

**Cities from Above in Literature: Moscow, Kolkata<sup>1</sup>**

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I

Long before the human race had achieved the technological advancement that enabled flight, first with hot air balloons and subsequently with the airplane, our imagination had speculated on placing the eye at greater altitudes than were physically accessible. Early Modern cities were often depicted from great heights, showing a panoramic sweep of cathedrals, houses, bridges and towers. In the absence of high vantage points around cities, geometric calculations and its allied tools would be employed by the artists. Jean-Marc Besse describes the four-step process that had been known since the sixteenth century, where the initial “geometric plan” of an area, measured and drawn on the site, would be converted into a “perspectival plan”, as though viewed from an imagined point at a higher altitude. Upon this backdrop, then, buildings, monuments, walls and bridges are sketched to provide a bird's-eye view of a city (Besse 68). Besse describes this in the context of Alfred Guesdon’s (1808-1876) work with cities like Barcelona and Madrid. Urban projections from above could be produced for aesthetic consumption, for mapping and for surveys, such as Ralph Agas’s sixteenth

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century *Civitas Londinum* (1561). In terms of achieving a high-altitude point of view, at the extreme end of the spectrum is the map, as it came to be drawn in Early Modern Europe. The major impetus behind such projections was navigation, and even though imperial designs were not waiting for exact cartography, one can hardly doubt that maps facilitated such travels.

In this article, I will try to understand the politics and poetics of high-altitude points of view in literary representation by looking principally at two texts, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Nabarun Bhattacharya's *Kangal Malshat*. The two novels are different thematically but both reveal their authors' frustration with contemporary political regimes. Apart from the fact that *Kangal Malshat* makes overt references to Bulgakov's text, including its epigraph, "Manuscripts don't burn' - Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940)", the novel employs the trope of aerial anarchy, which is the standard *modus operandi* of the *fyataru*. The religious, moral connotations of flight are absent in *Kangal Malshat*, but in *The Master and Margarita* it is the devil who empowers Margarita to take flight. In order to understand the literary lineage of flying beings, the essay will consider Milton's Satan, myth of Faust and the story of Icarus. Just as *Kangal Malshat* opens with

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Bulgakov's words, *The Master and Margarita* refers back to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Faust*. The epigraph reads:

‘...who are you, then?’

‘I am part of that power which eternally  
wills evil and eternally works good.’

Literary adaptations of the Faust myth had often alluded to Icarus as the prototype of the overreaching winged human. In one of the best known Early Modern adaptations of the Faust legend, Christopher Marlowe made the connection with the arrogant flight of Icarus in relation to Faustus's scholarly pursuits that thrive, “Till swoln with cunning, of a self-conceit, / His waxen wings did mount above his reach, /And, melting, heavens conspir'd his overthrow (Prologue 20-22).

In Goethe's *Faust*, there are allusions to Icarus once again. Niall Rudd has noted two passages in particular: In Part I, “I long to join his quest on tireless wings uplifted from the ground...Then mountains could not check my god-like flight”, and the other in Part II, where Euphorion tries to valiantly fly down from a mountain top, shortly before falling to his death (Rudd 48).

Besides these direct references, the works mentioned contain the trope of flying, even though in each the moral and religious implications

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are negotiated afresh. The next section will try to examine the different connotations of flying bodies – Icarus, Satan, Faustus, Margarita and the *fyataru*. The third section will look at the connotations of the high-altitude perspectives of cities vis-a-vis knowledge/power, taking into account Michel de Certeau's writings on the city walker, and two accounts of the devil's view of cities: *The Devil on Two Sticks* (1762) (a translation of Rene Lesage's *Le Diable Boiteux*), and the 1844 collection, *Le Diable a Paris* (1844). The final section will consider the position of characters at high altitudes and its association with historical knowledge.

