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# Nothing From Nothing

## The Underground in Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdiaev

by Bradley Underwood

### Abstract

The Underground Man, in Russian literature and in European philosophy, is so familiar that it's easy to take him for granted. This was not always the case. Two of Russia's greatest minds, Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov, were keenly aware of his philosophical potential. This article discusses their use of the Underground Man to explore the problems of freedom and evil, foregrounding the cosmic backdrop of their inquiries. The Underground Man, in their view, seeks a freedom that resembles the void from which God fashioned humans. Evil is coterminous with the freedom to unmake what God has made. Berdiaev and Bulgakov regarded the Underground Man as a mode of de-creation. His mission is metaphysical suicide. While he fails to achieve his aim, Berdiaev and Bulgakov presumed that he comes sufficiently close to that goal to infer the fundamental or primordial elements of the cosmos. Here, Berdiaev and Bulgakov diverge, challenging the perception that they are complementary role-players for the same ideas. Both thinkers differ over the "nothing" towards which the underground is headed. Bulgakov's conception of a "primal nothing" was more radical than Berdiaev's, which better positioned him to argue that humans have free will but can also be confident that evil will one day be defeated. Evil is too unnatural, too much like nothing, to last.



**Keywords:** Sergei Bulgakov, Nikolai Berdiaev, evil, freedom, creation *ex nihilo*, abyss, soul, nothingness, *mē on*, *ouk on*, creativity



# Nothing From Nothing

## The Underground in Sergei Bulgakov and Nikolai Berdiaev

Bradley Underwood

"Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again"—Lear, *King Lear*

Dostoevsky boasted in his notebooks that "I alone deduced the tragic essence of the underground."<sup>1</sup> "The underground" and its anonymous inhabitant, the Underground Man, remain among the most novel contributions of the Russian intellectual tradition. The Underground Man's liminal personality and hyperbolic arguments have served as a touchstone for psychological and philosophical analysis: for psychologists, to understand the nuances of spite and resentment; and for philosophers, to develop insights into language and consciousness.<sup>2</sup> His tragic thirst for freedom galvanized the existentialist movement in philosophy, which continues to pack introductory courses with similarly restless undergraduates.

The aim of this article is to delineate how two Russian philosophers—Nikolai Berdiaev (1874–1948) and Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944)—use the underground to grapple with the problems of free will and evil. My argument begins with the premise that Berdiaev and Bulgakov approach the Underground Man as someone whose will is grounded in "nothing," a concept invested with cosmic significance. The Underground Man, in their view, seeks a freedom that approximates the void from which God fashioned humans. For both thinkers,

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1. This essay would not have been possible were it not for the immense generosity of Caryl Emerson, Randall Poole, Susan McReynolds, and Yuri Corrigan. The epigraph is from William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Folks (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), 164. Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), vol. 16: 329–330. All translations from Russian texts are mine unless stated otherwise.

2. See, for example, Peter Shabad, "Giving the Devil His Due: Spite and the Struggle for Individual Dignity," *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 17, no. 4 (2000): 690–705; Garry Hagberg, "Wittgenstein Underground," *Philosophy and Literature* 28, no. 2 (2004): 379–392.

evil is coterminous with the liberty to unmake what God has made. Yet Berdiaev and Bulgakov differ in their understanding of the "nothing" towards which the underground is headed.

The underground thus provides a prism through which to discern vital differences between two eminent thinkers from the Russian Silver Age (1890s–1920s) in Berdiaev and Bulgakov.<sup>3</sup> Such dissimilarities are at times obscured due to their intellectual and biographical overlap. Berdiaev and Bulgakov made the transition from Marxism to religious belief after encountering the philosophical idealism of the Moscow Psychological Society.<sup>4</sup> Despite their sympathy for modern liberal democracy, each grounded the concept of the human "person" in religious precepts that they regarded as more holistic than the conception of the human being advanced by their liberal, secular peers. In 1922, both were exiled from Russia at the behest of the more radical secularism of the Bolsheviks. Both lived out the rest of their days in Paris. While Berdiaev, unlike Bulgakov, immediately found an audience in the spiritually restive West, Russian Orthodox theologians tended to criticize both figures as beyond the pale of Orthodox Christian thought.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, Berdiaev and Bulgakov were seen as

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3. These parameters for the "Russian Silver Age" are given by Catherine Evtuhov, *The Cross and the Sickle: Sergei Bulgakov and the Fate of Russian Religious Philosophy, 1890–1920* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 65.

4. Randall A. Poole, "Philosophy and Politics in the Russian Liberation Movement: The Moscow Psychological Society and its Symposium, 'Problems of Idealism,'" in *Problems of Idealism: Essays in Russian Social Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Randall A. Poole (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 12–13.

