In the 1930s and 1940s the Soviet Union repressed any ideas that did not adhere to the Stalinist party line. Some of the country’s best-educated writers, poets, and Party members fell victim to purges as the Soviet government pruned its ranks. Thus began the era of writing as a black market commodity and the development of *samizdat*, “the system of underground publishing in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union.” Works deemed politically incorrect were either silenced or experienced a long delay in printing due to government interference. Authors were also often reluctant to publish due to potential persecution. Such is the case with the works of the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote “Discourse in the Novel” in the 1930s and early 1940s but did not see it published until the 1970s. Similarly, Mikhail Bulgakov began his novel *The Master and Margarita* in 1928, but the first complete version was not printed until 1973. While it is possible to argue that both of these writers had socialist tendencies, a close examination of their writing reveals the existence of anti-authoritarian themes as well. The difficulties and delays in publication each author faced can be seen as further evidence of this fact.

In the case of Bakhtin, critics also disagree on the relationship between his own works and those of Pavel Medvedev and Valentin Voloshinov. Several of Bakhtin’s books and articles were published under the names of his friends, including Medvedev and Voloshinov. Thus the

---

true origin of authorship is still a matter of literary debate. Professor Gary Saul Morson argues that Bakhtin is not responsible for the Marxophilic ideas presented in the works of Medvedev and Voloshinov and that his body of work can be viewed as a separate entity. For the purpose of this paper, I will accept the validity of Morson’s argument. Regardless of whether one is to accept Morson’s argument, however, Bakhtin’s relationship to Marxism as a theory should not be conflated with his outlook on the Soviet regime itself. Examining the respective relationships that these authors had with the Soviet regime requires a nuanced approach. Neither Bulgakov nor Bakhtin can be labeled dissidents who directly spoke out against the authoritarian social structure, but their works still exemplify a refusal to follow the party line. At a time when the regime supported socialist realism as the ideal form of artistic expression—one that they hoped would portray socialism and the time in a positive and optimistic manner—these authors were creating works of far greater complexity. Analyzing the ideas presented in Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” and Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, I propose that while Bakhtin was a theorist and Bulgakov a novelist, both authors found the ideology of Soviet Marxism problematic and expressed this dissatisfaction through their writing. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin outlines his distaste for what he calls monologic discourse and highlights the importance of heteroglossia and the integral processing involved between the speaker and the listener. In his novel The Master and Margarita, Bulgakov applies these same concepts by utilizing parody and satire to contest the monologic and poke fun at socialist realism.

---

It can be argued that both *The Master and Margarita* and *Discourse in the Novel* portray elements of socialism in a positive light, but it is important not to accept these depictions as a sign of the authors’ approval of the Soviet regime. When outlining his theory on language, Bakhtin stresses the importance of viewing language in a communal context, stating that “…verbal discourse is a social phenomenon—social throughout its entire range and in each and every of its factors, from the sound image to the furthest reaches of abstract meaning.”5 This notion of discourse, as grounded in the exchanges of common people, supports the socialist ideology that rejects the literature as an upper class phenomenon. Bakhtin promotes “…the social life of discourse outside the artist’s study, discourse in the open spaces of public squares, streets, cities, and villages, of social groups, generations and epochs.”6 Thus the image of the artist in his study seems to be aligned with the bourgeois perspective that the upper echelons of society have a monopoly on literary language. Instead of focusing on the artist, Bakhtin stresses the importance of dialogue among the masses, an emphasis that is congruent with socialist realism.

While it may be tempting to view Bakhtin’s support for heteroglossia and plurality of language as a reflection of the party line, this view would ignore the other implication of heteroglossia— that it can only exist in a system that takes into account a plurality of voices and opinions. Thus, while heteroglossia can be viewed as a socialist notion, this does not automatically imply support for the regime.