While Mark Dorian and Frederic Pousin, among others, have dealt with the visual cultures of high-altitude perspectives, such views in literary works have rarely received the kind of critical attention they deserve. The present paper owes a great debt to such readings and is informed by a range of material which offers a large number of ways of describing and writing about high-altitude points of view down the years. While an article such as this, conducted within limits of time and space, cannot accommodate detailed studies of the many approaches, it will allude to several, keeping the focus on the twin aspects of mobile and static views of cities from above.

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The flying body, that is flight without the use of vessels for human beings, has carried moral implications. At the very foundation of recorded myths related to flying lies the story of Icarus and Daedalus. While Daedalus uses his wings to serve a utilitarian purpose in order to escape the Cretan maze, Icarus takes pride in the act of flying. In Ovid's version, his wax wings melted and the overreacher fell to his death. As a moral metaphor, flying is present also in the western Christian and pagan tradition (good angels, Lucifer, popular images of the devil, witches in the medieval and early modern periods). John Milton's *Paradise Lost* epitomizes some of the differences between the flights of angels (who are doing God's bidding) from the reckless and enjoyable flight of Satan. The good angels fly only when no other means are available, but Satan often loses his ways and delights in the act of flying.

Traditions and figurations of literary characters and motifs run parallel and often intertwine. Despite the allusion to the Icarus myth in Christopher Marlowe's *Faustus*, the theme of flight is not developed in the play. In other accounts, however, the flight of Faustus and its connections with Icarus are clearer, and the fable of arrogance assumes religious connotations. According to tradition, Faustus was linked to Simon Magus and he is shown to enact similar falls in trying to fly (see Watt 16). Even in

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Marlowe, Faustus transgresses the altitudinal limits set upon human beings. He “did mount him up to scale Olympus’ top” (*Faustus* 3.4) and visits and sees many different lands from on high through his magical powers.

Goethe’s *Faust*, as noted above, likens the Doctor to arrogant Icarus. The close links between Goethe’s *Faust* and Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* were noted by Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor as early as 1969. Taking cue from the epigraph of the novel, which is a quotation from Goethe’s *Faust*, Stenbock-Fermor explores several crucial links, and goes so far as to suggest that Koroviev-Fagott may be read as a “reincarnation of Faust, but of a Faust who instead of being the devil’s master is now his servant and is doing penance for the pun which offended the devil” (Stenbock-Fermor 312). In Bulgakov’s novel, it is Margarita who strikes the deal with the devil in order to save the Master, but what the novel offers is a transcendental ending for the two characters. (Hector Berlioz had written an opera in 1846, to which Stenbock-Fermor alludes, it was titled *The Damnation of Faust*. Interestingly, the editor whose head is cut off at the beginning of Bulgakov’s novel is called Berlioz.) There are distinctions in the manner of flying that need to be drawn before entering into a discussion of Margarita’s flight in the novel.

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There are two subversive aspects of Margarita's flight: first, the physical sensation of flight and the pleasure it affords, and second, the ability to perpetrate petty damage upon the city-dwellings. Although in the novel it is Margarita who strikes the deal with the devil, it becomes clear gradually that Woland is not altogether a maleficent presence. Along with his retinue he is capable of displaying powers commonly attributed to the devil, but his ultimate aim is to save what is good in Moscow. After Margarita crosses the gate and before heading to the river, she is instructed: "Then fly over the city a little, to get used to it" (Bulgakov 234). Her flight is eventful as she gradually adjusts to the physical sensation of flying. It is pleasurable and she flips upside down, taking herself and the readers of the novel on a magical ride through Moscow. A little later Margarita realizes that she need not ride at a great speed.

She was depriving herself of the opportunity of seeing anything properly, of revelling properly in her own flight. Something told her that she would be waited for in the place she was flying to, and that there was no need for her to become bored with this insane speed and height (Bulgakov 242).