5. Paul Gavrilyuk and Brandon Gallaher challenge the widely accepted dichotomy that Florovsky and Lossky drew between their own "neo-patristic revival" and their forebears in the Russian religious renaissance. In doing so, Lossky and Florovsky sought to liberate Eastern Orthodox theologians from the ethos of Western "idealistic" philosophy, ostensibly gnostic in orientation and agnostic towards the church, which influenced many Russian thinkers, including Berdiaev and Bulgakov, during the Silver Age. Gavrilyuk and Gallaher maintain that such binaries—East versus West, patristics versus idealism—are reductive. They place Florovsky and Lossky on a continuum with the Russian religious renaissance rather than as a reaction to its excesses. Gavrilyuk traces Florovsky's interest in freedom to Berdiaev and his preoccupation with patristics to Bulgakov. Paul L. Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky and the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 260–261. Gallaher contends that Lossky drew from the sophiology of Bulgakov in a positive rather than reactionary manner. See Brandon Gallaher, "The 'Sophiological' Origins of Vladimir Lossky's Apophaticism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 66, no. 3 (July 2013): 278–98. Gallaher's claim is especially provocative. Florovsky and Lossky dismissed sophiology as a Western innovation that blurred the difference between God and the world as well as the two natures of Christ. Lossky's criticisms played a crucial role in motivating the metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church to issue an official opprobrium on Bulgakov's sophiological teachings in 1935 (Gavrilyuk, *Georges Florovsky*, 120–124, 138–140). Gallaher argues that so long as one focuses on Bulgakov's conception of Christ, accusations of heresy carry little theological weight. See Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 107–108. Gallaher's judgment on Bulgakov's concept of creation is more measured. Gallaher concedes that the sophiology of Bulgakov often conflates God and creation in a way that is consistent with a heretical framework such as pantheism. Gallaher, nevertheless, contends that Bulgakov is not a pantheist. He is a panentheist. Bulgakov believes, Gallaher argues, that "all things exist in God, but have their own existence and activity distinct from Him." Brandon Gallaher, "The Problem of Pantheism in the Sophiology of Sergii Bulgakov: A Panentheistic Solution in the Process Trinitarianism of Joseph A. Bracken?" in *Seeking Common Ground: Evaluation and Critique of Joseph Bracken's Comprehensive Worldview: A Festschrift for Joseph A. Bracken, S. J.*, eds. Gloria Schaab and Marc Pugliese (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2012), 147–167, esp. 147. Gallaher juxtaposes pantheism, which rejects the traditional, Christian notion that the world is created from nothing (*ex nihilo*), and panentheism, which is sufficiently supple for Bulgakov to appropriate creation *ex nihilo* so as to preserve much of its integrity. Gallaher contends that Bulgakov is too invested in creation *ex nihilo* for his sophiology to collapse into pantheism. My article supports such an intuition. Gallaher extrapolates creation *ex nihilo* through

complementary role-players for the same ideas. Berdiaev was cast as the winsome preacher and Bulgakov as the laborious systematizer.<sup>6</sup>

The blossoming of interest in Bulgakov has complicated matters. As the "orthodoxy" of Bulgakov's corpus is reevaluated, often along more forgiving lines, some have questioned the tendency to overlook his differences with Berdiaev. The current essay is consistent with this trend.<sup>7</sup> Berdiaev and Bulgakov may not have been as incompatible as water is with fire, as Zinaida Gippius remarked. But Gippius was right to notice that there was something forced, even "wretched," about their social and intellectual overlap.<sup>8</sup> Any common ground or apparent "peace" between Bulgakov and Berdiaev on freedom and evil was haunted by a more elementary dispute over the origins of nothing. And nothing, as I will argue, is nothing to sneeze at; something comes of it.

## The Underground

Against the fashion of his time for "rational egoism," Dostoevsky created an irrational and "repugnant" egoist in the Underground Man.<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that the Underground Man's "consummate" egoism is of a routine sort. His narcissism is paradoxical and principled. Its provocative claim is that humans want freedom to choose more than they wish to act in accordance with their best interests. It is through a defense of freedom over rational self-interest that the Underground Man delineates a more radical self-centeredness than his contemporaries thought possible. His sole desire is to be dependent on nothing. The weight of the paradoxes that the Underground Man sustains as a result—self-adoration as self-loathing, self-affirmation as self-destruction, freedom as self-imprisonment—exposes the inadequacy of such a ground. His liberty is undone at every turn. The Underground Man might succeed

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Bulgakov's use of "antinomy" and "apophaticism," whereas I outline Bulgakov's understanding of God's original act of creation through the privation theory of evil.

6. "What Berdiaev proclaimed in his affirmative style, Bulgakov elaborated in a systematic fashion." Michael A. Meerson, "Sergei Bulgakov's Philosophy of Personality," *Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard F. Gustafson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 139.

7. Some scholars, like Gavrilyuk, may overlook such differences out of concern for what they regard as a more pressing problem: the widespread distrust among Eastern Orthodox theologians for anything "Western." It is an anxiety that Florovsky and Lossky's criticisms toward figures like Berdiaev and Bulgakov did much to inflame. For scholarship that distinguishes Berdiaev and Bulgakov on personalism, deification, the apocalypse, and creation, see, respectively, Regula M. Zwahlen, "Different Concepts of Personality: Nikolaj Berdjaev and Sergej Bulgakov," *Studies in East European Thought* 64, no. 3 (November 2012): 183–204; Ruth Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought: Between the Revolutions, 1905–1917* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 110–173; Cyril O'Regan, *Theology and the Spaces of Apocalyptic* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2009), 52, 55, 136 nt. 14; Deborah Casewell, "The Authenticity of Creativity: The Philosophical and Theological Anthropologies of Nikolai Berdiaev and Sergei Bulgakov," in *Building the House of Wisdom: Sergii Bulgakov and Contemporary Theology, New Approaches and Interpretations*, eds. Barbara Hallensleben, Regula M. Zwahlen, Aristotle Papanikolaou, and Pantelis Kalaitzidis (Münster: Aschendorff, 2024), 123–126.

