but also of his personal life. Rather than the experience of exile, therefore, the aspect of Dante's biography

¹¹⁸ Pamela Davidson, *The Poetic Imagination of Vyacheslav Ivanov: A Russian Symbolist's Perception of Dante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 14.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Andrei Belyi, 'Scartazzini', *Vesy*, 11 (1905), 75 (p. 75).

¹²² John M. Kopper, 'Dante in Russian Symbolist Discourse', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 31.1 (1994), 25-51 (pp. 32-33).

¹²³ Ibid., p. 31.

that mostly fascinated the Symbolists was his love for Beatrice.¹²⁴ A testimony of this interest was the popularity among Russian Symbolists not only of the *Divine Comedy*, but also of the *Vita Nova* (1292-1295), a work where Dante examines the influence of his muse on his life and writings from their first encounter until her death.¹²⁵

Further evidence of the Symbolist interest in Dante's life is apparent in Aleksandr Blok, who visited Italy in 1908-1909 and not only admired the 'historical', medieval Dante, but saw him as a personal guide. A telling example of this was Blok's foreword to an unpublished edition of *Stikhi o prekrasnoi dame* (*Verses about the Beautiful Lady*, 1905) dated 15 August 1918:

I felt myself astray in the wood of my own past until it occurred to me to use the device which Dante chose when he was writing the *Vita nuova*.¹²⁶

In this excerpt Blok not only pointed to the *Vita Nova* as one of the main influences on his poetry, but also implied a very obvious parallel between his creative endeavours and the situation of Dante-character at the start of *Inferno* I: 'Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura' ('Midway in the journey of our life / I came to myself in a dark wood'). Blok's self-identification with Dante was actively encouraged by his contemporaries, leading Kopper to summarise this phenomenon as the 'Dantification of Blok'.¹²⁷

Among Russian Symbolists, Viacheslav Ivanov, who published translations of Dante's works in the journals *Vesy* (*Libra*, a Symbolist magazine published in Moscow between 1904 and 1909), *Zolotoe Runo* (*The Golden Fleece*, a Symbolist journal of art and literature published in Moscow between 1906 and 1910), and *Trudy i Dni* (*Works and Days*, a Symbolist journal published in Moscow between 1912 and 1916), displayed a level of engagement with Dante that had no rivals. Ivanov, who had lived in Italy for three years between 1892 and 1895, not only possessed a particularly thorough knowledge of Italian, but, thanks to his academic knowledge of classical antiquity, had an understanding of the origins of European culture that made him stand out from the rest of the Symbolist movement.¹²⁸ His first four collections of poems, published between 1903 and 1911, showed a consistent engagement

¹²⁴ Davidson, p. 17

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Aleksandr A. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh*, 8 vols (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1960), I, p. 560. Translated in Kopper, p. 39.

¹²⁷ Kopper, p. 41.

¹²⁸ Davidson, p. 19.

with Dante's works. This dialogue frequently took the shape of direct citations, especially in titles and epigraphs, or of paraphrases of entire episodes from Dante's poems.¹²⁹ The originality of Ivanov's take on Dante was rooted in the reinterpretation of the relationship between Christianity and paganism. According to Ivanov, Hellenism, and particularly the Dionysiac religion, were not at odds with Christianity, but were, on the contrary, 'a prefiguration' of its 'ideal, primitive essence'.¹³⁰ Similarly to other intellectuals of the time, Ivanov viewed Dante as the most representative poet of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. He considered the return to Greek tradition a distinctive characteristic of pre-Renaissance culture, and regarded Dante as a synthesis of Christian and Dionysiac spirituality.¹³¹ The fact that Dante historically repudiated paganism was irrelevant to Ivanov: he approached Dante not as a theologian, but as a poet, and considered poetry as a means to communicate 'universal mystical truths'.¹³² For Ivanov, while Greek tragedy represented one of the earliest examples of this, Dante's poetry was the last true fulfilment of this purpose.¹³³

Dante's privileged position in the Symbolist canon expressed itself in a Russian cult of Dante, as exemplified by the literary journal *Trudy i dni*, published between 1912 and 1916. The concluding issues included a *Danteana*, a collection of works on Dante which partly showed the persistence of nineteenth-century commonplaces on the poet, but also expressed reverence for a mystical, esoteric Dante, which was characteristic of this phase of the Russian reception.¹³⁴ Dmitry Merezhkovsky, for instance, attempted to theorise a new religious doctrine based on the *Divine Comedy*, which inspired him to write a Dante-themed prayer book with the contribution of Zinaida Gippius.¹³⁵

At the beginning of the new century Dante's popularity in Russia was on the rise: between 1900 and 1922 the average yearly number of publications dedicated to him reached a peak that would be hit again only forty years later.¹³⁶ However, on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution Dante appeared as a highly ambiguous figure: an eternally relevant political

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 35-36.

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 43.

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Ibid., pp. 46-47.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

¹³⁵ Potthoff, p. 31.

¹³⁶ Kopper, pp. 42-43.

figure, but at the same time a product of a particular historical moment; an enemy of the Tsarist autocracy, but also a Symbolist mystic. The Italian poet's multifaceted image posed significant challenges to post-revolutionary culture, which was faced with the necessity of deciding whether Dante's work was compatible with the new country that was meant to rise from the collapse of the Tsarist regime.

3. 'A Florentine Petty Bourgeois' and a 'Genius': The Reception of Dante after the Bolshevik Revolution (1917-1930s)

A sign of the enduring interest in Dante in post-revolutionary Russia was offered by the numerous initiatives organised by the *Obshchestvo Druzei Italii (Society of the Friends of Italy)* between 1918 and 1921.¹³⁷ These efforts to preserve Dante's legacy in Russia were all the more remarkable, considering that the country was then facing the aftermath of a world war, followed by a five-year Civil War which came to an end in 1922.¹³⁸ In 1918 a full Russian translation of Dante's *Vita Nova* was printed in Samara at the printing house affiliated to the Fourth Division of the Red Army.¹³⁹ In 1921 Russia commemorated the six-hundredth anniversary of Dante's death with numerous initiatives, including the redaction of a bibliography of Dantean philology.¹⁴⁰ As part of the celebrations, the Rumiantsev Museum in Moscow hosted an exhibition of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Dante editions and a conference chaired by the Museum's director Vasily Golitsyn.¹⁴¹ The conference was organised in the presence of representatives from the Narkompros (*Narodnyi Komissariat Prosvishcheniia*, the People's Commissariat for Education, which later became the Ministry of Education) and featured papers regarding Dante's time, his relationship with Italian literature and the Russian collections of early printed editions of his works (Figure 2).¹⁴²

¹³⁷ Potthoff, p. 48.

¹³⁸ Il'ia N. Golenishchev-Kutuzov, *Tvorchestvo Dante i mirovaia kul'tura* (Moskva: Nauka, 1971), p. 487.

¹³⁹ Dante, *Novaia zhizn' (Vita nuova). Perevod'' v'' stikakh c'' vvedeniiem'' i kommentariem'' prof. M. I. Liverovskoi* (Samara: Tipografiia shtaba 4-i armii, 1918).

¹⁴⁰ Potthoff, p. 48.

¹⁴¹ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 488.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 489.



Figure 2: A personal invitation to the archivist Nikolai Gulkov to attend the 1921 Dante celebrations at the Rumiantsev Museum (Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts)

In Petrograd (today's Saint Petersburg) the main highlights of the anniversary celebrations were the Petrograd Philharmonic's Dante-themed concert, and the public event organised by the *Obshchestvo Druzei Italii* and inaugurated by the philologist Faddei Zelinsky.¹⁴³ By the time this conference took place, Petrograd had been severely affected by the war and was in the grip of a famine emergency. The historian Nikolai Antsiferov, who was a former student of Zelinsky, recalled meeting him at the conference and being struck by the thinness and unkempt appearance of his former teacher, who was wearing a white sock covered in black ink at one foot, hoping that this would be enough to conceal a hole in his shoe.¹⁴⁴ Zelinsky's speech, also published in the literary journal *Vestnik Literaturny (The Literary Herald)*, published between 1919 and 1921), started with an assessment of the Russian knowledge of Dante:

If we exclude Dante specialists, our information on Dante as a person amount to the fact that he was exiled from his hometown Florence by his political enemies and that he died in

¹⁴³ Ibid., pp. 489-490.

¹⁴⁴ Mikhail V. Novikov and Tat'iana B. Perfilova, 'Professionalnoe stanovlenie F. F. Zelinskogo i ego sud'ba', *Yaroslavskii pedagogicheskii vestnik*, 3.1 (2011), 7-17 (p. 14).

exile... In the best circumstances the writer Dante, for us, –and I am again excluding specialists –is the author of a trilogy which includes the *Vita Nova*, the *Convivio* and that *Comedy* which through the reverence of the posterity gained the attribute of 'Divine'. However, what we know about the first two parts of this trilogy comes mostly from hearsay; if we have to make a realistic judgement, for us Dante is precisely the minor trilogy, the just mentioned *Comedy* made of three parts – *Hell*, *Purgatory* and *Paradise*. But maybe that is still an exaggeration: only few are able to penetrate the network of astronomy and scholastic philosophy which constitutes the main content of *Paradise*, and very few people like *Purgatory* and its dull tones; those among us who know Dante not by hearsay know him precisely as the author of the *Inferno*. And so that is what Dante is to us: the political exile and the poet of Hell.¹⁴⁵

Zelinsky then drew a comparison between Dante's painful experience of exile and Russia's contemporary history and ended with a passionate appeal to the Russian people to read the *Divine Comedy*:

Does this mean that we have to deplore the humanity of the time we have recently lived through? Certainly not: on the opposite, let us hope that with God's help those days will come back, that the days we are going through now will seem just a nightmare. Understanding does not mean approving. But may the science of this nightmare never be lost to us. And so we will now read Dante's immortal poem harder than ever. It takes one to know one: right now we have become more able to understand his 'città dolente', after we have built a 'città dolente' for ourselves...¹⁴⁶

Zelinsky was not alone in reflecting on Dante's relevance for contemporary Russia. Between 1921 and 1924 Soviet literary periodicals published several kinds of contributions on Dante, including reviews of new Italian academic works.¹⁴⁷ From the analysis of these texts it appears that at this stage one of the main concerns of Soviet literary critics was trying to understand what place Dante could occupy in the new proletarian culture.¹⁴⁸

This stage of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* must be analysed in the context of a broader discussion on the role of literary classics after the Bolshevik Revolution. At the end of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks were confronted with a dilemma: which elements should characterise post-revolutionary Russian culture and what was to be done with the culture preceding it? The sections of the intelligentsia which had supported the Revolution did not provide a unanimous answer: some, like the Futurist avant-gardes, called for a class-conscious intelligentsia to take on the responsibility of art production, while other currents like *Proletkul't* (*Proletarskaia Kul'tura*, Proletarian Culture) and the *Rossiiskaia Assotsiatsiia*

¹⁴⁵ Faddei F. Zelinsky, 'Privet Dante', *Vestnik literatury*, 10.34 (1921), 2-3 (p. 2).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁷ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 492.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

Proletarskikh Pisatelei (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, or RAPP) believed that in post-revolutionary Russia art should be produced by a new generation of proletarian artists.¹⁴⁹ In the early post-revolutionary years, however, some of the most important personalities in the Bolshevik party, like Leon Trotsky, distanced themselves from the exclusive orientation towards novelty which characterised both these positions. This clash of views was well exemplified by the Bolshevik debates on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. The rest of this section provides an overview of the most interesting voices in this debate: Vladimir Friche, Anatoly Lunacharsky, Vadim Bystriansky and Leon Trotsky.

To formulate the question in the terms used at the time, there was a necessity to understand what social forces Dante represented, and whether his was a conservative or a progressive voice.¹⁵⁰ Vladimir Friche, author of a collection of essays on Western literature that was reprinted several times in the Soviet Union, had already worked on Dante, particularly on the *Inferno*, before the Revolution. In the Twenties he directed the literary section of the Narkompros and later became dean of the Faculty of Philology of Moscow State University.¹⁵¹ According to him, Dante was an apologist of aristocracy and chivalrous culture, 'an imperialist in the medieval sense of the word'.¹⁵² Commenting on *Inferno* XXVIII, a canto where Mohammed predicted that the soul of Fra Dolcino, head of a reformist movement that advocated poverty and had been crushed by the Catholic Church, would dwell in hell among the heretics, Friche wrote:

In the poet's aristocratic paradise, where emperors and knights, ladies and saints drown in bliss, there was no room for a communist! [...] So be it! On the day of Dante's jubilee it is our duty to put beside him, who fought with words for the aristocratic past, his contemporary Dolcino, who fought with a sword for the future, for communism.¹⁵³

According to Golenishchev-Kutuzov, Friche's judgement seemed to echo Veselovsky in describing Dante as a figure rooted in a medieval past, not suitable for modernisation.¹⁵⁴ However, it should be remarked that, to reinforce his opinion, Friche compared Dante to Fra Dolcino and explicitly described the latter as a 'communist'. It is therefore significant that,

¹⁴⁹ Stefano Garzonio and Maria Zalambani, 'Literary Criticism during the Revolution and the Civil War, 1917-1921', in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism - The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), pp. 1-16 (pp. 8-9).

¹⁵⁰ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 494.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² Vladimir M. Friche, 'Dante Alig'eri', *Tvorchestvo*, 4-6 (1921), 33-38 (p. 38).

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 494.

by associating Fra Dolcino with communism, Friche's approach, although seemingly positivistic in its effort to situate Dante within the ideological and historical context in which he operated, actually revealed unexpected analogies with the Romantic tendency to modernise historical figures of the past to serve contemporary political goals.

Moreover, by creating an opposition between 'Dante-past' and 'Fra Dolcino-future' Friche also appeared to suggest that Dante's thought could be considered old-fashioned even for his own time, thus seemingly contradicting the idea, common in part of the Marxist environment of the time, that Dante symbolised the transition from feudalism and capitalism.¹⁵⁵ This aspect of Friche's interpretation encountered opposition in some segments of the Bolshevik environment.

In his *Istoriia zapadnoevropeiskoi literatury (History of Western-European Literature, 1924)* the head of Narkompros Anatoly Lunacharsky expressed his disagreement with Friche's characterisation of Dante and described the Italian writer as the greatest poet of the Middle Ages.¹⁵⁶ Lunacharsky considered Dante, together with Petrarch and Boccaccio, a poet of the early Renaissance, but in some respects still rooted in the Middle Ages. He therefore criticised Friche's classification of writers into literary periods for being too rigid and not considering epochs of transition.¹⁵⁷ Friche's and Lunacharsky's views on Dante are explained in more detail in Chapter Three.

Among those who distanced themselves from Friche was also Vadim Bystriansky, another prominent intellectual figure who would later become the head of the Faculty of Economics of Leningrad Polytechnic Institute. His article *Pamiati Dante (In Memory of Dante, 1921)* acknowledged Dante as one of the greatest poets of humanity, and reflected on the similarities between him and Karl Marx:

If we consider his spiritual type, there was some degree of affinity between Marx and the greatest artist of the Middle Ages. Like Dante, Marx had a proud and independent

¹⁵⁵ See for instance Marx and Engels, p. 37: 'The first capitalist nation was Italy. The close of the feudal Middle Ages, and the opening of the modern capitalist era are marked by a colossal figure: an Italian, Dante, both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times'.

¹⁵⁶ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 494.

¹⁵⁷ Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, 'Istoriia zapadnoevropeiskoi literatury v ee vazhneishikh momentakh' in *Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh*, ed. by Ivan I. Anisimov and others, 8 vols (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1963-1967), IV, Lecture Four

<<http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/ss-tom-4/lekcia-4/>> [accessed 24 September 2021].

personality and like the Italian poet he had to endure until the last day of his life the anger and hatred that class society prepares for the genius.¹⁵⁸

Interestingly, although he utilised the Marxist concept of class in his analysis, Bystriansky proposed a characterisation of Dante which was entirely compatible with the Romantic image of Dante as a genius, particularly in the Decembrist interpretation of the genius as a figure who suffered injustice to defend his own freedom. His representation of the relationship between class society and the artist as one of inevitable enmity, therefore, appears to be greatly indebted to the exaltation of the individual by part of the self-proclaimed Romantic environment, rather than the Marxist focus on the proletarian masses.

In this writing, however, Bystriansky also took a stand in the Bolshevik discussion regarding the possibility of promoting the reading of the *Divine Comedy* among the working classes, and expressed a decidedly favourable opinion. He praised the *Divine Comedy* as the greatest work of literature of all time for its political and ethical content and for its capacity to continuously stir the reader to action.¹⁵⁹ In his view, although Dante's ideas were very far from the proletariat's spiritual world, 'the working class will be able to assess the poet's greatness'.¹⁶⁰ He then concluded the article by stating that among the treasures of poetic creativity of all people and all time, Dante's poem 'will shine like a priceless pearl and will become a possession of the world's proletariat'.¹⁶¹ This choice of words (*dostoianie*) betrays an idea that will manifest itself on many occasions throughout this study: translation is an act of appropriation, and using translation to render the masterpieces of European literature 'a possession of the world's proletariat' will be one of the tenets of Soviet cultural policies in the following years.

The question of whether the *Divine Comedy* should be recommended to the working classes was probably one of the most hotly debated issues during these early post-revolutionary discussions on Dante. As earlier mentioned, these debates must be interpreted as a direct projection of a very significant cultural phenomenon of the early Soviet times: the conflict between those who advocated the necessity of a new culture made by the proletariat and those who defended the importance of pre-revolutionary classics. One of the most

¹⁵⁸ Vadim A. Bystriansky, 'Pamiati Dante', *Kniga i revoliutsiia*, 1.13 (1921), 13-16 (p. 14).

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

important occasions on which these two positions faced each other was a meeting organised by the press department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party on 9th May 1924. At this gathering, the necessity of creating a new proletarian literature was advocated by Fedor Raskol'nikov, whereas the need to spread knowledge of pre-revolutionary classics among the proletariat was fostered by Leon Trotsky. It was on this occasion that Trotsky presented an approach to literature which was frowned upon for being allegedly too reminiscent of Shevyrev's appreciation of Dante.

Raskol'nikov, a key figure in the earlier mentioned Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), was very vocal in calling for a new art made by the proletariat under the party's supervision.¹⁶² On the other hand, Trotsky believed that, due to the 'extraordinary cultural backwardness of the overwhelming majority of the proletariat',¹⁶³ the party's priorities should lie in 'the growth of literacy, education, special courses for workers, the cinema, the gradual reconstruction of everyday life, the further advance in the cultural level',¹⁶⁴ while the creation of a new culture should be postponed until the moment when the masses would 'have come of age culturally'.¹⁶⁵

Interestingly, both sides in this debate used Dante as an example to describe their attitude towards literature. In Trotsky's words, Raskol'nikov claimed that the *Divine Comedy's* value lay solely in its capacity to describe the mentality of a specific class in a specific era.¹⁶⁶ In his reply Trotsky described this view as 'a historical approach to Dante' and, although not ruling out the legitimacy of this approach, considered it to be completely distinct from the aesthetic approach, i.e. a relationship where the work of art 'must speak to' the reader's 'feelings and moods'.¹⁶⁷ In Trotsky's words:

Dante was, of course, the product of a certain social milieu. But Dante was a genius. He raised the experience of his epoch to a tremendous artistic height. And if we, while today approaching other works of medieval literature merely as objects of study, approach the *Divine Comedy* as a source of artistic perception, this happens not because Dante was a

¹⁶² Evgeny Dobrenko, 'Literary Criticism and the Transformation of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928-1932', in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism - The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), pp. 43-63 (p. 45).

¹⁶³ Leon D. Trotsky, *Class and Art. Culture Under the Dictatorship* (2002), <<https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/05/art.htm>> [accessed 24 September 2021] (para. 11 of 15).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., para. 14 of 15.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., para. 15 of 15.

¹⁶⁶ Fedor F. Raskol'nikov in *ibid.*, para. 4 of 15.

¹⁶⁷ Trotsky in *ibid.*

Florentine petty bourgeois of the 13th century but, to a considerable extent, in spite of that circumstance. [...] I am sure that many, like me, would, after reading Dante, have to strain their memories to remember the date and place of his birth, and yet none the less, this would not have prevented us from getting artistic delight, if not from the whole of the *Divine Comedy* then at least from some parts of it. Since I am not a historian of the Middle Ages, my attitude to Dante is predominantly artistic.¹⁶⁸

This debate appears to have striking similarities with pre-revolutionary discussions on Dante, despite the presence of significant differences. On the one hand, Raskol'nikov fostered a view of Dante which is vaguely reminiscent of the late nineteenth-century effort to situate Dante within the Middle Ages. On the other hand, he carried this to the extreme by suggesting that the reading of the *Divine Comedy* should be recommended only to historians who specialised in the medieval period, a conclusion which was not implied either in Veselovsky's or in Friche's stance. To this, Trotsky replied by applying a nineteenth-century category of genius to Dante. However, rather than recalling the poet's value for Pushkin and the Decembrists, Trotsky preferred to defend the legitimacy of an aesthetic appreciation of the work, and argued that the artistic value of the *Divine Comedy* was precisely the reason why the working classes should read it.

Significantly, a transcription of Trotsky's speech shows that, at the moment when he expressed his defence of the work's artistic qualities ('Since I am not a historian of the Middle Ages, my attitude to Dante is predominantly artistic'), a member of the audience, a certain Riazanov, interrupted him to say: 'That's an exaggeration. "To read Dante is to take a bath in the sea", said Shevyrev, who was also against history, replying to Belinsky'. It seems remarkable that Trotsky's aesthetic attitude towards the *Divine Comedy* led another member of the Bolshevik party to interpret it as an apologia of Shevyrev, who, as mentioned above, with this famous verse had become, for Belinsky and others, the incarnation of a purely aesthetic, apolitical (and, therefore, suspicious) reading of Dante. To those who alluded to similarities between his and Shevyrev's thinking, however, Trotsky replied:

I don't doubt that Shevyrev did express himself as Comrade Riazanov says, but I am not against history – that's pointless. Of course the historical approach to Dante is legitimate and necessary and affects our aesthetic attitude to him, but one can't substitute one for the other.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

To those who accused him of promoting a superficially aesthetic approach to Dante over a more serious historical one, Trotsky insisted in defending the legitimacy of both aesthetic and historical attitudes, despite admitting that ‘the historical approach to Dante [...] affects our aesthetic attitude to him’.¹⁷⁰ Moreover, while the beginning of Trotsky's reply may cast doubt on his awareness of Shevyrev's judgement of Dante, with his comment Riazanov demonstrated his own knowledge of the Shevyrev-Belinsky debate, showed an awareness of how this discussion influenced his opinions on Dante and revealed the extent to which the Bolshevik party was engaging with the cultural battles of the past.

Conclusion

The history of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia from its outset in the late eighteenth-century until the first decades following the 1917 Revolution offers a tangible incarnation of the main concerns of contemporary translation theories. The first section of this chapter, for instance, provided strong evidence that the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia was clearly influenced not only by Russian stereotypes of Italy, but also by French and German stereotypes of Italy imported into Russia. For this reason, long before the era of modern globalisation, the reception of Dante in Russia can be considered a very good example of the transnational dimension of translation.

This chapter has also shown the persistence of one of the great themes surrounding the canonisation of the work in Western Europe: the ethical, political implications of Dante's work. Particularly, it has been shown how the Russian intellectual reading public created their own Dante through the filter of European influences. The nineteenth-century reception of the *Commedia* was characterised by the tension between different images of Dante: an aesthetic as opposed to a radical, anti-autocratic reading, and a depoliticised interpretation of his work, which either aimed at situating Dante within his own historical

¹⁷⁰ The Raskol'nikov-Trotsky debate on Dante is reminiscent of similar arguments made pro or contra Fedor Dostoevsky, who also underwent a complex process of canonisation in the Soviet Union, marked by the opposition between those who saw him as the purveyor of an ideology wholly incompatible with the Soviet State, and those who appreciated his artistic merits (Sarah Hudspith, ‘Lev Tolstoy and Contemporary Russian Cultural Policy: Negotiating the Canon’, in *Russian Culture in the Age of Globalization*, ed. by Vlad Strukov and Sarah Hudspith (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 42-67 (p. 51). Further research will need to assess whether the Soviet cultural establishment perceived similarities between the two writers (on the basis, for example, of their engagement with religious matters).

context, like in the case of Veselovsky, or, rather, enhanced the more ethereal, mystical aspects of his work, as the example of the symbolist movement shows.

It is no wonder that such a complex picture resulted in conflicted attitudes towards Dante in the post-revolutionary establishment. While some segments of the Bolshevik party seemed inclined to spread knowledge of the *Commedia* among the working classes, others were more sceptical towards the possibility of using Dante for the purposes of the socialist state. Interestingly, aesthetics also played a part in this debate: some of the Bolshevik defenders of Dante, like Trotsky, advocated for the necessity to encourage the reading of pre-revolutionary classics among the proletariat to improve their chances to produce literature of the highest quality. All these elements considered, 1920s Russia is the perfect laboratory to analyse the process of canon formation: if the values which had characterised Tsarist Russia were to be substituted with new values, could these new values be expressed by an old literature? Debates around this question show that not only aesthetic, but ethical, political, and ideological considerations are all factors that have an impact on the canon.

When Mikhail Bulgakov started working on his novel, therefore, the Soviet intellectual world was engaged in an ongoing discussion on the social role of literary tradition. Born in 1891 Kiev, when Ukraine was part of the territories of the Russian Empire, Mikhail Bulgakov, a trained doctor, decided to give up medicine, move to Moscow and become a full-time writer in 1921.¹⁷¹ At that time, after the end of the Civil War had marked the Bolsheviks' victory over their external and internal enemies, the Russian capital was the centre of social and political changes which were reflected in the country's cultural life. Bulgakov became a writer at a moment when new social classes, which until then had been mostly excluded from access to belles lettres, were about to make their debut in literature both as writers and readers. This context is one of the key factors that must be taken into account while analysing the use of Dantean references in *The Master and Margarita*.

Through a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*, the thesis intends to reach more general conclusions regarding the reception of literary classics in totalitarian regimes. In order to do so, it is essential to fully understand how the changes occurred in the transition from pre- to post-revolutionary Russia influenced the reception of

¹⁷¹ Bulgakov, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: A Life in Letters and Diaries*, pp. 1-10.

Dante. When applied to post-colonial studies, recent research has shown that a world literature framework has potential to build bridges between ‘the oppressed’.¹⁷² This was certainly the case in nineteenth-century Russia, where, through the common experience of political persecution, the anti-tsarist intelligentsia found a connection with Dante and Italian patriotic thinkers. How did this change when the socialist discourse became mainstream in Russia? This is what the next chapter aims to find out.

¹⁷² Jing Tsu, ‘World Literature and National Literature(s)’, in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. by Theo D’haen, David Damrosch and Djelal Kadir (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 158-168 (p. 166).

Chapter Three

Reading Dante in Stalin's Russia: Uses of the *Divine Comedy* in Mikhail Bulgakov's

The Master and Margarita

Introduction

Chapters One and Two of this thesis have examined the history of the reception of Dante in Western Europe and Russia, and shown that in both contexts the *Divine Comedy* has been deemed controversial in style and content. It has also been argued that, in the late nineteenth century, the work had been chosen as a point of reference by the Russian Symbolists, an artistic movement which had very little in common with post-revolutionary proletarian artists. As a consequence, it seemed reasonable to assume that the Symbolist aura surrounding Dante at the beginning of the twentieth century might have shaken the position of the Italian poet in the canon after the Revolution. However, the favourable judgements on Dante expressed by some of the most famous personalities in the Bolshevik party, like Leon Trotsky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, as described in Chapter Two, suggested that the reception of the *Divine Comedy* may indeed have managed to survive the Revolution and the Civil War. Following on from the previous chapter, which reconstructed the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia from the late eighteenth century until the 1921 Dante centenary, this chapter will focus on examining scholarly analyses of Dante published between 1921 and 1940, a period of time which coincided roughly with the years Bulgakov dedicated to writing *The Master and Margarita* (1928-1940). While Chapter Two has analysed the reception of Dante from a diachronic, historical point of view, Chapter Three explores the same topic from a synchronic perspective, focusing on a series of materials published in the same period of time: *Ocherk razvitiia zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury* (*Essay on the Development of Western European Literature*, 1922) and *Literatura epokhi feodalizma* (*Literature of the Feudal Times*, 1927) by literary critic Vladimir Friche; *Istoriia*

zapadnoevropeiskoi literatury v ee vazhneishikh momentakh (A History of Western European Literature in Its Most Important Moments, 1924) by Anatoly Lunacharsky, *Ocherki po istorii zapadnoevropeiskoi literatury* (Essays on the History of Western European Literature, 1928) and *Istoriia zapadnoi literatury* (History of Western Literature, 1928) by literary historian Petr Kogan.

Among the various sources analysed for this research, these specific texts have been selected for their popularity and their similarity to one another. First, other scholarly works on Dante produced in the Soviet Union around the same time frequently cited these texts as sources. Second, they are all literary anthologies but, as will be shown in due course, they addressed different kinds of readers. For this reason, they provide an interesting picture of how knowledge of the *Divine Comedy* was disseminated among the Soviet people, and constitute an example of how manuals for the study of literary classics can be used to assess the position of a foreign writer in the canon.

More generally, looking at the reception of Dante in this crucial phase in Soviet history, between the end of the Civil War (1922), the death of Lenin (1924) and Stalin's rise to power (1928), can be an effective way to observe the factors that can contribute to shaping the literary canon. To highlight these factors more clearly, the first section explores the debates around the reception of pre-revolutionary literature in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. The second section is dedicated to Dante and, more specifically, to the literary anthologies listed above. Finally, the last section introduces the first elements of a comparative analysis between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. This represents the first necessary step, before the analysis can be expanded to include more general observations on the reception of Western European literature in the official Soviet literary establishment (Chapter Four) and in Soviet unsanctioned literature (Chapter Five).

This chapter addresses the following research questions:

- To what extent do Bulgakov's views on Dante reflect the attitude of the Soviet cultural establishment towards the Italian poet?
- What does Bulgakov's relationship to Dante reveal about the use of literary classics in totalitarian regimes and the ethics of literature?

1. Literary Debates in Russia from the End of the Civil War to Stalin's 'Cultural Revolution'

Chapter Two concluded with a debate on Dante at the press department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party. Here Trotsky recommended promoting the reading of literary classics among the working class until such time as the proletariat could produce artistically valid literature, and opposed Raskol'nikov, who believed that a work like the *Divine Comedy* could only be interesting for specialists in history. This confrontation constituted a practical example of how ideas around writing and reading were being reformulated in the same years when Bulgakov began his literary career.

In the 1920s the Bolshevik government was actively participating in literary criticism: representatives from the Politburo (*Politicheskoe biuro*, the most important policy-making body in the Soviet Communist Party), Comintern (the 'Communist International', an international organisation headed by the Soviet Union which advocated world communism), and other institutions not only engaged in literary debates but also met regularly with artists and writers, wrote prefaces and reviews for new publications, and prepared literary questionnaires.¹ With the new government getting increasingly involved in literary disputes, the creation of post-revolutionary culture became a field where the battle for party leadership played out. Polemics around the role of the classics in post-revolutionary Russia must be interpreted in the context of a broader competition for leadership in the party after Lenin's death in January 1924. Therefore, references to Dante in Trotsky's speech at the press department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party in 1924 were not simply an event in the history of the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy*: opposing views regarding arts and culture inside the Bolshevik party represented opposing contestants in the race for party leadership.