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The aspect of physical pleasure is not given primacy in the fyataru's case, perhaps because the religious, moral context is missing. Bulgakov offers clues that help the reader identify Margarita with popular depictions of the witch in Europe since medieval times, and her ability to fly has its source in the devil. There is banality and a sense of bureaucratic oppression in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and only the diabolical can redeem human existence. T.S. Eliot remarked about Charles Baudelaire's moral universe: "damnation itself is an immediate form of salvation--of salvation from the ennui of modern life, because it at last gives some significance to living" (Eliot 343). The same can be said of Bulgakov's depiction of Woland and his retinue and the role they play in Moscow.

It is, however, this aspect of anarchical acts in flight that the two novels have in common. During the flight, Margarita pauses to vandalize the critic, Latunsky's apartment in the "Dramlit", the House of Dramatists and Literary Workers. The devastation "afforded her a burning pleasure, and yet it seemed to her all the while that the results came out somewhat meagre" (Bulgakov 238). Part of the thrill of being able to fly is to perpetrate such crimes—at times targeted, but often random. The fyataru, created by Nabarun Bhattacharya, usually participate in the latter kind.

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The fyataru are a group of malcontent individuals who have somehow acquired the ability to fly. The three who feature most prominently in Nabarun's oeuvre are Madan, D.S. and the failing poet, Purandar Bhat. Using their powers they spread chaos where they can, disrupting parties, literary meets, and football games. Apart from their arbitrariness, the fyataru mode of anarchical behaviour is characterized by a lack of definite desire to succeed. "There is a certain amount of despondence in the fyataru", Nabarun said in an interview. "Success or failure is not the point"<sup>2</sup> (*Katha-barta* 62). What, then, is the purpose of the fyataru's anarchical flight that threatens and disrupts the existing order, which in systemic and institutionalized ways seeks to dominate over the financially marginal sections? It is in the randomness that the fyataru discovers pleasure, but the celebration of this pleasure is nowhere anything more than banality itself. Like Bulgakov (not only in *The Master and Margarita*, but also in works like *Diaboliad*), Nabarun's world in his fyataru stories is marked by drudgery and mechanized existence. The source of their ability to fly is unexplained by the characters and they appear utterly uninterested in following a seemingly natural curiosity about the powers they are bestowed with. For Nabarun, "the ability to fly is subversive" in itself (*Katha-barta* 147).

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Henri Lefebvre saw a direct correlation between the altitudinal positions of the gaze and the degree of power the viewer holds over the city. This divide between planners and users of cities (Baron Haussmann and the flâneur as the two extremes) has been questioned by Jeanne Haffner, who suggests that the “dichotomy, in both theory and in practice, was clearly never as vivid as Lefebvre and others often alleged” (Haffner 137). Even if the position of the gaze is not necessarily an indicator of power, the occupation and habitation of higher altitudes afford undeniable power over the city. In modern cities the higher altitudes with commanding vantage are largely occupied by the richer sections. Residential compounds protected by imposing gates can only prevent the perceived threat of mendicants or stray creatures. However, the *fyataru* is above all street-level protectors of class privilege and *Margarita* also has the power to make herself invisible. The invisibility is part of the politics of the seeing and being seen, where the citizens who are subjected to surveillance turn the gaze on the civic authorities. Even if the acts they perform do not add up to a narrative of ultimate victory, the individual acts of anarchism themselves are small victories because in the very act of perpetrating them, both the *fyataru* and *Margarita*, are flouting the urban laws social and political hierarchies. It is the ability to look at the city from

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the same metaphorical height that is occupied by planners and political heads that allows them to gain agency.

## III

The occupation of positions at higher altitudes facilitates anarchical missions, but in the literary imagination, power functions even through the positioning of the gaze. This section will deal with the different connotations of the high-altitude view in secular urban literature and in Christian thought. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau relates the experience of looking down from the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. He sees beneath the haze, the texture of the city rising, falling, undulating, spread out beneath his vantage point like a gigantic, immobilized surface. He reads in it the recent history of New York, a city, de Certeau notes that does not play on its pasts as Rome does. He asks,

To what erotics of knowledge does the ecstasy of reading such a cosmos belong? I wonder what is the source of this pleasure of 'seeing the whole,' of looking down on, totalizing the most immoderate of human texts (de Certeau 91-92).