8. Zinaida Gippius, *Dnevniki* (Moscow: NPK Intelvak, 1999), 316–318, quoted in Zwahlen, "Different Concepts of Personality," 184.

9. James P. Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 63–64, 76.

in showing that the will is freer than many at his time would have allowed, and that one does not have to accept what others say is good for oneself, but this gain is illusory. For he also establishes that the naked will offers the stability of a high-velocity vacuum, which is to say, no sustainable stability at all. The Underground Man exhibits a free will that is grounded in, and headed for, nothing.

### **Berdiaev: The Underground and the *Ungrund***

In 1938, late in life, Berdiaev divulged to Lev Shestov that "Dostoevsky and Nietzsche played a much larger role in my life than Schelling and German idealism."<sup>10</sup> One might suspect that Berdiaev was telling Shestov, a philosopher also styled in Dostoevsky's mold, what he wished to hear. As it happens, he was telling the truth.

Berdiaev's first reflection on the Underground Man was published thirty years prior, in "Tragedy and the Everyday" (1905). The purpose of the article was, in part, to evaluate Shestov's full-throated endorsement of the Underground Man and his passion for liberty. Berdiaev tried to be more measured. He contended that the Underground Man's unbridled pursuit of freedom might be laudable, but it was also destructive. Rather than fester in fields of underground detritus, Berdiaev summons his reader to "go further into the mountains to create."<sup>11</sup> Berdiaev would not abandon the Underground Man. The character continued to inspire him as he worked to construct a more positive philosophy of freedom. Three decades later, Berdiaev returned in earnest to the Underground Man in *Dostoevsky (Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskogo)*, 1934). Ruinous underground negativity would serve as more than a mere foil for Berdiaev's larger philosophical ambitions.

*Dostoevsky* begins by summarizing the Underground Man rather conventionally. He is a figure in "rebellion against the external world order." He will not accept that "man needs a will directed towards reason and his own benefit." He is bereft of any desire for "universal harmony." Outrage soon morphs into "exorbitant self-love," and "he moves from the surface of the earth to the underworld."<sup>12</sup> At last, "the Underground Man appears—an unattractive, shapeless person—and reveals his dialectic": boundless freedom is possible through the "destruction of human freedom and the decomposition of personality." This is the dialectic of "irrational freedom."<sup>13</sup> It swears by originality. The result is regress towards nothing.

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10. Nataliia Baranova-Shestova, *Zhizn' L'va Shestova v dvukh tomakh* (Paris: La Presse Libre, 1983), vol. 1: 194, quoted in Edith W. Clowes, "Groundlessness: Nietzsche and Russian Concepts of Tragic Philosophy," in *Nietzsche and the Rebirth of the Tragic*, ed. Mary Ann Frese Witt (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 131.

11. Nikolai Berdiaev, "Tragediia i obydennost'," *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1989), vol. 3: 397.

12. Nikolai Berdiaev, *Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskogo*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1995), vol. 5: 236.

13. Nicholas Berdiaev, *Dostoevsky: An Interpretation*, trans. Donald Attwater (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 55.

Berdiaev continues to see Dostoevsky's *Underground Man* as an uniquely destructive iteration of freedom. But mutiny in the underground interrogates more than the life-habits of modern intellectuals. The target of his revolt is God. The "dialectic" is as follows: humans can only destroy God by superseding God. If humans are to replace God through becoming gods they must first extinguish their humanity. This argument follows Ludwig Feuerbach on the human capacity to emulate and supersede the divine. "Deification," so conceived, is actually "apotheosis."<sup>14</sup> Berdiaev regards such a Feuerbachian "dialectic" to be, on its own terms, a dead-end.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, in the right dosage, the *Underground Man*'s example can jolt modern, secular folks from their spiritual slumber. He shows that "the road to liberty can only end either in the deification of man or in the discovery of God; in the one case, he is lost and done for; in the other, he finds salvation."<sup>16</sup> The *Underground Man*, for Berdiaev, clarifies the spiritual stakes of existence. Our free will must be understood as the capacity either to defy God or to turn toward God, grounding the human will in the divine rather than in nothing.

Berdiaev regards the *Underground Man* as a spiritual stage which, however fraught, is necessary and wisdom-bearing. One of the key developments of his revolution against "the external order" is the recovery of an interior "depth" that Berdiaev believes has eluded Western civilization since the Renaissance. The havoc wrought by the *Underground Man* "loosens" or reveals the soul. Onlookers can now peer into the soul's farthest reaches. Below the surface, "platonic calmness" is nowhere to be found. One uncovers "hidden tempests," the ferocity of which reveal a "struggle in man between the God-man and the man-God, between Christ and the Anti-Christ."<sup>17</sup> In the underground of the soul, Berdiaev insists that an apocalyptic "abyss [opens] and therein God and Heaven, the Devil and Hell, [are] revealed anew."<sup>18</sup> The *Underground Man* shows that the conflict between good and evil is not a clash between God and humanity so much as between the divine and the demonic. The "field of

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14. Feuerbachian apotheosis claims to "exalt anthropology into theology, very much as Christianity, while lowering God into man, [makes] man into God." Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989), xviii. However, in the eyes of most Christian theologians, apotheosis would constitute a pseudo-divinization that leads one away from God (i.e., "apo") and one's humanity. Theologians often frame Christian deification or "theosis" (literally, "becoming God," or becoming one with God) as the fulfillment of human nature according to God's purposes. On Feuerbach's influence in Russia, see Irina Paperno, *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 140–161.