Trotsky cited Dante and other pre-revolutionary classics as an example to illustrate what, in his view, were the most serious obstacles on the way to establishing a new proletarian literature. Commenting on working-class literature, Trotsky noted:

All these verses, such as they were, constituted very important and significant documents in the history of culture. They expressed the revolutionary awakening and political growth of

¹ Natalia Kornienko, 'Literary Criticism and Cultural Policy during the New Economic Policy, 1921-1927', in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), pp. 17-42 (p. 19).

the working class. In this cultural-historical sense their importance was no less than that of the works of all the Shakespeares, Molières and Pushkins in the world. In these feeble verses was the pledge of a new and higher human culture which the awakened masses will create when they have mastered the elements of the old culture. But, all the same, the workers' verses in *Zvezda* and *Pravda* do not at all signify the rise of a new, proletarian literature. [...] It is wrong to suppose that the development of literature is an unbroken chain, in which the naïve, though sincere, doggerel of young workers at the beginning of this century is the first link in the coming "proletarian literature". In reality, these revolutionary verses were a political event, not a literary one.²

Although recognising the political and historical value of pre-revolutionary literature from the lower classes, Trotsky believed there was not sufficient ground to confer on them the status of artistic works. This could not become possible, in his opinion, until the working classes had 'mastered the elements of the old culture'. As is possible to infer from his speech, Trotsky believed that to spread knowledge of pre-revolutionary classics among the working-class readership was necessary at least until the lower class had acquired the instruments to reach the same level of artistic perfection the upper classes had been capable of attaining.³ Literary merit was also the motivation which Trotsky used to encourage the reading of those he labelled *poputchiki* (fellow travellers), writers who, despite being neither proletarian nor politically revolutionary, were willing to cooperate in the construction of Soviet society.⁴

Trotsky's opponents at the same conference, besides Raskol'nikov, were Illarion Vardin and Leopold Averbakh, both members of VAPP (*Vserossiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei*, All-Union Association of Proletarian Writers), which would later morph into RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers). This association was initially supported by Iosif Stalin in its struggle to annihilate all other literary currents, but subsequently dismantled and replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers in 1932.⁵ Fedor Raskol'nikov, who, in Trotsky's words, claimed that the *Divine Comedy* 'is valuable to us just because it enables us to understand the psychology of a certain class at a certain time',⁶ was soon to become an active member of RAPP.⁷ VAPP-RAPP was one of the most radical voices in the debate on

² Trotsky, para. 3 of 15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Leon D. Trotsky, *Literatura i Revoliutsiia* (Moskva: Krasnaia Nov', 1923), pp. 21-36.

⁵ Dobrenko, 'Literary Criticism and the Transformation of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928-1932', pp. 45-46.

⁶ Trotsky, *Class and Art. Culture Under the Dictatorship*, para. 4 of 15.

⁷ Dobrenko, 'Literary Criticism and the Transformation of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928-1932', pp. 45-46.

literature, since it demanded the establishment of party dictatorship on culture and aspired to become the official voice of the Bolshevik party in Soviet literary matters.⁸ Mikhail Bulgakov did not refrain from commenting on these developments in Soviet literary criticism, as shown in a scene he sketched in one of the preparatory notebooks to *The Master and Margarita*. This episode, which shows a character named 'Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant' unintentionally disrupting a meeting of Soviet writers, is discussed in the final section of this chapter.

Initially, the political situation seemed to favour the opponents of pre-revolutionary culture. A few months after the debate between Trotsky and members of VAPP took place, measures were adopted to increase the Government's influence over literature. In May 1924 the resolution *O pechaty* (On Print Media), issued by the Thirteenth Party Congress, declared that 'party-minded literary criticism' was to adopt the perspective on literature fostered by *rabkory i sel'kory* (worker- and peasant-correspondents).⁹ On 13 March 1925 the Russian Communist Party established that all literary periodicals were to be complemented with review sections to promote the party's stance towards culture, while on 18 June 1925 the Central Committee issued the resolution *O politike partii v oblasti khudozhestvennoi literatury* (On Party Politics in the Area of Belles Lettres), which attributed leadership in the literary field to the party itself, and declared literary criticism 'one of the main educational instruments at the party's disposal', which would serve to educate both writers and readers.¹⁰ According to this resolution, the party would direct literary critics so that they would convey the perspective of the 'educated part of society' to the 'masses'.¹¹ The resolution also assured 'fellow travellers' that, although some of them seemed to be less devoted to the Soviet government than others, the party's stance towards them should be 'tactful and solicitous'.¹²

In the meantime, Glavpolitprosvet (Glavnyi politiko-prosvetitel'nyi komitet, Chief Committee of Political Enlightenment), which in the 1920s had assumed control over

⁸ Kornienko, p. 21.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

political education from Narkompros,¹³ issued a set of instructions which expanded on previous regulations from 1920 and aimed at 'examining the corpus of books in the libraries'.¹⁴ 1924, the same year when Trotsky defended the necessity of promoting the reading of pre-revolutionary classics like Dante, Shakespeare, Byron, Pushkin and Goethe among the working class, was also the year when these guidelines decreed the 'unconditional removal' of 'counterrevolutionary and [other] harmful literature' from all mass and scholarly libraries.¹⁵ As a result, many Russian and Western classics, including Dante, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Hoffmann, Homer, Leopardi and Tasso, were banned from Soviet libraries. They were later reintroduced following new regulations issued in 1926, but with a warning that these works fostered 'philistine morality', 'bourgeois ideology', and 'decadent and reactionary attitudes'.¹⁶

As Dobrenko remarked, the reasons why these and other works were readmitted to Soviet libraries, despite these harsh judgements, are not immediately clear.¹⁷ A possible hypothesis is to see this as a consequence of the absence of a univocal party line in culture. Despite publicly insisting that the newly formed Soviet state had a 'completely defined policy in the realm of art', even People's Commissar for Education Anatoly Lunacharsky confessed in a private letter that the censorship organs still offered examples of officials enforcing principles that stood in almost complete contrast to what he officially declared.¹⁸ At this stage the cultural policy of the Soviet state must not be seen as a coherent set of instructions, but, rather, as 'a contest between differing approaches'.¹⁹

On the political spectrum, the situation did not look promising for the main advocates of pre-revolutionary literary classics. Following accusations of 'factional activities', in October 1926 Trotsky was expelled from the Politburo and lost his leading position in Bolshevik

¹³ Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 124.

¹⁴ Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 188.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 188-89.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 195-96. These pages contain a more comprehensive list of works of *belles lettres* which were excluded from Soviet libraries in 1924 and reintroduced in 1926.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Michael S. Fox, 'Glavlit, Censorship and the Problem of Party Policy in Cultural Affairs, 1922-1928', *Soviet Studies*, 44.6 (1992), 1045-68 (p. 1047).

¹⁹ *Ibid.* For more on Soviet cultural policies on access to library materials, see also Marianna Tax Choldin, 'Access to Foreign Publications in Soviet Libraries', *Libraries & Culture*, 26.1 (Winter, 1991), 135-50.

literary debates.²⁰ He was subsequently exiled to Kazakhstan in 1928 and expelled from the Soviet Union in 1929. By 1927 Stalin had therefore defeated his internal enemies and become the unquestioned leader of the Bolshevik party and of the Soviet Union.²¹

It has been shown how the defence of literary classics had been a prerogative of Trotsky during his fight to become leader of the Soviet government. Stalin, by contrast, initially supported RAPP, which promoted the point of view of the *pisatel'-seredniak* (average writer), the *pisatel'-udarnik* (shock worker-writer), and of workers' correspondents.²² As a consequence, the association started an aggressive press campaign against writers who, in their words, voiced 'the ideology of the new bourgeoisie', a perspective which they saw as diametrically opposed to that of the proletarian writers.²³

However, Stalin's support of the association was rather ambiguous. For a start, he did not modify the regulation of 1925 which attributed to the party the responsibility of guiding literary activity, and therefore impeded RAPP's efforts to build a monopoly in literary criticism.²⁴ From this decision it is possible to infer Stalin's intention to centralise control of literary activity, rather than delegating its surveillance to an external institution. Moreover, as mentioned above, many previously forbidden masterpieces of pre-revolutionary literature had already been reintroduced into Soviet libraries in 1926, an early signal that the Soviet government's approval of RAPP's campaign for proletarian literature was rather shaky.

Another element that needs to be considered is that not only did RAPP's campaigns not find full support in the government, they also did not seem to make an impression on the readers they were meant to address. The gulf between the party's discussions around literature and the actual preferences of readers of literary fiction were becoming increasingly apparent. A study carried out in 1925 in Kolomna, a Moscow factory-workers' suburb, shows that readers in this district were mostly interested in Russian belles lettres, although it must be taken into account that this library did not hold alternative reading

²⁰ Kornienko, p. 22.

²¹ Dobrenko, 'Literary Criticism and the Transformation of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928-1932', p. 44.

²² Ibid., p. 46.

²³ Kornienko, p. 22.

²⁴ Dobrenko, 'Literary Criticism and the Transformation of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928-1932', p. 46.

materials, such as adventure novels or fiction about the Revolution.²⁵ The libraries that did offer a selection of works from these genres, like those considered in the report by the Odessa Office of Worker's Political Education, which covered the period between October 1926 and February 1927, registered a phenomenon which the authors of this study called 'an unheard-of "Americanization" of the working class reader'.²⁶ According to the data they collected, the favourite authors of the Odessa factory workers were Jack London, Upton Sinclair and H.G. Wells. Among non-English-language authors, Heinrich Mann, Claude Farrère and Victor Hugo were also very popular.²⁷ As far as Russian authors were concerned, three-quarters of readers preferred reading contemporary literature instead of the Russian classics, but the majority of these readers (60.3%) preferred 'fellow travellers' to proletarian writers.²⁸

As a result of these studies, by the end of the 1920s Soviet critics had to acknowledge that the mass reader was not particularly interested in their debates.²⁹ The steps subsequently taken to address this issue involved the theorisation of Socialist Realism, which was to be the standard for literature produced in the Soviet Union for years to come. With the institutionalisation of Socialist Realism in the mid-1930s came the end of the plurality of voices and opinions in literary criticism, and the enforcement of strict criteria which literary works had to comply with in order to be published and to receive favourable reviews.³⁰ The establishment of these rules led to the creation of a canon comprising both contemporary Soviet and foreign writers and Russian or foreign literary classics.³¹ In all cases Iosif Stalin's opinion was crucial: it was his prerogative to decide which authors should be included in the Soviet canon and why.³² Despite this, there was a sharp difference in the treatment of Russian and foreign works; when deciding whether to grant approval to a Soviet writer, not only Stalin's judgement, but also popularity among Soviet readers and writers, was taken into account. In contrast, when it came to selecting foreign writers, Stalin's word was the

²⁵ Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, pp. 46-47.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

²⁹ Kornienko, p. 23.

³⁰ Nailya Safiullina, 'The Canonization of Western Writers in the Soviet Union in the 1930s', *The Modern Language Review*, 107.2 (2012), 559-84 (p. 559).

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

only criterion to be considered.³³ It is interesting to note that the rules described so far applied to the canonisation of contemporary literature. While it may seem natural to think of the literary canon as something that is built retroactively, as a legacy of past institutional practices and past readers' preferences, Soviet policies on contemporary literature show that the canon is also constantly expanding and shrinking depending on changes in the present.

A distinction has to be made, however, between canonising contemporary literature and the classics. In the second case, the status of classic is the result not only of contemporary factors, but of a process of negotiation between the past and the present. While Chapter Two has shown how the legacy of Dante in Russia evolved over the centuries, the next section will analyse a few examples of commentary on the *Divine Comedy* made by prominent Soviet scholars during the 1920s. The analysis will show how the state-sponsored reception of Dante targeted the working classes and strived to canonise the aspects of Dante's work that were most instrumental to support the ideology promoted by the state. To this, Bulgakov opposed a more traditional view of literary heritage as a link between the past and the present. *The Master and Margarita* therefore offered a good example of Bulgakov's personal version of the canon through its extensive use of references to works of art from previous centuries.

2. The Reception of Dante in Stalin's Russia

To grasp the connections between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy*, it is necessary to study how both Soviet institutions and their critics approached Dante as a literary and political figure. However, the reception of Dante in the Soviet press during Mikhail Bulgakov's literary career, which spanned from the end of the Civil War (1922) until the start of the Second World War in Europe in 1939 (and the subsequent start of the Great Patriotic War in 1941), is still largely unexplored by scholars. Despite a considerable amount of research being devoted to Dante's presence in the work of writers with a conflicted relationship with the Soviet regime (Osip Mandel'shtam, Anna Akhmatova, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, just to name a few), little has been written about how Soviet cultural institutions approached the *Divine Comedy*. A notable exception is Kristina Landa's new

³³ Ibid., p. 560.

work on Russian translations of the *Divine Comedy*, which includes an in-depth analysis of Mikhail Lozinsky's 'canonical translation', completed between 1936 and 1946.³⁴ For this accomplishment, in 1946 Lozinsky was awarded the Stalin Prize, the most prestigious Soviet award for science and literature at the time.³⁵

Besides Lozinsky's translation, between the 1920s and 1930s Soviet scholars produced a varied selection of materials on Dante, ranging from reviews of new scholarly works aimed at a specialist audience, to anthologies of Western literature for young students. Most of these works have so far attracted little to no attention in Western scholarship, except for being briefly mentioned in Landa's monograph.³⁶ It may seem unusual to explore such a topic in a study centred on Mikhail Bulgakov, given the writer's well-known estrangement from the official Soviet literary institutions. Since access to archival materials has been facilitated after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the field of Bulgakov studies has mostly focused on the study of the writer's biography as a gateway to the interpretation of his literary production. This approach, although undoubtedly valuable, may benefit from being complemented with the analysis of the social context surrounding the composition of *The Master and Margarita*. Especially where material evidence does not provide sufficient significant information regarding Bulgakov's engagement with Dante, analysing the historical context can fill the gaps of an exclusively biography-oriented approach to Bulgakov. The analysis of this historical context and of the reception of literary classics in the Stalin era helps to shed light on the aspects which distinguished Bulgakov's own approach to the classics from the one promoted by the Soviet establishment.

As Chapter Two has shown, discussions on Dante took place in the Soviet cultural establishment around and in the years immediately following the Dante sixcentenary in 1921. The literature on Dante published in the Soviet Union as a part and a consequence of these debates preserved the legacy of a theory which had developed in the second half of the nineteenth century: Friedrich Engels' 1893 definition of Dante as 'both the last poet of the Middle Ages and the first poet of modern times'.³⁷ The echo of this concept resounded in two significant contributions to the study of Western European classics in the Soviet

³⁴ Landa, pp. 321-427.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 328.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 350.

³⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto del partito comunista* (Torino: Einaudi, 1948), p. 320.

1920s: Vladimir Friche's *Essay on the Development of Western European Literature* (1922) and Anatoly Lunacharsky's *History of Western European Literature through Its Most Important Moments* (1924). As mentioned in Chapter Two, although they agreed on the indisputable aesthetic value of the *Divine Comedy*, these two histories of literature were distinguished by slightly different approaches: while Lunacharsky adhered more closely to Engels' idea that Dante was a figure of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Friche seemed to strictly consider Dante a representative of medieval values and 'mentality'. It is worth taking a closer look at both of these works, since they are both referenced in great part of the Soviet scholarship produced in the following years. The close reading of Friche's *Essay*, in particular, will also be complemented with an analysis of *Literatura epokhi feodalizma (Literature of the Feudal Epoch)*, a later work by the same author that further clarified the ideas already introduced in the *Essay*.

In his *Essay on the Development of Western European Literature* Vladimir Friche described the *Divine Comedy* as 'the highest expression of medieval poetry' and Dante as 'the highest interpreter of feudal-monastic culture'.³⁸ Therefore, Friche interpreted Western European culture as a combination of two elements: feudalism and monastic Catholicism. As this synthesis suggests, in his chapter on medieval literature Friche considered the spiritual aspects of the *Divine Comedy* and the economic circumstances from which, in his view, the poem stemmed. In the first part of the chapter Friche focused in particular on the spiritual, allegorical component of Dante's work. After indicating Dante's poem as the most telling example of medieval literature, he moved on to describe what he considered the most defining attribute of this kind of literature: 'the predominance of magical and fantastical elements'.³⁹ According to Friche, the *Divine Comedy* belonged to the genre of 'vision literature', a medieval genre concerned with exploring realms beyond the earthly world.⁴⁰ In this, it was the most accomplished manifestation of the mentality of the *srednevekovyi chelovek* ('medieval man'), who, in Friche's words, 'was interested in objects and people not

³⁸ Vladimir M. Friche, *Ocherk razvitiia zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury* (Moskva: Moskovskoe Otdelenie Gosudarstvennogo Izdatel'stva, 1922), pp. 6, 15.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

in themselves, but insofar as they hinted at a world which was distinct from the earthly world, and more wonderful'.⁴¹

In this respect, according to Friche, the *Divine Comedy* was the highest accomplishment of medieval culture. At first, this seems to openly contradict Engels' idea of Dante as a writer representing the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. What is more interesting, however, is that Friche actively attempts to reconcile Engels' view with his own interpretation of Dante. According to him, there was a specific phase in Dante's life, 'from the death of Beatrice to the death of [Holy Roman Emperor] Henry VII', in which the poet 'fully gave himself to worldly vanity'.⁴² During this time, 'it is almost as if Dante betrayed the love of his young years, and philosophy became the "lady" of his heart'.⁴³ In the course of this limited period, marked by the composition of *Convivio*, a compendium of four essays written between 1304 and 1307, 'Dante already represents to a certain extent a man of a new era, a precursor of the Renaissance'.⁴⁴ Although Engels is not mentioned directly here, the way this idea is expressed and formulated leaves little doubt as to what might have inspired it: Friche seems to suggest that Engels' theory was still valid; it simply did not apply to the *Divine Comedy*, which, in Friche's view, represented in fact a 'return to asceticism'.⁴⁵

According to Friche, Dante's return to a more spiritual worldview had a political facet as well. As already mentioned, in his contribution for the Dantean centenary of 1921 Friche had described Dante as 'an imperialist in the medieval sense of the word'. The meaning of this statement is clarified in *Literatura epokhi feodalizma (The Literature of the Feudal Era, 1927)*. This later work was part of a collection aimed at secondary schools, which in the 1920s enrolled pupils from the age of 12 until the age of 17.⁴⁶ In the preface Friche explained the two main objectives of this volume: 'to provide literary illustrative material which will elucidate the evolution of society' and 'to provide the teacher with the opportunity of familiarising the students with the development of literature as a particular

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁴² Ibid., p. 17.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁶ Aleksandr Iu. Rozhkov, *V krugu sverstnikov: Zhiznennyi mir molodogo cheloveka v Sovetskoj Rossii 1920-kh godov* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014), p. 34.

“superstructure”, as “art”⁴⁷. The emphasis on the social aspect of literary development and the categorisation of literature as a ‘superstructure’ dependent on the mode of production (structure) was a declaration of the handbook’s adoption of Marxist theory. In this spirit, Friche presented this phase of Western European literature as a conflict between ‘the poetry of the feudal class’ and ‘the cantors of peasant life’.⁴⁸ He also specified that, besides the landowning class, the Church was the other dominant social group of the Middle Ages, and defined the clergy as the medieval equivalent of the intelligentsia.⁴⁹ According to this interpretation, literature was an instrument used by the clergy to propagate their ideas, and vision literature was an example of a genre which could be used for this purpose.⁵⁰ Given that in his previous work he had described the *Divine Comedy* as an example of vision literature, it is clear that Friche considered Dante’s poem as a product of Catholic propaganda. In his own words, ‘against the promotion of worldly life and values, he [Dante] puts forward the ascetic ideals of the Catholic church’.⁵¹

Observations like these naturally had political implications. After his introduction on medieval literature, Friche started the section on the *Divine Comedy* with three excerpts from Min’s translation of *Inferno*: cantos III, V and XXXIV.⁵² Interestingly, Friche did not preserve the original denominations, but replaced each one with a short, descriptive title: *Entrance to Hell*, *Francesca da Rimini*, and *The Depths of Hell*.⁵³ This choice makes the didactic purpose of the handbook even more evident: the intention to make the text more accessible to school pupils was probably the primary motive behind this decision. In addition, the excerpts were accompanied by a few footnotes which identified characters that were supposedly unknown to the reader (Dido, Paolo and Francesca, and Galeotto, to name a few examples). Particularly interesting, however, is the footnote attached to Brutus and Cassius, the murderers of Julius Caesar, portrayed by Dante in the worst place in Hell: directly in Satan’s mouth, together with Judas, who was guilty of betraying Jesus. The

⁴⁷ Vladimir M. Friche, *Literatura epokhi feodalizma: teksty i kommentarii* (Moskva; Leningrad: GOSIZDAT, 1927), p. 3.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 56-65.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

footnote recites: 'Brutus and Cassius - the assassins of Julius Caesar, the person that Dante considered the incarnation of his sacred political idea of universal monarchy'⁵⁴ (Figure 3).

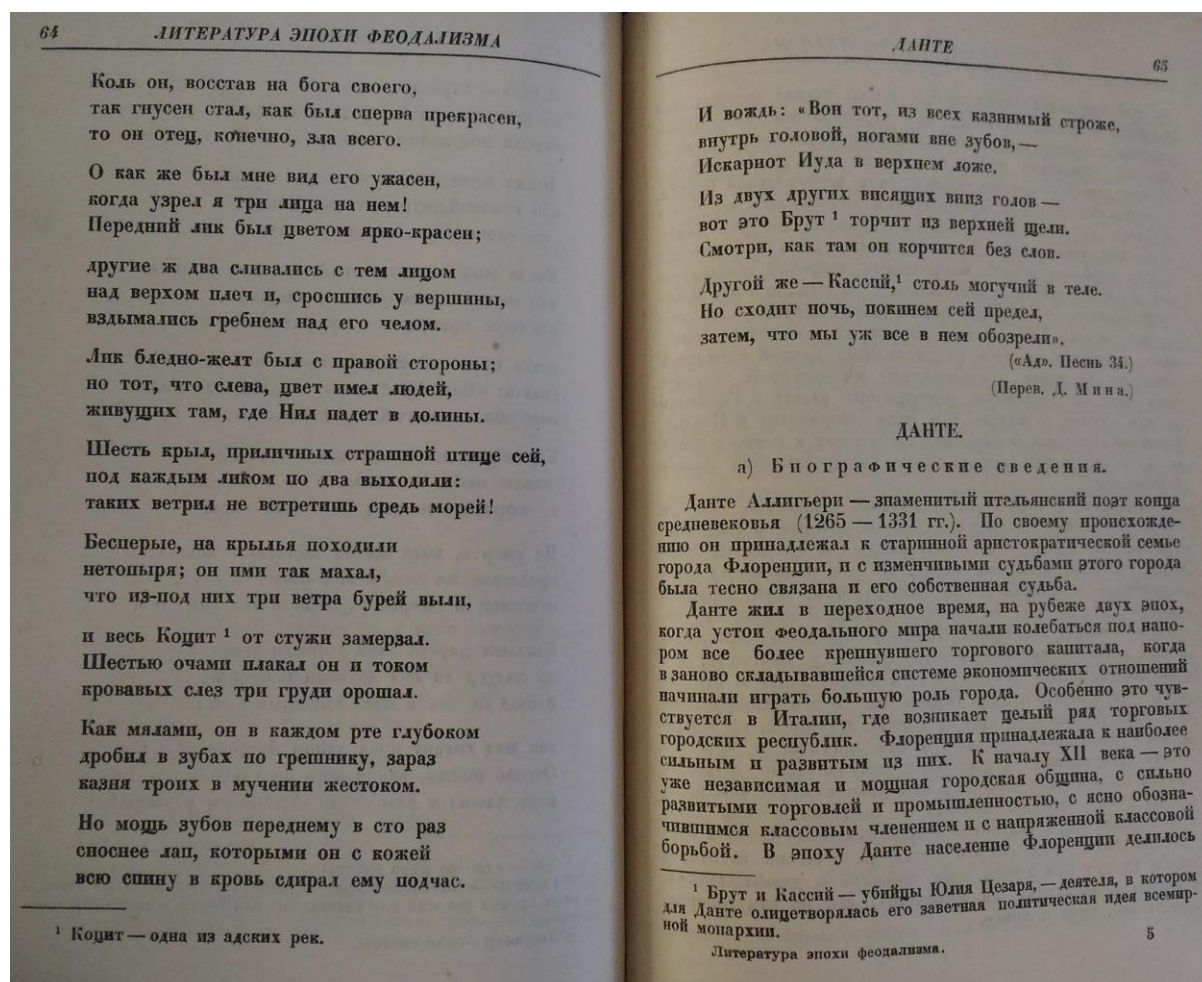


Figure 3: Pages 64 and 65 from Vladimir Friche's *Literatura epokhi feodalizma*, containing an excerpt from *Inferno XXXIV*. The footnote concerning Brutus and Cassius is at the bottom of page 65.

As already anticipated in his 1921 article for *Tvorchestvo*, for Friche Dante's decision to judge the murderers of Caesar as the worst sinners in history was proof of the Italian writer's monarchist sympathies. This theory is further developed in the brief commentary following the excerpts from Dante's poem. The commentary is divided into two parts: *Biographical Information* and *The Divine Comedy*. This last section is further divided into two sub-sections: *Plot and Meaning of the Poem* and *The Structure of the Poem* (an excerpt from Karl Federn's *Dante and His Time*).⁵⁵ The short paragraph on Dante's life specifies that Dante

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 65-70.

'belonged to an ancient aristocratic family' and 'lived in a period of transition, on the boundary between two epochs, when the foundations of the feudal world started to vacillate under the pressure of the mercantile capital, which was growing stronger and stronger'.⁵⁶ The implications of this were made explicit in the section dedicated to the interpretation of the poem: 'His [Dante's] poem is in its essence the protest of a man from the receding class and a receding epoch against the new forms of life'.⁵⁷ Therefore, in his works from 1921 and 1927 Friche maintained the same positions he had expressed on the 1921 Dantean centenary: excluding the brief phase in his literary career marked by the composition of *Convivio*, Dante was an advocate of the aristocracy.

The next case study is Anatoly Lunacharsky's 1924 *History of Western European Literature*. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the Soviet Dantist Golenishchev-Kutuzov interpreted Lunacharsky's position on Dante as a challenge to Friche.⁵⁸ While serving as the Soviet People's Commissar responsible for the Ministry of Education, the first person to occupy this position, Lunacharsky maintained his activities as a literary critic. One of the products of his endeavours was *History of Western European Literature Through Its Most Important Moments*, a series of lectures he then collected in a volume.⁵⁹ Lecture Four of this series was dedicated to 'The Transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Early Renaissance' and covered Dante, Petrarch and Boccaccio. The opening to this chapter stated:

The great Italian poet Dante Alighieri was born in 1265 and died in 1321, that is in the first quarter of the XIVth century. Because of when he lived and partly for the nature of his works, Dante is normally associated with the Middle Ages. For instance, in the work of comrade Friche you can find a description of Dante as the greatest poet of the Middle Ages. However, I agree more with those who, for the spirit of his works, associate Dante to the early Renaissance.⁶⁰

Since Friche is directly mentioned here by Lunacharsky, it is useful to introduce a comparison between the works of the two Soviet scholars. Like Friche, Lunacharsky presented the political situation of Dante's Florence through the lens of class warfare. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to compare how the two literary critics interpreted the

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 65.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 69.

⁵⁸ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 494.

⁵⁹ See also Kristina S. Landa, 'Kanonizirovannyi i nepriiatnyi Dante: K istorii retseptsii i tsenzury Bozhestvennoi Komedii v SSSR (1920-e-1950-e gg.)', *Studi Slavistici*, 18.1 (2021), 147-73.

⁶⁰ Lunacharsky, para. 1 of 122.

conflict between Guelfs and Ghibellines which characterised this stage in the history of medieval Italy. In 1922 Friche had described the Guelfs as 'the party of the mercantile democracy', and the Ghibellines as 'the party of the feudal landowners'.⁶¹ Interestingly, Lunacharsky also described the Guelf Florentine government as 'a democracy'.⁶² Friche, however, had affirmed that 'while belonging to the Guelfs by background', Dante 'moved to the side of the Ghibellines and preached their programme until the end of his life'.⁶³ Friche then seemed to contradict himself in his 1927 handbook, by arguing that Dante came from the nobility,⁶⁴ an environment that according to the scholar would normally oppose Guelfism. In Lunacharsky, the contradiction seems resolved: Dante, he wrote,

was born in the bourgeois sphere. Because of his background, he belongs to the social layer that was, in substance, Guelf, and his father was Guelf. Nevertheless Dante soon moves to the side of the Ghibellines, exercises a few political roles among them and is even their ideologue.⁶⁵

Therefore, according to Lunacharsky, Dante was a bourgeois who chose the side of the aristocracy. At the start of his political career, Lunacharsky explained, Dante became a prior and occupied a few political roles in the Florentine government. He then took the Ghibellines' side and was exiled from Florence by the Guelf government.⁶⁶ The scholar recognised that summarising Dante's political stance was not an easy task:

It was Dante that said of himself (true, through someone else's lips) in the XVII canto of the Inferno of his *Divine Comedy*: 'Good for you, Dante, that you have always made a party of yourself'. This makes one wonder. How did this happen? A great personality [человек] always represents a well-known social group, but here it proudly says that he made a party of himself; a passionate Catholic and at the same time an enemy of the pope, who in his *Divine Comedy* had sent four popes to hell and tortured them there with pleasure; a man who was a supporter of democracy, but was a member of the party of the aristocracy... All this happened because, as he matured, Dante embraced an idea that was universal to all classes [проникался общеклассовой идеей], not specific for a certain group. That is also where his greatness was, in the fact that he embraced the idea, universal to all classes, of the bourgeoisie of the time, and, through this, he ultimately embraced an idea universal to all Italy, and even, in part, to the whole world.⁶⁷

⁶¹ Friche, *Oчерk razvitiia zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury*, p. 17.

⁶² Lunacharsky, para. 33 of 122.

⁶³ Friche, *Oчерk razvitiia zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury*, p. 17.

⁶⁴ Id., *Literatura epokhi feodalizma: teksty i kommentarii*, p. 65.

⁶⁵ Lunacharsky, para. 32 of 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid., para. 33 of 122.

⁶⁷ Ibid., para. 34 of 122.

It must be noted that the passage Lunacharsky misquoted as *Inferno* XVII, was in fact verse 69 of *Paradise* XVII.⁶⁸ This oversight, however, does not affect the complex picture of Dante's political conscience painted by the People's Commissar of Education in this paragraph. This complexity, Lunacharsky subsequently argues, can be understood by looking at the chaos that dominated the political situation of Florence at the time, to which Dante reacted by proposing a vision of unity, where the earthly sphere would be ruled by the Emperor, and the religious would be the Pope's domain.⁶⁹ According to Lunacharsky, it was the conviction that the Church should not interfere with politics which ultimately caused Dante to abandon the side of the Guelfs.⁷⁰ Differently from Friche, therefore, who saw the clergy as a medieval equivalent of the intelligentsia, and the *Divine Comedy* as clerical propaganda, Lunacharsky suggested that Dante's political ideas should not be viewed as an emanation of the Catholic Church. Rather, his political thought is best summarised in another, more modern ideology:

[...] the utopia of enlightened absolutism. What is enlightened absolutism? Did it ever have a place in the world? Of course! I am referring, for instance, to Peter the Great, Catherine II (a painful memory) and Joseph the Second, Maria Theresa, to Frederick II in Germany, Louis XIV in France. In England we can see in Elizabeth the brightest representative of this kind of monarchy. [...] the reigns of these monarchs have fundamental common traits. When did their time come? When bourgeois development started in the form of initial accumulation. [...] Bourgeois development promoted the need for a solid government and a strong monarch, [...] who would have an army to defend the internal market and expand it by attacking foreigners, and the authority of whose word would be felt by the residents of other countries, so that merchants would be able to trade with pride and in peace even there.⁷¹

According to Lunacharsky, enlightened absolutism was the ideology that, although not completely interchangeable with it, would be the closest equivalent to Dante's dream of a universal monarchy. The way in which Lunacharsky developed his argument is truly remarkable: like Friche, he recognised that Dante was a supporter of the monarchy. Differently from his peer, however, he did not see this as a sign of approval of the feudal monarchy, but an anticipation of the forms of imperial rule which would characterise the Modern Age. His interpretation of the ending of *Inferno* was also, naturally, quite different: for Lunacharsky Brutus and Cassius were not members of the bourgeoisie, punished for

⁶⁸ Ibid., footnote 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid., para. 37 of 122.

⁷⁰ Ibid., para. 38 of 122.

⁷¹ Ibid., para. 42 of 122.

suppressing the feudal status quo incarnated by Julius Caesar, as Friche had suggested. On the contrary, they represented the old Roman aristocracy, who dared challenge Caesar's enlightened rule.⁷² Furthermore, Lunacharsky suggested that the new forms of government anticipated by Dante were a direct consequence of the rise of the mercantile bourgeoisie. Friedrich Engels' definition of Dante as a gateway between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance remained valid: while staying firmly rooted in the medieval belief that the spiritual world was the exclusive domain of the Catholic Church, Dante gave voice to the rising bourgeoisie's need for a strong and stable government.⁷³ In conclusion,

Here is how Dante's political and cultural figure presents itself in its general traits. Among the deep divisions of the bourgeoisie, he is the first to create a genuine bourgeois ideal (particularly in his treatise *De Monarchia*): this ideal, however, is not the bourgeois republic, but the enlightened monarchy, portrayed in utopistic terms.⁷⁴

The implications of this short summary are fascinating. On one hand, it is certainly true that Lunacharsky disagreed with Friche's characterisation of Dante as a throwback to feudalism. However, by saying that Dante was a precursor of modern absolutism, Lunacharsky implicitly conceded Friche an important point: maybe the most radical fractions of the Italian patriotic movement had been too hasty in their appropriation of Dante after all.