The higher the human eye succeeded in climbing owing to technological advancements, the flatter the surface below seemed, until

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the eye itself had its vision literally clouded. In its most extreme form, this landscape, which individuals know to be inhabited by life of all kinds, appears dehumanized based on their visual perception.

Within the Christian context, however, there are nuances in the discourse of viewing from above. On the one hand, there is the peril of assuming a misplaced sense of power when the world is seen from above. The Biblical example, as represented in *Paradise Lost* is of Satan alighting on a stair of the golden ladder and gazing out at the world in wonder. Milton describes it as “some renown’d Metropolis/ With glistening Spires and Pinnacles adorn’d” (3.540-557). On the other hand, it may also elicit in the viewer a sense of benevolent detachment, as in Luke 19.41-43, where Christ looks over a city blind in its faith and weeps. Whether or not the distance creates a sense of power or of benevolence, the fact remains that the distant gaze “totalizes” the human habitation and creates a sense of personal detachment for the viewer. Therefore, there is need for conscious humility. Stephen Bann notes that when John Bargrave climbed the “Tour de Beurre” after settling in Bourges in 1645, he commemorated the visit to the highest point of the cathedral by inscribing on the “inside of the pinnacle and steeple”: “*Noli altum sapere*” (“I do not wish to know the heights”) (Bann 83). The group climbed down and as if to compensate

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for this transgression made their way to the sepulchre without wasting any time.<sup>3</sup>

When Woland looks out at the Moscow cityscape, his gaze is described more as a survey in detail of life in the city, rather than a totalizing gaze. This is true of at least a few other instances in literature since the eighteenth century where the Devil or other diabolical figures were allowed to report on cities from on high. This may be because the Devil does not carry the sense of guilt stemming from humility which a Christian subject like Bargrave would carry as he sees himself as God's subordinate.

In literature, however, it is the devil or similar diabolical forces who have occupied these positions on the highest points of cities most memorably, even when the connection with the sinful aspects of flying are not explored within the text. While the idea of placing Woland in the tradition of a figure in myth or literature attempts to explain his characteristics or his motives,<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that coincidentally or deliberately, Bulgakov was compelled to give him certain traits principally out of narrative compulsion. Two significant instances where the Devil or similar figures are shown to inhabit high altitude positions in cities may be worth discussing, to suggest that the character of Woland may be studied as part

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of this literary lineage of occupying such positions as well. These characters look at Madrid and Paris literally or metaphorically from great heights. Literary representations have an advantage over visual representations of high altitude perceptions in that they enable the reader to get both a sweeping, panoramic view of the city, and a close-up view that describes the details of individual lives.<sup>5</sup>

A thoroughly detailed analysis provided by Jillian Taylor Lerner, points to Alain-Rene Lesage's *Le Diable Boiteux* [The Lame Devil] (1707), as an example of a tutelary demon's account of Madrid. She writes,

Le Sage had Asmodeus perch atop a church tower to describe the city from above. Yet he also empowered Asmodeus to peel back the rooftops and delve into the human dramas unfolding simultaneously behind the public facades of each household (Lerner 238).

However, in my reading of the English translation, titled *The Devil on Two Sticks*, panoramic views of the city did not feature as much as accounts of individual houses. There is no doubt that Asmodeus and Don Cleofas Leandro Perez Zambullo, “a young student of Alcala”, who eventually lets the spirit free, before the two perch on St. Saviour’s steeple to look at the city, but much of what he does is offering glimpse into the personal lives.

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By my diabolical power I will heave up the roofs of the houses, and, notwithstanding the darkness of the night, clearly expose to your view whatever is now under them. At these words he only extended his right hand, and in an instant all the roofs of the houses seemed removed (La Sage trans. 12).