15. In *The Meaning of The Creative Act*, Berdiaev endorses Feuerbach's focus on theological anthropology yet dismisses as demonic his concept of the human being. Feuerbach, for Berdiaev, endorses a "religious anthropology turned inside out." See Nikolai Berdiaev, *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, trans. Donald Lowrie (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 61. It is not clear, in my view, whether Berdiaev exorcises himself of the Feuerbachian legacy that he wanted most to avoid. Berdiaev continued to be attracted to Feuerbach's disciple, Friedrich Nietzsche, specifically his mission to free humans from philistine, external constraints on their creativity. See Nel Grillaert, *What the God-seekers Found in Nietzsche: The Reception of Nietzsche's Übermensch by the Philosophers of the Russian Religious Renaissance* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), 207–248; Clowes, "Groundlessness," 131–133.

16. Berdiaev, *Dostoevsky*, 56.

17. Berdiaev, *Dostoevsky*, 58.

18. Berdiaev, *Dostoevsky*, 49.

battle" lies *within* each human creature. God and the Devil take up arms amid the fluctuations of the underground, within the enigmatic depths of the "heart"—or will.

The Underground Man, according to Berdiaev, shows that "evil has a deep spiritual nature" (*zlo imeet glubinnuiu, dukhovnuiu prirodu*).<sup>19</sup> Moral depravity is nothing short of demonic. Berdiaev's fundamental point is that the self is too divided between virtue and vice for the latter to dissipate on its own. Evil must be actively subdued and defeated. Evil's chameleon nature further complicates matters. Berdiaev writes that "evil comes forward under an appearance of good, and one is deceived; the faces of Christ and of Antichrist ... become interchangeable."<sup>20</sup> The soul is torn between grounded liberty and groundless license. In its potentially limitless freedom, the soul is in perennial danger of succumbing to wickedness. Evil begins to seem so powerful, so cunning, so real, so substantive, so intertwined with the soul, that, as Berdiaev would later state, the "feeling of evil becomes a metaphysical feeling."<sup>21</sup>

In presenting the underground as a bottomless abyss, Berdiaev is elaborating upon his own idiosyncratic interpretation of the mystical thought of Jacob Boehme. As Berdiaev speculates:

If Dostoevsky would have developed to the end his teaching about God, about the Absolute, then he would have been forced to recognize the polarity of the divine nature itself, to have found in him also a chasm of darkness, thus approximating Jacob Boehme's teaching of the *Ungrund*. The human heart is, at its most fundamental, polar, but the human heart is embedded in the abysmal depths of being.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Berdiaev processes Boehme—and rather heavy-handedly—as much through Freud's unconscious and Nietzsche's Dionysius as through Dostoevsky's underground. A quick review of Berdiaev's reading of Boehme will help us to understand the metaphysical backdrop to this notion of the underground—a reading often indistinguishable from Berdiaev's own views.

Berdiaev interpreted Boehme as suggesting that God and the universe are founded in the "*Ungrund*" (in German, "non-ground"). He also would refer to "*Ungrund*" as *mē on*, Greek for "nonbeing." Following Boehme, or what he took to be Boehme, Berdiaev presumed that prior to God and creation was groundlessness, nonbeing, or "nothingness."<sup>23</sup> Berdiaev does not mean to suggest *absolute* nothing. For him, "nothing" signifies a vacuum that is home to

19. Berdiaev, *Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskogo*, 243.

20. Berdiaev, *Dostoievsky*, 60.

21. By "metaphysical feeling," I take Berdiaev to mean that Dostoevsky confronts the reader with the palpable realization that evil cannot be reduced to a psychological response. The implication is that one cannot talk properly about evil without considering its metaphysics. See Nikolai Berdiaev, "Unground and Freedom," *CrossCurrents* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1957): 247–262, 253. Also see Nikolai Berdiaev, "Iz etiudov o Ia. Beme. Etiud I: Uchenie ob Ungrunde i svobode." *Put'* (February 1930), 56.

22. Berdiaev, *Mirosozertsanie Dostoevskogo*, 243.

23. The *Ungrund*, for Berdiaev, is "nothingness, the unfathomable eye of eternity, and at the same time a will, a will without bottom, abysmal, indeterminate" (Berdiaev, "Unground and Freedom," 253).



formless, chaotic energy and is analogous to a feral "will." In the beginning, for Berdiaev, is a nothing that is indeterminate freedom. Berdiaev refers to this *relative* nothing as the "first divinity" (*Pervo-Bozhestvo*).<sup>24</sup> A moral, rational, conscious God arrives later. All of God's creative acts, according to Berdiaev, impose harmony on this anarchic "nothing" while relying on its vitality and dynamism. Humans, made as they are in God's image, replicate this dynamic. Berdiaev assumes that God and humans contain within themselves a "dark source" (*temnyi istok*) of groundless, Dionysian energy.<sup>25</sup> God and humanity emerge from an ungovernable yet indispensable "nothing." Both live in tragic self-conflict with the "dark residue" (*temnyi ostatok*) of nothing until the end of time.<sup>26</sup> Only humans, however, interact with this "source" in a manner that leads to evil. The underground is where the ambiguous freedom of primal nothing is stored in humans after the Fall.