Friche and Lunacharsky were not the only prominent personalities in literary criticism who reframed Dante's figure for a Soviet audience. Among other analyses of Western European literature published towards the end of the 1920s, two works aimed at different audiences stand out: Petr Kogan's *Ocherki po istorii zapadnoevropeiskoi literatury* (*Essays on the History of Western European Literature*, 1928), which targeted literature students at university level; and *Istoriia zapadnoi literatury* (*History of Western Literature*, 1928), by the same author, addressed at self-taught proletarian readers. It is particularly fruitful to include Kogan in this analysis, as his work was re-published many times before and after the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions, and therefore might have inspired Friche and Lunacharsky, who in turn complemented it with their own studies.

A professor of Romance and Germanic philology at Moscow State University, Petr Kogan penned the first edition of *Essays on the History of Western European Literature* in 1903.

⁷² Ibid., para. 61 of 122.

⁷³ Ibid., para. 48 of 122.

⁷⁴ Ibid., para. 47 of 122.

This university-style manual was then reprinted nine times between 1903 and 1928. In the preface to the first edition, published in all subsequent reissues of the work, Kogan explained that, of all products of the 'rich Western European literary heritage', he selected the 'most significant ones', those which 'made it possible to mark important milestones in the path taken by European society'.⁷⁵ The table of contents displayed Dante in a prominent position, at the end of the chapter dedicated to the Middle Ages.⁷⁶ The chapter was divided into four sections, each one starting with keywords highlighting the main themes of each section: medieval culture and institutions (foundations of Christianity, medieval art, Scholastic philosophy and science, feudalism and chivalric culture); medieval literature (Christian literature, chivalric poetry, troubadours and fabliaux); Dante's times and works (the Holy Roman Empire as a concept, the political situation of Europe, Italy and Florence in Dante's times, Dante's life and works, *Vita Nova*, *Convivio*, *De Monarchia*) and the *Divine Comedy* (see Figure 4).

⁷⁵ Petr S. Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury*, 3 vols (Moskva; Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1928), I, p. 3.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 421-424.

ОГЛАВЛЕНИЕ.

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Figure 4: Excerpt from the table of contents of the 1928 edition of Petr Kogan's *Essays on the History of Western European Literature*, showing the sections devoted to Dante. A comparison with a previous edition published in 1909 suggests that the table of contents was not altered after the Revolution.

The order in which the different sections followed one another was probably not coincidental: the decision to open the chapter by exploring the fundamentals of the

medieval system of belief, as well as the choice to begin the section on Dante by introducing the Holy Roman Empire and describing the political configuration of Europe, were reflective of a Marxist approach, based on interpreting literature as the product of a series of social and historical factors. A close look at the fourth edition of the anthology, published in 1909, also reveals that the order assigned to the various topics in the chapter was left intact in pre- and post-revolutionary editions of the manual. Kogan's anthology therefore constitutes an example of a cultural product designed in the Marxist-leaning circles of the Russian intelligentsia at the start of the twentieth century.

A comparison between the 1909 and 1928 editions reveals only minor changes in the Dante chapters. Already in 1909 Kogan identified Dante as the most significant poet of the Middle Ages, and at the same time fully supported Friedrich Engels' view of Dante as the poet who anticipated the Renaissance:

The whole medieval worldview found its full expression in the greatest creation of the epoch, which rightfully so is known as the encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages: Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*. Dante made an effort to answer the fundamental questions of the time: the question of the mutual relationship between the Pope and the Empire, between theology and science. He was the first outstanding voice of the liberation of the human individual. In his poetry he managed to unite the amorous idealism of the troubadours with the dialectical wisdom of Scholastic philosophy and the rapturous ardour of mysticism. In his poem it is also possible to find evidence of how the self-emancipating thought was making its first efforts to take on the task to solve humanity's eternal questions.⁷⁷

This paragraph, which concluded the section immediately before the description of Dante's life and works, summarised what Kogan considered the essence of medieval mentality: the dialectic between Church and Empire on one hand, and between theology and science on the other. This, and Dante's capacity to contain and give voice to medieval culture in the variety of its expressions, was, in Kogan's opinion, what made Dante the main interpreter of his time. What linked him to the Middle Ages, therefore, was not a supposedly medieval adherence to Church dogmatism. Quite the opposite, Kogan placed emphasis on Dante as the precursor of a tendency to develop independent thought, an aspect which would later characterise Renaissance culture. This concept was further explored in the following pages:

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 38. See also Petr S. Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskikh'' literatur''*, 3 vols (Moskva: Tipografiia V. M. Sablina, 1909), I, p. 31.

Dante is a son of his time, and at the same time he is a man of genius, filled with love for classical culture and with universal human feelings. The poet managed to combine his love of classical literature with Christian beliefs in a genius way.⁷⁸

This definition is particularly dense. First, it describes Dante as a 'son of his time', and in doing so it reflects the Marxist approach to Dante already signalled by the prominence accorded to history and society in the chapter structure. However, this picture is complicated by a dissonant note: the idea of Dante as 'a man of genius', endowed with exceptional qualities that cannot be fully explained as the consequence of a series of social factors, does not seem fully compatible with a purely mechanistic framework. Kogan's analysis of Dante, therefore, was similar to what already observed in the writings of Leon Trotsky and Vadim Bystriansky analysed in Chapter Two: the Dante-phenomenon was explained by resorting to both material (history, society) and transcendent categories (the concept of 'genius'). This delicate balance occupied a central role, as we have seen, also in Lunacharsky's 1924 lecture: if we assume that everyone is the product of social-political circumstances, how do we explain Dante, a man who 'made a party of himself'?

At this stage it is also possible to notice the only significant variation between the pre- and post-revolutionary edition of Kogan's anthology. In the 1909 edition Kogan developed his thoughts as follows:

Classical poets were pagan, and access to heaven is restricted to them, because "they were not saved through baptism". However, their great accomplishments do not allow the poet, who has sharpened his intellect through the wisdom of antiquity, to condemn them to torment.⁷⁹

In the 1928 version Kogan added a few extra sentences right before this remark. Below is the new version of the paragraph, with the sentences that were not included in previous editions transcribed in italics:

Dante is a son of his time, and at the same time he is a man of genius, filled with love for classical culture and with universal human feelings. The poet managed to combine his love of classical literature with Christian beliefs in a genius way. *It must be remembered that Dante lived at a time when the feudal-catholic life structure was already being undermined by new economic forces: the emerging bourgeois-urban culture. This explains the duality of the moods that appear in the poem, which is the deepest incarnation of the feudal-catholic worldview, but already in a sort of bourgeois environment* [emphasis mine]. Classical poets were pagan, and access to heaven is restricted to them, because «they were not saved

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 57. See also Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskikh'' literatur''* (1909), p. 50.

⁷⁹ Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskikh'' literatur''* (1909), p. 50.

through baptism». However, their great accomplishments do not allow the poet, who has sharpened his intellect through the wisdom of antiquity, to condemn them to torment.⁸⁰

As this new version of the paragraph clearly shows, while working on the new edition Kogan used Dante's combination of Christian beliefs with admiration for classical culture as an opportunity to strengthen the Marxist framework of his analysis. References to classical culture in the *Divine Comedy* are here presented as a response to the influence of the 'bourgeois environment' that was developing around Dante. In this respect, Kogan clearly distances himself from Friche, who presented Dante as an opponent of these tendencies. On the other hand, there seems to be a possible connection between Kogan's analysis and Lunacharsky's claim that Dante was influenced by a newly born bourgeois class. Further research is needed to discover which one of the numerous re-editions of Kogan's anthology was the first to present this insertion, and if the publication of Lunacharsky's lectures played a role in this respect.

The importance attributed to the coexistence of Christian and pagan elements in the *Divine Comedy* leads the reader of this handbook to conclude that the Italian poet anticipated the Renaissance revival of ancient Greek and Roman literature. The characterisation of Dante as a transitional poet between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was also supported by underlining the most secular aspects of the poet's interests and personality:

Dante believed that the foundation of material and spiritual life was love. In the first period of his life Dante's love is focused only on Beatrice, and he writes the *Vita Nova*. In the age of maturity his love is directed towards every aspect of earthly life, politics, science, family, and he dedicates himself to secular glory and secular happiness. He is neither a mystic nor a hermit, but a human being with a realistic view of the world, a precursor of the emerging humanism. He writes *Convivio*, possibly the treatise *De Monarchia*. In the third period Dante returns to medieval traditions, and, although he maintains the interest in reality from the second period, he illuminates it with a mystical and ascetic point of view. In this phase he writes the *Divine Comedy*, in honour of the same love, risen above the sinful earth to a higher unearthly world.⁸¹

As shown in this paragraph, Kogan divided Dante's spiritual life into three phases, each of which corresponded to one of his main works. Particularly interesting here is the similarity with Friche's interpretation, especially as far as the second stage is concerned, which, both scholars agree, started with the death of Beatrice and expressed itself through an interest in the earthly, rather than the spiritual world. According to both Friche and Kogan this period

⁸⁰ Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury* (1928), p. 57.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

was best represented by *Convivio*. The similarity between Friche's and Kogan's theories in this respect is, without a doubt, not coincidental: this paragraph was present in both the 1909 and the 1928 editions of the work, and in both cases Kogan cited Friche as the source of this analysis.⁸² However, Kogan seemed more cautious than Friche in labelling the third phase as a complete return to a medieval mentality. Rather, he described the three phases as milestones in a journey that culminated in the *Divine Comedy*. A similar effort to find coherence rather than disjuncture in the story of Dante's spiritual development animated Lunacharsky's lectures.

As Lunacharsky would argue in 1924, already in 1909 Kogan strived to highlight the correspondences between these three phases and the evolution of Dante's political views. The *Divine Comedy*, he argued, is a work where medieval spirituality is embedded in a rapidly changing historical context. Thus, the 'dark wood' where the poet gets lost at the beginning of *Inferno* represented 'the earthly existence of man, full of sinful misconceptions and mistakes', but also 'the political anarchy which the whole of Europe, Italy and Dante's native city, Florence, were facing at the time'.⁸³ As Lunacharsky and other early Soviet commentators of Dante also demonstrated, the idea of the Italian poet as an example of intellectual integrity in the face of chaos clearly appealed to the Marxist environment: in his interpretation of *Inferno* III, for instance, Kogan emphasised the severity with which Dante portrayed 'those who lived without disgrace yet without grace', who never developed a personal stance, but always changed it according to what was most convenient.⁸⁴ Particularly significant was also Kogan's interest in *Inferno* XIX, a canto which denounced simony in the Catholic Church. For Kogan, Dante's harsh judgement of Pope Nicholas III's nepotism was 'the symptom of a new time, a sign of the fall of Papacy'. It was this willingness to challenge the highest authority of the Catholic Church that, according to Kogan, earned Dante the fame of first poet of modernity.

In the course of his analysis Kogan further elaborated on the internal connections between the three phases of Dante's literary and spiritual history. Particularly telling, in his view, was the affinity between the *Divine Comedy* and *Convivio*. According to Kogan, connected to the

⁸² Ibid. See also Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskikh'' literatur''* (1909), p. 44.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 63, 66.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

philosophical focus of *Convivio* was an encyclopaedic scope which made the work similar to the *Divine Comedy*.⁸⁵ At the same time, as mentioned earlier, Dante's love of knowledge, to which *Convivio* was a testimony, did not emerge from a void, but was deeply correlated to Dante's love for Beatrice. While exploring this connection, Kogan reflected:

Dante is all projected towards the love of knowledge. He burns with the desire to enlighten the dark masses, to share the treasures of his mind with the crowd. He did not write for scholars.⁸⁶

It is most significant that Kogan considered Dante's creative output as aimed primarily at the education of the masses, rather than at the entertainment of his most cultivated readership. Kogan, therefore, suggested that the *Divine Comedy* was naturally designed to reach out to the working classes. It is therefore not surprising that he decided to include it in *History of Western Literature*, a handbook for proletarian readers he published in 1928. The small volume was part of *Stupeni samoobrazovaniia (Stages of Self-Education)*, a collection of syllabi for the education of workers which covered different disciplines. On the endpaper of the book it is possible to see a map of the course, which was structured around four levels of difficulty and comprised various subjects divided into three main areas: social studies, literature and languages, mathematics.⁸⁷ *History of Western literature*, like *history of Russian literature*, was a subject recommended to second-level students (see Figure 5).⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 49.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 50.

⁸⁷ Petr S. Kogan, *Istoriia zapadnoi literatury* (Moskva: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1928), back cover.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

ПЛАН ИЗДАНИЯ „СТУПЕНИ САМООБРАЗОВАНИЯ“.

Издание имеет целью дать подробные программы с методическими указаниями и библиографией для самообразовательной работы массового учителя. Вместе с тем эти же программы в части не-специальной могут служить для целей общего образования.

Объем издания по содержанию должен соответствовать в части специальной, примерно, объему знаний и навыков, которые даст педагогич. техникум. Общеобразовательная часть программы приблизительно соответствует программе школы второй ступени или рабочего факультета (первого и второго концентров). Все программы настоящего издания разделяются, с одной стороны, по своему содержанию на циклы, охватывающие однородные области знаний и навыков, а с другой — на ряд последовательных ступеней внутри каждого цикла, дающих возможность проводить самообразовательную работу некоторыми законченными частями (подробнее см. в брошюре: „Как работать по ступеням самообразования“).

Циклы	1-я ступень	2-я ступень	3-я ступень	4-я ступень
1. Общественно-педагогический.	1. Введение в исторический материализм. 2. История России, ч. I. 3. Введение в политэкономию. 4. Первобытная культура.	1. История классовой борьбы на Западе до конца XIX века. 2. История России, ч. II. 3. Экономическая география.	1. История мирового империализма (XX век). 2. Основы советского права. 3. История ВКП(б).	1. Основы марксизма. 2. Основы ленинизма. 3. Основы политической экономии.
2. Литературно-языковедческий.	1. Русский язык — теоретическая часть. 2. Русский язык — практическая часть. 3. Введение в литературу.	1. Русский язык — теоретическая часть, ч. II. 2. Русский язык — практическая часть, ч. II. 3. История русской литературы 4. История зап. литературы	1. Современная литература. 2. История западной литературы, ч. II.	1. Современный русский язык.
3. Математический.	1. Численные операции и приближенные вычисления (арифметич.). Начало алгебры и геометрии.	1. Геометрия и алгебра в связи с черчением. Начальная тригонометрия.	1. Землемерие. 2. Техническое черчение.	1. Различные главы из высшей математики, применяющиеся в жизни.

Figure 5: Structure of the Course Stages of Self-Education as printed in Kogan's History of Western Literature

The handbook did not offer an in-depth analysis of major literary works, but only a series of guidelines. The reader was then referred to other works for a more detailed examination of the subject. In the case of Dante, for instance, the *Divine Comedy* was briefly introduced at the end of the paragraph dedicated to medieval literature as 'the genial application of the artistic techniques developed by medieval poets, and the most multifaceted and deep

incarnation of the medieval worldview'.⁸⁹ The book concluded with a series of questions concerning medieval literature in general and the *Divine Comedy* in particular, with the intent to help the reader reach the following objectives:

as a result of the study of the first section, it is necessary to have a clear idea of the influence of medieval economics on the psyche of medieval culture and on the literary style of the time, to get acquainted with the important cultural groups and forces who were active in the Middle Ages and with the literary monuments that reflect the worldview of each one of these groups, and to dedicate particular attention to Dante and the peculiarities of his *Divine Comedy*.⁹⁰

For instance, in addition to questions regarding the political and economic situation of Italy and Europe during Dante's time and the use of allegories in the work, other questions included:

1. How did papacy and the church, feudalism, chivalry and Christianity emerge and what role did they play in the Middle Ages? Highlight important moments in the ideas and daily practices of medieval society (mysticism, Scholastic philosophy, asceticism, the monastery, the castle, the cult of the lady, etc.).

[...]

5. Read *Inferno* and focus on the following episodes: classical poets, Francesco [sic] da Rimini, Farinata, Pope Nicholas III, Ugolino, Beatrice. Based on these episodes, analyse Dante's stance towards antiquity, human passions, the papacy, adultery and love.

[...]

8. How are Dante's religious, political and moral opinions represented in the poem? Highlight the elements in the poem that signal the imminence of the Renaissance.⁹¹

Next to each question, readers found bibliographical references to guide them towards the answer. In addition to Kogan's *Essays on the History of Western European Literature*, indicated as the main secondary source, recommended readings included Vladimir Friche's and Anatoly Lunarcharsky's literary histories (Figure 3 and 4). Kogan himself therefore acknowledged the kinship between his work and these authors' research on Dante.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 29-31.

Литература¹

Основным пособием для проработки данной программы должны служить книги:

П. С. Коган. Очерки по истории западно-европейской литературы. Том первый. Издание 8-е. Госуд. изд. Москва. 1922. Том второй. Издание 6-е. Москва. 1922. Том третий. Часть первая. Москва—Петроград. 1924. Том третий. Часть вторая.

П. С. Коган. Хрестоматия по истории западно-европейских литератур. Том I. Издание Н. Н. Ключкова. Москва. 1911. Том II. 1912.

В качестве дополнительных:

В. М. Фриче. Очерк развития западно-европейской литературы. Гос. изд. Московское отделение. Москва. 1922.

А. В. Луначарский. История западно-европейской литературы в ее важнейших моментах. Том I. Госуд. изд. Москва. 1924. Том II. Госуд. изд. Москва. 1924.

Для более углубленной работы необходимо прочесть указанные в настоящей программе крупнейшие произведения классических писателей и самостоятельно разобрать согласно поставленным ниже заданиям такие произведения, как „Божественная комедия“ Данте, трагедии Шекспира, „Дон-Кихот“ Сервантеса и т. д. В тех случаях, когда какого-нибудь из классических произведений не удастся достать, можно ограничиться отрывками произведений, помещенными в „Хрестоматию“ П. С. Когана. Но вообще хрестоматией следует пользоваться для ознакомления с теми произведениями, которые являются как бы сопутствующими. Напр., в первом вопросе программы с поэзией трубадуров можно познакомиться по образцам, помещенным в хрестоматию (так же как и с „Песней о Нибелунгах“ и другими средневековыми памятниками), но поэма Данте должна быть прочтена, по возможности, целиком, а не в отрывках, помещенных в хрестоматию. Так же и в других отделах — произведения, указанные в качестве центральных, должны быть проработаны в полном виде.

Задания по проработке программы.

Задание № 1.

Данте и средневековая литература.

Как отмечено выше, в результате проработки первого задания, необходимо ясно представить себе влияние средневековой экономики на психику средневекового общества, на стиль тогдашней литературы, познакомиться с главными культурными группами и силами, действовавшими в средние века, с литературными памятниками, отражавшими мировоззрение каждой из этих групп, и сосредоточить главное внимание на поэзии Данте и в особенности на его „Божественной Комедии“.

1. Как возникли и какую роль играли в средние века папство и церковь, феодализм и рыцарство, крестьянство. Отметьте главные моменты в представлениях средневекового общества и в его быту (мистика, схоластика, аскетизм, монастырь, замок, культ дамы и т. д.). — Коган, I, отдел I, гл. I¹⁾.

2. Укажите главные памятники монашеской, феодально-рыцарской, крестьянской литературы и

¹⁾ Без пометки работы здесь и дальше Коган „Очерки“.

выделите в них черты, характеризующие их связь с классом, из которого они возникли. — Коган, I, отд. I, гл. II. Для дополнения: Фриче, отд. „Средневековая литература“, особенно стр. 12—14 (о крестьянской поэзии) и Луначарский, т. I, стр. 101—105 (о крестьянской и городской поэзии).

3. Состояние (политическое) Италии и Флоренции в конце XII и в начале XIII века, личность Данте. Отражение средневековых представлений в его произведениях: „Новая жизнь“, „О монархии“, „Пир“. — Коган, I, отд. I.

4. Разберите внешнее построение „Божественной Комедии“, определите характер ее символики. Как представляет себе Данте устройство мироздания и какую связь это представление имеет с церковно-монашеским мирозерцанием. — Коган, I, отд. I, гл. IV. — Луначарский, I, стр. 123—130.

5. Прочтите „Ад“ и выделите эпизоды: античные поэты, Франческо да-Римини, Фарината, папа Николай III, Уголино, Беатриче. Определите на основании их отношение Данте к античному миру, к человеческим страстям, к папству, к измене, к любви. — Коган, I, отд. I, гл. IV.

6. Какое символическое значение имеют темный лес, три зверя, образ Беатриче, Виргилий, сюжет поэмы, самое путешествие Данте по загробному царству. — Коган, I, там же.

7. Чем отличается господствующее настроение в „Чистилище“ и „Рая“ по сравнению с „Адом“. — Коган и Луначарский, там же.

8. Как отразились в поэме религиозные, политические и моральные взгляды Данте. Определить в поэме черты, в которых чувствуется приближение эпохи Возрождения. — Коган, там же.

Проверочное задание № 1.

Выясните сущность средневекового мистицизма на отдельном примере. Для этого поставьте себе, например, задачу охарактеризовать природу любви Данте к Беатриче. Вспомните еще раз то, что говорится об этой любви в прочитанных вами отрывках пособий, и затем самостоятельно прочтите отрывки из „Чистилища“ и „Рая“, помещенные в первом томе „Хрестоматии“ Когана на стр. 117—127, выделите те стихи, в которых проявляется духовный характер дантовой любви, в которых можно найти объяснение отождествлению любви с добродетелью у средневековых поэтов.

Задание № 2

Эпоха Возрождения.

1. Как происходила в XIV—XVI веках смена натурального хозяйства денежным и связанная с ней смена феодально-монашеской культуры торговой, городской. — Фриче, стр. 21—31.

2. Какие перемены произошли в представлениях общества о религии, нравственности, науке, искусстве, строении мироздания, политике, женщине и т. п. — Коган, I, стр. 59—64.

Figure 6 and 7: Petr Kogan's History of Western Literature: End of chapter questions. At the end of each question the reader is redirected to either Kogan's, Friche's or Lunacharsky's work.

These questions are significant for a series of reasons. First, they underlined the approach favoured by Kogan for the literary education of the working classes, which combined two elements: it introduced readers to basic notions of medieval culture and it encouraged them to unearth the same notions in the poem, through a direct engagement with the text. Particularly apparent was, of course, the emphasis on the political implications of the *Divine Comedy*, a tendency which was already manifest in Kogan's *Essays on the History of Western European Literature*. Most importantly, they reveal which passages of Dante's work were selected for the education of the working classes. From this, it is possible to infer the enduring popularity of *Inferno*, particularly of the cantos that had already acquired fame in the nineteenth century, like *Inferno V* (Francesca da Rimini) and *Inferno XXXII-XXXIII* (Ugolino). However, it would be too superficial to presume that popularity among the readers was the only criterion behind the choice of these passages. The attention Kogan, Friche and Lunacharsky poured into examining Dante's political mindset leaves little doubt that these episodes in the *Divine Comedy* were chosen specifically for their political significance. A very telling example is *Inferno V*, the very well-known canto centred on the love story between Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini, who are killed by Gianciotto Malatesta, husband of Francesca and brother of Paolo, and punished in the circle of lust. Although the two lovers are doomed to spend eternity in hell, Kogan argued that the compassion shown by Dante towards them was a prelude to a more modern, Renaissance mentality.⁹² What attracted the attention of early Soviet commentators was not so much the romance in the episode, but what they interpreted as an implicit challenge to the dogmas of the Catholic Church. The same is true of the reference to Pope Nicholas III, which, as already mentioned, Kogan picked out as an example of Dante's criticism of the Church. The analysis of early Soviet scholarly work on the *Divine Comedy* therefore confirms what was anticipated at the start of this chapter. The inclusion of literary classics in the Soviet canon was both a diachronic and a synchronic process: it was built on the legacy of previous centuries of literary reception, but also responded to the necessities of the contemporary political situation.

⁹² Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskikh'' literatur''* (1909), p. 51. See also Kogan, *Ocherki po istorii zapadno-evropeiskoi literatury* (1928), p. 58.

The analysis of materials aimed at the education of Soviet readers provides interesting insights into the mechanisms used by the Soviet government to include Dante into the Soviet canon. A brief examination of works by Vladimir Friche, Anatoly Lunacharsky and Petr Kogan, all published or reissued at the start of Stalin's 'Cultural Revolution', has shown the foundations on which the Soviet authorities built their reception of Dante: the lasting success of *Inferno*, but also the possibility to apply a Marxist framework to the work, which was largely based on Friedrich Engels' definition of Dante as the poet representing the transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In contrast, Mikhail Bulgakov's use of literary classics in *The Master and Margarita* represented a conscious rejection of the Marxist approach to the literary canon. The ways in which Bulgakov's last work represented an attempt to preserve the memory of literature from the past for future generations are explored in more detail in Chapter Four. In the meantime, it must be noted that, while opposing the appropriation of the classics conducted by the Soviet government in the 1920s and 1930s, Bulgakov nevertheless did not refrain from using literary references to challenge the regime, as shown by the presence of a Dantean character in one of the early notebook versions of the novel.

3. Dantean References in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Between Modernism and Realism

As it is reasonable to expect from a novel that blends satirical realism with twentieth-century formal experiments, in *The Master and Margarita* references to the *Divine Comedy* can be found on both the symbolic and the mimetic levels of the work. For the first category this section will look at structural analogies between the two works, particularly with regard to the time architecture and its symbolic implications. The chapter will then move on to examine the mimetic, realistic component of Bulgakov's novel by looking at a specific example: a reference to Dante used in a realistic setting. Bulgakov embedded the reference in an episode he sketched in one of his notebooks for the novel, but decided not to include in the full draft. The excerpt, as will be shown in due course, exemplifies how Bulgakov used literary classics to shed light on the most grotesque aspects of Soviet reality.

There are, of course, significant differences in the setting of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*: on one hand, Dante's poem starts in 1300, the Jubilee Year

proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII,⁹³ while *The Master and Margarita* is situated in Moscow, in all probability in the 1930s, at least for what concerns the last version of the novel, written between 1938 and 1940.⁹⁴ In addition to this, the Master, from whom the novel gets its title, is the author of a novel that retells the story of Pontius Pilate's interrogation of Jesus Christ and the crucifixion of the latter. This story constitutes a plotline in its own right, which occupies four out of the thirty-three chapters of the final version of Bulgakov's manuscript, and is connected to the 1930s Moscow narrative through various stratagems. As made explicit in this plotline, Bulgakov's novel contains a very strong Easter subtext. This is the first significant analogy between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy*: in both works the use of time is enriched with a strong symbolic connotation, associated with an Easter theme. Dante's journey to Hell begins on a Friday and ends roughly one week later,⁹⁵ which implies that his ascent to Purgatory must have begun on a Sunday; similarly, in Bulgakov's novel both the Moscow and the Jerusalem plot start from midweek and end on Sunday.⁹⁶ The two works, therefore, share an Easter chronotope: time and space, strongly interconnected, are not only 'physical', but also symbolic points of reference, that introduce the reader to the main themes of the novel: redemption, forgiveness, death and resurrection.

As above mentioned, the reader learns halfway through *The Master and Margarita* that the crucifixion narrated in the Jerusalem plot is in fact a novel written by the Master, one of the characters in the Moscow story. Similarly to what Dante did with the *Divine Comedy*, therefore, in Bulgakov's novel the Master is the author of a work on an Easter theme. This seems to suggest a similarity between Dante-narrator and Dante-character on one hand, and the Master as a narrator and Ieshua as a character on the other hand. This apparent connection, however, may have been toned down in the final version of the novel, compared to earlier drafts. Elena Kolyshcheva's examination of the first manuscripts of the work, dated between 1928 and 1930, shows that, among other possibilities, Bulgakov was

⁹³ Lino Pertile, 'Introduction to *Inferno*', in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*, ed. by Rachel Jacoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 67-90 (p. 68).

⁹⁴ Whether Bulgakov's novel is set in the 1920s or the 1930s is debatable. For more on this, see also Boris M. Gasparov, *Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi romana M. A. Bulgakova "Master i Margarita"* (2008), <<https://web.archive.org/web/20080601120253/http://novruslit.ru/library/?p=25>> [accessed 24 September 2021].

⁹⁵ Pertile, p. 70.

⁹⁶ Weeks, p. 30.

considering *Bozhestvennaia Uvertiura (Divine Overture)* as a title for the first chapter of his work.⁹⁷ From this early very fragmentary draft chapter it appears that Bulgakov intended to have his narrator act as a character in the story.⁹⁸ This emerges also from other draft chapters written in 1931, where, similarly to what happens in the *Divine Comedy*, the Master, a character who to a great extent was modelled upon Bulgakov himself, should have been the one to take up the role of both narrator and protagonist.⁹⁹ Unfortunately, however, materials from the first draft of the novel which have survived until today are not sufficient to support this argument.

The analogies between the *Divine Comedy's* and *The Master and Margarita's* symbolic frameworks will become clearer in due course (Chapter Five). Meanwhile, a more direct reference to Dante can be observed in a less metaphorical and more realistic episode contained in one of Bulgakov's notebooks from 1931.¹⁰⁰ This excerpt takes place during a meeting of MASSOLIT, the only literary institution portrayed in *The Master and Margarita*. Although it can be argued that in the final version of Bulgakov's novel MASSOLIT was probably conceived as a parody of the Union of Soviet Writers, the same cannot be said of the version of MASSOLIT we find in this excerpt, since the episode was sketched out in 1931, a year before the foundation of the Union. Therefore, there is good reason to assume that the association Bulgakov had in mind while working on this notebook was RAPP, the only literary association left in place by Stalin after 1928, which claimed to represent the Bolshevik party perspective on literature and intended to promote the point of view of the proletarian writer.

The possibility that in this excerpt MASSOLIT may have been conceived as a parody of RAPP is also made evident by the events described in the episode. The excerpt centres on the description of a gathering of writers. On this occasion, the chairman of the meeting reads out a list of writers who have been allocated accommodation from the state. Among the names included on the list, much to the dismay of the attendant crowd, there is also Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant:

⁹⁷ Elena Iu. Kolysheva in Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita. Polnoe sobranie chernovikov romana. Osnovnoi tekst*, I, p. 10.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 130-132.

Товарищ председатель,- играя змеиными переливами, заговорил бузотер,- не откажите проинформировать собрание: к какой писательской организации принадлежит Беатриче Григорьевна Дант. P-раз. Какие произведения написала упомянутая Дант? Два. Где означенные произведения напечатаны. Три. И каким образом она попала в список.

[...] - Товарищ Беатриче Григорьевна Дант,- продолжал он [председатель],- долгое время работала в качестве машинистки и помощника секретаря в кабинете имени Грибоедова.

Зал ответил на это сатанинским хохотом.

[...]

- Покажите хоть эту Дант! - рявкнул некто.- Дайте полюбоваться!

- Вот она,- глухо сказал председатель и ткнул пальцем в воздух.

И тут многие встали и увидели в первом ряду необыкновенной красоты женщину.

Змеиные косы были уложены корзинкой на царственной голове. Профиль у нее был античный [...]. Цвет кожи был смертельно бледный. Глаза были открыты, как черные цветы. Платье кисейно-желтое. Руки ее дрожали.

-Товарищ Дант, товарищи,- говорил председатель,- входит в одно из прямых колен известного писателя Данте, и тут же подумал: - Господи, что же это я отмочил такое?!-; Вой, грохот потряс зал. Что-нибудь разобрать было трудно кроме того, что Данте не Григорий, какие-то мерзости про колено и один вопль «издевательство!» И крик «В Италию!! (I, pp. 131-132)»

Comrade chairman, - a troublemaker began, - do not refrain from providing the following information: to which writers organisation Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant belongs. F-first. Which works did the above-mentioned Dant write? Second. Where the above-mentioned works are printed. Third. And how she got on the list.

[...]