*Le Diable a Paris*, which was published in instalments beginning in April 1844, appears to be more aware of the dual function of viewing the city as panorama and as a collective constituted by individual lives. According to Lerner, the collection of literary sketches and drawings is given the following origin story. It was conceived in the throne room of hell, where the Devil wished to know, “everything that is, diabolically speaking, possible to know about it” (qtd. in Lerner 235). He appoints Flammeche, a lazy minion, who “outsources the work to the capital's most celebrated writers and graphic artists” (Lerner 235). The frontispiece that is drawn by Paul Gavarni features Flammeche standing on a map of Paris with a monocle in his hand. These tools of viewing may be seen as symbolic, as Lerner suggests, of Flammeche's aim “to reconcile...contrasting strategies: to maintain a commanding purview of the city whilst also exploring the Parisian scene from within” (238).

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Woland, likewise, offers this dual perspective. But his ways of getting to know the city of Moscow are much more innovative and varied. It is only towards the end of the novel that we find Woland sitting with his retinue on top of a building that would later be occupied by the Lenin Library.

Woland began to speak:

‘Such an interesting city, is it not?’

Azazello stirred and replied respectfully:

‘I like Rome better, Messire.’

‘Yes, it’s a matter of taste,’ replied Woland. (Bulgakov 359)

They see Griboedov’s building burning. Soon Matthew Levi joins them and the fate of the Master and Margarita is decided from on high. This is hardly the only tool that Woland uses to survey the city. The episode at the Variety Theatre becomes part of the strategy to provide a panoramic view of society.

Woland and his retinue employ diabolical tricks to gain access to the reputed Variety Theatre, where they are to perform magic tricks. In the Russia represented in *The Master and Margarita*, an open acknowledgement of anything supernatural is blasphemous and the

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master-of-ceremony insists that the point of the show is to reveal the magic tricks as mere workings of science. It becomes a social experiment for Woland's retinue as they turn the spectator-spectacle relation on its head. The disembodied gaze of unseen spectators sitting in the dark is snatched away. The retinue perform tricks, such as letting ten-rouble bills fall freely from the air, or conduct a public trial and near-execution of Bengalsky, only to understand the city of Moscow. Sternly rejecting Bengalsky's suggestion that they are admiring the changes in urban infrastructure, Fagott insists they want to see if the city folk have changed inwardly (Bulgakov 123). This panoramic view is to be distinguished from one that is seen from high altitudes, where the cityscape constitutes the subject of visual description. Here society is studied although not for individual characters, but more in terms of mass behaviour.

The third strategy adopted by Bulgakov to show both the panoramic and the close-up of the magical globe that Woland has in his possession. Reminiscent in its variable zoom-ability of Google Earth, the globe provides for Woland a convenient replacement for radios for learning about occurrences all over the world. Margarita leans towards the globe and suddenly the flat surface turns into a relief map, and before she realizes she is witnessing the explosion of a house as if from up close

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(Bulgakov 259). In comparison, Nabarun's manner of representing the comprehensive vision: both panoramic and personal, is different. Unlike the Devil in Paris, Asmodeus in Madrid or Woland in Moscow, the fyataru are not outsiders to the city. They do not need a map or a globe, objects that symbolize their users' exteriority. Instead, as Nabarun said in an interview,

The map of the city that the fyataru offer is an upside-down version of the standard view. Of course, their acts are anarchist, and no, they do not care for the existing order. They deny the imposed discipline. (*Katha-barta* 124)

Michel de Certeau articulates a position that the majority of writers who describe city-walkers occupy: the users of the city, the walkers, and city-dwellers, are writers of the urban text, weavers of its texture. Those who view from above always pose a threat to this delicate text, which for them is the very definition of the city. Walter Benjamin's characterisation of the flâneur has marked this Parisian who goes on "botanizing the asphalt" as one of the classic examples of the city walker. Unlike de Certeau's city walker, however, the flâneur is not strictly writing the text on the city. Where de Certeau understands the walker as writing an urban text in the very act of walking, the flâneur who inhabits the Parisian arcades provides

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its frequenters their “chronicler and philosopher” (Benjamin 68). Quintessentially an insider to the city, the flâneur is both a character type and a distant observer. The flâneur moves around in places that serve both as interior and exterior, eluding surveillance, but seeks refuge on the terraces of coffee houses “from which he looks down on his household after his work is done” (Benjamin 69). His “balconies” are not high enough to make his gaze a totalizing one. The people of Paris and the parts they play are eminently visible. The flâneur’s gaze is distinguishable from those placed at higher altitudes, or the mobility of Margarita or the fyatarus’ position, which blur the dichotomy between the view from above and the street-walker’s view.

