

Magical Realism as a Transcendent Force in Bulgakov, Aksyonov, and Nabokov

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## Introduction

The short stories “The Visit to the Museum” by Vladimir Nabokov and “Victory” by Vassily Aksyonov as well as Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel *The Master and Margarita* all utilize elements of magical realism in their narration. The most prevalent aspect of magical realism across these works is the manipulation of space and time, specifically the blending of borders between two often contradictory settings. Such borders can be between literal or metaphorical realms, such as the difference between Earth and Hell or between the mind and the real world. Analyzing these spatial and temporal boundaries (or lack thereof) provide insight into the nature and purpose of magical realism. Though these borders sometimes exist, what is often seen in these works is “an almost unnoticeable transition from the realm of reality into that of fantasy.”<sup>1</sup> These invisible borders and transitions illuminate the tenuous ability to differentiate between different modes of seeing and being. Such dichotomies are emphasized by the magical blending of space, time, and the subversion of the reader’s expectations. For these writers, utilizing magical realism, instead of transporting the reader completely away from reality, goes to reveal more about the reality in which the reader lives. Through the experience of extraordinary, impossible circumstances, the protagonists and the reader gain insight into the nature of their existence.

## Hell, Earth, and Space

Both “The Visit to the Museum” and *The Master and Margarita* create a Hell-like space for their protagonists: Nabokov through the labyrinth of the museum and Bulgakov through

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<sup>1</sup> Birutė Ciplijauskaitė, “Socialist and Magic Realism: Veiling or Unveiling?,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 10, no. 3 (1979): 219-220.

Satan's Ball in Apartment 50. Bulgakov's depiction is a more literal representation of a demonic place, while the museum creates a sensation of terror and entrapment that emulates Hell. In both narratives, Hell-like spaces are contiguous, with the border between Earth and Hell being blurred and often indistinguishable.

Upon the protagonist's first visit to the museum, nothing is out of the ordinary: "Everything was as it should be: gray tints, the sleep of substance, matter dematerialized."<sup>2</sup> The museum is empty aside from the protagonist and the custodian and is exceedingly mundane. However, when the protagonist returns with M. Godard, the space of the museum completely transforms. Will Norman calls M. Godard a devil figure<sup>3</sup> and with this reading, Godard's tour of the museum becomes a Dante-esque tour of Hell. When Godard vanishes upon the protagonist's request, neither he nor the reader can tell if he did so by normal or supernatural circumstances. Nabokov does not describe how he leaves, only that he "had already vanished."<sup>4</sup> This vagueness adds to the magical realism of the story; one can choose to assume a logical answer or a mystical one.

Regardless, Godard's disappearance leaves the protagonist trapped in the museum and its space changes to further entrap him: "Every time I turned and tried to retrace my steps along the passages, I found myself in hitherto unseen places."<sup>5</sup> The magical transformation of the museum, rather than being a wonderful experience, is a hellish one. Norman writes, "The harmless

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<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "The Visit to the Museum," in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Simon Karlinksy. (New York: McGraw-Hill International, 1973), 68.

<sup>3</sup> Will Norman, "Nabokov and Benjamin: A Late Modernist Response to History," *Urbandus Review* 10 (2007): 95.

<sup>4</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "The Visit to the Museum," in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Simon Karlinksy. (New York: McGraw-Hill International, 1973), 76.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

provincial museum is thus turned for Nabokov into a vision of hell—the hell of the historical.”<sup>6</sup> Not many would think a portal to Hell could be accessed through a mundane museum in a French town, but this subversion of expectations brings the realms of Earth and Hell closer to one another. The two regions are not wildly disparate, but rather seamlessly connected to one another. Through this, Nabokov communicates that the categorization of Hell and Earth are not as distinct as one may believe.