Similarly, it may be argued that Bulgakov ridicules capitalism and reinforces the superiority of socialist society in his novel *The Master and Margarita*. This representation,

---

6 Ibid.
however, should not be equated with his support for the regime. When Woland, Bulgakov’s devil
color, puts on a black magic show for the Soviet audience, he opens up a shop with free
European commodities on the center of the stage. The women in the audience are beside
themselves and “all hesitation was now cast aside, and women streamed to the stage from all
sides.”7 In the scene that follows, the audience members who had rushed to take advantage of
these free commodities are seen running naked through the streets as their new-found garments
disappear. It could be argued that this is Bulgakov’s way of criticizing the greedy behavior
instilled by capitalism, but the scene could also serve the purpose of illuminating the problems of
the current regime. When Woland’s compatriot Fagot clears the stage, “the last to vanish was the
mountain of old dresses and shoes, and the stage was again severe, empty, and bare.”8 This
image could be likened to Soviet stores that were not able to offer their customers any degree of
variety and were constantly undergoing shortages of necessary products. It may be coincidental
usage, but the aptly named “black magic” is reminiscent of the commonly used term “black
market,” which for many was the only way to compensate for the lack of goods. Thus, the mass
rush of Soviet citizens toward the European dresses and offerings may be interpreted as a
problem with capitalism, but it also suggests that supply was not meeting demand in the socialist
system.

When viewed as a whole, Bakhtin’s literary theories oppose the top-down approach to
language mandated by the Soviet government; they stress the necessity of discourse as a dialogic
rather than monologic phenomenon and propose that language is intrinsically heteroglossic.
Bakhtin defines heteroglossia as the natural state of language which is then constantly re-

---

8 Ibid., 114.
established against the will of the unifying forces in a tug of war. Bakhtin argues against unitary language, which he defines as “…the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language.”

This can be compared to the language of the authoritarian regime, which does not allow room for discussion or alternative viewpoints. He strengthens this connection between language and political ideology by stating:

> We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a worldview, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual understanding in all ideological life. Thus a unitary language gives expression to forces working towards…centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural socialization.

The language that Bakhtin uses to express this concept invokes the idea that unitary forces— in this case, the regime—work against the natural function of language. Bakhtin states:

> Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralization and unification, the uninterrupted processes of decentralization and disunification go forward.

In the context of socialist realism this may indicate that even though the Soviet state attempts to dictate a specific ideology, the natural plurality of language and society consistently opposes it. By establishing heteroglossia and plurality as the natural state of language (as

---

10 Ibid., 271.
11 Ibid., 272.
opposed to the unnatural forces of unifying authoritarian centrifugal forces), Bakhtin indicates a deviation from authoritarian ideology.

In addition, the language itself that Bakhtin uses in order to express his theories on heteroglossia and plurality reflect a frustration with authoritarianism. In his discussion opposing monologic discourse, Bakhtin explains:

Stylistics locks every stylistic phenomenon into the monologic context of a given self-sufficient and hermetic utterance, imprisoning it, as it were, in the dungeon of a single context; it is not able to exchange messages with other utterances; it is not able to realize its on stylistic implications in a relationship with them; it is obliged to exhaust itself in its own single hermetic context.\(^{12}\)

The language Bakhtin uses to describe the monologic can be directly associated with authoritarianism. Much like those who spoke out against the regime, the utterance is “imprisoned.” It is unclear whether Bakhtin intended a direct correlation, but placing words in a dungeon where they cannot communicate could possibly be a clever reproach to censorship. In Bakhtin’s view, language is first and foremost a form of communication. He argues that language is directed at an active processing listener, a concept that cannot be upheld in an authoritarian regime not accepting of multiple opinions. This suggests that meaning is derived from context and interpretation. Bakhtin rejects the traditional stylistic understanding of the word as something that “…does not encounter in its path toward the object the fundamental and richly varied opposition of another’s word. No one hinders this word, no one argues with it.”\(^ {13}\) This traditional view of communication allows for the authoritative, undisputed word, since by

\(^ {12}\) Ibid., 274.
\(^ {13}\) Ibid., 276.
definition it stands on its own and encounters no opposition. Bakhtin, however, argues against these notions by proposing that the listener not only possesses a passive understanding, but also must be active and reacting. This system, like that of heteroglossia and dialogism, is innate since “in the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active…and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement."\(^{14}\) By invoking the natural state of the present active listener, Bakhtin suggests a world in which communication cannot be passed down from government to citizen as fact, but instead must undergo a transmutation upon reaching the listeners, which accounts for their active input in the conversation.