While high altitude positions are undeniably associated with power, Nabarun, acknowledges the significance of a thorough, street-level knowledge of the city. The fyataru, therefore, as a result of this fusion, have at their command both a thorough knowledge of the urban underbelly, as well as the powers to view it from above and to spread chaos from their heights. Even though, one could argue, that the fyataru do not have the same manner of viewing the city as the *Daar-kaak* or Raven who is the brainchild behind the “war-cry of the beggars” in *Kangal Malshat*. The Raven sits atop the Vidyasagar Setu and stares out. He sees all from

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Watgunj to the “uncouth monument”, cocks his head and goes on cursing (*Kangal Malshat* 84). The hierarchy between the intellectually gifted Raven and the fyataru is maintained even when they fly. The fyataru fly at a slightly lower level, “but flying like a detective’s satellite at a much higher altitude than the Madan and D.C. was Bhadi’s father, the Raven” (*Kangal Malshat* 50). What sets him apart is not merely is intellectual gift but also his seeming familiarity with historical events of the city’s most ancient past.

## IV

For the spectator who arrived, panting, upon that pinnacle, it was first a dazzling confusing view of roofs, chimneys, streets, bridges, places, spires, bell towers.

Everything struck your eye at once (Hugo 3.2).

In *Notre-Dame de Paris*, Victor Hugo offers a view of the Parisian cityscape. He does not leave the reader unassisted, but from that great height offers not just a description of the urban geography, but also of urban history. It is as though the cathedral itself has witnessed the long history of the metropolis and from that vantage point has seen the palimpsest take on newer forms, until it became impossible for the lay person to distinguish between the layers of urban settlement. A famous

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photograph shot by Charles Negre in 1853 shows Henri Le Secq standing on the balcony of the Cathedral looking out towards the city of Paris. He is accompanied by a winged chimera who stares with an expression that “looks like world-weariness, if not depression”. Lerner describes it as “a petrified relative of Hugo's narrator”. Following Michel Foucault, she says that the moment marks an epistemological shift, “whereby the transcendent subject of classical knowledge is eclipsed by a precariously situated modern subject” (Lerner 241-2). Lerner does not, however, include in her analysis the third creature who is present in the photograph, a relatively more benign looking griffon-like creature who looks heavenward. The stones bear witness to the history of the city, even if from their vantage point they are unable to know personal matters. The Gothic aspect of such chimera are echoed in the image of Woland sitting atop the high building in *The Master and Margarita*.

Woland was sitting on a folding stool, dressed in his black soutane...Resting his sharp chin on his fist, hunched on the stool with one leg drawn under him, Woland stared fixedly at the endless collection of palaces, gigantic buildings and little hovels destined to be pulled down (Bulgakov 359).

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Woland was, especially if we regard him as a figuration of the Wandering Jew, an eye-witness to the Passion of Christ, and derives his authority from the fact that quite simply he was there in person. The story of Yershalaim which he narrates has what Julie Curtis and Malcolm Jones call “historical verisimilitude”: they are “free interpretation in one’s own words” of what has been witnessed (Bulgakov 121). On at least couple of occasions, Woland claims that the Gospel’s stories do not represent what actually happened, and on this occasion, like the chimera, Woland alone can see through the layers of the urban palimpsest, uncovering the history of the great city. This Gothic representation likens him to the timeless observers on top of the Cathedral of Notre Dame, before whom the city stretches out in time and space. The narrator invites us to share Woland’s view, perhaps to occupy (alternating with the narrator) the position Le Secq occupied beside the chimera in Negre’s photograph.