As for *The Master and Margarita*, the location of the Hell-like space also reflects the ability of Hell to exist alongside Earth. On the outside, Apartment 50 is an average Moscow apartment. It is a location familiar to readers and common in Moscow, but also is a unique quality of urban settings. Nesbet writes, “Hell erupts into the urban spaces of America and Russia, and in that eruption, space itself is reshaped in peculiar ways.”<sup>7</sup> Within cities, space must be reimagined to accommodate a large population, whether that is small, cramped apartments in Moscow or skyscrapers in America. Similarly, Woland refigures the space of the apartment to serve his purpose of hosting the ball. Woland’s ability to do this is supernatural, but humans can do something similar through practical means. Koroviev’s explanation of the partitioning of apartments without fifth dimension magic is humorous but also relates how both humans and Woland create space when necessary, albeit in different ways.

When Margarita enters the apartment, she repeatedly mentions how the apartment appears endlessly spacious. The ball is hosted in “an absolutely enormous hall, with a colonnade

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<sup>6</sup> Will Norman, “Nabokov and Benjamin: A Late Modernist Response to History,” *Urbandus Review* 10 (2007): 95.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Nesbet, “Skyscrapers, Consular Territory, and Hell: What Bulgakov and Eizenshtein Learned about Space from Il’f and Petrov’s America,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 2 (2010): 384.

besides, dark and on first impression endless.”<sup>8</sup> Initially, Margarita “was struck that the front hall of an ordinary Moscow apartment could contain this extraordinary invisible, yet quite palpable, endless stairway.”<sup>9</sup> The entrance to the apartment is akin to a portal from the earthly realm to the supernatural one. Yet, Margarita’s transcendence blurs the line between the two. Just like how Woland occupies the real world, Margarita occupies the supernatural one, if only for a brief time.

Generally, the ball challenges the typical structures of space and time. For example, the ball begins at midnight and ends at midnight, though Margarita knows a significant amount of time has passed. Before the ball begins, Margarita is told it is ten seconds to midnight, but these ten seconds feel so long for her that she thinks that they have passed already. Time can be either stretched out or frozen altogether. As for space, it can just as easily be expanded as it can be condensed. This is seen when the ball ends and the apartment returns to its normal proportions.

“The crowds of guests began to lose their shape: tailcoaters and women fell to dust. Decay enveloped the room before Margarita’s eyes, a sepulchral smell flowed over it. The columns fell apart, the fires went out, everything shrank, there were no more fountains, no camellias, no tulips. And there was simply this: the modest living room of the jeweler’s widow, and a strip of light falling from a slightly opened door.”<sup>10</sup>

A space that just hosted a supernatural, spectacular ball is now the modest apartment it originally was. Apartment 50 has both “a kind of citational relationship to Hell”<sup>11</sup> and the qualities of being

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<sup>8</sup> Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Penguin Classics, 1997), 250.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 249.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 275.

<sup>11</sup> Anne Nesbet, “Skyscrapers, Consular Territory, and Hell: What Bulgakov and Eizenshtein Learned about Space from Il’f and Petrov’s America,” *Slavic Review* 69, no. 2 (2010): 385.

a normal, Moscow apartment. This duality blurs the extent to which one space has a singular definition. Its expansion and contraction for the needs of the devil blend the distinction between Earth and Hell. Similarly, the museum's nightmarish qualities for the protagonist combine the mundane with the fantastic, thus exposing the difficulties of classifying it as one or the other. The same removal of definitive borders occurs in the perception of memory and reality in Aksyonov's and Nabokov's short stories.

### **Time, Space, and Memory**

The spatial and temporal changes in setting in "Victory" and "The Trip to the Museum" reveal the complexity of memory's relationship to reality. In Nabokov's story, the protagonist's memory clashes with the contemporary state of Russia he sees, while in Aksyonov's story, the grandmaster's memory is not simply memory, but a core part of his reality.