The Underground Man, for Berdiaev, points down toward humanity's self-division, up toward God's self-conflict, and back to the free and stormy void that was at the dawn of the cosmos. Berdiaev implies that the Underground Man is the closest approximation to this original cosmic absence. All the qualities that Berdiaev ascribes to the *Ungrund*—or *mē on*—he also attributes to the Underground Man and his habitat. The *Ungrund* is chaotic, arbitrary, free, formless, irrational, feverish, agonistic, and ambiguous. And so is the Underground Man. His will is grounded in the "nothing" of the underground. By making his abode there, he hopes to exist in a primitive state of freedom that is beyond good and evil. It is as if he wants to return to nothing to replicate God's own birth from the abyss. The Underground Man's project is one of *de-creation*. He wants to undo what God has done, even if his ambitions are frustrated. He yearns to go back to the beginning and do it all over again his way. To de-create, then, is to side with the devil, to choose to unmake oneself in order to become God.

Berdiaev's notion of evil as the freedom to uncreate is not wholly discordant with accepted Christian opinion. In particular, groundless freedom oriented toward nothing is close to St. Augustine's conception of evil as privation. His metaphysical backstory to this notion *is* a substantial deviation, however. The difficulty is that Berdiaev correlates seminal "nothing"—the "first divinity"—with an aboriginal freedom that is beyond good and evil. Most Christian theologians would find it odd to link the divine to this conception. Thus, Berdiaev's identification of the divine with meonic freedom was bound to be met with skepticism. Among these skeptics was Fr. Sergei Bulgakov.

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24. Berdiaev, "Unground and Freedom," 254.

25. Berdiaev, "Unground and Freedom," 257. Nikolai Berdiaev, *Smysl tvorchestva*, in Berdiaev, *Filosofia svobody. Smysl tvorchestva. Opyt opravdaniia cheloveka* (Moscow: Akademicheskii proekt, 2020), 239.

26. Berdiaev, *Smysl tvorchestva*, 375.

## Bulgakov: Underground Heroics and the Soul

Bulgakov's most significant exploration of the underground occurs in his early work, *Unfading Light* (1917).<sup>27</sup> By this point, Bulgakov had written three noteworthy pieces on Dostoevsky. He had delivered two public lectures, "Ivan Karamazov as a Philosophical Type" (1901) and "A Crown of Thorns: In Memory of F. M. Dostoevsky" (1906). He had also composed a lengthy essay, "Russian Tragedy: On Dostoevsky's *Demons*" (1914).<sup>28</sup> In *Landmarks* (1909), he touched on "underground psychology" to elucidate the animus of aspiring Russian revolutionaries.<sup>29</sup> But he had yet to entertain the underground and its notorious fanatic at length.

The opportunity presented itself in *Unfading Light*, while discussing matters of creation. Bulgakov identified in the "underground" a nothing that was analogous to a seminal cosmic void. His logic is similar to Berdiaev's. It shall come as no surprise, then, that the problems of freedom and evil are right up front. Bulgakov begins his foray into the underground with the following passage:

The nature of humankind is marked by genius and nothingness. The underground is the "inside out" [*iznanka*] of being. Every creature has an underground, although it is able not to know about this, and not able to sink into it ... by sinking into it, each person lives through the eerie cold and dampness of the grave. To want oneself in one's own selfhood [*khotet' sebia v sobstvennoi samosti*], to lock oneself in one's creatureliness as in the absolute, means to want the underground and to be affirmed in it. And therefore, the real hero of the underground is Satan who fell in love with himself as God, and who was affirmed in his own selfhood and turned out to be captive to his own underground.<sup>30</sup>

The paradoxes here are familiar. Bulgakov, like Berdiaev, interprets the Underground Man and his type as persons engrossed in a hapless demonic revolt. These subterranean revolutionaries lust after inexhaustible freedom only to witness their efforts climax in an excruciating scene of enslavement to their own egos. The Underground Man is a free will headed for nothing. And the instability of his groundless ground leads Bulgakov to a conversation about the metaphysics of the soul.

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27. Sergei Bulgakov, *Unfading Light: Contemplations and Speculations*, trans. Thomas Allan Smith (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

28. Sergii Nikolayevich Bulgakov, "Ivan Karamazov kak filosofskii tip," *Sergii Bulgakov v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Irina Rodnianskaia (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), vol. 2: 15–45; Bulgakov, "Venets Ternovyi—pamiati F. M. Dostoevskogo," *Sergii Bulgakov v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2: 222–239; Bulgakov, "Russkaia Tragediia—o 'Besakh' Dostoevskogo," *Sergii Bulgakov v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2: 429–526.

29. Sergei Bulgakov, "Heroism and Asceticism: Reflections on the Religious Nature of the Russian Intelligentsia," *Vekhi: Landmarks*, eds. and trans. Marshall Shatz and Judith Zimmerman (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 17–51.

30. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187. Sergii Nikolayevich Bulgakov, *Svet nevechernii: sozertsaniia i umozreniia*, in Bulgakov, *Pervoobraz i obraz: sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, eds. N. M. Kononov and M. I. Potapenko (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1993), 169.

For all the parallels in their argument, Bulgakov is actually attempting to distance himself from Berdiaev. To be persuaded of this, it is enough to read the footnotes. Bulgakov inserts a pregnant citation after he pronounces Satan as exemplary of the underground. He reflects on Berdiaev's *The Meaning of The Creative Act* (1916), which had been published a year earlier.<sup>31</sup> Bulgakov was eager to underscore their differences rather than similarities. He gives the following appraisal:

The dual and contradictory nature of creatureliness, woven out of divinity and nothingness, does not admit the immanent divinization of humankind which constitutes the distinctive feature of N. A. Berdiaev's anthropology. ... In our view, the creative impulse and the frenzy of the "underground" merge indistinguishably in the "creative act" as he proclaimed it.<sup>32</sup>

The satanic context of this notation is crucial. Bulgakov criticizes Berdiaev for awarding the dubious economy of the underground an unduly prestigious role in human improvement.<sup>33</sup> The result is a picture of human nature—mind, soul, and body—that is too diabolical to redeem until the *Endzeit*. Rather Bulgakov assumes, as do most Orthodox theologians, that the process of redemption can begin now and that it takes the form of divinization, which, properly pursued, is not blasphemous but salvific. Christian *theosis* stands in contrast to Feuerbachian *apothēsis*. The doctrine of *theosis* outlines a path toward deification in which humans do not compete with the Creator or deny their nature as contingent creatures. "God became human so that we might become god," wrote St. Athanasius of Alexandria in the fourth century.<sup>34</sup> As Ruth Coates has most recently shown, this point of faith became mainstream in Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>35</sup> Christians are called to internalize God's energies so thoroughly that their moral and physical composition converges with the divine. Bulgakov assumed that unless deification is conceived as the transcendent culmination of a process that

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31. Ana Siljak notes how Berdiaev returned to *The Meaning of the Creative Act* "repeatedly" throughout his life. See Ana Siljak, "The Personalism of Nikolai Berdiaev," in *The Oxford Handbook of Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Caryl Emerson, George Pattison, Randall A. Poole (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 313. In his autobiography, Berdiaev claimed that "all the themes to which I devoted my life and work were contained or prefigured in this book." Nikolai Berdiaev, *Self-Knowledge: An Essay in Autobiography*, trans. Katharine Lampert (Philmont, NY: Semantron, 2009), 100–101.

32. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 469, nt. 5.

33. The reservations of Bulgakov towards *The Creative Act* were not atypical. As Coates puts it, many of his contemporaries feared that there was a line which "Berdiaev had crossed, beyond which the God-sanctioned high human calling of synergy becomes demonic titanism" (Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 133–134).

34. "[God], indeed, assumed humanity so that we might become God." St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996), 93.

35. Coates, *Deification in Russian Religious Thought*, 24–54, 156. Also see Richard F. Gustafson, "Soloviev's Doctrine of Salvation," in *Russian Religious Thought*, eds. Judith Deutsch Kornblatt and Richard Gustafson (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 31–49. Vladimir Solovyov (1853–1900)—intellectual predecessor of Bulgakov and Berdiaev—revived the doctrine of *theosis*.

human beings can undertake now, then humans and their material environment are deprived of their inherent goodness and worth. The cosmology of Berdiaev was case in point.

Bulgakov's criticisms seem fair. Berdiaev did believe, as we noted, that creative acts were a propitious combustion of the soul's volatile and vaporous elements. He assumed that chaotic potentiality or "nothingness" was integral to the tragic side of the cosmos, residing within humans, in the underground of their souls, until the eschaton. And he would have agreed that the salvific function of creativity underscored the integration of evil within the natural order, because the "creative impulse" arose from the uncreated, amoral energies of the underground. Bulgakov implies, in *Unfading Light*, that Berdiaev treats evil as if it is ontologically real. Evil appeared so pervasive in Berdiaev's thought that Bulgakov often seems to doubt whether his theory of creativity could guarantee the future deification of humanity, let alone at present. He suspected that Berdiaev was in possession of a more fundamental metaphysical tool than "creativity" to ensure humanity reached its ideal destination. Bulgakov thus criticizes Berdiaev elsewhere in *Unfading Light* for championing a "creative gesture" (*tvorcheskii zhest*) rather than a bonafide, creative *act*. Bulgakov discerns in Berdiaev a view of human nature that is as "powerless" as it is "pretentious," qualities that Bulgakov associates foremost with the devil and his legions.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Demons of the Heart***

Bulgakov uses the concept of the underground to construct an alternative picture of human interiority. Berdiaev sees in the human soul a capacity for colossal depth, which he refers to as the underground—to which Bulgakov counters in *Unfading Light*, "there are two abysses [*bezdney*] in the human soul: dead-end nothing [*glukhoe nichto*], an infernal underground, and God's heaven which has imprinted the image of the Lord."<sup>37</sup> These abysses are immiscible; they cannot overlap.