In his novel *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov implements Bakhtin’s theoretical concepts of heteroglossia, dialogism, and active communication in a satirical manner that undermines the functionality of the Soviet regime. In the opening chapter of the novel the characters of Berlioz and Ivan Bezdomny (Homeless), both Soviet writers, engage in an arguably monologic conversation fostered by the unitary force of language. Bezdomny, who is commissioned to a write poem about Christ, displeases the editor, Berlioz, because he “had portrayed the principal character of his poem, Jesus, in very dark hues…. It is difficult to say precisely what had tripped up Ivan Nikolayevich—his imaginative powers or complete unfamiliarity with the subject. But his Jesus turned out, well…altogether alive….\(^{15}\) A “live” figure of Jesus is problematic in the atheistic Soviet Union, so Bezdomny is instructed to re-write his piece to maintain the monologic foundation that this society is built upon. Berlioz stresses that “…the main point was not whether Jesus had been good or bad, but that he had never existed

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 282.
\(^{15}\) Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, 5.
as an individual….”\textsuperscript{16} Even the unintentional dialogism put forth by Bezdomny cannot be allowed to distort the monologic line of the regime.

The character of Woland adds a dialogic dimension to Bulgakov’s portrayal of Moscow. In “Discourse in the Novel,” Bakhtin cautions that “only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object.”\textsuperscript{17} In Bulgakov’s novel, both the reader and Woland are entering such a world, where words have not yet been oriented in the dialogic. Prior to Woland entering the scene, “the poet, to whom everything the editor said was new, listened to Mikhail Alexandrovich [Berlioz] attentively, staring at him with slightly impudent green eyes….”\textsuperscript{18} In this case, Bezdomny’s response to Berlioz is not one of processing or active listening. Bezdomny views every word pronounced by the editor as new and representative of true authority. At this point, he does not take in the information, examine, and process it the way he does later in the novel. As soon as Woland enters the scene, however, the dialogic emerges. When they first see Woland, the writers each react in their own way: “…the poet was repelled by the foreigner from his very first words, while Berlioz rather liked him.”\textsuperscript{19} This is the introduction of a plurality in processing that continues throughout the novel, an integration of various voices and opinions that act against the established monologic.

Bulgakov’s novel also explores the active form of listening presented in Bakhtin’s theory. Bakhtin’s literary theories allow not only for an active listener, but propose that “…the word is at

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 279.
\textsuperscript{18} Bulgakov, The Master and Margarita, 6.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 8.
the same time determined by that which has not yet been said but which is needed and in fact anticipated by the answering word.”

Thus, there is an anticipatory quality to speech that does not just present information, but also accounts for the thoughts, needs, and concerns of the audience. In *The Master and Margarita*, Woland is able to anticipate the desires of those around him. As a result, in his dialogues with Berlioz and Bezdomny, part of the process that would normally be completed by the listener is accomplished by the speaker. For example, when Woland offers Bezdomny cigarettes, the poet is surprised that the stranger could identify exactly what he was craving.

Similarly, in the chapter presented on Pontius Pilate, Yeshua can anticipate the needs of the procurator without the other having to formulate his own thoughts. After making several observations, Yeshua remarks, “‘the truth is, first of all, that your head aches and aches so badly that you are giving yourself over to cowardly thoughts of death…”

Through dialogue, Bulgakov demonstrates that the relation between the speaker and the listener is more complex than one where the listener is not accounted for or actively engaged.