The protagonist's inexplicable transportation back to St. Petersburg evokes the Russian emigre's nostalgia for the country he once knew but that is no more. The protagonist thinks, "I knew, irrevocably, where I was. Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land."<sup>12</sup> Through this magical transportation, the protagonist is forced to confront the change to his homeland, the homeland that he never expected to see again. His visit shatters the illusion of what St. Petersburg looks like in his mind; he can now definitively see how much everything has changed. From the phrase "hopelessly my own native land," one gets the sense of sadness that comes with this. Though the protagonist realizes the horror of his new location later, the initial

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<sup>12</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, "The Visit to the Museum," in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Simon Karlinsky. (New York: McGraw-Hill International, 1973), 78.

emotions are that of happiness to escape the museum and then sadness, because “Petersburg [does] not provide the reassurance of ‘restorative nostalgia.’ Instead, the narrator experiences extreme dislocation.”<sup>13</sup> The protagonist’s confrontation with the present calls into question how one can interpret memory in relation to reality. How does one cope with the fact that what once was reality is now no more? In essence, “the story of reverse estrangement in the once familiar city underscores an important discovery . . . that memory is indeed distinct from reality—the recreation of the past can occur only in the imagination.”<sup>14</sup> In Nabokov’s story, one’s memory is not equal to reality. While this creates a stark difference between the two, it also demonstrates how the ways in which memory captures reality are constantly changing. Because every person’s memory is different, the distinct experience of reality is not as concrete as it would appear.

As for “Victory,” the grandmaster’s memory influences the chess game in the story; his memories influence one’s understanding of the events of the story despite understanding it is not entirely the reality. The magical elements of the story do not originate from outside sources like in Nabokov’s story, but rather from the grandmaster himself. As Slobin describes, “the boundaries of narration are blurred, the transitions from one situation to another are barely noticeable as the passages of the master’s stream of consciousness acquire a powerful rhythm.”<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon is especially prevalent as the game ends and the grandmaster realizes his inevitable defeat.

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<sup>13</sup> Greta Slobin, “Double Exposure in Exile Writing: Khodasevich, Teffi, Bunin, Nabokov,” in *Russians Abroad: Literary and Cultural Politics of Diaspora (1919–1939)*, ed. Katerina Clark et al., (Academic Studies Press, 2013), 90.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 90-91.

<sup>15</sup> Greta Slobin, “Aksenov beyond ‘Youth Prose’: Subversion through Popular Culture,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 31, no. 1 (1987): 54.

“Following behind him, someone was lightly poking his back with a hard object. Up ahead, a man in a black coat and S.S. lightning bolts on his epaulets was waiting. A step. A half-second, another step . . . These things are supposed to be done in a pit . . . How long does it take to put the disgusting-smelling bast sack over the head? It became dark and hard to breathe . . . ‘Mate!’ exclaimed G.O. like a brass horn.”<sup>16</sup>

The grandmaster blends his experience of the past with playing chess in the present. These two situations, though quite different, are united by the spatial and temporal shifts in narration. Just when one would expect the gunshot to sound off and execute him, instead we hear G.O. exclaim “Mate!,” which reminds the reader of the reality distinct from memory. For the grandmaster, he is torn between the trauma of the past and his current life. The shifting of space and time, which are portrayed by the magical realism in the story, cements the inexorable influence of past memory on one’s view of reality.

The magical realism in “The Trip to the Museum” results in the protagonist confronting that his memory of St. Petersburg is no longer an accurate representation of it. However, for the grandmaster, his memory *is* the reality. Instead of reality influencing his memory, his memory influences his experience of reality. Both stories question the truth of memory and reality, which makes it difficult to discern which is more accurate and powerful. This is accomplished through magical realism. Thus, magical realism acts as a force to move beyond reality and challenge the reader’s perception of these common concepts. The same challenge to one’s perception occurs when these writers take other concepts familiar to the reader and make them unfamiliar.

### **Defamiliarizing the Familiar**

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<sup>16</sup> Vassily Aksyonov, “Victory, a Story with Exaggerations,” trans. Eric Konkol, 1965, 5.