Bulgakov is expanding an argument he made two years earlier in "Russian Tragedy: On Dostoevsky's *Demons*" (1914). He insisted that Dostoevsky's celebrated line—that the struggle between God and the devil occurs on the "battlefield of the heart"—not be taken to suggest that evil is tragically but inevitably interlaced with the good. To make this point, he notes how Stavrogin's character is oddly truant in *Demons*. He recedes into the background, despite serving as the center of gravity for wickedness in the novel. The fact that Stavrogin is "terribly,

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36. This comment builds on a footnote from Part III of *Unfading Light*, in which Bulgakov explains how humans are created in the image of God. The note is worth quoting in full: "This confusion of image and Prototype, of ego and Ego, distinguishes the fundamental motifs of Fichte's metaphysics, who equates the human I, taken in the greatest intensity, with the divine I. The intuition of the transcendence of the spirit in relation to all of its determinations or products lies at the basis of the philosophy of creativity in N. A. Berdiaev ... but he sees insufficiently the difference between image and Prototype, between the unlimited creativity of humankind on the basis of sophianicity and the absolute divine creative act. Therefore the result is an objectless and for that reason powerless although pretentious, creative gesture" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 487, nt. 3).

37. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187.

ominously, infernally not there" confirms, in Bulgakov's view, his status as the paragon of the "forces of evil."<sup>38</sup> Having been "possessed by the spirit of nonbeing [*dukh nebytiia*]," his personality is whittled down to a "psychological skeleton-iron-will." What remains of Stavrogin is not a distilled essence but layer upon layer of artificiality. He is no longer a personality but a "mask of masks."<sup>39</sup> Bulgakov compares him to "an actor, not on the stage, not in art, but in real life."<sup>40</sup> Stavrogin may wish "to cope with the disintegration of his personality, to be born to life," but there is nothing left to exhume and reassemble.<sup>41</sup> His example indicates, for Bulgakov, that evil is a form of "nothingness [that swallows] up its victim."<sup>42</sup> It is quite possible, Stavrogin reveals, to be "dead before death."

A peculiar tragedy ensues. Bulgakov reads Stavrogin as so disconnected from his material body that he can no longer act. Like a disincarnate spirit, he lives vicariously through neighboring bodies. The temptation of others becomes Stavrogin's only course of action. He serves as a "provocateur" who stokes fire in others' hearts, but "he himself does not burn and is obviously incapable of igniting." He is a "medium" who receives others' hopes for salvation and love only to pervert them within the toxic vortex of his interiority. He is the inverse of the angelic light that caught fire but did not incinerate the bush in Exodus. Stavrogin's demonic luminescence is not ablaze but destroys nevertheless. He is an "icy reflection of alien fire and light."<sup>43</sup> He is a "black hole"—a "black grace" (*chernaia blagodat'*)—that becomes visible only as it devours.<sup>44</sup>

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38. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 503.

39. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 512.

40. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 511.

41. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 512.

42. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 512.

43. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 512.

44. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 513. A century later, the Archbishop Rowan Williams would read *Demons* in a similar vein. See Rowan Williams, *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 63–110. Williams frames Stavrogin as a paradigmatic example of the demonic: as that which "disincarnates, dis-tracts us from the body and the particular" (Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 83). Stavrogin, he insists, is a "will arbitrarily exercised," because he is nothing *more* than a will. He cannot live in the real world, much less "[discriminate] between good and evil." He can only draw other bodies into his "self-consuming void" (Williams, *Dostoevsky*, 25). Williams projects evil as an immaterial absence and an explicitly demonic one at that. For a contrasting reading, see Susan McReynolds, *Redemption and the Merchant God: Dostoevsky's Economy of Salvation and Antisemitism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 144–156. Whereas Williams and Bulgakov read Stavrogin's subjective lack to signify that evil is ontologically non-primary and, thus, impermanent, McReynolds sees in Stavrogin a moral and metaphysical challenge to the assumption that evil naturally implodes and that malicious actions are universally redeemable. His refusal to receive forgiveness for abusing the eleven-year-old Matresha suggests, for McReynolds, that his project is anything but nihilistic. If anything, he asserts that it is the Christian assumption that any sin—no matter how grotesque—can be forgiven that obliterates any meaningful distinction between good and evil. McReynolds concludes that "refusing to accept Christ's forgiveness may be the only way [for Stavrogin] to show respect for Matresha's loss." In doing so, he confirms that his actions were inexcusable and will forever be considered so (McReynolds, *Redemption and the Merchant God*, 150). McReynolds implies that one would be wise to presume that ours is a cosmos in which evil and the good are co-foundational and co-eternal rather than follow Dostoevsky and Augustine's attempt to render the first and final word to the good.