- Comrade Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant, - he [the chairman] continued, -has worked for a long time as a typist and an assistant secretary in the 'Griboedov' office.

The audience responded with a satanic laughter.

[...]

- Show us this Dant! – barked someone, - Let us see her!

- There she is, -said the Chairman with a muffled voice, pointing somewhere in the air.

And then many stood up and saw a woman of extraordinary beauty in the first row. Her snake-like plaits were laid like a basket on her regal head. She had an ancient profile [...]. The colour of her skin was mortally pale. Her eyes, like black flowers, were open. Her dress was muslin-yellow. Her hands were shaking.

-Comrades, comrade Dant,- said the chairman, -is among the closest relatives of the famous poet Dante, and immediately thought: -God, I can't believe I actually said that?!-;

A howl, a roar shook the audience. It was difficult to make out anything except 'Dante is not Grigory', some ugly things about family relationships, and a cry: 'Mockery!', and a yell 'To Italy!!'

In this vivid satire of a meeting of Soviet writers, the character of Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant is not only named after the author of the *Divine Comedy* and his most famous muse; she is also represented with the traditional stylistic features of Dantean iconography: an 'ancient

profile' and a crown of laurel around the head (here transformed into 'a basket of plaits').¹⁰¹ Her image, however, is completely deprived of the seriousness with which official Soviet culture approached Dante's work. Her name, together with the hilarious suggestion that she might be related to Dante, is just a label, attached to a person who, in reality, is no more than a typist, who never talks and has no part in the discussion the other writers are having about her. Even the reference to the audience's 'devilish laughters' seems a mere parody, compared to the horrors of Dante's Hell. It seems quite clear from this excerpt that in Bulgakov's opinion contemporary literature promoted by government-sponsored institutions could not possibly aspire to the peaks reached by literary classics from the past.

While the character is introduced by the name of 'Beatrice Dant', her physical appearance and her 'literary aspirations' may suggest that through this figure Bulgakov was interested in making a connection with Dante, rather than Beatrice. Particularly notable, in this respect, is Bulgakov's decision to 'transform' Dante into a female character. According to Andrei Margulev, with this choice Bulgakov may have wanted to reference Anna Akhmatova, who frequently compared herself to Dante in her poems and astonished many of her contemporaries with her physical resemblance to the Italian poet.¹⁰² Examples of Dantean intertextuality in Anna Akhmatova are discussed in more detail in Chapter Five of this thesis. Rather than looking for a model for this character among Bulgakov's acquaintances, however, it may be more illuminating to compare Beatrice Dant to another character within *The Master and Margarita* itself. The major female character of Bulgakov's novel is of course Margarita, the Master's lover. The name of Margarita is a direct reference to Margarethe, Faust's lover in Goethe's *Faust*: when Margarita strikes a pact with the devil to save the Master's life, it becomes clear that she represents a feminine incarnation of Faust, just like Beatrice Grigor'evna is a female version of Dante. There is, however, a very significant difference between Margarita and Beatrice: while shortly before Satan's ball the reader discovers that Margarita has royal blood (II, p. 713), at the gathering of MASSOLIT Beatrice is revealed to be a typist. From the episode of Beatrice Grigor'evna Dant, therefore, it is possible to infer Bulgakov's scepticism towards recent developments in Soviet literary

¹⁰¹ Margulev, para. 4 of 4.

¹⁰² Ibid.

debates: in his view, giving new names to proletarian writers was not enough to turn them into classics.

Although this episode was not developed further, Bulgakov was clearly aware of the comic effect created by directly mentioning a classical author while depriving their name of any significance. As the final draft of the novel shows, no literary authority, not even Pushkin, was safe:

Никанор Иванович [...] совершенно не знал произведений поэта Пушкина, но самого его знал прекрасно и ежедневно по нескольку раз произносил фразы вроде: «А за квартиру Пушкин платить будет?» Или «Лампочку на лестнице, стало быть, Пушкин вывинтил?», «Нефть, стало быть, Пушкин покупать будет?» (II, p. 713).

[...] Nikanor Ivanovich knew nothing of the works of Pushkin, although he knew his name well enough and almost every day he used to make remarks like 'Who's going to pay the rent--Pushkin?', or 'I suppose Pushkin stole the light bulb on the staircase', or 'Who's going to buy the fuel-oil for the boilers--Pushkin, I suppose?' (p. 655).

In this scene one of the minor characters of the novel, Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi, the chairman of a tenants' association, is having a very discomfoting dream: he finds himself in a theatre where the audience is accused of being in possession of foreign currency. Since nobody confesses to the crime, the attendants are forced to listen to a recital of Pushkin's *Skupoi Rytsar'* (*The Covetous Knight*, 1830). Before resuming the description of the dream, the narrator briefly brings the reader back to reality to offer an interesting piece of information: in real life Bosoi had no knowledge of Pushkin, but frequently brought him up in daily altercations with the tenants of the apartments he presided over, thinking that this conferred authority to his requests. In this scene Bulgakov condensed a parody of what he regarded as the dangers connected to the Soviet approach to literary classics: first, classics are valorised not for their artistic value, but for the contribution they can bring to the education of the masses (people who are accused of owning foreign currency illegally are exposed to a work by Pushkin centred on a greedy moneylender); second, names of classical authors have become signifiers with no signifieds, a concept already present in Bulgakov's early sketch centred on Beatrice Dant, but fully developed in later versions of the novel through the reference to Pushkin, Russia's highest literary authority.

Conclusion

Following an historical excursus on the reception of Dante in Russia, this chapter has introduced the core of this research. A selection of works on Dante published at the end of

the 1920s reveals that, although these materials have so far escaped the attention of Western scholarship, important personalities of the Soviet intelligentsia, including People's Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky, continued to develop the discourse on Dante which had already emerged in Marxist environments both in Western Europe and in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. What the late 1920s Soviet reception of Dante inherited from previous centuries was the engagement with Friedrich Engels' choice of the Italian poet as a symbol of, to use Marxist categories of historical analysis, the passage from the feudal into the bourgeois era. Completely evident in this is the impossibility to detach the *Divine Comedy* from Dante as a historical and political figure, a persona that was embedded in his epoch, but, by the Soviet scholars' own admission, at the same time seemed to transcend it, thus evading any attempts to constrain him within the boundaries of a purely materialistic analysis. Particularly surprising, on the other hand, is the lack of engagement with nineteenth-century radical readers of Dante like, for example, Herzen. Not only did Friche and Lunacharsky not make any reference to this aspect of the reception of Dante in Russia, but they also implicitly disavowed it by describing Dante as a sympathiser of the monarchy.

Furthermore, it is apparent that the passages included in the anthologies analysed so far were selected not only because they were popular, but also because they could potentially be adapted to the political necessities of the Soviet intelligentsia. Despite their differences in the interpretation of Dante's political opinions, it is clear that the most esteemed Soviet Dantists of the end of the 1920s had one priority at heart: selecting the aspects of Dante's work that were most worthy of being communicated to the masses. In some cases, like Kogan, they even deemed necessary to underline that Dante 'did not write for scholars'.

This new focus on the working classes was met with disillusionment by Bulgakov, as his satire of MASSOLIT shows. Besides her name, the typist portrayed in Bulgakov's satirical sketch from 1931 seems to have very little in common with Dante, as she sits in silence, incapable of standing her ground against the other writers who dispute her literary merit. This scene is particularly poignant when compared to the phenomena which had characterised Soviet cultural life in the 1920s. The first section of this chapter has concentrated on describing early Soviet literary debates between the sectors of the intelligentsia which defended the place of pre-revolutionary literary classics in the Soviet

canon, and those who exclusively promoted proletarian literature. By contrast, the picture of the same literary debates Bulgakov offered in his notebooks is one where Soviet intellectuals are exclusively concerned with petty interests, and alleged literary value is used only as a pretext to claim housing benefits. Bulgakov's use of a Dantean reference in this context may function as a starting point to ask more questions: what was the status of literary classics in the Soviet Union? Were they also silent, like the typist in this scene, or did they still have an audience? If the latter was true, what kind of reader did they speak to? These are the main issues the next chapter will explore.

Chapter Four

Literary Classics and Social Critique: Uses of Intertextuality in Mikhail Bulgakov's

The Master and Margarita

Introduction

Mikhail Bulgakov's literary output was without a doubt reflective of his time. Nowadays the writer owes his fame mainly to his satires of Soviet society (*Rokovye laitsa* [*The Fatal Eggs*, 1924], *Sobache serdtse* [*Heart of a Dog*, 1925], *Master i Margarita*, just to name a few). However, despite his attention to the contemporary, Bulgakov often manifested a great attachment to literary classics. In a letter he wrote to his sister Nadezhda on 31 December 1917, after being transferred from Kiev to the small town of Vyazma in September of that year, Bulgakov recited:

I find my surroundings so repellent that I live in complete solitude... [...] My only consolation has been work, and reading in the evenings. I have been fondly reading authors from the past (whatever comes to hand, since there are few books here), and I have been revelling in scenes from bygone ages. Ah, why was I so late in being born! Why was I not born a hundred years ago?¹

Bulgakov's literary taste and approach to writing was rather different from that of his contemporary proletarian writers. Chapter Three has shown that a 'Dantean' sketch from the preparatory notebooks to *The Master and Margarita* can reveal much of the author's reservations on the state of Soviet literature in the 1920s. By looking at the seventh and final draft of the novel, however, we can see that the use of references to European classics seems to have evolved to respond to a new phenomenon which characterised Stalinist culture in the 1930s: the decline of the conflict between proletarian and bourgeois literature and the rise of the cultural rivalry between the Soviet Union and the West. Connected to this last development was the urgency of new translations of Western European classics:

¹ Bulgakov, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: A Life in Letters and Diaries*, p. 15.

the appropriation of classics of European culture which had already started in previous centuries became a means to confer authority on Stalin's recently born regime.

In this study the analysis of references to European culture in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* intends to highlight how intertextuality can be used as a tool to reflect on Soviet-Western relationships during the Stalin era. The first part of this chapter examines changes taking place in the Soviet literary establishment in the aftermath of Iosif Stalin's rise to power, focusing in particular on the theorisation of Socialist Realism and how this affected Soviet approaches to Western literature. The second part analyses the reception of European classics in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. As this thesis focuses mainly on the reception of the *Divine Comedy*, this will also be an opportunity to explore how the Soviet cultural establishment reacted to the appropriation of Dante by the Italian Fascist regime. Finally, the third section delves into the particular role played by intertextuality in *The Master and Margarita* and examines how the use of references to European culture in Bulgakov's novel points towards broader issues around the reception of literary classics in totalitarian regimes.

This chapter addresses the following research question:

- What does Bulgakov's relationship to Dante reveal about the use of literary classics in totalitarian regimes?

1. Realism, Modernism, and the West: Changes in the Soviet Cultural Establishment from Stalin's Rise to Power (1928) until the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945)

While introducing the key issues of Dantean intertextuality, Chapter 1 fleshed out the factors which frequently endangered Dante's position in the Western European canon over the centuries, and divided them into two groups: content and style. These categories are particularly relevant for understanding the transformations taking place in the Soviet literary establishment during the first decade of Stalin's government (1928-1941). The ideological message and the aesthetic principles of new Soviet literature were essential in guiding the transition from RAPP, whose aggressive promotion of proletarian writers has been discussed in Chapter Three, to the Union of Soviet Writers, from proletarian literature to Socialist Realism.

As mentioned earlier, in the second half of the 1920s the reception of Western classics in the Soviet Union was entwined with broader developments which were unfolding in the Soviet Communist Party and government of the time. In 1924, Trotsky, in opposition to RAPP, advocated the necessity of spreading the reading of the classics among the proletariat. In the same year, however, a new set of regulations banned a series of Russian and Western monuments of literature, like Dante and Dostoevsky, from Soviet libraries. Although new guidelines warned about the alleged 'bourgeois ideology' promoted in these works, the same books were then reintroduced into libraries in 1926, which, ironically, was also the same year when Trotsky was expelled from the Politburo and progressively ostracised from the Soviet government.² The reintroduction of forbidden classics into Soviet libraries was one of the early signals that the Bolshevik party was unlikely to subvert literary hierarchies, but would, rather, focus on integrating pre-revolutionary classics into the government's political narrative, as a few examples of Soviet Dante scholarship have shown (Chapter Three).

At the same time, significant changes were looming in the country's economic and political structures. If 1921, the year when Mikhail Bulgakov moved to Moscow, had been the year of NEP (*Novaia Ekonomicheskaja Politika*), the New Economic Policy which had partly reintroduced private initiative into the country's economy, 1928 marked a return to the centralisation of the industrial and agricultural sector. The Five-Year Plan, the enormous project of industrialisation and collectivisation that Iosif Stalin carried out in the first years of his government, however, extended far beyond the economic sphere.³ As an article published in *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party, on 30 November 1927 explained:

The point, after all, is not simply that we have to industrialise the economy and erect the building of socialism stone by stone. The point is also how to work, with what methods and at what pace, how it is better for everyone of us, for every screw in the great socialist mechanism, to organise their own work, and how to best organise people so as to reach maximum results with minimum efforts. And this can be done effectively only on the foundations of a higher culture, higher than the one we have at present. [...] The necessity to

² Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, pp. 195-196.

³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 116.

raise the culture of the working and peasant masses, the necessity to accomplish an extensive and profound 'cultural revolution' in the country is evident [...].⁴

From the very start of this project, Stalin enlisted all Soviet arts in a fight for the construction of socialism.⁵ In the literary field, as we have seen, this resulted in the banning of all literary associations with the exception of VAPP, now renamed RAPP (Chapter Three). Like VAPP, RAPP condemned what they considered bourgeois literature of the past, and aggressively campaigned for the predominance of class perspective in literature. To reach this goal, between 1928 and 1931 circa ten thousand people with a proletarian background were trained by RAPP to become writers.⁶ At the same time, the main press outlet of the association, *Na literaturnom postu* (*On the Literary Guard*, published in Moscow between 1926 and 1932), published disparaging reviews of every writer who in RAPP's opinion did not conform to the ideal of proletarian literature. This indicated a radical difference between 1920s and 1930s Soviet cultural policies. In the 1920s it was generally accepted that collaborating with the so-called 'bourgeois specialists' was necessary to rebuild the economy after the First World War, the Revolution, and the Civil War. From 1928 onwards, however, anyone who defended this idea was attacked in the name of class war.⁷ Similar accusations, for instance, were directed against Anatoly Lunacharsky, the commissar of culture and education who had criticised proletarian literature and defended the reading of the classics.⁸

Considering RAPP's endeavours to promote party ideology in literature, it may be reasonable to presume that the association's monopoly on literary criticism would make it difficult for avant-gardes and pre-revolutionary classics to survive the Five-Year Plan. RAPP's relationship with literary classics, however, turned out to be more complex than expected. On one hand, there is evidence to confirm that RAPP considered all pre-revolutionary literature, without distinction, as a product of bourgeois culture, and therefore ideologically inappropriate. As RAPP leader Leopol'd Averbakh wrote:

⁴ 'Front Kul'tury', *Pravda*, 30 November 1927, 1.

⁵ Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2002), p. 472.

⁶ Harriet Borland in *ibid.*, p. 473.

⁷ Fitzpatrick, pp. 91-92.

⁸ *Ibid.*

We do not only exhort writers to emulate realism. Our realism will be different from that of the classics, from that of writers of another era... Proletarian literature will not simply inherit previous realist forms, but create new ones.⁹

However, the need to create new forms did not necessarily imply that nothing could be learned from the old ones. According to RAPP literary critic Aleksandr Mikhailov, for example, imitation of the classics could be legitimate if intended as 'the critical mastering of certain styles'.¹⁰ In another work, Averbakh himself also elaborated on the idea that literary criticism was an instrument to favour the

reboiling of both the realism and the romanticism of the classics in the cauldron of proletarian content, setting oneself the task of creating a new proletarian form and a new proletarian style.¹¹

In other words, as Evgeny Dobrenko summed up, 'what had to be learned was style, while the method had to remain "proletarian"'.¹² As to which models the new writers should draw on specifically, Averbakh was very clear: 'When talking about study we mean that it is first and foremost necessary to learn from the Pushkin school—from Lev Tolstoy'.¹³ This remark appears particularly significant because it testifies to RAPP's intention to go back to the so-called 'Golden Age' of Russian literature, to nineteenth-century realism, bypassing late-nineteenth century symbolism and early twentieth-century avant-gardes.¹⁴ The attitude of Soviet cultural institutions towards the legacy of Symbolism is also a subject of the next section of this chapter.

The return to nineteenth-century literary models was to be partly inherited by Socialist Realism.¹⁵ With the end of the first Five-Year Plan and the unrest it brought into the country's economic and cultural life, the necessity came for a phase of normalisation.¹⁶ On 23 April 1932 the resolution *O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii* (*On the Restructuring of the Literary-Artistic Organisations*) decreed the end of RAPP and the

⁹ Leopold L. Averbakh, 'Eshche o tvorcheskikh putiakh', *Na literaturnom postu*, 11-12 (1927), 15-19 (p. 19).

¹⁰ Aleksandr A. Mikhailov in Dobrenko, 'Literary Criticism and the Transformation of the Literary Field during the Cultural Revolution, 1928-1932', p. 51.

¹¹ Leopold L. Averbakh in *ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ For more on this, see also Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

¹⁶ Hans Günther, 'Soviet Literary Criticism and the Formulation of the Aesthetics of Socialist Realism, 1932-1940', in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism - The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. by Evgeny Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), pp. 90-108 (p. 90).

formation of the Union of Soviet Writers, the sole literary association admitted within the Soviet Union.¹⁷ On their first meeting, in 1934, the Union of Soviet Writers proceeded to formulate the principles of Socialist Realism, the only artistic method legally allowed to exist in the USSR. According to the statutes of the Union of Soviet Writers, this new stylistic approach

demands from the artist an accurate, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Within this, the veracity and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality should be combined with the task of ideologically transforming and educating the workers in the spirit of socialism. Socialist realism guarantees artistic creation the exceptional opportunity to demonstrate creative initiative and to choose various forms, styles and genres.¹⁸

According to this definition, Socialist Realism is distinguished by its commitment to realism and its orientation towards the masses. Although the Party officially disowned RAPP, it seemed that the dream of a literature which would be realistic in style and revolutionary in content was preserved. At the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers Karl Radek, the head of the International Information Bureau of the Russian Communist Party, gave a speech where he closely associated proletarian writers with Socialist Realism.¹⁹ However, from this moment onwards the focus on the proletariat, which was typical of RAPP's ideology, was progressively abandoned in favour of the more general concept of 'Soviet people'.²⁰ At the beginning of the 1930s the Soviet establishment proclaimed the complete defeat of the bourgeoisie and the definitive victory of socialism in the country. The years of class war had passed: the time had come to unite the people towards the greater goal of rivalling Western cultural hegemony.²¹

The idea that all art in the Soviet Union had to be audience-oriented and inspired by a pedagogical intent irrevocably compromised the relationship between Soviet authorities and the artistic avant-gardes. Although many experimental groups, like the Futurists, had actively supported the Revolution, their art and literature soon came to be regarded

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei* cited in *ibid.*, p. 91.

¹⁹ Samantha Sherry, *Discourses of Regulation and Resistance: Censoring Translation in the Stalin and Khrushchev Era Soviet Union* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 73.

²⁰ Günther, p. 90.

²¹ Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 25.

unfavourably from the authorities for its obscurity.²² Criticism of the avant-gardes, when analysed in the context of a broader rejection of modernism, had repercussions for the reception of Western literature as well. During the above-mentioned speech, Karl Radek gave an assessment of contemporary European literature where he condemned modernism and encouraged Soviet writers to draw on contemporary realist literature, particularly 'Western proletarian writers'.²³ Of all experimental works of literature, Radek was particularly critical of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), which he famously described as 'a heap of manure in which worms swarm, filmed with cinematographic apparatus through a microscope'.²⁴ The main reason for Joyce's inadequacy, in his view, was that his work gave no account of the Irish struggle for independence and focused exclusively on the private lives of the petty bourgeoisie.²⁵ Karl Radek's comments on *Ulysses* are particularly telling of the criteria which were adopted to judge Soviet and international literature at this stage: a literary work had to be realistic in style, with a working-class subject. Between these two elements, content seemed to have prominence, given that foreign authors who did not strictly adhere to the principles of nineteenth-century realism, but were sympathetic with the Soviet cause (like Bertolt Brecht) or presented society in a way the Soviet establishment considered appropriate (like Ernest Hemingway) were usually published.²⁶

As this section has shown, in the first decade of Stalin's government culture and wider society underwent a series of transformations. In the literary field, two interesting phenomena characterised this phase. The first was the shift from the proletarian-bourgeois to the Soviet-Western cultural conflict. The second was the opposition between realism and modernism, a conflict which affected not only the relationship between the Soviet authorities and the avant-gardes, but also the reception of modern Western literature in the USSR. The reception of Western literary classics, however, followed a slightly different path.

2. The Reception of Western Classics in Stalin's Russia

The 1920s Soviet reception of Dante was marked by two notable phenomena: the Dantean centenary at the start of the decade, and the production of a series of Marxist scholarly

²² Ibid., pp. 6-7.

²³ Sherry, p. 73.

²⁴ Karl B. Radek in *ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 72.

works near the end. In the 1930s, as earlier mentioned, the reception of Dante was instead distinguished by an extremely remarkable accomplishment: the new translation of the *Divine Comedy* by Mikhail Lozinsky, completed between 1936 and 1946 (see also Chapter Three).²⁷ It must be noted that Bulgakov most likely did not have the chance to access this translation, due to his final illness in 1939. This, however, does not make the history of Lozinsky's work less relevant for the purposes of this research. The choice to commission a new translation of the *Divine Comedy* and the broad recognition given to the work highlights that interest in Dante was still significant in the Soviet Union after the foundation of the Union of Soviet Writers and the institutionalisation of Socialist Realism. This interest was fuelled by two aspects: the debate on whether new Soviet literature should be proletarian or preserve the legacy of the classics, and the canonisation of specific passages from the *Divine Comedy* with the intent to spread a Marxist interpretation of Dante among the working classes. Both of them responded to a necessity that was at the same time practical and ideological: the still relatively young Soviet Union needed a new identity. Literary classics were used by Stalin's government to legitimise its own power, a phenomenon which was taking place in other totalitarian regimes around the same time. While looking at Soviet attitudes towards the *Divine Comedy* in the 1930s, therefore, it is worth expanding the research in two directions. In this section the reception of Dante is first situated in the broader context of the relationship between Western literature and the Soviet communist party, and, secondly, contrasted with the reception of literary classics by the Italian Fascist regime.

As the debate on pre-revolutionary literature partly suggested, the stance Stalin adopted towards Western European culture was the sublimation of a series of conflicting tendencies born within the Bolshevik party itself. An illuminating example is provided by *Vremena (How It All Began, 1937-38)*, an autobiographical work written by Nikolai Bukharin shortly before his execution during the Stalinist Purges in 1938.²⁸ In his recollections of his school years,

²⁷ For more on this, see Sergei M. Lozinsky and Igor' F. Belza, *Istoriia odnogo perevoda "Bozhestvennoi Komedii"* (2018), <[История одного перевода «Божественной Комедии» \(С. М. Лозинский\) - wikilivres](#)> [accessed 24 September 2021].

²⁸ Nikolai I. Bukharin, *How It All Began: The Prison Novel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. xviii-xix.

Bukharin described the elite of the Moscow Gymnasium as rigidly divided into two categories: the decadents and the revolutionaries:²⁹

the aristocratic group – the loners, the sons of the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie [...] often brought French books, from Baudelaire to Maeterlinck and Rodenbach, which they read with melancholy miens, to make clear that they lived in a world of altogether different dimensions. [...] They dropped the names of Nietzsche and Solovyov but did not read them; [...] and talked in church whispers of Oscar Wilde. Of the new Russian poets, they only recognised the Symbolists [...].

The rival group consisted mainly of children from intelligentsia families. They wore Tolstoy shirts under their jackets [...]. In class they secretly read Pisarev, Dobroliubov, and Shchedrin [...] They worshipped Gorky.³⁰

The picture Bukharin painted in this autobiographical account is one of stark opposition between the young dandies from the upper classes, all absorbed in their reverence for Western literature and trends, and the students from the intelligentsia, fascinated by Tolstoy, and also by the most radical Russian writers. The class division within the Russian intellectual world is here presented not only as a clash between different social backgrounds, but as a conflict of literary preferences: Bukharin's comment on the decadent youth not being interested in Russian literature (with the sole exception of the Symbolists), suggests that, by contrast, the attachment to Russian culture proudly manifested by the young Revolutionaries was especially worthy of praise. Particularly interesting is also that, with the exception of Gorky, who was a near-contemporary of Bukharin and his schoolmates, all the Russian writers mentioned in this excerpt belong to the nineteenth-century Russian realist tradition. Knowingly or not, Bukharin's literary reconstruction of his school experience established a link between the literary tastes of the revolutionary youth and the realistic method imposed by the Union of Soviet Writers.

The appeal of Russian nineteenth-century Realism among the radical intelligentsia has been investigated by, among others, Jeffrey Brooks. In his view, in the late nineteenth century a drastic change of attitude took place in the intelligentsia, who turned away from traditional Russian symbols of authority, the Tsar and the Orthodox Church, and began to look for guidance in literature, particularly in the Russian classics.³¹ Echoes of this legacy continued

²⁹ Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 26.

³⁰ Nikolai I. Bukharin in *ibid.*

³¹ Jeffrey Brooks, 'Russian Nationalism and Russian Literature: The Canonization of the Classics', in *Nation and Ideology. Essays in Honor of Wayne S. Vucinich*, ed. by Ivo Banac, John G. Ackerman and Roman Szporluk (New

to resonate after the Revolution: having dismantled old institutions of power, the Bolsheviks urgently needed to find new symbols to unify the Russian people.³² Russian classics continued to serve this purpose well after the end of the Civil War, as demonstrated by the decision to build a monument to Pushkin on the centenary of the poet's death, in 1937.³³

Although scholars have investigated the relationship of the 1930s Soviet establishment with the Russian classics on numerous occasions, the reception of Western literature in the same time span is still largely unexplored. Similarly to Russian classics, however, European culture served an important role in the construction of Soviet identity. The problem of a Bolshevik approach to pre-revolutionary Western literature presented itself in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution. Fundamental in this sense was the contribution of the writer Maksim Gorky, future chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers from its foundation, in 1934, until 1936. At the beginning of the Civil War, a most unexpected time to start such a project, Gorky funded the publishing house *Vsemirnaia Literatura (International Literature)*. Opened in Petrograd in 1918 with a view to publish 1,500 translations of world literary classics in its *Osnovnaia Serii (Main Series)* and 3,500 translations of shorter works in its *Narodnaia Serii (Popular Series)*, the publishing house remained active until 1924, when it became part of the state publishing house *Gosizdat*.³⁴ As Gorky himself explained in a letter to Lenin from January 1919, the purpose of these translations was to show the West

that the Russian proletariat not only is not barbaric, but that it also has a far broader understanding of internationalism compared to them, cultivated people, and that, in the most vile conditions imaginable, it was capable to accomplish in a year what they should have thought of doing long ago.³⁵

In contrast to the rigid separation between revolutionaries and decadents described by Bukharin in his autobiography, and contrary to what implied by Gorky's emphasis on the 'Russian proletariat', many collaborators of *Vsemirnaia Literatura* did not come from a working-class background. In fact, a great number of them came from the Russian Symbolist

York: Columbia University Press, 1981), pp. 315-335 (p. 315).

³² Ibid., p. 316.

³³ On the history of this monument, see Jonathan Brooks Platt, *Greetings, Pushkin!: Stalinist Cultural Politics and the Russian National Bard* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

³⁴ Francesca Lazzarin, 'Il libro e il caos. La casa editrice Vsemirnaja Literatura (1918-1924) tra le luci e le ombre di Pietrogrado' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Università degli Studi di Padova, 2012), pp. 12, 49-50.

³⁵ Maksim Gorky in Efim G. Etkind, *Bagrovoe svetilo: stikhi zarubezhnykh poetov v perevode Mikhaila Lozinskogo*, *Mastera Poeticheskogo Perevoda* 17 (Moskva: Progress, 1974), p. 7.

movement, like Aleksandr Blok, Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Valery Briusov.³⁶ This can partly be explained by the fact that the Bolsheviks needed the expertise of the intellectual bourgeoisie to fulfil their literary goals, but it also indicates that the gulf between the bourgeois and the radical intelligentsia was, at least in the early aftermath of 1917, not necessarily as deep as Bukharin felt. In his by now familiar 1924 speech at the Press Department of the Soviet Communist Party, Trotsky affirmed:

You remember, of course, *Novoye Slovo* [New Word], the best of the old legal Marxist periodicals, in which many Marxists of the older generation collaborated including Vladimir Ilyich. This periodical, as everyone knows, was friendly with the Decadents. What was the reason for that? It was because the Decadents were then a young and persecuted tendency in bourgeois literature. And this persecuted situation of theirs impelled them to take sides with our attitude of opposition, though the latter, of course, was quite different in character, in spite of which the Decadents were temporarily fellow-travellers with us.³⁷

It is also interesting that in the same speech Trotsky mentioned Bukharin among the supporters of proletarian literature, in contrast to Lenin's and his own opposition to the same phenomenon.³⁸ During his time as an editor at *Pravda* Bukharin had indeed shown support for *Proletkul't* and their efforts to build a proletarian culture. This activity and his memories from his school-days show that support of working-class culture could coexist with reverence for nineteenth-century realist Russian classics. This can be read as a foretaste of the attitude Soviet institutions would adopt towards the classics: rather than renouncing pre-revolutionary culture altogether, the tendency would be to preserve within the canon the writers, or the specific aspects of a writer's work, that could be adapted to become compatible with the ideology promoted by the regime. This phenomenon, which has already been observed in publications on Dante from the late 1920s, would intensify during the early to mid-1930s.

Another consideration suggested by Trotsky's comment concerns the relationship between Bolshevik and late nineteenth-century Decadent environments, and the support for the Revolution by some members of the Symbolist movement.³⁹ This has important consequences for this research. While analysing the reception of Dante in the immediate

³⁶ Lazzarin, p. 52.

³⁷ Trotsky, *Class and Art. Culture Under the Dictatorship*, para. 3 of 15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, para. 6 of 15.

³⁹ For more on the complexity of formulating a univocal judgement of the Symbolist attitude towards the First World War and the Revolution, see for instance Ben Hellman, *Poets of Hope and Despair: The Russian Symbolists in War and Revolution, 1914-1918. Second Revised Edition* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2018).

aftermath of the Revolution, this thesis hypothesised that, given his popularity in the Russian Symbolist environment, the figure of Dante had acquired a mystical aura which could potentially destabilise his position in the canon after 1917 (see Chapters Two and Three). To the contrary, the situation appears to be much more complex. It is certainly true that the most spiritual aspects of Dante's poem were not necessarily the ones to be preserved in the canon, as examples from Soviet anthologies have shown. However, the necessity to resort to the expertise of the Decadent intelligentsia, and the antagonism towards the Tsarist regime expressed by part of this environment before the Revolution, meant that ties between the Soviet government and early twentieth-century poetic movements were initially kept in place. Further evidence of this is that Mikhail Lozinsky, who in 1936 was put in charge of producing a Soviet translation of the *Divine Comedy*, came from the ranks of Acmeism, a poetic movement which also included Osip Mandel'shtam and Anna Akhmatova, whose relationship to Dante will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Five.

Before being assigned the task of translating Dante's work, Mikhail Lozinsky had also been one of the collaborators of Maksim Gorky's *Vsemirnaia Literatura* translation project.⁴⁰ Gorky's January 1919 message to Lenin revealed the strategic function attributed to translations in the relationship with Western countries during the Civil War. From this it is possible to conclude that the first years of Bolshevik rule already contained the seeds of the complex dynamics of collaboration and competition which defined Soviet-Western contacts during the 1930s. In this time, particularly after the foundation of the Union of Soviet Writers, RAPP's focus on class warfare was progressively abandoned, in an effort to unite the Soviet people. This movement to unite the different facets of the Soviet Union towards the greater goal of mastering European culture is evident also in the propaganda of the time. As an example of this, see the poster in Figure 8, depicting a girl with Central-Asian features playing a violin with a Beethoven bust in the background.

⁴⁰ Lazzarin, p. 52.