One uniting feature of magical realism in these three works is their aim in taking a situation or object that is familiar and changing it so that it becomes unfamiliar. This phenomenon makes the reader question the absolutism of fact and reality. However, finding an answer to the ambiguities these authors present is less important than accepting magical realism as a tool to question and subvert the audience's beliefs and understanding of the world.

There are many such examples of defamiliarization in *The Master and Margarita* that could warrant its own paper. I am choosing to focus on the blending of fiction and reality that accompanies the storyline of the Master and Pontius Pilate. The Master's manuscript is a work of fiction, but it picks up where the previous chapters of the Pontius Pilate storyline ended. Unlike the Master, the reader knows about the previous two Pilate chapters. However, his fictional account perfectly coincides with Woland's retelling and Ivan Homeless' dream,<sup>17</sup> which implies that it is reality. The unlikely circumstances surrounding the Master's work blur the line between fiction and reality. Does the Master have some divine inspiration or amazing guesswork? This question is left unanswered. Prizel writes that Bulgakov "attempts to combine the two estates, those of dream and of reality. For, if the so-called true reality combines the two, then what we call 'reality' would be only relative."<sup>18</sup> The relativity of reality comprises the very nature of the novel. As a result, "the absolute concepts of 'life' and 'art' are thus abolished along with the absolute concepts of 'space' and 'time.'"<sup>19</sup> Rejection of the absolute includes questioning the relationship between space and time, which was discussed previously, but also in the rejection of

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<sup>17</sup> Mark Amusin, "'Your Novel Has Some More Surprises in Store for You' (The Specificity of the Fantastic in 'The Master and Margarita')," trans. Liv Bliss, *Russian Studies in Literature* 42, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 84.

<sup>18</sup> Yuri Prizel, "M. Bulgakov's 'Master i Margarita': The True Absolute," *Russian Language Journal* 30, no. 107 (1976): 110.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 115.

fiction and reality as two wholly separate entities. Thus, the magical realist elements of the Master call on the reader to question how real reality is and how fictitious fiction is.

In “The Visit to the Museum,” the line between past, present, and future ceases to exist. The relics are from the past experienced in the present, but they also experience violence from the direction of the future.<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon contradicts the conception of time being linear by nature. The same happens in the spatial dimension. The limitless space contained in a finite building is magical, but the relation of space causes the protagonist to question what is real when he finally escapes the museum.

“From beyond a door came a burst of applause, but when I flung the door open, there was no theater, but only a soft opacity and splendidly counterfeited fog with the perfectly convincing blotches of indistinct streetlights. More than convincing! I advanced, and immediately a joyous and unmistakable sensation of reality at last replaced all the unreal trash amid which I had just been dashing to and fro.”<sup>21</sup>

The fantastic reality of the museum affects the protagonist’s view of reality so that instead of recognizing the scene before him as real, he views it as another elaborate exhibit. His automatic assumption is that the fog is counterfeited, and the streetlights are fake. Additionally, he is initially not frightened to find himself in another foreign place simply because it is not the museum. He has escaped the fantastical labyrinth of the museum and is happy to be free from it, regardless of where he is. Like the story of the Master’s manuscript, the events of Nabokov’s

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<sup>20</sup> Will Norman, “Nabokov and Benjamin: A Late Modernist Response to History,” *Urbandus Review* 10 (2007): 91.

<sup>21</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, “The Visit to the Museum,” in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov and Simon Karlinksy. (New York: McGraw-Hill International, 1973), 77.

story result in the blurring of fact and fiction. This, in turn, elevates the status of reality to one as magical as fantasy, thus transforming reality itself.

Defamiliarization takes place in “Victory” through the grandmaster’s relationship with chess and the ending of the story. As has been discussed, the grandmaster’s view of chess is filtered through his own memory. Additionally, the reader watches the chess match unfold through the grandmaster, who treats the chess match not as a game, but as an actual battle.