The disregard for official, documented history also characterizes the Raven in *Kangal Malshat*. After leaving his perch on the Vidyasagar Setu, he makes his way to the Victoria Memorial Hall and starts to bully the curator, whom Nabarun’s narrator clearly distrusts. The Raven is constantly in communication with Begum Frances Johnson (“the oldest British Resident in Calcutta”), who died in 1812 and was buried at St.

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John's Church.<sup>6</sup> His authority is also in part derived from his personal acquaintance with Begum Johnson, and her presence through the history of Calcutta since Siraj-ud-Daulah's siege (*Kangal Malshat* 85). The Victoria Memorial too could then be said to have had a configuration of witnesses similar to Negre's photograph of Notre Dame: the fairy and the Raven, although in this case it is the fairy that is a recent addition to the cityscape in comparison to the Raven's vintage. The Raven tries to convince the curator that instead of recycling endlessly the school-book version of Calcutta's history, a more engaged and living form of historiography needs to be practised. Quite the opposite of Negre's photograph, the Raven is the one who sits disgruntled at high altitudes gazing at the city and cursing, but it is also he who defends memory against history. Around him the ghosts of old Calcutta still fight duels over their beloved and continue the petty activities they had always engaged in.

Nabarun Bhattacharya repeatedly dismissed descriptions of his fiction as post-modern,<sup>7</sup> but the opposition between official history and personal memories recurs in his works. For someone who has seen from intimate quarters the Naxal movement and all of Bengal's years since, there can be no doubt about the vast difference between the two. Every event in history, the narrator says in *Kangal Malshat*, has a witness. In

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this case, the role is served by Barilal, who influences the events in the novel only minimally but is present continuously as a witness positioned between reader and narrator. While the fyataru and Choktars try to decide on a course of action during their first encounter, Barilal watches from behind a tin door. At a crucial moment he feels something climbing up his leg and realizes it is an ant. In an effort to get rid of it he knocks against the door, creating a noise. This alarms the fyataru, but Bhadi is quick to dismiss their anxiety. “That's nothing. A witness. Everything has a witness. There has to be. Don't bother. Now, tell me, what do you want to know?” (*Kangal Malshat* 23).

## V

In most of the texts discussed above, the view is not in fact channelized through the narrator's own perspective, but given as free indirect discourse through the embodied view point of one or more characters. As Milton with Satan's sweeping views and thrilling sensation of flight tempts the reader to replicate the fall before they are saved at the end of the epic poem, the reader, likewise, can never read the account of Margarita's or the fyataru's flight without vicariously fulfilling their subversive potential. Transgressions need not always be enacted in person. It may suffice, as Nabarun himself was keenly aware, to

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vicariously take part in the plundering of some marker of class privilege, or simply to enjoy the sensation of flying upside down in the night air of Moscow. In the case of these novels, the reader's participation has to be an embodied one.

Nabarun has been read in the light of Mikhail Bakhtin, and this is no surprise. A well-read and mischievous writer, Nabarun often anticipated the kinds of critics who will be cited by academics such as myself to read him. Much to their confusion, he often included them in his novels. But in some sense, he also ensures that he has achieved a fuller realisation of their ideals through his writing than one would expect. I would like to end by suggesting that it is not sufficient to read the events that unfold within *Kangal Malshat* or *Mausoleum* as "carnavalesque" in nature. Bakhtin noted that the carnival "does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators" (Bakhtin 7). Even though modern theories of reading acknowledge the reader's role in enacting or completing the role of the author and of the narration, this has been inadequately addressed in the case of Nabarun. The point I am trying to make is that it is only by an active participation with the many games and personal jibes that Nabarun throws at us, that we can complete the function of the novel. The personal

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jibes, or addressing the reader in the second person, are not happening for the first time in literature, undoubtedly. But because Nabarun provokes us to respond to these, the reader must realize that they are part of the carnival that is taking place, embodied and present at the scene in full participation. The joke is on everyone. The carnival is extended to the reader, and it is in this extension and inclusion, rather than representing the images of a carnival with its elaborate un-crowning and disruptive laughter, that Nabarun succeeds in further advancing Bakhtin's theory.