Figure 8: 'People of the Soviet Union - to the Heights of World Culture'. Date: around 1936 (Source: 'Seventeen Moments in Soviet History: An On-Line Archive of Primary Sources', [Creation of the Ethnic Republics Images – Seventeen Moments in Soviet History \(msu.edu\)](http://www.seventeenmoments.com/Creation-of-the-Ethnic-Republics-Images-Seventeen-Moments-in-Soviet-History-msu.edu)).

As the caption of the poster makes clear, overcoming not only the proletarian-bourgeois gulf, but also geographical and cultural divisions was felt as a necessary step towards a greater goal: the Soviet Union aspired to become a world-leader in cultural production. To do so, it had to master world culture, which, as the poster suggests, from the 1930s Soviet perspective was equated with European culture. This meant that the country needed to affirm its superiority on two levels: first, it had to show that it could measure up to bourgeois Western states; second, it had to present itself as an alternative to Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy.⁴¹

⁴¹ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-*

Competition with Western countries was strongly linked with ongoing economic transformations. When the Union of Soviet Writers was born, in accordance with Stalin's Five-Year Plans state propaganda declared that the construction of socialism in the Soviet Union was finally complete. This had repercussions for how the country's relationship with the West was represented by the regime. The USSR not only did not need to imitate the West: it had become far superior to it in every respect. This narrative was described by Michael David-Fox as the 'Stalinist superiority complex', borrowing a phrase coined by the French writer André Gide, who visited the Soviet Union in 1936.⁴² The 'Stalinist superiority complex' was not limited to economics and industry but was extended into the cultural sphere. In this sense the reception of Western classics was one of the fields where the rivalry with Europe expressed itself with particular intensity. A common claim made by the Soviet cultural establishment at the time, for instance, was that German and English literary giants like Goethe and Shakespeare were enjoying far more attention in the Soviet Union than in their home countries.⁴³ In this regard the 1930s wave to re-translate Western classics might be seen as an instrument for the Soviet Union to celebrate its own accomplishments vis-à-vis the West.

Therefore, the reception of Western classics can be examined together with the reception of Russian classics in the broader context of Soviet attitudes towards literary classics. However, Western European classics also had a special status, which distinguished them from Russian literature: on the one hand they were incorporated in the Soviet canon as a way of challenging Western aspirations to international cultural leadership. On the other hand, their presence in the canon risked becoming problematic, as relationships between the Soviet Union and the country of origin of specific European works started to change. For this reason, a study of the reception of Dante during the Stalin era must necessarily reckon with the appropriation of Dante by the Italian Fascist regime. Similarly to what was happening in the Soviet Union, in Italy the newly born Fascist regime was also seeking legitimisation through literary classics. Although the Italian Prime Minister and leader of the Fascist party Benito Mussolini did not have a particularly active role in organising Dante

1941, p. 25.

⁴² Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to Soviet Union, 1921-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 285.

⁴³ Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*, p. 11.

initiatives himself, he seemed to regard these projects with approval, as shown by his favourable opinion of the plan of building a Temple to Dante in Rome.⁴⁴ Interesting, in this sense, was Mussolini's address for the apposition of an epigraph to a Dante monument in Naples in 1932:

I want to be present in spirit at the great celebration which will see representatives from all the South of Italy gather around the monument to Dante to reaffirm the deep, old, immutable, devotion to unity. [...] Dante – the father of the Italian language, and therefore of the Nation.⁴⁵

Two elements stand out from this message. The first is the mention of national unity, a direct link to the reception of Dante by the Italian nineteenth-century patriotic movements. Mussolini left no doubt that this reference was intentional. 'The Fascist Revolution', he continued, 'has perfected what Risorgimento has created'.⁴⁶ The second interesting point is the choice of Dante as the 'father of the Nation', and therefore the effort to co-opt him into the nationalistic narrative of the regime. A survey of Italian criticism of the 1930s points towards a 'fascistisation' of Dante by the Fascist cultural establishment as an instrument to promote and celebrate 'Italianness'.⁴⁷

Chapter Two briefly described the connections between the Risorgimento movement and the Russian radical intelligentsia. Further research is needed to investigate how the attempts of the Fascist regime to appropriate Italian patriotic movements may have impacted on Soviet representations of the nineteenth-century struggle for the independence of Italy. It can already be observed, however, that the efforts of the Fascist cultural establishment to present Dante as a foundational figure of Benito Mussolini's Italy did not put an end to the Soviet engagement with the *Divine Comedy*. A possible explanation was probably the peculiar role played by literary translation in the history of cultural relations between Russia and the West, a phenomenon which survived through and beyond the *Vsemirnaia Literatura* project. According to Eleonory Gilburd, with the exception of a few specific historical phases (the peak of the Russian Romantic era during the 1820s-

⁴⁴ Martino Marazzi, *Danteum. Studi sul Dante imperiale del Novecento* (Firenze: Franco Cesati Editore, 2015), p. 23.

⁴⁵ Benito Mussolini in Luigi Scorrano, 'Il Dante >fascista<', *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch*, 75 (2000), 85-123 (p. 122).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See *ibid.*, pp. 90-123 for numerous examples of Italian literary studies from the 1930s which served this purpose.

1830s, and the Symbolist trend at the turn of the twentieth century), translation in Russia tended heavily towards appropriation. As a result, Russia created its own Hamlet, Faust, Don Juan and Don Quixote.⁴⁸ The same applied to Dante: the history of the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy* cannot be detached from the impact Dante had on the intelligentsia as a historical and political figure. The various experiments of appropriation of Dante by different sectors of the Russian cultural establishment can be seen as pieces of a puzzle which, assembled together, compose the image of a hybrid, fragmented 'Russian Dante'. This phenomenon fuelled the conviction that only Russians could fully understand the main Italian national poet.⁴⁹

A further step in this process of appropriation was represented, of course, by the new translation of the *Divine Comedy*, commissioned by Gorky himself in 1932. The founder of *Vsemirnaia Literatura* and future chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers had by then become head of the editorial board of the publishing house *Academia*. In his account of the reception of Dante in Russia and the Soviet Union, Il'ia Golenishchev-Kutuzov, an eminent Soviet Dantist of the 1950s, underlined that, in his view, Gorky's request had been inspired by the awareness that only through a translation that would 'preserve with the greatest completeness the specificity of the Italian verse', it would be possible 'to make the *Divine Comedy* a property (*dostoianie*) of our [Soviet] poetry'.⁵⁰ In other words, according to Golenishchev-Kutuzov, in order to become Soviet, Dante had to remain as similar as possible to himself. Golenishchev-Kutuzov offered very limited acknowledgement of the process of appropriation Dante underwent to become part of the Soviet canon: saying that 'preserving the specificity of the Italian verse' was all that was required 'to make the *Divine Comedy* a property of Soviet poetry' implies that Dante had always been Soviet.

Denying that an appropriation of Dante was in fact taking place has strong ideological consequences, and it is worth analysing them within the context of the translation approaches that were most popular in the Soviet Union at the time. As earlier noted, the translator who was chosen to re-translate the *Divine Comedy* was Mikhail Lozinsky, already made famous by his translations for *Vsemirnaia Literatura*. One of the most eminent Soviet

⁴⁸ Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 10.

⁴⁹ Potthoff, p. 15.

⁵⁰ Golenishchev-Kutuzov, p. 503.

translators of his generation, Lozinsky has sometimes been contrasted to poet and writer Boris Pasternak, who also worked as a translator of Western classics.⁵¹ Lozinsky was known for being a literalist, with an astonishing capacity to mimic other poets.⁵² He himself described his work in these terms:

The language of translation should be something like a transparent window, which allows us to see the original clearly, without distortions.⁵³

There is a striking resemblance between Lozinsky's position and Norman Shapiro's view of translation, quoted by Lawrence Venuti as an epigraph to *The Translator's Invisibility*:

I see translation as the attempt to produce a text so transparent that it does not seem to be translated. A good translation is like a pane of glass. You only notice that it's there when there are little imperfections - scratches, bubbles. Ideally, there shouldn't be any. [...]⁵⁴

However, as Venuti argues with reference to the Anglo-American tradition of translation, transparency in translation is an 'illusionistic effect'.⁵⁵ Despite Lozinsky's and Gorky's affirmations to the contrary, part of the Soviet cultural world was acutely aware that translation was not ideologically neutral. As evidence of this, the next paragraphs will look at examples offered by Pasternak and by *Krokodil* (*Crocodile*, a satirical magazine published in the Soviet Union and subsequently in the Russian Federation from 1922 until 2008).

Pasternak was a very well-recognised poet in his own right, and in his very free renditions of Western literature he would deploy his own style, rather than reproducing the originals.⁵⁶ According to Maurice Friedberg, one reason for this might be that Pasternak was prevented by Soviet censorship from publishing original work, and would therefore need to find other ways to express his creativity.⁵⁷ According to Brian Baer, however, Pasternak and other writers in his position had also further concerns:

⁵¹ Maurice Friedberg, *Literary Translation in Russia: A Cultural History* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), p. 102.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Mikhail L. Lozinsky in Etkind, p. 9.

⁵⁴ Norman Shapiro in Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

⁵⁵ Venuti, p. 1.

⁵⁶ Friedberg, p. 102.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

[...] literary translation perpetuated the concepts of timeless 'universal values' and 'world culture' that were in opposition to what they saw as the tendentious, politicized, and class-based official culture of the Soviet Union.⁵⁸

It is, therefore, one of the paradoxes of Soviet literary culture that both literalist and non-literalist translators seemed to be preoccupied with preserving the spirit of the originals. This is hardly surprising, and assessing which one of these 'schools' was more accurate in reproducing the original 'message' of the text is a fruitless operation. As Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere noted in the introduction to Venuti's work, 'translation is, of course, a rewriting', and 'all rewritings, whatever their intention, reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way'.⁵⁹

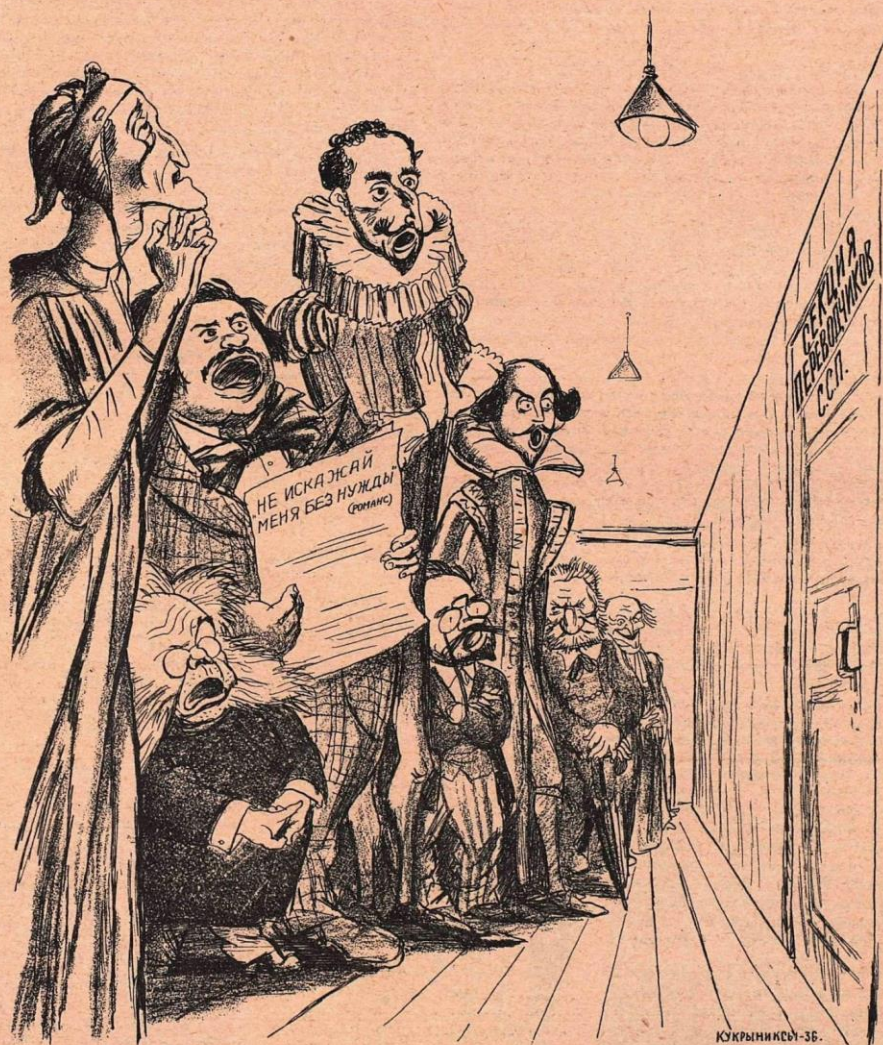
The Soviet cultural world was especially aware that retranslating Western European literature was to a great extent an ideological endeavour. An interesting take on this is offered by the cartoon 'Khor postradavshikh' (*Choir of Victims*), published in the satirical magazine *Krokodil* in 1936. The cartoon depicts a choir composed of famous European writers of the past giving a performance outside the headquarters of the Soviet translators committee (Figure 9).

⁵⁸ Brian Baer in Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*, p. 18.

⁵⁹ Susan Bassnett, André Lefevere in Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, p. vii.

ХОР ПОСТРАДАВШИХ

Рис. Кукрыниксы



ДАНТЕ, ИБСЕН, БАЛЬЗАК, СЕРВАНТЕС, ЗОЛЯ, ШЕКСПИР, ГЮГО, ВОЛЬТЕР И ДРУГИЕ КЛАССИКИ, НЕ ПОМЕСТИВШИЕСЯ НА РИСУНКЕ, НО НЕ МЕНЕЕ ИЗУРОВОДАННЫЕ ПЕРЕВОДЧИКАМИ:
— Не искажай меня без нужды...

(9)

Figure 9: Kukryniksy, 'Khor postradavshikh', Krokodil, 11 (1936), 9.

This cartoon is a valuable testimony to which European classics were most involved in the appropriation conducted by the regime. The caption reads: 'Dante, Ibsen, Balzac, Cervantes, Zola, Shakespeare, Hugo, Voltaire and other classics who did not fit in the drawing, but are no less disfigured by translators: - Do not distort me unnecessarily'. 'Do Not Distort Me Unnecessarily', as shown on the sheet held by Balzac, is also the title of the musical piece the choir is performing. Standing in the front row is, of course, Dante, depicted according to the European and Russian tradition of Dantean iconography: long tunic, Roman nose and penitent expression. It must also be noted that Dante is portrayed in the act of praying: the religious devotion he expressed in the *Divine Comedy* is ironically transformed in an appeal to Soviet translators to maintain the integrity of his work.

The first part of this chapter has illustrated various phenomena characterising Soviet literary culture in the 1930s: the birth of the Union of Soviet Writers and the institutionalisation of Socialist Realism; the official condemnation of modernist tendencies; the Soviet appropriation of literary classics and their enrolment in the construction of a Soviet identity. Mikhail Bulgakov was a witness to these events, and his last novel *The Master and Margarita* partly represented a reaction to these stimuli.

3. Structural and Thematic Intertextuality in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*

As this brief excursus into the reception of Western European literary classics after the Civil War and during the first decade of the Stalin era has shown, translation and adaptation are hardly ideologically neutral. The same can be said of Mikhail Bulgakov's use of intertextuality, which often serves a dual purpose: preserving the memory of the literary tradition of the past and criticising recent developments in the Soviet literary world. This section focuses in particular on the first aspect, highlighting the extent to which Bulgakov deploys intertextuality in *The Master and Margarita*.

Boris Gasparov's highly influential study of recurring patterns in Bulgakov's novel begins with this observation: '*The Master and Margarita* is a myth-novel [roman-mif]'.⁶⁰ One of the reasons he gives for using this definition is that the novel is entirely built on a structure of

⁶⁰ Gasparov, para. 1 of 8.

leitmotifs.⁶¹ Just like Richard Wagner's operas, in Bulgakov's novel a motif can take any shape (a character trait, a word, a sound, an element of the landscape, and so on), and once it is introduced into the plot it can be repeated many times and present itself in different combinations with other motifs in the work.⁶² As a consequence of this, *The Master and Margarita* is structured around a system of references which will direct the reader either to the outside (by referencing other works of literature) or to the inside of the novel (by referencing other elements that are present within the novel itself).

What allows this structure to work is, according to Gasparov, a cooperation between two actors: although it is true that the associative process can easily escape the author's control and that the reader might infer allusions and references which were not intentionally placed in the text, it was the author who set the associative machine into motion by building its first nucleus.⁶³ This mechanism is entirely based on allusion, which, according to Genette, is one of the most common forms through which intertextuality manifests itself.⁶⁴ This technique was often deployed in Bulgakov's works, but it is with *The Master and Margarita* that the writer explored its potential to the fullest. An examination of the work's leitmotifs shows that the novel possesses strong associations with both past and contemporary literary works.

To see how this mechanism works in practice, it might be useful to briefly analyse the first scenes of the novel. The first chapter starts at the Patriarch's Ponds in Moscow, where Mikhail Berlioz, head of the literary association MASSOLIT, is having a conversation with the poet Ivan Bezdomny regarding a poem about Jesus which the latter has just written and hopes to get published. According to Berlioz, there is something fundamentally wrong about Bezdomny's work: although his poem ridicules the figure of Christ, it does not lead the reader to conclude that Jesus did not exist, and this is why it needs to be corrected. During their dialogue, the two writers are approached by a bizarre stranger who introduces himself as Woland and asks them if they are indeed atheists. To their affirmative answer, the newcomer replies that Jesus actually existed, and that he personally witnessed his

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Genette, p. 2.

interrogation by Pontius Pilate. At this point Woland starts recounting the above-mentioned meeting between Ieshua and Pilate which constitutes the second chapter of the novel.⁶⁵

The first two chapters of *The Master and Margarita* already contain a significant number of connections to both 'internal' and 'external' textual referents. The first element that captures the attention of the reader is the family name of one of the writers, Berlioz. This name is clearly a reference to the composer Hector Berlioz, author of *Symphonie fantastique: Épisode de la vie d'un artiste, en cinq parties* (*Fantastical Symphony: An Episode in the Life of an Artist, in Five Parts*, 1830), whose last movements revolve around the motif of God's judgement and the image of a sabbath of witches, thus introducing elements which will be developed in the course of Bulgakov's work.⁶⁶

The gathering of witches may also represent a connection to Johann W. Goethe's *Faust* (1808-1832). Already announced in the first chapter of the novel is therefore another important intertext. The stranger that suddenly interrupts the conversation between Berlioz and Bezdomny goes by the name of Woland, the same name the devil Mephistopheles uses to introduce himself during the Walpurgis Night scene.⁶⁷ This is only the first of a series of numerous references to both Goethe's drama and Charles Gounod's opera *Faust* (1859). With these works Bulgakov's novel shares also important similarities on a thematic level: the role of intellectuals in society, redemption and punishment are among the primary concerns of both works.⁶⁸ This must be taken into account when approaching the Dantean references in the novel, given that the *Divine Comedy* is in turn one of the main intertexts of Goethe's *Faust*. Particularly fascinating are the similarities in the ethical principles expressed in the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*, a topic explored in the next chapter.

Berlioz's family name, therefore, evokes a series of associations with a French nineteenth-century musical piece, anticipates themes and events which will unfold later in the plot, and introduces the biblical motif, which, starting from the second chapter, plays a central role in the whole novel. The New Testament narrative of the second chapter, in turn, builds a

⁶⁵ Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, II, pp. 546-554.

⁶⁶ Gasparov, para. 3 of 8 ('2. Berlioz').

⁶⁷ Weeks, p. 21.

⁶⁸ For further reference, see Evgeny A. Iablokov, *Mikhail Bulgakov i mirovaia kul'tura* (Sankt-Peterburg: Dmitry Bulanin, 2011); Stenbock-Fermor, pp. 309-25; Galina G. Ishimbaeva, *Russkaia Faustiana XX veka* (Moskva: Nauka, 2002).

contrast with the poem about Jesus written by Ivan Bezdomny, the other writer from the Moscow scene. The biblical connection makes an excellent example of how intertextuality creates cohesion within Bulgakov's work: the links it builds are internal to the novel (Bezdomny's poem is connected to the evangelical plot in the second chapter), but are also directed towards the outside of the text (Bezdomny's poem and the evangelical chapter are both connected to the Gospels).

One of the immediately recognisable differences between *The Master and Margarita* biblical chapters and the New Testament is that Ieshua, in contrast to Jesus, does not have twelve disciples, but only one, Levy Matvei. As Ieshua mentions during his exchange with Pilate, Matvei is following him everywhere, but is writing an untruthful account of his life.⁶⁹ His criticism of Matvei's work mirrors Berlioz's judgement of Ivan Bezdomny's poem, and establishes a connection between Matvei and Ivan. This connection, according to Gasparov, introduces into the novel another musical reference, to Johann Sebastian Bach, who is the author of two famous musical pieces on the Passion of Christ: *Johannes-Passion* and *Matthäus-Passion* (*Saint John Passion*, 1724 and *Saint Matthew Passion*, 1727), Matvei and Ivan being the Russian equivalents of Matthäus and Johann.⁷⁰ The need to make an explicit reference to Bach would also explain why, among four evangelists, Bulgakov decided to keep only Matthew in his version of the story.⁷¹

Of the numerous intertextual connections present in the novel a great part is built through parody, and the same applies to references to the New Testament. To use the terminology provided by Genette, the Gospel is the 'hypotext' of one of the two plots in the novel, or the source without which the storyline which is set in Jerusalem simply would not exist. However, the way in which the Jerusalem plot line is connected to the religious source text is not based on simple association. The relationship between the novel and its hypotext is intensely polemical: the narrator of the Jerusalem events frequently suggests that the story told in the New Testament is in no way faithful to what happened in real life.⁷² The conflict between the novel and its source becomes explicit in this passage where Ieshua explains to Pilate that Levy Matvei has been lying in his chronicle of events:

⁶⁹ Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, II, p. 557.

⁷⁰ Gasparov, para. 2 of 8 ('1. Bezdomny').

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

– Эти добрые люди [...] ничему не учились и все перепутали, что я говорил. Я вообще начинаю опасаться, что путаница эта будет продолжаться очень долгое время. И все из-за того, что он [Левий Матвей] неверно записывает за мной. [...] ходит, ходит один с козлиным пергаментом и непрерывно пишет. Но я однажды заглянул в этот пергамент и ужаснулся. Решительно ничего из того, что там написано, я не говорил. Я его умолял: сожги ты бога ради свой пергамент! Но он вырвал его у меня из рук и убежал (II, p. 557).

‘These good people [...] are unlearned and have confused everything I said. I am beginning to fear that this confusion will last for a very long time. And all because he [Levy Matvei] untruthfully wrote down what I said. [...] This man follows me everywhere with nothing but his goatskin parchment and writes incessantly. But I once caught a glimpse of that parchment and I was horrified. I had not said a word of what was written there. I begged him-- please burn this parchment of yours! But he tore it out of my hands and ran away’ (p. 19).

The dialogue between Pilate and Ieshua in Chapter 2 represents a further example of leitmotiv: Ieshua’s invitation to burn the manuscript recurs later in the novel, when the Master, the author of the novel Ieshua is one of the main characters of, attempts to burn his manuscript, which is then returned to him by Woland. Woland’s comment on this occasion, ‘Рукописи не горят’ (‘Manuscripts don’t burn’) is not only one of the most famous quotes from Bulgakov’s novel, but also a perfect summary of the ethos that animated the writers that opposed Stalin’s regime. This aspect will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

The irony Bulgakov expresses through Ieshua’s words also signals an affinity between the novel and early twentieth-century literary modernism, a movement the Soviet government and cultural institutions were openly opposing, as Karl Radek explained in his speech at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers. The first element that reconnects the novel to this tendency is the distrust in the power of the written word, a theme already anticipated in the dialogue between Berlioz and Bezdomny in the first chapter. Berlioz asks Bezdomny to write a poem that proves that Jesus did not exist, but how can non-existence be put into words? Through this paradox, Bulgakov offered an example of how modernism challenged nineteenth-century confidence in the narrator and in the capacity of the literary word to mimic reality. As a consequence, the Soviet belief in the potential of realist literature is here called into question.

A further modernist element in the novel is, of course, the playful, ironic relationship with the Gospel. Ieshua’s words reveal that *The Master and Margarita’s* Jerusalem story does not simply cite, but is in part a parodic retelling of the New Testament. This element of parody

reveals the ambivalence of Bulgakov's relationship to the literary past. While expressing reverence for literary tradition in his letters to his sister (see the Introduction to this chapter), the author of *The Master and Margarita* did not shy away from problematising the same tradition. The acme of this conflict is best represented in the scene from the sixth chapter in the novel, where poet Riukhin has a tirade directed at the statue of Pushkin in Pushkinskaia Square in Moscow:

Вот пример настоящей удачливости...— тут Рюхин встал во весь рост на платформе грузовика и руку поднял, нападая зачем-то на никого не трогающего чугунного человека,—какой бы шаг он ни сделал в жизни, что бы ни случилось с ним, все шло ему на пользу, все обращалось к его славе! Но что он сделал? Я не понимаю... Что-нибудь особенное есть в этих словах: "Буря мглою..."? Не понимаю!.. Повезло, повезло!--вдруг ядовито заключил Рюхин и почувствовал, что грузовик под ним шевельнулся,—стрелял, стрелял в него этот белогвардеец и раздробил бедро и обеспечил бессмертие... (II, pp. 591-592).

Now there's an example of pure luck.'--Ryukhin stood up on the lorry's platform and raised his fist in an inexplicable urge to attack the harmless cast-iron man--'...Everything he did in life, whatever happened to him, it all went his way, everything conspired to make him famous! But what did he achieve? I've never been able to discover... What about that famous phrase of his that begins "A storm of mist..."? What a load of rot! He was lucky, that's all, just lucky!--Ryukhin concluded venomously, feeling the lorry start to move under him--'and just because that White officer shot at him and smashed his hip he is famous forever... (p. 79)'.

There is little doubt that Riukhin's character was probably inspired by Vladimir Mayakovsky, one of the most charismatic and notable figures in the Futurist movement before the Revolution, and a vocal advocate of revolutionary art after it. By calling George d'Anthès, who famously killed Pushkin in a duel in 1837, a 'White officer', Riukhin is clearly using terminology from the Civil War, since 'White Army' is the term used to describe the forces fighting for the reinstatement of the Tsar against the Bolshevik Red Army. However, he is also referencing *Iubileinoe* (*Jubileum*, 1924), a poem Mayakovsky wrote for Pushkin's 125th birthday.⁷³ The tone of the speech is also reminiscent of *Poshcheczina obshchestvennomu vkusu* (*A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, 1917), the Russian Futurist manifesto in which Mayakovsky, among others, famously invited readers to 'Throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of Modernity'.⁷⁴ Although he did not support iconoclastic behaviour and certainly did not sympathise with his political ideas, there is enough evidence in Bulgakov's novel to suggest that he shared the frustration and

⁷³ Boris M. Gasparov, *Literaturnye leitmotivy* (Moskva: Nauka, 1993), p. 135.

⁷⁴ David D. Burliuk and others, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (2002), <<https://www.unknown.nu/futurism/slap.html>> [accessed 24 September 2021].

hopelessness Mayakovsky-Riukhin is expressing here. The attack on Pushkin perpetrated by this character also hinted that Bulgakov did not reserve his irony for the Bible, but applied it as a general attitude to literary classics.

The relationship between Bulgakov and the classics, however, is too complex to be reduced to satire. While condensing a great number of intertextual references *The Master and Margarita* does not only polemise with literary classics as much as it criticises a specific attitude towards the classics which was gaining momentum in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era. As is the case with many of the themes covered in the novel, this topic is already introduced in the first chapter. Berlioz's lecture on Jesus to Bezdomny is interrupted by the sudden arrival of Woland, who seems to be amused by the atheism of the two characters and brings in Immanuel Kant's arguments on the existence of God:

– Bravo! – вскричал иностранец, – bravo! Вы полностью повторили мысль беспокойного старика Иммануила по этому поводу. Но вот курьез: он начисто разрушил все пять доказательств, а затем, как бы в насмешку над самим собою, соорудил собственное шестое доказательство!

– Доказательство Канта, – тонко улыбнувшись, возразил образованный редактор, – также неубедительно. И недаром Шиллер говорил, что кантовские рассуждения по этому вопросу могут удовлетворить только рабов, а Штраус просто смеялся над этим доказательством.

Берлиоз говорил, а сам в это время думал: «Но, все-таки, кто же он такой? И почему так хорошо говорит по-русски?»

–Взять бы этого Канта, да за такие доказательства года на три в Соловки! – совершенно неожиданно бухнул Иван Николаевич (II, p. 550).

'Bravo!' exclaimed the stranger. 'Bravo! You have exactly repeated the views of the immortal Emmanuel on that subject. But here's the oddity of it. He completely demolished all five proofs and then, as though to deride his own efforts, he formulated a sixth proof of his own.' 'Kant's proof', objected the learned editor with a thin smile, 'is also unconvincing. Not for nothing did Schiller say that Kant's reasoning on this question would only satisfy slaves, and Strauss simply laughed at his proof.'

As Berlioz spoke he thought to himself: 'But who on earth is he? And how does he speak such good Russian?'

'Kant ought to be arrested and given three years in Solovki asylum [sic] for that "proof" of his!' Ivan Nikolayich burst out completely unexpectedly. 'Ivan!' whispered Berlioz, embarrassed (pp. 7-8).

In just a few sentences Bulgakov managed to offer a glimpse into the 1920s and 1930s Soviet literary scene as he saw it. First the newcomer, clearly identified as a foreigner, underlines that Berlioz's atheistic convictions register the influence of Immanuel Kant, one of the pillars of eighteenth-century Western Enlightenment. Trying to beat him at his own game, Berlioz reacts by showing his own erudition on German philosophy. Their exchange is

interrupted quite abruptly by the proletarian writer Bezdomny, who, unable to join the debate on the same level as the other participants, suggests that Kant be sent to Solovki, causing profound embarrassment in Berlioz. Solovki, here translated 'asylum', was, in fact, an infamous labour camp on the Solovetsky Islands. The fact that Bulgakov chose to name this particular camp seems extremely significant: as Andrea Gullotta has recently argued, Solovki was not only the 'Mother of the Gulag', where the Soviet system of using slave labour for profit was developed, but was also the setting of a very active literary scene.⁷⁵ Even more openly than he did with the Dantean episode in his notebooks, in this dialogue Bulgakov voiced a clear view of the current political situation: if Kant was alive in Stalin's Russia, he would be sent to Solovki.

The meeting between Woland and the Soviet writers is also an occasion for Bulgakov to denounce another phenomenon of High Stalinism: the widespread climate of suspicion in the country, directed especially against foreigners. Western literary classics prove again to be a useful instrument to describe the issue. When reading the description of Woland on his first appearance at the Patriarch's Ponds it becomes immediately apparent that he bears no similarity with the traditional Russian iconography of the Devil:

Он был в дорогом сером костюме, в заграничных, в цвет костюма, туфлях. Серый берет он лихо заломил на ухо, под мышкой нес трость с черным набалдашником в виде головы пуделя. По виду – лет сорока с лишним. Рот какой-то кривой. Выбрит гладко. Брюнет. Правый глаз черный, левый почему-то зеленый. Брови черные, но одна выше другой. Словом – иностранец.

[...]

«Немец», – подумал Берлиоз.

«Англичанин, – подумал Бездомный [...] (II, p. 548).

He wore an expensive grey suit and foreign shoes of the same colour as his suit. His grey beret was stuck jauntily over one ear and under his arm he carried a walking-stick with a knob in the shape of a poodle's head. He looked slightly over forty. Crooked sort of mouth. Clean-shaven. Dark hair. Right eye black, left eye for some reason green. Eyebrows black, but one higher than the other. In short--a foreigner.

[...]

'A German', thought Berlioz. 'An Englishman', thought Bezdomny (pp. 4-5).