The utterance, as explained by Bakhtin, must be able to function within the interplay of other utterances and must not be isolated on its own. This concept is illustrated throughout Bulgakov’s novel. For example, when Yeshua incorrectly addresses the procurator, he is brutally informed that “‘the Roman Procurator must be addressed as Hegamon. Speak no other words. Stand still. Do you understand me, or shall I hit you again?’” This is a system that exemplifies imprisonment within the monologic, but it also functions as a counterpoint to the monologic by exposing the ridiculous expectations of unitary forces to control language. Forcing Yeshua to call

---

22 Ibid., 23.
23 Ibid., 20.
the procurator “Hegamon” does not accomplish any goal or alter the way he thinks. In a similar moment of authoritarian language, Yeshua is informed that “not much is written down, but enough is written to hang you.”24 This statement does not take the listener into account at all; it simply states the facts of an authoritarian decision. The situation in itself, however, shows the futility of attempting to establish a unitary language or a concrete monologic, since controlling language does not alter Yeshua’s opinion. In the novel, Bulgakov also makes a more general standpoint against authoritarian language. The interjection of the Pontius Pilate story itself opposes the authoritarian position which actively suppresses religion. With its addition, the story adds another dimension to viewpoints, and thus it could also be used as evidence of heteroglossia and the multiplicity of voices.

Bakhtin’s prime examples of monologic unitary language are based on poetry, and both he and Bulgakov use this writing form to highlight the government’s attempt to make language a unitary force. Bakhtin states:

At the time when poetry was accomplishing the task of cultural, national and political centralization of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels, on the lower levels, on the stages of local fairs and at buffoon spectacles, the heteroglossia of the clown sounded forth, ridiculing all…25

By controlling its writers, and poets in particular, the authoritative Soviet government could mandate a unity of language by encouraging the monologic. In The Master and Margarita, Bulgakov criticizes Soviet writers. He exposes that the Soviet regime often favored writers not

24 Ibid, 61.
according to their talents, but depending on how willing they were to support the party line. In describing the meeting place for the writing society, Bulgakov comments:

Any visitor at Griboyedov’s, unless, of course he was a dunce, immediately realized how well those lucky chosen ones—the members of the MASSOLIT—were living, and was attacked at once by the blackest envy. And began at once to send up bitter reproaches to heaven because it had not endowed him at birth with literary talent, without which one cannot even dream of coming into possession of a MASSOLIT membership.26

The last sentence could potentially be taken seriously, but in the novel’s context, the reader is already informed that Berlioz and Bezdomny were not actually superior writers. It is thus clear that Bulgakov uses satire to criticize the Soviet system for rewarding incompetent writers for their praise of the authoritative regime. With time, the character of Bezdomny comes to realize that his poetry, which he was once proud of, is now an object of aversion: “his own verses which he recalled at the moment seemed most unpleasant now.”27 Bezdomny realizes this after his initial introduction to Woland, which enables him to see past the original monological constraints of his universe. Bezdomny and his poetry represent the unitary language that Bakhtin argues against in “Discourse in the Novel.”

It may be tempting to categorize Bakhtin and Bulgakov as either dissidents of the Soviet system or as Marxist proponents of socialism. This unilateral categorization, however, would be an oversimplification of their respective works, which uphold socialist values while questioning their implementation in the Soviet system. While Bakhtin’s “Discourse in the Novel” does

27 Ibid., 98.
contain pro-socialist elements, such as his theory of heteroglossia, these elements also contradict the rigid authority of the regime. By definition, a unitary force of language counters the notion of heteroglossia since it leaves no room for the multiplicity of voices or opinions. Similarly, an authoritarian government opposes Bakhtin’s idea of an active interaction between the speaker and the listener because such governmental doctrine does not take the concerns of the listener into account. In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov incorporates these concepts, leading to the conclusion that both of these authors considered certain aspects of Soviet life mandated by the regime as problematic. The expression of these themes in their writing is likely what prevented their fellow citizens from reading the publicized versions during the years in which they were actually written.
Works Cited