It is a pity that Bakhtin and Bulgakov, although approximately contemporary, are not known to be familiar with each other's work. Bakhtin, as Lesley Milne notes, was being "discovered as a critical theorist simultaneously with the rediscovery of Bulgakov as a writer...They articulated the experience of the non-official creative intelligentsia, but because their voices were non-official, they went unpublished and unheard" (Milne 228-9). They do come together, however, as spectre and as presence in writing, in *Kangal Malshat*. As literal presence, Bakhtin appears where the narrator is deciding that the only way forward is literal beheadings and suddenly chants, "Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), long live, long live!" Apart from the epigraph which is one of the most iconic quotes from *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov may have appeared as spectre

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too. Anirban Bhattacharya writes that one of the pages in the *Kangal Malshat* papers carried the following:

“Mikhaíl Afanasyevich Bulgakov

Writer

(1891-1940)

This is all that the grave-stone in the Novodevichy cemetery in Moscow says. Should an opportunity to visit arise, ‘Kangal Malshat’ will sit there quietly. They will remember, ‘Manuscripts don't burn’.

Nabarun Bhattacharya

1.1.2003”

(Bhattacharya 372)

Direct parallels between the political milieu that produced *The Master and Margarita* in Russia of the 1930s and the one in which Nabarun Bhattacharya wrote *Kangal Malshat* cannot be sustained. Both authors recognize the links between the political climate, which they are never shy to critique, and the stagnation that plagues literary production. Bulgakov’s solution takes the form of salvation through damnation of the true artist and lover, while Nabarun, living at a time when history is repeating itself as farce, resorts to a few common tropes, but in the spirit

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of the absurd. In his work there is no sublime artist, who transcends the existing industry, but there is one who satirizes it by shedding all pretention: Purandar Bhat writes only for himself and for the ears of his closest friends.

There is a good deal more that can be said about the high-altitude or flying perspective in literary representation. The article chooses to stick to two texts principally because one was in no uncertain terms inspired by the other, and ever since Nabarun wrote *Kangal Malshat*, one gets the feeling the *The Master and Margarita* has been in conversation with this long-awaited manifestation of its legacy. Manuscripts don't burn, and texts never cease their dialogue.

**Notes:**

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2. All translations from Nabarun Bhattacharya are mine.
3. In 'The Hammer of God', G.K. Chesterton tells the story of a holy man who commits a crime because he stops recognizing human beings as individuals as he gets used to looking down from the height of the steeple.
4. For a reading of Woland as a figuration of the figure of the “Wandering Jew” as a witness to history, see Malcolm V. Jones, “The Gospel According to Woland and the Tradition of the Wandering Jew,” in *Bulgakov: The Novelist-Playwright*, edited by Lesley Milne (Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), pp. 121-130.
5. In cinema, however, the dual perspective has been used to good effect. In the context of angelic flight, Wim Wender in *The Wings of Desire* (1987) has his camera show panoramic sweeps of Berlin and zoom into the living rooms of tenements where people lead private lives, dealing with everyday problems. See Martin Jesinghausen, “The Sky over Berlin as Transcendental Space: Wenders, Doblin and the Angel of History,” in *Spaces in European Cinema*, edited by Myrto Konstantarakos (Intellect Books, 2000), pp. 77-92.
6. For details of Frances Johnson’s life see 'Mrs. Frances Johnson-- (The oldest British Resident in Calcutta)', in *The Bengal Obituary or, a Record to Perpetuate the Memory of Departed Worth*

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(Calcutta: Homes & Co.; London: W. Thackers & Co.; Calcutta: St. Andrew's Library, 1851), pp. 5-6.

7. See *Kathabarta*, p. 11.

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