“The intrusion of the black knight into the senseless mass on the left flank, or, at any rate, its occupation of the b4 square, gave rise to reflection . . . there comes a moment when you feel the danger and very real proximity of the black knight on the b4 square. A difficult, subtle, fascinating, careful struggle lay ahead. Life lay ahead.”<sup>22</sup>

The declaration of “life lay ahead” contradicts the view of chess as a leisurely game. The grandmaster’s view of chess extends beyond competition; chess marks a real, concrete struggle for life. Here, Aksyonov touches on the absurd by depicting chess as a threat of danger for the grandmaster. This is a purely psychological view, but the grandmaster’s perspective endows the game with mystical qualities as well. One questions if a black knight on the b4 square means real danger or if this is simply from the skewed perception of the grandmaster. Chess transforms from a game into a battle. This element of the story confronts the reader’s perceptions of chess by portraying a mundane chess game as an epic struggle.

Aksyonov further challenges the reader’s expectations with the ending of the story. Considering the grandmaster’s status, one would not expect him to give in so easily to defeat.

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<sup>22</sup> Vassily Aksyonov, “Victory, a Story with Exaggerations,” trans. Eric Konkol, 1965, 3.

Even less would one expect him to have gold medals to award to anyone who beat him. Aksyonov hints that the grandmaster has some wealth since he wears a Dior tie, but the logistics of having pure gold medallions is unfeasible. The absurdity of the story contradicts much of the story which focuses on the struggle and battle of chess. The experience is intense for both players involved, but the ending dissolves all tension and questions the seriousness of the game. The last line of the story reads, "I've ordered a lot of these medals, and I'll always keep them in supply."<sup>23</sup> Again, the grandmaster appears accustomed to defeat, which is reinforced by his passivity compared to G.O. If he was so prepared to accept defeat that he has multiple medals to hand out to those who beat him, why does he treat the game so seriously? The psychology of the grandmaster defies what one would expect of a highly skilled chess player. Overall, these three narratives utilize magical realism to provide a transformative experience for the reader that subverts expectations based on reality and familiarity.

### **Conclusion**

Magical realism in all these works creates different and nuanced understandings of reality. One cannot generalize one unifying purpose of magical realism in these three texts. In Bulgakov's and Nabokov's texts, the manipulation of space creates a liminal space between Earth and Hell, which questions how distinct and separate the two are from one another. Conversely, the relationship between space and time speaks to the preservation of memory in Aksyonov's and Nabokov's work. Just as space and time are manipulated in these stories to confuse reality, so too are these protagonists' perceptions of reality affected by their memories.

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<sup>23</sup> Vassily Aksyonov, "Victory, a Story with Exaggerations," trans. Eric Konkol, 1965, 6.

The magical elements of these two stories reveal the emotions and memories of characters, which cannot be defined as reality nor rejected as it either.

Furthermore, all three stories utilize magical elements to defamiliarize readers from conventional views. In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov utilizes the Master's manuscript to question the role of fiction and reality. The ability of the Master's manuscript to align with other details of the Pilate storyline, despite being fiction, makes it so that fiction cannot be entirely distanced from reality. Realism aims to imitate reality, but the Master's story is itself reality; fiction is non-fiction in this. In "The Visit to the Museum," the protagonist's view of reality is so affected by the impossibilities and magic of the museum that upon stepping back into the real world, he believes it to be another part of the museum. The museum, which is traditionally considered a display of objective reality and facts, becomes an exhibit of fantasy. The mundane becomes the fantastic. As for "Victory," the psychology and vivid imagery of the story transform chess from a friendly game to a struggle for life. However, this struggle is completely contradicted by the absurd ending, which negates the grandmaster's view of the story for most of the story.

Altogether, these three texts utilize magical realism to transform reality and question its certainty. One cannot discern reality from fantasy easily in these works, which allows magical realism to have a transformative and transcendent effect on the reader. Not only does it bring fantasy into the realm of reality, but it also exposes how elements of reality are themselves fantasy.

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