Berlioz's and Bezdomny's immediate reaction to the first appearance of Woland highlights the otherness of the newcomer. To underline this impression, the narrator attributes to the character, who is later revealed to be the Devil, traits that are typical for Western

⁷⁵ For more on this, see Andrea Gullotta, *Intellectual Life and Literature at Solovki 1923-1930: The Paris of the Northern Concentration Camps* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2018).

representations of satanic presences. Not only are the name Woland and the poodle's head-shaped knob Goethean references, but the clothing and facial traits are strongly reminiscent of depictions of the devil in nineteenth-century European gothic literature. To reinforce this concept, let us look for example at the following excerpt from the description of Coppelius, the devilish antagonist in E. T. A. Hoffmann's novella *Der Sandmann* (*The Sandman*, 1816):

But the most hideous figure could not have awakened greater trepidation in my heart than this Coppelius did. Picture to yourself a large broad-shouldered man, with an immensely big head, a face the colour of yellow-ochre, grey bushy eyebrows, from beneath which two piercing, greenish, cat-like eyes glittered, and a prominent Roman nose hanging over his upper lip. His distorted mouth was often screwed up into a malicious smile; then two dark-red spots appeared on his cheeks, and a strange hissing noise proceeded from between his tightly clenched teeth. He always wore an ash-grey coat of an old-fashioned cut, a waistcoat of the same, and nether extremities to match, but black stockings and buckles set with stones on his shoes.⁷⁶

Although Woland's physical appearance is doubtlessly more appealing, the crooked smile and the predominance of the grey colour in his clothing may suggest a Hoffmannesque use of the fantastic. Equally fascinating is the fact that in Hoffmann's novella the devil also introduces himself as a foreigner: at the beginning of the story, Coppelius reconnects with the protagonist Nathaniel under the name of Giuseppe Coppola, an Italian weather-glass dealer. In *The Master and Margarita*, Berlioz wonders whether the mysterious stranger might be German, thus implicitly referencing not only German nineteenth-century literature (Goethe, Hoffmann), but also another writer from the same time who reinterpreted this literary genre and, in turn, had a remarkable influence on Bulgakov: Nikolai Gogol. In the short story *Noch' pered Rozhdestvom* (*The Night of Christmas Eve*, 1832), the narrator affirms that 'in front' the devil 'looked like a regular German'.⁷⁷ In a note to this sentence, Gogol specified: 'Among us anyone is called a German who comes from a foreign land; even though he may be a Frenchman, a Hungarian, or a Swede, he is still a German'.⁷⁸ By going back to these nineteenth-century representations of the devil, Bulgakov fulfils a double purpose: he preserves the legacy of literary classics in the Soviet Union, and provides a

⁷⁶ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *The Sandman - Der Sandmann and The Tales of Hoffmann - Les contes d'Hoffmann: English-German/English-French Parallel Text Edition*, ed. by D. Bannon, trans. by J. T. Bealby (from the German) and Charles Alfred Byrne (from the French) ([s.l.]: Bilingual Library, 2010), p. 8.

⁷⁷ Nikolai V. Gogol, *Evenings Near the Village of Dikanka. Stories Published by Beekeeper Rudi Panko*, ed. by Ovid A. Gorchakov (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1957), p. 129.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

commentary on the climate of suspicion that surrounded Western-Soviet relations in the first decade of the Stalin era.

Episodes like these show that besides references to internal and external literary texts, there is another dimension to Bulgakov's novel which extends into the extra-literary domain. Most of the intertextual references which are present within the novel work simultaneously on two different levels: they place the novel in connection with broader European culture, but they also provide a social commentary on Stalin's Russia. In the first chapter, for example, Mikhail Berlioz is introduced as the head of MASSOLIT. The name of the association is obviously a portmanteau for *Massovaia Literatura* (Mass Literature), a name that, with its emphasis on literature for and from the common people, clearly evokes organisations like VAPP and RAPP. Similarly to the 'Dante episode' he sketched out in his 1931 notebook, where receiving an apartment was the utmost priority of Soviet writers, throughout all seven versions of the novel Bulgakov maintained the idea of MASSOLIT as an organisation exclusively concerned with the bodily, rather than the cultural aspects of life. Gasparov remarked that the most prestigious institution linked to the literary group is in fact the restaurant Griboedov, which he read as a parody of Auerbach's cellar, the tavern visited by Faust and Mephistopheles on their first adventure in Goethe's play.⁷⁹ According to Gasparov, through this allusion Bulgakov reinforced the reference to early Soviet associations of proletarian writers by hinting at a connection between Auerbach's cellar and Leopold Averbakh, the head of RAPP.⁸⁰

In addition to the association between Mikhail Berlioz and Leopold Averbakh there is an equally clear link between Ivan Bezdomny and real-life proletarian writers such as Demian Bedny. Ivan, whose real family name is Ponyrev, pens his poem under the pseudonym 'Bezdomny', 'The Homeless'. With this choice, Bulgakov clearly placed him in the category of proletarian writers.⁸¹ It was common practice, among the authors who participated in this current, to choose pseudonyms which would remark their working-class background. One of the most famous examples was Efim Pridvorov, better known as Demian Bedny, who,

⁷⁹ Gasparov, *Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi romana M. A. Bulgakova "Master i Margarita"*, para. 3 of 8 ('2. Berlioz').

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

similarly to Bezdomy, authored a series of antireligious poems.⁸² As the allusion to Demian Bedny shows, the poem ridiculing Jesus that Berlioz and Bezdomy are discussing at the start of the novel is a clear reference to antireligious literature, a genre which was extremely popular and encouraged in the Soviet press in the 1920s. The Jerusalem plotline that starts in the second chapter, therefore, must be read as a polemical response to Bezdomy's antireligious poem in particular, and to Soviet militant atheism in general.

In Chapter 13 the reader discovers that the Jerusalem events are in effect a novel within the novel. Chapters 2, 16, 25 and 26 are therefore part of a work authored by the Master, a character bearing many similarities to Bulgakov himself. The main point of contact between the two is probably the persecution they encountered for their literary outputs, a circumstance Bulgakov alluded to not only through the character of Berlioz-Averbakh, but also through Bezdomy. In addition to Bedny, another literary personality of the Soviet era who almost certainly inspired the figure of Bezdomy was Ivan Bezymensky. Apart from the clear assonance in the name, Bezymensky, who, like Bezdomy, was also a poet, was the author of *Vystrel (The Shot, 1929)*, a satire of Bulgakov's first novel *Belaia Gvardiia (The White Guard, 1925)*.⁸³ Gasparov noted that in *Vystrel* Bezymensky applied the same literary strategy adopted by his fictional counterpart Bezdomy in his own satirical poem: just as Bezymensky offered an unflattering portrayal of Aleksei Turbin, the protagonist of Bulgakov's *The White Guard*, in the same way Bezdomy ridiculed Jesus, and therefore made fun of Ieshua, who is actually a character in the novel written by the Master.⁸⁴ As a consequence, when the Master is revealed to be the author of the Jerusalem novel, it becomes clear that Bezdomy wrote a satire of one of the main characters in the Master's novel, just like Bezymensky parodied the main hero in one of Bulgakov's works.⁸⁵ This constitutes what Gasparov called 'the destiny of the hero - destiny of the author parallelism': the persecution of Aleksei Turbin mirrors Bulgakov's own persecution by Bezymensky and other members of the Soviet press (of which more will be said in Chapter

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

Five), just like the irony against Jesus is akin to the derision the Master encountered for his works.⁸⁶

Finally, this correspondence doubtlessly signals the use of a meta-literary technique: it is impossible to conceive of 'the destiny of the hero - destiny of the author parallelism' without seeing the connection between the fate of the Master and Bulgakov's own destiny. This conclusion is fascinating when analysed within the context of a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. In this respect it seems possible to draw a parallel between Dante-author and Dante-character on one hand, and Bulgakov and the Master on the other hand.⁸⁷ In *Paradise* XVII Dante meets his great-great-grandfather Cacciaguida, who predicts the poet's exile from Florence, thus confirming the overlap between the destiny of Dante as a character and Dante as an author. In a similar way the Master is subjected to a hate campaign in the Soviet press and is ostracised from the literary world, just like Bulgakov (see Chapter Five). Even more importantly, however, both Dante-character and the Master are placed on a path heading towards redemption and justice. The *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita* both originated from the idea that divine justice is not only possible in the afterlife, but also representable in the world of fiction. Given the extent of Bulgakov's use of literary references in the novel, it is possible to conclude that the writer considered justice as a principle that could be applied not only to human beings, but to literary classics as well. The existence of a parallelism between the destiny of the Master and Bulgakov's own fate implies a connection between the Master's novel and Bulgakov's work: just like the Master's novel cannot burn, *The Master and Margarita* will survive the Soviet experience, and so will the memory of all the cultural referents cited within the novel.

Conclusions

Moving on from the Cultural Revolution started in 1928, the changes Iosif Stalin brought about in the Soviet cultural world differed from the main aspirations of RAPP. The focus on proletarian literature was too divisive to respond to the main necessities of Stalin's regime:

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ The issue of the authorial voice in *The Master and Margarita* also raises questions around the identity of the narrator. For an overview of the numerous hypotheses on who might be narrating the Moscow novel, see Weeks, pp. 3-73.

legitimising the new government and competing with the West for the role of cultural world leader. In this context, Western European classics underwent a process of re-evaluation. Under Stalin's rule incorporating works of Western European literature into the Soviet canon served two goals: giving a solid and respectable identity to the Soviet Union and rivalling the West in the field of European culture. Through this operation, Stalin perfected a process already started during the Civil War, as Gorky's project *Vseminaia Literatura* exemplified (and it is certainly not a coincidence that in 1932 Gorky also became the first chairman of the Union of Soviet Writers).

This chapter has, therefore, analysed two important characteristics of 1930s Soviet culture: the rejection of modernism and the appropriation of pre-revolutionary classics by Stalin's regime. *The Master and Margarita* represents a challenge to both these phenomena. Through its intense use of intertextuality, Bulgakov's novel not only pushed the boundaries of realism: it also created its own canon. By alluding extensively to other works of literature and music Bulgakov does not simply engage in a parody of the literary tradition or in a satire of contemporary Soviet literature and society. Although these elements are certainly present in his novel, another important function of intertextuality in *The Master and Margarita* is to transform the text into a repository of musical, literary and cultural models from past centuries. In this respect, Bulgakov's work represents a monument to pre-revolutionary Russian and European culture.

While Chapter Three and Four have focused on contrasting Bulgakov's idea of literary tradition to the use of literary classics promoted by the Soviet government, it is now necessary to analyse how *The Master and Margarita* relates to the work of other dissident writers. How do references to Dante and other classics in *The Master and Margarita* compare to uses of intertextuality made by other writers who also lived on the margins of the Soviet cultural establishment? This is what the next chapter intends to investigate.

Chapter Five

Writing Dante in Stalin's Russia: The Ethics of Intertextuality

in Dante Alighieri and Mikhail Bulgakov

Introduction

Chapter Four was concerned with illustrating the main characteristics of literary life and culture during the first decade of Stalin's regime. Two were the key moments in the process of institutionalisation of Stalinist culture: the formulation of the principles of Socialist Realism in 1932 and the birth of the Union of Soviet Writers, and its subsequent First Congress in 1934. These two events posed a major threat to many art practitioners who opposed these changes to the country's cultural life. In the literary field, writers like Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandel'shtam and Mikhail Bulgakov were barred from publishing original work.¹ Yet, Akhmatova recalled, right at this time her close friend and poet Mandel'shtam made a perentorial statement: 'Теперь стихи должны быть гражданскими' ('Now we must write civic verse').² As Clare Cavanagh has remarked, this pronouncement may seem particularly ironic, given that Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova were encountering difficulties specifically for their refusal to engage in civic literature in the sense the regime attributed to this expression.³

In Mandel'shtam's words, the preliminary requisite for any Soviet writer who aspired to publish their work in the Soviet Union was the willingness to take part in 'the book of Stalin'.⁴ As Cavanagh noted, this image can be juxtaposed to Mandel'shtam's concept of 'rough draft'. Characterised by their unfinished status, *chernoviki* (notebooks, rough drafts) could not be appropriated by official discourse, and were, therefore, truly permanent.⁵ To

¹ Clare Cavanagh, 'The Death of the Book à la russe: The Acmeists under Stalin', *Slavic Review*, 55.1 (Spring, 1996), 125-35 (p. 128).

² Anna A. Akhmatova in *ibid.*, 129.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Osip E. Mandel'shtam in *ibid.*, 128.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

quote from Mandel'shtam's *Conversation about Dante*, 'rough drafts are never destroyed'.⁶ Readers of Bulgakov will not fail to see the similarity between this statement and Woland's famous motto in *The Master and Margarita*: 'Manuscripts don't burn' (II, p. 737). Bulgakov, who wrote seven versions of his final novel, was not oblivious to the power of rough drafts, and neither were Soviet authorities. A testimony to this is Bulgakov's decision to (literally) burn some of his manuscripts, a gesture he himself recalled in a very famous letter to Stalin dated 28 March 1930.⁷ Because of how widespread this practice was during the Stalin era, literature which circulated outside the boundaries of the Union of Soviet Writers is here described as 'literature for the ashtray'. The reasons why this expression seems preferable to the more well-known Russian phrase 'writing for the drawer' are discussed later in this chapter.

A further source of conflict between the Soviet cultural establishment on one hand, and poets like Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova on the other, was the refusal of the latter to conform to the artistic method of Socialist Realism. Quoting one of the main cultural ideologists of the Stalin era, Andrei Zhdanov, Katerina Clark defined Socialist Realism as the result of a compromise between two literary tendencies of the time: RAPP's proletarian realism and the revolutionary romanticism promoted by Aleksei Tolstoy, Lunacharsky and Gorky among others.⁸ Great emphasis was placed on a particular aspect: rather than engaging in a true-to-life psychological analysis of the Soviet individual, literature was expected to anticipate the 'new man' that was being moulded in the Soviet experiment.⁹ It is possible to conclude that the first decade of Stalin's regime was marked by two competing models of civic literature: one, promoted by the state, sought to present the socialist ideal as an already tangible reality; the second, fostered by Mandel'shtam and others, strove to uncover what was hiding underneath the shiny facade of literature sponsored by the State. Those who set themselves this task had no other choice but 'writing for the drawer' or 'for the ashtray'.

⁶ Osip E. Mandel'shtam, 'Conversation about Dante', trans. by Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link, in *The Poets' Dante*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 40-93 (p. 62).

⁷ Bulgakov, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: A Life in Letters and Diaries*, p. 109.

⁸ Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, p. 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*

Although its formulation took place inside the main Soviet cultural institutions, it would be reductive to think of Socialist Realism as something imposed by the authorities without the participation of the masses. In his study of Soviet reading culture Evgeny Dobrenko defined 'the ideal reader' as

the reader who is modeled by the author as a recipient (for Mandel'shtam, an "interlocutor" [...]). But in our case the authorities themselves are an author, and the reader, by analogy, is a product of the joint creative work of the authorities and the masses.¹⁰

This synthesis condenses the main characteristics of the dynamics lying at the basis of the Soviet writing-reading experience in the Stalin era. The reader's disinterest in critical debates, as recorded in the surveys reported in Chapter Three, testified to the necessity of a third way between the two poles represented by the State and the audience. In this sense, Socialist Realism represented a compromise between literature for the elite and literature for the masses.¹¹ A striking element emerges from this picture: the complete absence of the writer. Between following official guidelines and the requirements of the reader, one wonders whether Socialist Realism admitted individual expression at all, or whether the 'death of the author' Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault envisaged as one of the consequences of capitalist society actually found its realisation in Stalinist literary culture.

To these developments poets like Akhmatova and Mandel'shtam responded by recuperating the lyrical I. This, however, does not mean that their writing does not possess a collective dimension. The literature produced in their circles is rooted in communication with the reader, based on two elements: the shared experience of the Stalinist terror and, connected to this, the use of Aesopian language. Intertextuality and, more specifically, the preservation of past literary tradition, plays an important role in this process. Chapter Four has highlighted the amplitude of Bulgakov's use of the classics in his last novel. Far from being a simple display of erudition, parallels with other works, particularly the *Divine Comedy*, can serve Aesopian purposes, but also provide an occasion to reflect on values in contrast to the ethics promoted by Stalinist society. Before delving into this subject, however, the chapter starts by assessing the importance of the reception of Dante in the 'literature for the ashtray'. By looking at examples of Dantean intertextuality in the 'literature for the ashtray'

¹⁰ Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, pp. 282-283.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

and seeing how Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* fits into this context, this chapter intends to address the following research questions:

- How do Bulgakov's uses of Dante compare to examples of Dantean intertextuality from the so-called 'literature for the ashtray'?
- What does Mikhail Bulgakov's use of Dantean references and literary classics reveal about the Soviet author-Soviet reader relationship?

1. Uses of Dante in the 'Literature for the Ashtray': Dantean Intertextuality in Osip Mandel'shtam's *Conversation about Dante* and Anna Akhmatova's Poetry

After Socialist Realism was declared the only government-sponsored literary method in the Soviet Union, those writers who did not adapt to its guidelines would often turn to writing 'for the drawer', as the Russian expression goes, composing new material with little to no hope of publishing it in the near future.¹² Many of these works, like Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1966) and *Heart of a Dog* (1987), or Anna Akhmatova's collection of poems *Rekviem* (*Requiem*, 1987), only reached the broader Soviet public many years after the death of their authors. Contrary to what the image of the dark recesses of a drawer might suggest, however, this kind of literature was not necessarily left unread until its publication. The diaries of Elena Bulgakova, Mikhail Bulgakov's third wife, for instance, show that the writer frequently read aloud parts of his last novel to fellow intellectuals.¹³ Analogously, Akhmatova would give her close friend Lidiia Chukovskaia and other acquaintances scraps of paper with poems from *Requiem* to learn by heart, which she would then proceed to burn once the memorising process had been completed. For this reason, rather than 'literature for the drawer', definitions like 'burnt notebooks' or 'poems written for the ashtray'¹⁴ are perhaps more apt to describe literature which did not immediately reach a wide audience, but was passed on to a restricted circle of people charged with preserving its memory. Naturally this definition also presents a few problems, as it may convey the impression that the great part of this literature was lost, which is only partly true. Nevertheless, the expression 'literature for the ashtray' still suggests that similar works

¹² Brian James Baer, 'Literary Translation and the Construction of a Soviet Intelligentsia', *The Massachusetts Review*, 47.3 (2006), 537-60 (p. 542).

¹³ Elena S. Bulgakova, *Dnevnik Eleny Bulgakovoi* (Moskva: Knizhnaia palata, 1990), pp. 38-40.

¹⁴ Clare Cavanagh, *Lyric Poetry and Modern Politics: Russia, Poland, and the West* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 118.

were not left untouched in a drawer until their publication, but did in fact reach an audience before then, although very limited.

The complex circumstances in which Soviet cultural life unfolded during the Stalin era, therefore, resulted in the creation of two alternative literary cultures: one promoted by the State, and one in opposition to it. Despite the undeniable differences between these two poles, perhaps the most striking element in this picture is the centrality, for both movements, of the writer-reader relationship. As Dobrenko has convincingly shown, in the case of Socialist Realism the interaction between writer and reader is subordinated to the one between the reader and the State. Although the reading preferences of the masses partly contributed to orienting the new Soviet literary method, the authorities clearly pursued a strong educational approach. Socialist Realism was seeking not only to represent reality 'in its revolutionary development', but to educate the reader to the principles of socialism. For this reason, Soviet culture was highly recipient-focused, in an attempt to shape the Soviet reader as part of the larger project of creating the 'new Soviet man'.¹⁵ In this respect, although being oriented towards the masses, Socialist Realism had a strong top-down component.

'Literature for the ashtray', in contrast, through its reliance on memory and word-of-mouth transmission, seemed to acknowledge more prominently the reader's participation in the creative process, rather than seeking to impose the State's perspective on the audience. Aesopian language is a pertinent example of this: the reader needs to actively decipher the coded messages left by the author in order to uncover the hidden meaning of a text. Through this and other strategies, controversial literature became the habitat for a phenomenon that challenged Stalin's 'Cultural Revolution': a concept of reading and writing based on a dynamic exchange between author and audiences. Nevertheless, 'literature for the ashtray' also has a top-down dimension to it, as its mechanisms rely on the author communicating their truth to the reader. This is evident, for instance, in the relationship between Anna Akhmatova and her listeners, like Lidiia Chukovskaia, who were required to memorise the poems for posterity, but did not seem to bestow a substantial contribution to

¹⁵ Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, p. 2.

their composition.¹⁶ In this sense, 'literature for the ashtray' is both collective and individual: collective, because the bond between the author and the reader is based on the shared trauma of the Stalinist purges; individual, because the reader must acknowledge the author's unique capacity to emerge from the masses. As Cavanagh convincingly argued, in a political situation where dissident writers often encountered physical death, poets like Akhmatova and Mandel'shtam created a literature that defied Barthes's theories of intertextuality. Authors may have died in real life, but remained alive in their texts.

The perspective on literature implied in the works for the ashtray was outlined long before the Stalinist terror, as shown by the theoretical works of one of the most celebrated poets of this scene: Osip Mandel'shtam.¹⁷ In his 1913 essay *O sobesednike* (*About the Interlocutor*) Mandel'shtam described poetry composition as a *beseda* (talk), between writer and reader. According to him, poetry could only arise from the constant communication between these two actors.¹⁸ It was therefore not coincidental that Mandel'shtam named his most famous theoretical contribution on Dante Alighieri a 'conversation', rather than an 'essay' or a 'study'.

Razgovor o Dante (*Conversation about Dante*, 1933) was not simply an analysis of Dante's poetics: it was a meditation on Mandel'shtam's own vision of literature, and a description of reading as an experience fundamentally rooted in intertextuality. As Elena Glazov-Corrigan put it:

the infernal landscape of poetry is described as the celebration of the endless subtextual referentiality of the text, an awareness not so much of the text as of its sources. The fragmentation into intertextual echoes affects both the text that is being apprehended and the inner world of the reader who begins to process the text: both the text and the reader are broken into segments of memory. The text at this level is not something spoken by a single voice [...]. It can be perceived only as a chorus of quotations, the echoes of antecedents therein understood as the only reality.¹⁹

The highly intertextual dimension of Mandel'shtam's literature had the potential to establish a connection between the reader and the past, making the dialogue with tradition

¹⁶ For more on this, see Lidia K. Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi* (Paris: YMCA, 1976).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Elena Glazov-Corrigan, *Mandel'shtam's Poetics: A Challenge to Postmodernism* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2000), p. 72.

the essence of literary creation and communication.²⁰ The selected readers who could access Mandel'shtam's works during the Stalinist terror, however, were not the only participants in this conversation. In his *About the Interlocutor*, Mandel'shtam had claimed for the poet the legitimacy to address a reader from the future.²¹ This pronouncement, made in 1913, acquired renewed significance under Stalin's regime.

If, according to Mandel'shtam, literature was in essence a network of references, Dante occupied the central position in this system. In the poet's view, a 'never fully-read Dantean text' could be seen as the starting point of all European literature.²² At the same time, as Mandel'shtam explained in *Conversation about Dante*, Dante's poetry itself was highly intertextual:

The conclusion of canto 4 of the *Inferno* is truly an orgy of quotations. I find here a pure and unalloyed demonstration of Dante's keyboard of references.

A keyboard stroll around the entire horizon of Antiquity. Some Chopin polonaise in which an armed Caesar with a gryphon's eyes dances alongside Democritus, who had just finished splitting matter into atoms.²³

In this excerpt Mandel'shtam referred to *Inferno* IV, the canto where Virgil introduces Dante to the souls who died unbaptised. It is not without reason that these verses could be described as 'a keyboard stroll around the entire horizon of Antiquity', as they presented a range of remarkable personalities from the Judaic (Abraham, Moses and King David just to name a few) and Classical tradition (besides Caesar and Democritus, also Diogenes, Cicero, Seneca and others). As Mandel'shtam pointed out, however, this was not a simple display of erudition:

A quotation is not an excerpt. A quotation is a cicada. Its natural state is that of unceasing sound. Having once seized hold of the air, it will not let it go. Erudition is far from being equivalent to a keyboard of references for the latter comprises the very essence of education.²⁴

In Mandel'shtam's view, the 'unceasing sound' produced by Dante's landscape of quotations was designed to resonate in the centuries to follow:

²⁰ Ibid., p. 77.

²¹ Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*, p. 3.

²² Marina Glazova, 'Mandel'shtam and Dante: The 'Divine Comedy' in Mandel'shtam's Poetry of the 1930s', *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 28.4 (Nov., 1984), 281-335 (p. 282).

²³ Osip E. Mandel'shtam, p. 45.

²⁴ Ibid.

It is inconceivable to read Dante's cantos without directing them toward contemporaneity. They were created for that purpose. They are missiles for capturing the future. They demand commentary in the *futurum*.²⁵

Conversation about Dante, therefore, stressed not only the possibility, but the absolute necessity to link Dante's work with contemporaneity. This is hardly surprising, given that the *Divine Comedy* has often been appropriated by various intellectual movements from different epochs, and for different purposes, as the histories of both the Western European and the Russian reception of the work have shown. From other passages in *Conversation about Dante*, however, it seems clear that Mandel'shtam's effort to bring Dante into the present was not in tune with the uses of the *Divine Comedy* promoted by the Soviet government:

In the subconscious of the Italian people prison played a prominent role. Nightmares of prison life were imbibed with the mother's milk. The Trecento tossed men into prison with astonishing unconcern. Ordinary prisons were open for viewing, like our churches or museums. The interest in prisons was exploited by the prison wardens as well as by the fear-inspiring machinery of the small states. There was a lively intercourse between the prison and the free world outside resembling diffusion, mutual infiltration.²⁶

Although the peak of the Stalinist purges would be reached only in the years following the publication of Mandel'shtam's essay, the wave of arrests and the state-run 'fear-inspiring machinery' here described cannot but evoke the atmosphere which would later lead to the arrest of Mandel'shtam himself in 1934. As his wife Nadezhda recalled, the poet 'obtained an edition of the *Divine Comedy* in small format and always had it with him in his pocket, just in case he was arrested not at home, but in the street'.²⁷ It is therefore clear that, while describing the symbolism of prisons in medieval Italian culture, Mandel'shtam was using Aesopian language to address a concern that was all too relevant for Soviet writers in the 1930s.

The same process of actualisation of Dante's work through the means of Aesopian language is to be found in another example of 'literature for the ashtray': Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem*. Composed between 1935 and 1961 and centred on the emotional calvary Akhmatova went through when her son Lev Gumilev and her husband Nikolai Punin were incarcerated during the Stalinist terror, this poem-cycle is a classic example of 'literature for

²⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

²⁷ Nadezhda Ia. Mandel'shtam, p. 228.

the ashtray'. As was typical of the works Akhmatova used to compose at the time, it makes ample use of references to Russian and Western European literature.²⁸ Although partly autobiographical, from its opening text the poetic cycle immediately reveals its collective aspiration. In *Instead of a Preface*, Akhmatova writes:

Вместо предисловия

В страшные годы ежовщины я провела семнадцать месяцев в тюремных очередях в Ленинграде. Как-то раз кто-то «опознал» меня. Тогда стоящая за мной женщина с голубыми губами, которая, конечно, никогда в жизни не слышала моего имени, очнулась от свойственного нам всем оцепенения и спросила меня на ухо (там все говорили шепотом):

— А это вы можете описать?

И я сказала:

— Могу.

Тогда что-то вроде улыбки скользнуло по тому, что некогда было ее лицом.

1 апреля 1957

Ленинград²⁹

In the terrible years of the Yezhov terror, I spent seventeen months in the prison lines of Leningrad. Once, someone “recognized” me. Then a woman with bluish lips standing behind me, who of course, had never heard me called by name before, woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered in my ear (everyone spoke in whispers there):

“Can you describe this?”

And I answered: “Yes, I can.”

Then something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face.

April 1, 1957

Leningrad³⁰

Through this interaction, Akhmatova assumes the responsibility of speaking not only for herself, but for all the women who went through the trauma of the Stalinist purges, a seemingly impossible task. Amert noted a similarity with Dante’s poetic mission, albeit with a significant difference: in the *Divine Comedy* Dante visited the Inferno as a living man. On the contrary, there is no detachment between Akhmatova and the woman she interacts with in the prison lines: all the people in the queue have ‘succumbed’ to the same ‘stupor’,

²⁸ Susan Amert, ‘Akhmatova’s “Song of the Motherland”’: Rereading the Opening Texts of *Rekviem*’, *Slavic Review*, 49.3 (1990), 374-89 (pp. 374-375).

²⁹ Anna A. Akhmatova, *Rekviem* (1963), <<https://www.culture.ru/poems/10174/rekviem>> [accessed 12 December 2021].

³⁰ *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, ed. by Roberta Reeder, trans. by Judith Hemschemeyer (Boston: Zephyr Press; Edinburgh: Canongate Press, 1992), p. 384.

they are all living through the same, collective experience of pain.³¹ Amert also suggests that the 'bluish lips' of Akhmatova's interlocutor are reminiscent of the extremely popular Ugolino-cantos (*Inferno* XXXIII-XXXIV), set in the ninth circle of hell, which in Dante's imagination assumes the aspect of a frozen lake.³² Furthermore, Amert notes that in its structure the interaction between Akhmatova and the unknown woman is almost identical to a dialogue that concludes another poem by Akhmatova, *Muza* (*Muse*).³³ In this 1924 composition, Akhmatova recounts this interaction with her muse: 'Ей говорю: «Ты ль Данту диктовала/Страницы Ада?» Отвечает: «Я!»'³⁴ ("Are you the one," I ask, "whom Dante heard dictate/the lines of his *Inferno*?" She answers: "Yes").³⁵ It may seem problematic to infer a direct correlation between the muse of *Requiem* and Akhmatova's muse from 1924. However, it is possible to assume that in *Instead of a Preface* the parallelism between Dante's and Akhmatova's role as poetic witnesses implies a parallelism between their respective subject matters: in Akhmatova's account Stalin's Russia appears as a recreation of Dante's hell.

A further, more explicit connection to Dante can be traced in Akhmatova's 1936 poem with the same title:

Данте

Il mio bel San Giovanni.

Dante

Он и после смерти не вернулся
В старую Флоренцию свою.
Этот, уходя, не оглянулся,
Этому я эту песнь пою.
Факел, ночь, последнее объятье,
За порогом дикий вопль судьбы.
Он из ада ей послал проклятье
И в раю не мог ее забыть,—
Но босой, в рубахе покаянной,

³¹ Amert, p. 378.

³² Ibid., p. 379.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Anna A. Akhmatova, *Muza* (1924), <<https://www.culture.ru/poems/8931/muza>> [accessed 24 September 2021].

³⁵ Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward, 'Four Poems by Anna Akhmatova', *Poetry Foundation*, May 1973. <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=122&issue=2&page=38>> [accessed 24 September 2021].

Со свечой зажженной не прошел
По своей Флоренции желанной,
Вероломной, низкой, долгожданной...

17 августа 1936, Разлив³⁶

Dante

Il mio bel San Giovanni.

Dante

Even after his death he did not return
To his ancient Florence.
To the one who, leaving, did not look back,
To him I sing this song.
A torch, the night, the last embrace,
Beyond the threshold, the wild wail of fate.
From hell he sent her curses
And in paradise he could not forget her-
But barefoot, in a hairshirt,
With a lighted candle he did not walk
Through his Florence - his beloved,
Perfidious, base, longed for...

August 17, 1936³⁷

Just as Socialist Realism aimed to present models of behaviour to the Soviet reader, the 'literature for the ashtray' also needed its heroes, and the stoic image of Dante conveyed through previous centuries of Russian reception suited this purpose perfectly. The 'political' reception of Dante clearly had an appeal to both state-sponsored literature, as the teaching and learning materials analysed in Chapter Three have shown, and to intellectuals on the margins of the Union of Soviet Writers, like Anna Akhmatova. Moreover, the image of Dante promoted by the cultural establishment was often oriented towards the collective (as in Kogan's description of Dante's 'desire to enlighten the dark masses'). A similar aspiration to speak for a collective is present in Akhmatova's *Requiem*, where the poet voices the pain shared by many during the Stalin era. Even her *Dante*, which at a first glance seems to be centred on Dante's experience of exile, thus emphasising solitude as the inevitable condition of the independent intellectual, does in fact preserve a collective dimension. The

³⁶ Anna A. Akhmatova, *Dante* (1936),
<https://45ll.net/anna_akhmatova/stihi/#dante> [accessed 13 December 2021].

³⁷ *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*, p. 395.

'torches' burning in the 'night', the 'last embrace', and 'fate' 'howling' at the 'threshold' are symbols that reconnect to the more general condition shared by many intellectuals who left the Soviet Union to go into exile. Akhmatova herself recalled that by 1935 every time she went to see one of her émigré friends off at the station, she never failed to bump into someone she knew, as so many of her acquaintances were leaving the country around that time.³⁸ A necessary distinction must, however, be drawn, between voluntary and forced exile, a topic Akhmatova wrote about on other occasions. Particularly fascinating, in this respect, is Akhmatova's evocation of Dante's relationship with his 'perfidious, base, longed for' hometown, Florence. Dante's troubled connection to the city, which occupies a central position in the poem, must have resonated particularly strongly with Akhmatova, who in earlier verses had explored her troubled connection to her own city, Saint Petersburg:

Петроград. 1919

И мы забыли навсегда,
Заключены в столице дикой,
Озёра, степи, города
И зóри родины великой.

В кругу кровавом день и ночь
Болит жестокая истома...
Никто нам не хотел помочь
За то, что мы остались дома,

За то, что, город свой любя,
А не крылатую свободу,
Мы сохранили для себя
Его дворцы, огонь и воду.

Иная близится пора,
Уж ветер смерти сердце студит,
Но нам священный град Петра
Невольным памятником будет.

1919 г.³⁹

Petrograd, 1919

Caged in this savage capital,
We have forgotten forever

³⁸ David N. Wells, *Anna Akhmatova: Her Poetry* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), p.2.

³⁹ Anna A. Akhmatova, *Petrograd. 1919* (1919),

<<https://www.culture.ru/poems/10213/petrograd-1919>> [accessed 24 September 2021].

The townships, the lakes, the steppes,
The dawns, of our great motherland.
In the circuit of blood-stained days and nights,
A bitter languor overcomes us...
No one wishes to come to our aid,
Because we choose to remain here,
Because, in love with our city,
More than the wings of liberty,
We preserved to ourselves,
Its palaces, flames, and waters.
Now another time draws near,
The wind of death chills the heart,
And Peter's sacred city,
Will be our unsought monument.⁴⁰

A love for her city, but also a sense of responsibility towards the role of witness to the historical tragedies (in this case, the First World War, Revolution and Civil War) of contemporary Russia (a part Akhmatova reclaimed for herself even more strongly in later years, with *Requiem*) led the poet to stay in Saint Petersburg. This decision came at the expense of her freedom, as the word 'caged', in a very prominent position (at the start of the second verse in the original), underlines. Ambivalent feelings towards Saint Petersburg were also shared by the other 'Dantean' poet in this chapter, Osip Mandel'shtam:

Ленинград

Я вернулся в мой город, знакомый до слез,
До прожилок, до детских припухлых желез.

Ты вернулся сюда, так глотай же скорей
Рыбий жир ленинградских речных фонарей,

Узнавай же скорее декабрьский денек,
Где к зловещему дегтю подмешан желток.

Петербург! я еще не хочу умирать:
У тебя телефонов моих номера.

Петербург! У меня еще есть адреса,
По которым найду мертвецов голоса.

Я на лестнице черной живу, и в висок
Ударяет мне вырванный с мясом звонок,

И всю ночь напролет жду гостей дорогих,
Шевеля кандалами цепочек дверных.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Anna A. Akhmatova, *Petrograd, 1919*, trans. by A. S. Kline (2005),
<https://www.poetsofmodernity.xyz/POMBR/Russian/Akhmatova.php#anchor_Toc322442177> [accessed 24 September 2021].

Leningrad

I'm back in the city I'd walk till I cried,
that I knew to my veins and glands as a child.

Back now in Leningrad. Quicker and quicker,
gulp down the fish oil in the lamps by the river.

Make friends with December's daylight fast,
where a yolk is mixed into the sinister tar.

Petersburg, I've no wish to die just yet:
give me those phone numbers of mine you've kept.

Petersburg, I still know each and every address
that I'll need to track down the voices of the dead.

I live on a dark staircase, where the doorbell
dangles from the wall and tolls into my temples.

All night, I wait for our friends to call,
as I move the chains, like shackles, on the door.

1930⁴²

In 1930 Mandel'shtam had not been exiled yet, but was living and writing in Moscow. As previously discussed, the extent of Mandel'shtam's engagement with Dante's works is indisputable, and there is good reason to presume that Dantean images of Florence were very present in his mind during the composition of the poem. In this context, the 'voices of the dead' evoked by Mandel'shtam resonate even more strongly, as haunting presences on the poet's personal journey through the *Inferno* of Stalin's Russia. A poet who was forced into exile by his political enemies, Dante was perceived as a kin figure by Akhmatova and Mandel'shtam, who were not expelled from the Soviet Union, but were nevertheless constricted into a form of internal exile.

In conclusion, Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova offered examples of readings of Dante which were not in accordance with the reception of the *Divine Comedy* promoted by the Soviet authorities. First of all, Mandel'shtam's idea of writing and reading as a process

⁴¹ Osip E. Mandel'shtam, *Leningrad* (1930),
<<https://classica-online.ru/catalog/leningrad-stikhi-mandelstam/>> [accessed 13 December 2021].

⁴² Alistair Noon, 'Four Translations of Osip Mandel'shtam', *The Oxonian Review*, 17 February 2013.
<<https://www.oxonianreview.org/wp/four-translations-of-osip-mandelstam/>> [accessed 24 September 2021]
(para. 3 of 5).

fundamentally built on intertextuality presupposed literature as an experience based on a plurality of voices: the writer, the reader, but also the echo of past literary works. This variety could not be reconciled with Socialist Realism and its commitment to produce one voice or, in our case, one view of Dante, which would then need to be accepted uncritically by the reader. Secondly, while in Chapter Three examples from textbooks published in the Soviet Union have shown how a Marxist reading of Dante made it possible for the Soviet government to use the *Divine Comedy* as a means to validate socialist ideals, Mandel'shtam's and Akhmatova's uses of Dante were reflective of the possibility to expose the darkest aspects of life under Stalin with recourse to intertextuality. Mikhail Bulgakov himself frequently recurred to this strategy while working on his final novel.

2. Aesopian Uses of Intertextuality in Mikhail Bulgakov's Works

As the mind behind one of the most memorable appraisals of this kind of literature, 'manuscripts don't burn', Bulgakov was, together with Akhmatova and Mandel'shtam, one of the most significant authors of 'literature for the ashtray'. The complications in his relationship to the regime and the rest of the Soviet cultural establishment are well-known. During the 1930s Bulgakov was put under close observation by Soviet censors and reviewers. RAPP, which, as recounted in Chapter Three, was initially supported by Stalin in its struggle against deviations from the party line in literature, pointed at Mikhail Bulgakov as the main representative of their new intellectual class enemies and made him the object of a fierce critical campaign commonly known as 'bulgakovshchina'.⁴³ In the previously mentioned letter to Stalin in which he demanded permission to emigrate from the Soviet Union, Bulgakov wrote:

When I carried out an analysis of my albums of cuttings, I discovered that there had been 301 references to me in the Soviet press during my ten years of work in the field of literature. Of these, three were complimentary, and 298 were hostile and abusive. These 298 reflect, as in a mirror, my life as a writer.⁴⁴

Further on, he added:

I can prove with documents in my hands that the entire press of the USSR, together with all the institutions to whom control of the repertory has been entrusted, throughout all the

⁴³ Kornienko, p. 22.

⁴⁴ Bulgakov, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: A Life in Letters and Diaries*, p. 104.

years of my literary career, has unanimously and with EXTRAORDINARY FURY demonstrated that the works of Mikhail Bulgakov cannot exist in the USSR. And I declare that the Soviet press is ABSOLUTELY CORRECT.⁴⁵

Despite the evidence he provided, Bulgakov was never granted permission to emigrate. Following Stalin's intervention, though, he was offered a job as assistant director at the Moscow Arts Theatre.⁴⁶ However, he would have trouble in getting his plays performed and his works published all his life. This letter gives a clear picture of the political (and ethical) difficulties Bulgakov was experiencing at that time and explains why he might want to resort to Aesopian strategies to be allowed to publish without compromising excessively with the authorities.

An Aesopian utterance is in some way similar to a folk riddle; similarly to what happens with riddles, the reader can decipher it only by making reference to a context which is external to the text. Likewise, Aesopian works also necessarily contain an element of surprise, something unexpected to catch the reader's attention. This is what Loseff defines as a 'marker', an element of oddness through which the author of the Aesopian text conveys a sort of coded message to his readers.⁴⁷ Drawing on Lotman's communication theory, Lev Loseff argues that the marker plays a double role: it must be interpreted as noise by the censor, who should authorise the publication of the text, but perceived as a signal by the reader, who should be able to crack the code and interpret the author's message using their knowledge of the social extra-literary context the author is referencing.⁴⁸ For this to work, Aesopian language needs to use a combination of 'screens', devices aimed at masking the forbidden content, and 'markers', intended to highlight the same content.⁴⁹

A great variety of aesthetic tools and literary genres can be employed to serve the purposes of Aesopian literature, and intertextuality and references to other literary works can be used with fascinating results. To explain this more clearly, it is useful to look at some practical examples from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. As already mentioned in Chapter Four, the novel is structured around two plot lines: one revolves around the visit of the devil and his retinue to Moscow during the 1930s, whereas the other one is a retelling of

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

⁴⁷ Loseff, pp. 29-34.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 42-50.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 50-52.

the Passion of Jesus, who in Bulgakov's novel goes by his Aramaic name 'Ieshua Ha-Notsri'. The two stories progress in parallel and constantly reference each other during the whole novel. When approaching *The Master and Margarita*, the notion of Aesopian language must be handled carefully, as the political satire, especially in the Moscow chapters of the novel, is sometimes so evident that ambiguity, a necessary requirement for Aesopianness, is completely lost. The Dantean episode discussed in Chapter Three, for instance, where the allocation of an apartment to Beatrice Dant causes a commotion at a gathering of writers, constitutes a very explicit attack on Soviet cultural institutions. As uses of intertextuality in Chapter Four have shown, however, there are examples in the text where the boundaries between the reality of the novel and the reality of the world become blurrier, and these moments of ambiguity are a fertile ground for Aesopian language.

As discussed in Chapter Four, the Moscow plot line is characterised by the heavy use of the literary mode of the fantastic, which, according to Loseff, was among the genres that could be used for the transmission of Aesopian content.⁵⁰ An avid reader of Nikolai Gogol, Bulgakov replicates in his prose the same pattern that had become the trademark of his literary hero: a combination of fantastic and realistic elements that exposed the most problematic aspects of Russian society.⁵¹ In this sense, his work represents a take on what Mikhail Bakhtin described as 'grotesque realism'.⁵² A telling example of this is offered by the following excerpt from *The Master and Margarita* which recounts a series of strange disappearances taking place in the apartment where a great part of the Moscow narrative is set:

И вот два года тому назад начались в квартире необъяснимые происшествия: из этой квартиры люди начали бесследно исчезать. Однажды в выходной день явился в квартиру милиционер, вызвал в переднюю второго жильца (фамилия которого утратилась) и сказал, что того просят на минутку зайти в отделение милиции в чем-то расписаться. Жилец приказал Анфисе, преданной и давней домашней работнице Анны Францевны, сказать, в случае если ему будут звонить, что он вернется через десять минут, и ушел вместе с корректным милиционером в белых перчатках. Но не вернулся он не только через десять минут, а вообще никогда не вернулся. Удивительнее всего то, что, очевидно, с ним вместе исчез и милиционер.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 60.

⁵¹ Curtis, *A Reader's Companion to Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita*, p. ix.

⁵² Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, Massachusetts; London, England: 1984), p. 299.

Набожная, а откровеннее сказать – суеверная, Анфиса так напрямик и заявила очень расстроенной Анне Францевне, что это колдовство и что она прекрасно знает, кто утащил и жильца и милиционера, только к ночи не хочет говорить. Ну, а колдовству, как известно, стоит только начаться, а там уж его ничем не остановишь (II, p. 593).

Two years ago odd things began happening in that apartment—people started to vanish from it without trace. One Monday afternoon a policeman called, invited the second lodger (the one whose name is no longer known) into the hall and asked him to come along to the police station for a minute or two to sign a document. The lodger told Anfisa, Anna Frantzevna's devoted servant of many years, to say that if anybody rang him up he would be back in ten minutes. He then went out accompanied by the courteous policeman in white gloves. But he not only failed to come back in ten minutes; he never came back at all. Odder still, the policeman appeared to have vanished with him.

Anfisa, a devout and frankly rather a superstitious woman, informed the distraught Anna Frantsevna that it was witchcraft, that she knew perfectly well who had enticed away the lodger and the policeman, only she dared not pronounce the name at night-time.

Witchcraft once started, as we all know, is virtually unstoppable (p. 82).

People then continue to disappear one after another until the devil comes to install himself in the apartment. It is clear that what is here described as a paranormal phenomenon has in fact a very rational explanation. The police officer's invitation to accompany him to the police station is the episode which prompts the series of disappearances, and is also a clear reference to the wave of arrests which overwhelmed Stalin's Russia at the time when Bulgakov was writing.⁵³ By applying Loseff's definition of Aesopian utterance, it is possible to argue that witchcraft is here the element of oddity which the reader must decipher in order to get to the real meaning of this excerpt.

However, the fantastic mode is not the only aesthetic tool used by Aesopian literature. Another example is provided by the following passage from the second narrative line in the novel, set in Jerusalem during Jesus's time. It is useful to analyse this passage using Gérard Genette's typology of intertextuality. In *Palimpsests* Genette broadens Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality by introducing the new term 'transtextuality', which, in his words, describes 'all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts'.⁵⁴ He then distinguishes between five different categories of transtextuality, where 'intertextuality' is a specific one which refers to 'the actual presence of a text within

⁵³ Irina Z. Belobrovtsseva and Svetlana K. Kulius, *Roman Mikhaila Bulgakova Master i Margarita: Opyt kommentariia* (Tallin: TPÜ Kirjastus, 2004), p. 188.

⁵⁴ Genette, pp. 1-2.

another'.⁵⁵ By applying this approach it is possible to conclude that one of the main intertexts in Bulgakov's novel is naturally the Gospel, particularly the verses regarding the trial and crucifixion of Christ. By looking at the way the New Testament story is presented in *The Master and Margarita*, it appears immediately clear that Bulgakov's intentions went beyond a simple interest in the biblical story. This, for instance, is an excerpt from the scene of the interrogation of Ieshua by Pontius Pilate:

– И так, – говорил он [Пилат], – отвечай, знаешь ли ты некоего Иуду из Кириафа, и что именно ты говорил ему, если говорил, о кесаре?

– Дело было так, – охотно начал рассказывать арестант, – позавчера вечером я познакомился возле храма с одним молодым человеком, который назвал себя Иудой из города Кириафа. Он пригласил меня к себе в дом в Нижнем Городе и угостил... [...] попросил меня высказать свой взгляд на государственную власть. Его этот вопрос чрезвычайно интересовал.

– И что же ты сказал? – спросил Пилат, – или ты ответишь, что ты забыл, что говорил? – но в тоне Пилата была уже безнадежность.

– В числе прочего я говорил, – рассказывал арестант, – что всякая власть является насилием над людьми и что настанет время, когда не будет власти ни кесарей, ни какой-либо иной власти. Человек перейдет в царство истины и справедливости, где вообще не будет надобна никакая власть.

– Далее!

– Далее ничего не было, – сказал арестант, – тут вбежали люди, стали меня вязать и повели в тюрьму (II, р. 562).

'So,' he said, 'answer this question: do you know a certain Judas of Karioth and if you have ever spoken to him what did you say to him about Caesar?'

'It happened thus,' began the prisoner readily. 'The day before yesterday, in the evening, I met a young man near the temple who called himself Judas, from the town of Karioth. He invited me to his home in the Lower City and gave me supper... [...]. He asked me for my views on the government. The question interested him very much.'

'And so what did you say?' asked Pilate. 'Or are you going to reply that you have forgotten what you said?' But there was already a note of hopelessness in Pilate's voice.

'Among other things I said,' continued the prisoner, 'that all power is a form of violence exercised over people and that the time will come when there will be no rule by Caesar nor any other form of rule. Man will pass into the kingdom of truth and justice where no sort of power will be needed.'

'Go on!'

'There is no more to tell,' said the prisoner. 'After that some men came running in, tied me up and took me to prison (pp. 27-28).'

This excerpt contains many of the elements which Lev Loseff identified as specifically Aesopian. A typical Aesopian strategy, for instance, was to place the content of the literary work into a context which was very far from both writer and reader in space or time, and

⁵⁵ Ibid.

apparently totally unrelated to Soviet reality.⁵⁶ Here, for instance, Bulgakov takes advantage of both spatial and temporal distance by setting one of the two plot lines in Jerusalem at the time when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judaea on behalf of the Roman Empire. However, thanks to the close connections between the Jerusalem and the Moscow story, it is clear that Jerusalem and the Passion story are simultaneously 'screens' conceived for diverting the attention of the censor, and 'markers' which communicate to the reader that what is really described is the climate of oppression and suspicion which characterised life under Stalin's regime. What is even more interesting is that this passage is not only Aesopian, but also meta-Aesopian. Since Pilate has taken an interest in Ieshua's fate, but his role of governor and the presence of witnesses (a secretary and a centurion) prevent him from helping him directly, he implicitly attempts to point Ieshua a way out of the impasse by suggesting an appropriate answer to his question ('Or are you going to reply that you have forgotten what you said?'). Here Pilate produces a sentence which he hopes is interpreted as noise by the witnesses and as a signal by Ieshua, and, in doing so, he exemplifies very clearly the mechanisms behind Aesopian language.

Thanks to these few examples it is possible to observe the tension between the seemingly chaotic power of intertextuality and the use of Aesopian language, which to some extent must be necessarily controlled by the author. As Chapter Four has shown, Mikhail Bulgakov's novel is intertextual to a very high degree, and this causes its meaning to disperse into different directions. This characteristic makes *The Master and Margarita* a great example to illustrate Julia Kristeva's and Roland Barthes's studies of intertextuality, as it partially demonstrates their argument regarding the impossibility of the author having full control over the interpretation of their text. However, these excerpts also show that Aesopian techniques partly resist the tendency of the text to escape the author's control: the 'screens' and 'markers' introduced by Bulgakov refer back to very specific aspects of Soviet society which the reader is asked to recognise. The next section will explore how this tension between chaos and control influences the use of references to Dante in the course of the novel.

⁵⁶ Loseff, pp. 62-64.

3. Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita: A Divine Comedy* for Stalin's Russia? Chapter Four of this thesis explored the use of intertextuality in Mikhail Bulgakov's works from a general perspective, with a view to encourage reflection on the role played by Western European culture in literature produced during the Stalin era. It has been argued that references to pre-revolutionary European culture played a double function in the novel: they were encapsulated in the text in order to preserve the memory of literary classics for future generations of readers, and they were sometimes bent to the necessity of conveying messages considered politically unacceptable. In this respect Bulgakov's novel was a remarkable example of 'literature for the ashtray', and, similarly to other works of this genre, like *Conversation about Dante*, it displayed a very significant use of intertextuality, which could sometimes be bent to serve political purposes. It is rather problematic to prove that Bulgakov's engagement with Dante was as deep as Mandel'shtam's. However, there certainly are fascinating analogies between *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy*, particularly in how the idea of divine retribution is represented in both works, as this section will show.

In his introduction to Marietta Chudakova's 1988 classic Bulgakov biography *Zhizneopisanie Mikhaila Bulgakova (Mikhail Bulgakov: The Life and Times)*, Fazil' Iskander described *The Master and Margarita* in these terms:

«Мастер и Маргарита» — это плод отчаянья и выход из отчаянья сильного человека. Это философский итог жизни и это духовное возмездие бюрократии, навеки заспиртованной в свете вечности. Как в поэме великого итальянца, здесь каждый навеки пригвожден к своему месту.⁵⁷

The Master and Margarita is the fruit of the despair of a strong man, and his way out of it. It is the philosophical output of a life and the spiritual retribution for a bureaucratic system forever inebriated in the light of eternity. Just like in the poem of the Great Italian, here everyone is forever nailed to their place.

In making a parallel between Bulgakov and Dante, Iskander's contribution was a testimony to the persistence of some of the most distinctive characteristics of the Russian reception of Dante. One of the most striking examples of this, of course, is the equivalence drawn up between the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*, which is based on two conditions: the difficult circumstances from which both works arose, and the idea that both of them represented the apex of the philosophical efforts of their authors. The first premise

⁵⁷ Fazil' A. Iskander in Marietta O. Chudakova, *Zhizneopisanie Mikhaila Bulgakova* (Moskva: Kniga, 1988), p. 6.

relies heavily on the celebration of Dante's heroic stoicism, a commonplace associated with the Italian poet since the nineteenth century. For what concerns the second aspect, *The Master and Margarita* is here read as a work approaching fundamental metaphysical problems in a way that readers of the *Divine Comedy* may find familiar. The last remark in Iskander's preface, in particular, traces an analogy between the distribution of punishments and rewards in Bulgakov's novel and the logic behind the system of retributions in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

This analogy is best exemplified in Chapter 23 of Bulgakov's novel, or *Satan's Rout*, which is entirely dedicated to the Grand Ball organised by Woland in Berlioz's apartment, where the Devil and his retinue have taken residence after the untimely death of its former owner (II, pp. 592-599). This chapter's status as a turning point in the plot is highlighted by the title itself, which represents the first instance in the novel in which Woland is explicitly identified as Satan.⁵⁸ In addition to the Dantean connection, which will be explained in due course, this chapter overtly cites one of the most important subtexts for Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Goethe's *Faust*. According to Andrew Barratt, it is no accident that, prior to the ball, Woland mentions suffering from a rheumatism he developed on the Brocken peak in 1571, a reference to the first Walpurgis Night scene in Goethe's drama, which is also the first scene in the play where the devil Mephistopheles goes by the name of Woland. Similarly, the guests at the ball are described as 'Brocken idlers'.⁵⁹ Moreover, Margarita, the heroine of the novel, is invited to be the queen of the ball and to wear a poodle pendant, which matches the walking stick Woland carried in Chapter 1, most likely a reference to Mephistopheles' first appearance in *Faust*, where the devil first approaches the protagonist disguised as a poodle.⁶⁰

While the Faustian motif is arguably dominant in the chapter, the hypothesis of a Dantean subtext could be useful in explaining two of the most enigmatic aspects in the story: the procession of the souls of the damned at the beginning of the ball, and the execution of Berlioz halfway through the chapter. In the first episode, Margarita is portrayed while

⁵⁸ Andrew Barratt, *Between Two Worlds: A Critical Introduction to The Master and Margarita* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 234.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.* For more on this, see also J. A. E. Curtis, *Bulgakov's Last Decade: The Writer As Hero* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 169-170.

witnessing the arrival of the guests, a mix of well-known and minor historical figures, like Johann Strauss, Caligula and Messalina, but also fictional characters, like Frieda, a very 'Faustian' woman, as discussed further on in this section. With its abundance of references to both history and fiction, this combination of different characters is a good example of what Mandel'shtam, with reference to Dante, would describe as 'an orgy of quotations'. Another category of analysis that is even more useful in this context is Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of 'carnival'. In *Rabelais and His World* Bakhtin described carnival as the most important of the 'humorous forms' which 'opposed the official and serious tone of medieval and ecclesiastical and feudal culture'.⁶¹ According to Bakhtin, carnival was one of the few aspects outside the control of the Roman Catholic Church, and therefore, 'a festive celebration of the other, the gaps and holes in all the mappings of the world laid out in systematic theologies, legal codes, normative poetics, and class hierarchies'.⁶² This is what makes it dangerous in the sight of authority.⁶³ It is also true, however, that the world created by Woland and his retinue is not completely interchangeable with Bakhtin's notion of carnival. While Bakhtin's carnival is not organised by 'a separate caste', but 'embraces all the people', the Devil is in fact the external initiator of the carnivalesque Moscow plotline. Ordinary Moscow citizens are of course involved, but seem to be overwhelmed by it, rather than actively participating. However, the momentary chaos Woland's visit brings into the daily lives of Moscow cultural practitioners is a form of escape not dissimilar from what the carnival represented in the Middle Ages according to Bakhtin. This momentary disruption of Soviet life reaches one of its climaxes during Satan's ball.

While witnessing this gallery of characters Margarita is accompanied by Korov'ev, who introduces the various characters by their names and personal stories. Andrew Barratt interprets this as a possible analogy to Dante and Virgil in the *Divine Comedy*.⁶⁴ One of the most interesting exchanges between Korov'ev and Margarita concerns Frieda, one of the guests at the ball:

– А вот это – скучная женщина, – [...] громко говорил Коровьев, [...] – обожает балы, все мечтает пожаловаться на свой платок.
[...]

⁶¹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin in Clark and Holquist, p. 300.

⁶² Clark and Holquist, p. 300.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 301.

⁶⁴ Barratt, pp. 236-237.

- Какой платок? – спросила Маргарита.
- К ней камеристка приставлена, – пояснил Коровьев, – и тридцать лет кладет ей на ночь на столик носовой платок. Как она проснется, так он уже тут. Она уж и сжигала его в печи и топила его в реке, но ничего не помогает.
- Какой платок? – шептала Маргарита, подымая и опуская руку.
- С синей каемочкой платок. Дело в том, что, когда она служила в кафе, хозяин как-то ее зазвал в кладовую, а через девять месяцев она родила мальчика, унесла его в лес и засунула ему в рот платок, а потом закопала мальчика в земле. На суде она говорила, что ей нечем кормить ребенка (II, pp. 723-724).

‘Now this woman is a terrible bore.’ Koroviev [...] shouted [...] ‘She loves coming to a ball because it gives her a chance to complain about her handkerchief.’

[...]

‘What handkerchief?’ asked Margarita.

‘A maid has been assigned to her,’ Koroviev explained, ‘who for thirty years has been putting a handkerchief on her bedside table. It is there every morning when she wakes up. She burns it in the stove or throws it in the river but every morning it appears again beside her.’

‘What handkerchief?’ whispered Margarita, continuing to lower and raise her hand to the guests.

‘A handkerchief with a blue border. One day when she was a waitress in a cafe the owner enticed her into the storeroom and nine months later she gave birth to a boy, carried him into the woods, stuffed a handkerchief into his mouth and then buried him. At the trial she said she couldn’t afford to feed the child (pp. 307-308).’

This scene has been highlighted by scholars as a further example of the Faustian subtext in the novel: the story of Frieda has drawn parallels with Goethe’s Margarethe, seduced and abandoned by Faust and sentenced to death for killing the baby born from their relationship.⁶⁵ What is even more interesting however, is that here the Goethean subtext seems to resonate with the *Divine Comedy*, a prominent intertext for Goethe’s *Faust*: the fate of Frieda, condemned to be followed everywhere by the handkerchief she used to choke her baby, may have an affinity with the system behind the punishment of sins in Dante’s *Inferno*, a logic that is explained even more explicitly towards the end of the chapter, when Berlioz is summoned to the ball.

It should be remembered that Berlioz was the most eminent personality in the Writer’s Union MASSOLIT, which clearly parodies both RAPP and the Union of Soviet Writers. After engaging in a conversation with Woland where he denied the existence of both God and the Devil, he had his head severed by a tram, just like Woland had predicted (II, pp. 570-574). During the ball, Woland eventually explains to Berlioz what his final destiny will be:

⁶⁵ See for instance Edythe C. Haber, ‘The Mythic Structure of Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*’, *The Russian Review*, 34.4 (Oct., 1975), 382-409 (p. 392).

– Михаил Александрович, – негромко обратился Воланд к голове, и тогда веки убитого приподнялись, и на мертвом лице Маргарита, содрогнувшись, увидела живые, полные мысли и страдания глаза. – Все сбылось, не правда ли? – продолжал Воланд, глядя в глаза головы, – голова отрезана женщиной, заседание не состоялось, и живу я в вашей квартире. Это – факт. А факт – самая упрямая в мире вещь. Но теперь нас интересует дальнейшее, а не этот уже свершившийся факт. Вы всегда были горячим проповедником той теории, что по отрезании головы жизнь в человеке прекращается, он превращается в золу и уходит в небытие. Мне приятно сообщить вам, в присутствии моих гостей, хотя они и служат доказательством совсем другой теории, о том, что ваша теория и солидна и остроумна. Впрочем, ведь все теории стоят одна другой. Есть среди них и такая, согласно которой каждому будет дано по его вере. Да сбудется же это! Вы уходите в небытие, а мне радостно будет из чаши, в которую вы превращаетесь, выпить за бытие (II, pp. 727-728).

‘Mikhail Alexandrovich,’ said Woland quietly to the head, at which its eyelids opened. With a shudder Margarita saw that the eyes in that dead face were alive, fully conscious and tortured with pain. ‘It all came true, didn't it?’ said Woland, staring at the eyes of the head. ‘Your head was cut off by a woman, the meeting didn't take place and I am living in your flat. That is a fact. And a fact is the most obdurate thing in the world. But what interests us now is the future, not the facts of the past. You have always been a fervent proponent of the theory that when a man's head is cut off his life stops, he turns to dust and he ceases to exist. I am glad to be able to tell you in front of all my guests-- despite the fact that their presence here is proof to the contrary --that your theory is intelligent and sound. Now--one theory deserves another. Among them there is one which maintains that a man will receive his deserts in accordance with his beliefs. So be it! You shall depart into the void and from the goblet into which your skull is about to be transformed I shall have the pleasure of drinking to life eternal! (pp. 307-308)’

In a scene of escalating intensity, Woland terminates his speech by hitting Berlioz's head with a sword and transforming it into a goblet. The logic behind his decision is clear: life eternal does exist, but because Berlioz did not believe in it, he was sentenced to disappear into nothingness. Woland's methods, therefore, bear similarities with the Dantean notion of *contrapasso*.⁶⁶ Dante used the word only in one occurrence in *Inferno* XXVIII, borrowing it from St. Thomas Aquinas, to describe the principle of justice at work in the afterworld, where every soul must endure a punishment which mirrors the sin they committed in life.⁶⁷ Bulgakov's application of this principle, however, is rather original. Differently from what happens in the *Divine Comedy*, in this scene imparting justice is a prerogative of the Devil, rather than God. Moreover, in Bulgakov's work the actualisation of this principle is not confined to the realm of the dead. From the moment when the Devil comes to Soviet Moscow, it is the secular world that becomes the scenario for the implementation of

⁶⁶ Barratt, p. 237.

⁶⁷ Lino Pertile, 'Contrapasso' in *The Dante Encyclopedia*, ed. by Richard Lansing (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 219-222 (pp. 219-220).

Woland's justice. A further example of this is the fate assigned to four other characters in the novel: the Master and Margarita, Pilate, and Korov'ev.

The final destiny of these characters is revealed in three different phases: in Chapter 29 Woland receives a visit from Levy Matvei, who reveals the fate Ieshua assigned to the Master:

– Он прочитал сочинение мастера, – заговорил Левий Матвей, – и просит тебя, чтобы ты взял с собою мастера и наградил его покоем. Неужели это трудно тебе сделать, дух зла?

– Мне ничего не трудно сделать, – ответил Воланд, – и тебе это хорошо известно. – Он помолчал и добавил: – а что же вы не берете его к себе, в свет?

– Он не заслужил света, он заслужил покой, – печальным голосом проговорил Левий (II, p. 788).

'He has read the master's writings,' said Matthew the Levite, 'and asks you to take the master with you and reward him by granting him peace. Would that be hard for you to do, spirit of evil?'

'Nothing is hard for me to do,' replied Woland, 'as you well know.'

He paused for a while and then added: 'Why don't you take him yourself, to the light?'

'He has not earned light, he has earned rest,' said the Levite sadly (p. 406).

The Master's destiny as described by Levy reflects the same principle applied by Woland in his judgement of Berlioz: everyone is rewarded according to their beliefs ('каждому будет дано по его вере') (II, p. 728). Differently from Goethe's *Faust*, a titanic intellectual figure with great ambitions, during the last years of his life the Master was simply consumed by the desire of a private apartment. Therefore, he is rewarded with a house, an event that could be considered the first phase of his salvation. The description of the Master and Margarita's 'home for eternity' (*vechnyi dom*) also contains an explicit Faustian reference: 'Don't you want, like Faust, to sit over a retort in the hope of fashioning a new homunculus?', asks Woland to the Master before pointing him towards his final destination (II, p. 803. Translation: p. 431), thus missquoting *Faust*: in Goethe's play the homunculus is in fact created by Faust's helper Wagner, and not by Faust himself.

In addition to the Dantean *contrapasso* and Goethe's *Faust*, the New Testament is of course another key intertext in this passage. Margarita sees the house as a form of retribution for the difficulties the Master experienced in the past: 'Слушай беззвучие, [...] слушай и наслаждайся тем, чего тебе не давали в жизни, – тишиной (II, p. 803).' ('Listen to the silence [...] Listen to the silence and enjoy it. Here is the peace that you never knew in your

lifetime') (p. 431). The woman's words seem to resonate with the principle of justice expressed in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'⁶⁸ Unlike what is stated in the Gospel, however, the Master and Margarita are not admitted 'to the light', as Levy Matvei confirmed to Woland. An explanation for this may be found in the destiny of Pontius Pilate, the hero of the novel created by the Master himself.

Before sending him off to his eternal refuge, Woland shows the Master the fate of his hero:

– Ваш роман прочитали, – заговорил Воланд, поворачиваясь к мастеру, – и сказали только одно, что он, к сожалению, не окончен. Так вот, мне хотелось показать вам вашего героя. Около двух тысяч лет сидит он на этой площадке и спит, но когда приходит полная луна, как видите, его терзает бессонница. Она мучает не только его, но и его верного сторожа, собаку. Если верно, что трусость – самый тяжкий порок, то, пожалуй, собака в нем не виновата. Единственно, чего боялся храбрый пес, это грозы. Ну что ж, тот, кто любит, должен разделять участь того, кого он любит. [...] Он говорит, – раздался голос Воланда, – одно и то же, он говорит, что и при луне ему нет покоя и что у него плохая должность. Так говорит он всегда, когда не спит, а когда спит, то видит одно и то же – лунную дорогу, и хочет пойти по ней и разговаривать с арестантом Га-Ноцри, потому, что, как он утверждает, он чего-то не договорил тогда, давно, четырнадцатого числа весеннего месяца нисана. Но, увы, на эту дорогу ему выйти почему-то не удастся, и к нему никто не приходит (II, pp. 801-802).

'We have read your novel,' said Woland, turning to the master, 'and we can only say that unfortunately it is not finished. I would like to show you your hero. He has been sitting here and sleeping for nearly two thousand years, but when the full moon comes he is tortured, as you see, with insomnia. It plagues not only him, but his faithful guardian, his dog. If it is true that cowardice is the worst sin of all, then the dog at least is not guilty of it. The only thing that frightened this brave animal was a thunderstorm. But one who loves must share the fate of his loved one.' [...] 'He always says' said Woland, 'the same thing. He is saying that there is no peace for him by moonlight and that his duty is a hard one. He says it always, whether he is asleep or awake, and he always sees the same thing--a path of moonlight. He longs to walk along it and talk to his prisoner, Ha-Notsri, because he claims he had more to say to him on that distant fourteenth day of Nisan. But he never succeeds in reaching that path and no one ever comes near him (pp. 428-429).'

Despite his longing to walk up the moonlight path and finish the discussion he started with Ieshua, Pilate is stuck in eternal waiting as a punishment for not saving Ieshua's life when he had the power to do so. In this he is similar to the Master, standing between damnation and redemption. This passage also clarifies the position of Margarita. The heroine of the novel was not guilty of 'cowardice', 'the worst sin of all'. She has in fact shown great courage

⁶⁸ *Matthew 5. Holy Bible. New International Version* (2011), <<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+5&version=NIV>> [accessed 24 September 2021] (verse 10 of 48).

throughout the whole novel. Nevertheless, ‘one who loves must always share the fate of his loved one’.

The mid-position occupied by Pilate, the Master and Margarita, however, is resolved during what may be described as the third phase in *The Master and Margarita’s* salvation story. In Chapter 32, the Master liberates Pilate, thus allowing him to finally meet Ieshua (II, p. 802). Analogously, in the novel’s Epilogue Ivan Bezdomny has a vision of the Master and Margarita walking towards the light (ibid.). The fact that the main characters in the novel have to spend time in an intermediate zone before being granted complete pardon has sometimes led to comparisons with Dante’s *Purgatory*.⁶⁹ Other studies, instead, see similarities between Pilate’s condition and *Inferno* IV, where Greek and Roman philosophers who lived before Jesus are eternally longing for Paradise.⁷⁰

A Dantean echo, however, resonates even stronger in the fate of Woland’s assistant, Korov’ev, unveiled in Chapter 32. The character has completely mutated his appearance, and is now portrayed as a knight wearing a violet armour. When interrogated about the reason behind this transformation, Woland replies:

– Рыцарь этот когда-то неудачно пошутил, – ответил Воланд, поворачивая к Маргарите свое лицо с тихо горящим глазом, – его каламбур, который он сочинил, разговаривая о свете и тьме, был не совсем хорош. И рыцарю пришлось после этого прошутить немного больше и дольше, нежели он предполагал. Но сегодня такая ночь, когда сводятся счёты. Рыцарь свой счёт оплатил и закрыл (II, p. 800)!

‘That knight once made an ill-timed joke,’ replied Woland, turning his fiery eye on Margarita. ‘Once when we were talking of darkness and light he made a somewhat unfortunate pun. As a penance he was condemned to spend rather more time as a practical joker than he had bargained for. But tonight is one of those moments when accounts are settled. Our knight has paid his score and the account is closed (p. 427).’

The dynamic behind this redemption story is also analogous to *contrapasso*: as a consequence of his failure to approach ‘darkness and light’, good or evil with the appropriate seriousness, Korov’ev was condemned to be a joker full time. What is even more intriguing, is that this ‘ill-timed joke’ may conceal an allusion to *The Master and Margarita* itself.⁷¹ Bulgakov dared to use irony to approach matters of life and death, and

⁶⁹ Laura Moudarres, ‘Visioni dantesche nella conclusione de *Il Maestro e Margherita*’, *Status Quaestionis*, 3 (2012), 133-54 (pp. 137-138, 146-148); Beatie and Powell, pp. 264-265.

⁷⁰ Beatie and Powell, pp. 265-267.

⁷¹ Kriuchkov, p. 229.

discuss these issues in the context of a satirical account on Soviet Russia. In a creative effort which could be compared to Dante's for its prophetic intensity, Bulgakov presented himself as a witness to Stalinist Russia's slow transformation into an earthly *Inferno*.

Conclusion

Among the many lasting consequences Iosif Stalin's 'Cultural Revolution' brought into the Soviet literary field, one of the most significant was certainly the creation of two literary spheres: one which, through the Union of Soviet Writers, fell under the direct control of the regime, and was therefore the only officially recognised literary institution in the Soviet Union, and one involved in producing 'literature for the ashtray' or 'writings for the drawer', in the hope that future readers would one day be able to access works that could not be published during the Stalinist terror. These two competing currents had an important similarity: they both combined a top-down approach with a horizontal dimension. On one hand, the regime and the Union of Soviet Writers (and the literary method that incarnated their cultural ideals, Socialist Realism), aspired to be the expression of the masses, but manifested an educational vocation, therefore presenting themselves as superior to the reading public. On the other hand, representatives of 'literature for the ashtray' like Mandel'shtam, Bulgakov and Akhmatova aimed to voice collective concerns, but were conscious that this role endowed them with a special status which distinguished them from the masses.

In this respect, it is not surprising that a heroic image of Dante was such a significant component in the collective imagination of both spheres of writers. The reception of the *Divine Comedy* mirrored the dichotomy which characterised the Soviet literary world at this stage. In a sense, Soviet anthologies on Dante and Osip Mandel'shtam's *Conversation about Dante* had something in common: they both lay emphasis on the value of Dante's work for contemporaneity. The materials created for the literary education of Soviet readers, however, intended Dante's timeliness only insofar as his work could be seen as a milestone in the path that led to the end of feudal society and pointed towards the triumph of socialism. Writers like Mandel'shtam and Bulgakov, instead, in drawing parallels between Italian thirteenth-century and Soviet prisons on one hand, and *contrapasso* in Dante's

Inferno and Soviet Russia on the other, have showed how the *Divine Comedy* could be used as a tool to reflect on justice and power under Stalin's regime.

Particularly fascinating is Mandel'shtam's use of prison images, which reveals something not only of the poet's view of Dante, but also of his general outlook on the Western European Middle Ages. His reflections on the pervasiveness of the prison system in the Italian political landscape of the fourteenth century betrays a vision of the Middle Ages as an austere phase in history, an opinion that seems to be shared also by one of the thinkers that inspired the framework of this thesis: Mikhail Bakhtin. A contemporary of Mandel'shtam, Bakhtin described the institution of 'carnival' as the only escape from the oppressive rule of the Roman Catholic Church. In this regard, Mandel'shtam's view of the Middle Ages in *Conversation About Dante* is not very dissimilar from the one promoted in Friche's learning materials. In both texts the Middle Ages evoke pictures of oppression. Differently from Friche, of course, Mandel'shtam uses Dante to denounce that, under Stalin's rule, a similar kind of oppression had become part of Soviet daily life.

As Osip Mandel'shtam's example has shown, the 'literature for the ashtray', of which *The Master and Margarita* was a luminous example, placed great emphasis on intertextuality. References to other works of literature, in particular, could serve different purposes: transmitting the legacy of pre-revolutionary literary classics to future readers, and providing a secret code to convey messages on contemporary society. In this sense, the 'literature for the ashtray' gave a sense of plurality that literature sponsored by the Union of Soviet Writers, with its exclusive commitment to Socialist Realism, was not able to offer.

Conclusion

This thesis focused on a comparative analysis of the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*. In doing so, it employed a framework that combined multiple approaches: theories of intertextuality and close reading were the main components of textual analysis, while world literature, comparative, and translation studies were used as the main tools to analyse the broader context of Soviet literature and culture in the 1920s and 1930s.

The analysis was conducted over five chapters. While Chapter One offered a detailed presentation of this framework, the remaining four chapters of this study focused on using this framework to reach two main goals: analysing the history of the reception of Dante in Russia before and after the 1917 Revolution and expanding the reach of Bulgakov studies.

In order to address general research questions concerning the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Soviet Russia, particularly during the first decade of Iosif Stalin's regime, this study provided a thorough analysis of the representation of Dante in the Soviet press between 1921 and 1940. In doing so, this thesis addressed a gap in scholarly research on the *Divine Comedy* in the Soviet Union, which in the past has focused almost exclusively on the reception of Dante by Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova, and other writers who tried to stay under the radar of the Union of Soviet Writers. Making a contribution to this hitherto neglected field in Dante studies was the main concern of Chapter Two and Three.

The second goal pursued by this study was to make a contribution to Bulgakov studies by expanding the scope of this discipline to include a thorough analysis of the social, historical, and political context in which Mikhail Bulgakov conducted his literary activity. The thesis focused on a particular aspect of Bulgakov's writing: the use of intertextuality, particularly references to Western European classics, in his masterpiece, *The Master and Margarita*. For this reason, this thesis examined a particular aspect of the context surrounding Bulgakov's literary production: the role of Western European literary classics in Soviet literary debates

in two key moments: around 1921, the year that marked the Dantean sexcentenary and the beginning of Bulgakov's career as a writer in Moscow, and between 1928 and 1939, the years in which Bulgakov composed his seven versions of *The Master and Margarita*. In exploring these topics, the first sections of Chapter Three, Four, and Five focused on reconstructing general tendencies in the reception of Dante in press materials approved by the Soviet establishment (Chapter Three and Four) and by writers who tried to distance themselves from Stalinist propaganda (Chapter Five). The final sections of each of these chapters, instead, focused on highlighting examples of reactions to these phenomena in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.

Main Conclusions and Original Contribution to Knowledge

The purpose of this final section is to offer some concluding remarks on each chapter and to indicate ways in which the most original aspects of this study, which opened a window into the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in the Soviet Union, could be developed further. Chapter One focused on three main goals: formulating the theoretical framework of the thesis, exploring the most recent scholarly literature published in the field of Bulgakov studies (with particular attention dedicated to comparative works on the *Divine Comedy* and *The Master and Margarita*), and providing an overview of the reception of Dante in Western Europe. In doing so, it addressed two research questions: the first one concerned theories of intertextuality, while the second addressed the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Western Europe.

To answer the first research question, Chapter One outlined a brief history of intertextuality. This concept was first introduced by Julia Kristeva, who was partly inspired by Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. However, while Bakhtin focused also on the social aspect of literary dialogism, Kristeva approached texts and textuality from a more abstract perspective. Furthermore, Julia Kristeva's and, most of all, Roland Barthes's theories of intertextuality not only placed emphasis on the notion of 'text', but also described the notion of 'author' as conservative, and, through their focus on textuality, theorised the 'death of the author'. While Kristeva's and Barthes's approach was doubtlessly pioneering, it is important to consider the ethical implications of applying the concept of 'death of the author' to literature produced in the Soviet Union during the 1930s, a context where death was an all

too real possibility for authors who challenged Stalin's regime. For this reason, while drawing on different theoretical frameworks, for its close-reading component this thesis relied mainly on Genette's theory of intertextuality. It was through Genette's theory, for instance, that *The Master and Margarita* was described as a 'hypertext' of the Gospels (hypotext). In this thesis the set of tools offered by Genette's theory of intertextuality was then complemented by elements from world literature and translation studies, which, together with Bourdieu's concept of 'field', provided the framework for the analysis of the social and historical context in which Bulgakov wrote his novel. Bourdieu convincingly argued that the literary 'field' can be influenced by economic and political factors. Given that Soviet literature produced between 1928 and 1941 was subject to significant surveillance by Stalin's regime, Bourdieu's theories offered an effective explanation for why considering the impact of social and historical circumstances was necessary in order to interpret Bulgakov's work.

The second research question explored in Chapter One was connected to the reception of Dante in Western Europe. As widely discussed in other scholarship on this topic, the presence of the *Divine Comedy* in the Western canon was often disputed due to the work's artistic and linguistic qualities and its moral outlook. Thus, focusing on how Western European commentators of Dante approached questions of style and content was a necessary premise to uncover how the same aspects affected the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia. This study does not ignore that there are moral issues connected to using the Western reception of Dante as a 'model' against which to compare the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy*. For this reason, while acknowledging the importance of Western European influences on the development of secular literature in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia, this thesis also highlighted the aspects of the reception of Dante that were unique to Russian readings of the work. The first one of these aspects was the early interest in *Purgatory* displayed by eighteenth-century Russian readers, as testified by the fact that the first excerpt of the *Divine Comedy* to be translated in Russian was *Purgatory XXVIII*, thus breaking a European tradition that normally chose *Inferno* as the first work to be translated. Furthermore, a second element of originality in the Russian reception of Dante was the inclusion of a passage from the 'Ugolino-cantos' of the *Commedia* in a

school anthology from 1801, which predated the rediscovery of *Inferno* by nineteenth-century German Romanticism.

These and other elements of the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia were discussed in more detail in Chapter Two. The first research question the chapter focused on was whether Dante's position in the literary canon was ever questioned in Russia as it was in the West. As mentioned in Chapter One, linguistic features such as the combination of different registers within Dante's work caused centuries of debate in Western criticism, and were met with scepticism particularly by Voltaire and other prominent figures in the eighteenth-century French intellectual world. Late eighteenth-century Russian culture cannot be easily detached from the influence of French culture, and the ambivalent judgements expressed by Voltaire and others towards the linguistic element in Dante's work seem to have affected the prestige of the *Divine Comedy* at the time. Moreover, it was the appreciation of idyllic French literature that inspired the first Russian translation of *Purgatory XXVIII* in 1798. As earlier mentioned, this translation represented an anomaly in the history of the reception of Dante, and can therefore be considered an indication of the uniqueness of the Russian reception of the work. Finally, a reaction against the dominant French taste and sensitivity to new literature coming from Germany, Italy and England was a decisive factor in promoting the circulation and translation of *Inferno*.

With regards to content, it has been shown how religion affected the popularity of the *Divine Comedy* in Russia. The influence of religion on the Russian reception of Dante was felt on at least two occasions: in the fifteenth century, when Dante's work encountered the scepticism of Orthodox theologians, and in the 1870s, when the Russian Orthodox Church opposed the publication of Minaev's translation on religious grounds. Besides religion, and similarly to other examples of Dantean reception from Western Europe, politics was an element that further influenced Russian readings of the *Divine Comedy*. Similarly to the Italian Risorgimento movement, members of the Russian radical intelligentsia such as Aleksandr Herzen engaged in interpretations of Dante that challenged the Tsarist rule. However, antiauthoritarian perspectives on the *Divine Comedy* were balanced by approaches such as the one promoted by Aleksandr Veselovsky, who warned readers against the possibility of using Dante for modern political purposes. Equally notable was Dante's inclusion into the pantheon of the late nineteenth-century Symbolist movement,

with poets like Viacheslav Ivanov using the *Divine Comedy* as an allegory of the Symbolist experience of art.

Given the productivity of Dante's myth since its inception in Russia in the late eighteenth century, Chapter Two necessarily had to engage with an additional research question, based on assessing the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution on the Russian reception of the *Divine Comedy*. After the end of the Civil War in 1922, the newly born Soviet government was coming to terms with the past, trying to understand if pre-revolutionary literary tradition still had a role to play in the canon that was to rise from the ashes of the Revolution. Within this context, it comes as no surprise that, given the ambiguity surrounding Dante's figure at the start of the twentieth century, the presence of the *Divine Comedy* in the Soviet canon was a particularly contested issue. Although arguments were made that Dante should stay in the canon by virtue of his artistic merits (Trotsky), it is reasonable to conclude that it was mainly Friedrich Engels's description of Dante as a figure of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance that made it possible for the *Divine Comedy* to acquire a position in the Soviet canon despite the undeniably religious outlook of the work.

This argument was corroborated by the works examined in Chapter Three, such as *A History of Western European Literature in Its Most Important Moments* by Anatoly Lunacharsky, *Essays on the History of Western European Literature*, and *History of Western Literature* by literary historian Petr Kogan. In their depiction of Dante as a figure of transition between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, these studies were aligned with Friedrich Engels's characterisation of the Italian poet. A partial counterpoint to this were *Essay on the Development of Western European Literature* and *Literature of the Feudal Times* by literary critic Vladimir Friche, who, while maintaining a Marxist framework in his study, saw Dante mainly as a conservative thinker. Particularly interesting in these studies, here analysed for the first time by Western scholarship, is the tension between two elements: the attempt to apply a Marxist, and therefore, materialistic framework to literary analysis, and the idea, which stood in direct contradiction to this materialistic framework, that Dante was a genius, an individual whose exceptional artistic talents could not be explained as a direct consequence of material circumstances. Common to all case studies analysed in Chapter Three, this conflict may be interpreted as a legacy of 1920s Bolshevik readers of Dante, who in some cases, like Trotsky and Bystriansky, unexpectedly applied the nineteenth-century

stereotype of genius to their literary analyses, although this appeared to contradict the Marxist framework of their interpretations.

Chapter Three selected Kogan, Friche and Lunacharsky to highlight patterns in 1920s Soviet literary criticism. As shown by the literary debates that began shortly after the end of the Civil War and culminated in the 1924 meeting of the press department of the Central Committee of the Russian Communist Party, this phase in Soviet culture was characterised by a conflict between those who, like the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) advocated for an exclusively proletarian literature, and those who, like Trotsky, argued that pre-revolutionary literary classics could be incorporated into the newly forming Soviet canon. The second part of the chapter focused on comparing the attitude towards literary criticism promoted by the Soviet government to Mikhail Bulgakov's use of literary classics in *The Master and Margarita*. As it is possible to infer from a few passages from *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov seemed to be especially critical of the idea of applying a Marxist approach to literary criticism. As an example of this, Chapter Three looked at an episode from the novel where Nikolai Bosoi, a character arrested for being found in possession of foreign currency, dreams of finding himself in a theatre where *The Covetous Knight* by Aleksandr Pushkin is being performed in order to teach the audience a lesson about greed. In this scene Bulgakov is evidently parodying approaches that attributed more value to the educational potential of literature, rather than focusing on its artistic, cultural dimension. This episode can therefore be read as a satire of the dangers of carrying a Marxist, materialist reading of literature to extremes.

In another example from Bulgakov's notebooks, a character named Beatrice Dant is awarded an apartment, and her alleged status as a descendant of Dante is used as an excuse to justify this special treatment. By analysing this scene in the context of 1930s Soviet literature, it is possible to see it as an example where references to literary classics are treated as empty vessels with no substance, only used by the speaker to give an impression of prestige. It is possible that, through this scene, Bulgakov intended to make a humorous observation on the superficiality of Soviet attitudes towards literary tradition. This impression is confirmed in subsequent versions of the novel, where above-mentioned Bosoi uses Pushkin references in everyday speech as a way to assert his own authority although, by his own admission, the great Russian writer is unknown to him. This seemingly

unimportant episode appears even more significant when analysed in the context of 1930s developments in Soviet cultural politics. At the time, the retranslation of European literary classics, including Dante, played an important role in Stalin's project of presenting the Soviet Union as a credible rival to Western cultural hegemony. Characters such as Beatrice Dant and Nikanor Bosoi are quite revelatory of Bulgakov's scepticism towards contemporary Soviet cultural initiatives, as the writer seems to suggest that such endeavours only produced a superficial acquaintance with literary classics among the population.

This topic was explored further in Chapter Four. While Chapter Three focused on analysing Soviet cultural policies in the tumultuous 1920s, which culminated with Stalin's Cultural Revolution in 1928, Chapter Four explored the reception of Dante and other literary classics in the 1930s, when Soviet official discourse shifted into a new phase: gradually, the priority of 'fighting the bourgeois enemy' within the Soviet borders, a message which had inspired the attacks against the pre-revolutionary canon, declined. At the same time, official government propaganda announced that all internal enemies of the Soviet Union had been defeated, and that the Soviet people were therefore ready to rally against other, external rivals. Therefore, the reception of literary classics became one of the fields where the Soviet Union competed to gain prestige over its Western counterparts. A particularly interesting phenomenon in this realm was the appropriation of Dante by the Fascist regime, which did not prevent Stalin's government from reintegrating the *Divine Comedy* into the Soviet canon. Similarly to what had been observed concerning the Soviet reception of Dante in the 1920s, the reason for this may be the popularity that Dante's work had acquired within the Marxist intelligentsia thanks to Friedrich Engels. In all probability, it was the legacy of this success that allowed the Italian poet to gain a stable position in the Soviet literary canon despite Fascist attempts at appropriating Dante's myth.

The efforts made by the Soviet government to build a literary canon that would be aligned with a Marxist interpretation of history and increase the country's respectability stood in contrast to Mikhail Bulgakov's own version of the literary canon. One of the results of the extensive use of intertextuality in *The Master and Margarita* was the preservation of the literary tradition from the past. In relation to this, Chapter Four set out to investigate what kind of relationship Bulgakov's novel promoted between author and reader, and found that,

despite showing an inclination to parody literature from the past, Bulgakov also took on himself the role to preserve its memory and convey it to future generations.

A certain sense of responsibility towards readers is an element that Bulgakov shared also with other writers who, like him, were critical of Socialist Realism. In 1934 Socialist Realism became the only artistic method endorsed by the Soviet government. As a consequence, artists who refused to adhere to the guidelines of Socialist Realism struggled to publish original work. Writers like Mikhail Bulgakov, Osip Mandel'shtam and Anna Akhmatova became part of an alternative literary scene, as they started to write 'for the ashtray', in the hope that their 'civic verse', as Mandel'shtam himself called it, would reach readers from the future. The prohibition of all other literary methods besides Socialist Realism effectively led to the creation of two parallel literary spheres within the Soviet Union: one that was officially sponsored by the government, and one made by writers who, facing considerable danger, strove to build bridges with their readers while trying to remain outside the government's radar. It is interesting to note that both spheres actively promoted a politicisation of the *Divine Comedy*. However, while the Soviet cultural establishment saw Dante as a milestone in a path heading towards the actualisation of socialism, literature produced in environments that opposed Stalin's dictatorship used knowledge of the *Divine Comedy* as an instrument to reflect on the injustices of the regime. This can be exemplified by the similarities observed by Osip Mandel'shtam between Italian thirteenth-century prisons and the Stalinist terror. In a similar vein, analogies in the way the principle of *contrapasso* is applied in Dante's *Inferno* and *The Master and Margarita* seem to indicate that the *Divine Comedy* was considered particularly well suited to describe the reality of Stalin's regime. Examples like these provide an effective answer to the question investigated by Chapter Five: as the main goal of the chapter was to assess the use of literary classics in dictatorial contexts, evidence provided by Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova and Bulgakov suggests that literary tradition could be a powerful instrument to denounce the darkest aspects of totalitarianism.

By focusing on the historical and social context in which Bulgakov lived and worked, this research addressed a gap in recent Bulgakov studies, which after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the consequential opening of archives that were formerly inaccessible to scholars, undertook the essential task of uncovering aspects of Bulgakov's

life that were previously unknown to readers and literary critics. New discoveries in Bulgakov's biography have since then been frequently used as clues to interpret his work, as studies by Julie Curtis and Laura D. Weeks mentioned in the course of this thesis show. This study represents an attempt at complementing these studies with a detailed analysis of the 1920s and 1930s Soviet cultural and literary environment. By looking at how the writer's literary production was embedded within the Soviet social and cultural context, it is possible to use Bulgakov's personal story and the development of his career not only to clarify some of the most enigmatic aspects of his literary production, but also to infer more general conclusions on what it meant to be a writer in the Soviet Union during the Stalin era. While readers and scholars can understand more about Bulgakov by looking at the Soviet context, they can also understand more about the Soviet Union by seeing it through Bulgakov's eyes, bearing in mind the limits of his personal experience.

Conducting a comparative analysis of *The Master and Margarita* and the *Divine Comedy* also offered an opportunity to address gaps in the scholarship on the reception of Dante in Soviet Russia. Previous studies that made essential contributions to this field mainly focused on analysing Lozinsky's translation of the *Divine Comedy* and literary interpretations of Dante by Mandel'shtam and Akhmatova. This study complemented them by including scholarly works published in the Soviet press, some of which, like Kogan's literary anthologies of Western literature, had never been analysed by Western scholarship before. There are several ways in which the initial discoveries made on this topic could be taken further. While this thesis engaged with Soviet attitudes towards Dante until Bulgakov's death in 1940, further research is needed to assess whether the Soviet involvement against Italy in the Great Patriotic War (1941-1945) had an impact on Dante's presence in the Soviet canon. Another aspect that deserves to be investigated further is the position of the Soviet government with regards to the legacy of nineteenth-century Italian Risorgimento, which occupied such an important place in the political outlook of the Russian radical intelligentsia.

It must also be remarked that this study was limited to exploring the reception of the *Divine Comedy* in pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. Further research is needed to assess the reception of other works by Dante in the Soviet Union. For example, the fact that a complete Russian translation of Dante's *Vita Nova* was issued by a printing house affiliated

to the Fourth Division of the Red Army in 1918 seems to be a particularly unexpected, and therefore fascinating event that deserves to be investigated further. For these reasons, it is hoped that this thesis will be only the first step in a series of future exciting developments.

To sum up, this thesis is composed of two research strands: one that analyses the reception of Dante Alighieri and the *Divine Comedy* in Soviet Russia during the first decade of Stalin's regime, and one that is driven by the role of intertextuality in Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*. These two strands are brought together by the main objective of the thesis: to analyse the processes behind the formation of the literary canon. The reception of Dante by the Soviet cultural establishment and the use of cultural references in *The Master and Margarita* indicate that the late 1920s and 1930s Soviet cultural world was marked by the presence of two alternative canons: one that was controlled by Stalin's political and cultural establishment, and one that was preserved by Bulgakov and other writers that had been relegated to the margins of the Soviet intellectual world. The final paragraphs of this conclusion explore how the history of the reception of Dante in Russia and the theme of intertextuality in Bulgakov's novel have been used in this thesis to highlight the presence of these two conflicting canons.

Since the start of the nineteenth century, marked by the conflict between Classical and Romantic literature and between French and German influences on culture, Russian literature has been shaped by the clash between competing preferences in the cultural establishment. With the partial broadening of Russian readership following the abolition of serfdom in 1861, various actors in the cultural environment, such as the Orthodox Church, the Tsar, and the radical intelligentsia were determined to influence what the lower classes should read. In the literary field, these cultural and political forces were all moved by the same goal: creating a canon that would be transmitted to and shared by all Russians. They often had conflicting ideas, however, regarding the specific authors and works that deserved to be included in this canon. While the Tsar and the leaders of the Orthodox Church intended to build a literary canon that would support the status quo, an aim that was evident in the use of Dante's Ugolino as a cautionary tale to warn young cadets against betraying the Russian Empire, the radical intelligentsia was creating their own canon as a way to challenge autocracy, a phenomenon that was testified by their interest in Dante as a patriotic political figure. Declared heretical by the highest ranks of the Orthodox Church, but

praised by the anti-tsarist intelligentsia, Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a good example of a work that divided Russian cultural leaders. It is not surprising, therefore, that its legacy was so contested after the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War.

After the fall of Tsarist institutions, the newly installed Soviet power sought to use the literary canon as a tool to legitimise itself. For this reason, the discussion around which writers from the country's pre-revolutionary past belonged in the Soviet canon was of vital importance. Just as the country it was seeking to represent, in its first twenty years of existence the Soviet literary canon underwent several transformations. Analysing the shape it took in the years when Mikhail Bulgakov was working on *The Master and Margarita* represents an opportunity to observe it at a particular moment in time. Bulgakov's novel itself provided commentary on some of the criteria that guided the creation of the Soviet canon at this stage: the scene where Bosoi and other viewers found in possession of foreign currency are required to sit through a theatre production of Pushkin's *The Covetous Knight*, for example, offers a glimpse into the tendency of the Soviet literary establishment to prioritise for inclusion in the canon works which could be used for didactic purposes.

This, however, was not always the main function of the Soviet literary canon, which was also an instrument for the government to affirm the country's cultural prestige on an international level. It is in this context that Mikhail Lozinsky's translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and new Soviet translations of other Western European literary classics, must be understood. Through these new translations, Stalin intended to send the clear message that the Soviet Union was not only an industrial and economic, but also a cultural superpower. The regime undertook this ambitious communication project by seeking to involve not only cultural professionals, but the whole Soviet population. Particularly significant in this respect was the publication of materials such as Petr Kogan's short handbook on Western literature for workers, designed to bring literary classics such as the *Divine Comedy* to the working classes. In this regard Stalin's regime significantly diverged from the Fascist government in Italy, which did not display any particular interest in transmitting knowledge of 'high culture' to the lower classes.

While Soviet political and cultural institutions were building a canon aimed at contemporary readers with the purpose of enrolling them in a plan to affirm the country's cultural

reputation on the international stage, writers like Mikhail Bulgakov, Osip Mandel'shtam and Anna Akhmatova used their works to address readers in the future. As their chances of publishing original work in the Soviet Union grew dimmer, authors that lived on the margins of the Soviet cultural world would produce works aimed at future generations, and in doing so they worked to preserve the memory of the pre-revolutionary cultural canon and question its appropriation by the Soviet government.

With its extensive use of intertextuality, Mikhail Bulgakov's last novel *The Master and Margarita* is a very telling example of this. As David Bethea noted, 'In Vladikavkaz in the Caucasus (1920-21), where he began his apprenticeship as a writer after renouncing his first profession of medical doctor, Bulgakov had occasion to discover how, under present conditions, one's social status could suddenly predetermine one's place in literary history. For Bulgakov, true culture could be embodied in national guises, but its essence was timeless and catholic'.⁵⁵⁸ While Soviet government and cultural institutions were building a literary canon that excluded or included authors based on the social forces they supposedly represented, Bulgakov designed his last novel to be a vehicle for the transmission of knowledge of pre-Soviet culture to future readers. References to other works of art in *The Master and Margarita* not only create cohesion within the novel itself, but also establish a connection between the novel and a cultural canon which openly challenged the official Soviet canon. By applying the principle of *contrapasso* to the characters in the novel, Bulgakov therefore ensures Dante's presence in this alternative canon.

In conclusion, this thesis conducted a comparative analysis of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* by examining two main elements: the history of the reception of Dante in Russia before and after the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War, and the purposes behind the use of intertextuality in Bulgakov's novel. When analysed together, both these elements point towards a more general phenomenon that characterised the Soviet cultural world in the years when Bulgakov was working on his novel, between 1928 and 1940: the conflict between Stalin's canon, which coopted past literature into supporting the regime, and Bulgakov's canon, which was intended to question the appropriation of literary tradition by the Soviet

⁵⁵⁸ Bethea, p. 188.

government. Thanks to a robust theoretical framework, which combined theories of intertextuality with translation studies and world literature tools, the analysis of Dantean references in Bulgakov's novel provided an ideal case study to examine the processes behind the formation of the literary canon in an extremely complex phase of Soviet cultural history.

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