Bulgakov considers the revolutionary Kirillov to be the most tragic of Stavrogin's victims. His agonizing demise, Bulgakov claims, "discloses the religious abysses [*bezdney*] of the human spirit."<sup>45</sup> The language of abysses, plural, is significant. Stavrogin's interiority represents a single nefarious void. Kirillov possesses not one, but two, bottomless trajectories. One is angelic, the other—demonic. The tragedy is that the virtuous, "simple-minded heart" of Kirillov is primary.<sup>46</sup> Unbelief is not his failing. He may possess a child-like disposition, but "naively negating atheism remains infinitely inferior to Kirillov's 'mystical requests.'"<sup>47</sup> Stavrogin corrupts Kirillov's pure "love for Christ" and all creation into an "idol" of "self-will." Messianic-wrapped dreams become the vessel of "not atheism, but anti-theism." Kirillov believes in God "but does not want Him." Kirillov hopes to rescue himself from God by refashioning himself into a "man-God" (*chelovekobog*). His attempt to plagiarize God and replace Him through a "rebellion" of "self-will" amounts to an abstract "caricature" of divine freedom.<sup>48</sup> Kirillov cannot reinvent himself as a self-sovereign deity.<sup>49</sup> He cannot supplant the actual God-man in Christ. He can only dismantle what God has created. He discovers, devastatingly, that "outside of God is nothing, nonbeing."<sup>50</sup> Kirillov's theological declaration of independence concludes in the ultimate abstraction: suicide.

For Bulgakov, Stavrogin's subjective vacancy and the gravitational pull thereof illustrates what it means to suggest that evil is not ontologically real. Evil does not have a legitimate claim to actuality because its venom is incompatible with *living* flesh and bone. Evil cannot abide a body. To frame evil as a "plagiarist" of reality is to acknowledge its radical destructivity. Bulgakov does not mince words. Evil is no facile mimicry of divine freedom and creativity. It is rather its negation, "a rape of the human spirit, of the image and likeness of God" in all its materiality.<sup>51</sup> The movements of the underground are similarly without reality or existence. The underground is a recapitulation of Stavrogin's interiority, which Bulgakov equates with the "Gadarene abyss" (*Gadarinskaia bezdna*) from the New Testament.<sup>52</sup> It is a place where

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45. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 513.

46. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 514.

47. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 515.

48. "Just as Satan is a caricature of God, so self-will is a caricature of freedom and the religious revolt is a parody of might." Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 514.

49. Bulgakov distinguishes two forms of apotheosis. Feuerbach's apotheosis is communal and humanitarian. It is "anthropotheosis," prefiguring Marx and Engels. The apotheosis of Max Stirner worships self-will and foregrounds Nietzsche. One suspects that Kirillov is between Feuerbach and Stirner. Sergii Bulgakov, "Religiia chelovekobozhiiia u L. Feiembakha," *Sergii Bulgakov v dvukh tomakh*, ed. Irina Rodnianskaia (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), vol. 2: 162–221.

50. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 517.

51. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 504. The metaphor of sexual violence alludes to Stavrogin's record of child abuse.

52. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 506. The story of the Gerasene or Gadarene demoniac tells of a man possessed by a "legion" of demons. These spirits endow him abnormal strength. His behavior becomes indistinguishable from an animal. Jesus exorcises the demons, but the spirits do not recede peacefully. The demons transfer to a

demonic hordes make their intentions clear, as they did in the Gospels by propelling a drove of swine off a lake-side escarpment. The underground makes room only for corpses.

Bulgakov later insinuates that his Dostoevskian meditations on evil were, at root, thoroughly Augustinian.<sup>53</sup> In *Unfading Light*, he endorses St. Augustine's interpretation of evil as "a negation (*negatio*), corruption (*corruptio*), and deprivation (*privatio*) of good-being."<sup>54</sup> All manner of vice, for Augustine and Bulgakov, are privations of virtue. Evil does not have substance, essence, being, or reality apart from the good. Vice is not self-sustaining. Neither can freedom that is devoid of the good claim to possess ontological substance or permanence. Unfettered license is the crux of evil, because it is grounded in nothing positive. The notion that wickedness is on a mission to free itself from the good proves that evil is reliant on goodness. Evil is like a parasite that perishes after sucking its host dry. "Evil cannot therefore have independent significance," Bulgakov writes.<sup>55</sup> He masterfully shows how any attempt to prove otherwise devolves into parody and tragedy. Moral depravity, for Bulgakov, models a hostile or negative form of dependency; evil cannot participate directly or harmoniously in the good. Neither can evil compete in a straightforward or equal manner with goodness, like heavyweights exchanging blows. Stavrogin demonstrates that evil is not a subject, but subject-lessness. Evil is not a thing but a process towards nothing.

Bulgakov contends that evil, as a "rebellious nothing" of pure freedom, "does not have the power to splash [its] dead waves through the weir of being that God has erected."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the underground's vortex of self-laceration cannot penetrate the more basic laceration or division between its own conceits and the celestial pursuits of the soul's other abyss. Fortunately, the irreconcilable nature of humanity's inner depths has much to teach the inquiring metaphysician. According to Bulgakov, one can learn something about the good from the evil that tries to negate it. The parasitic ravages of Stavrogin's "black grace," he argues, sketch "how the healing, saving, regenerating, liberating grace of God works." The charades of Kirillov's "anti-theism" outline "how [genuine] deification is possible."<sup>57</sup> And the underground illuminates the workings of the soul's heavenly abyss.

One can now more adequately parse Bulgakov's image of a bifurcated soul and its incongruous "nothings." There is the "rebellious nothing" of underground. It is a place where the self can assure itself, with much sound and fury, that it has no limits. The outcome of such self-perpetuating hubris is the corporeal flotsam of the "Gadarene abyss." Then there

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pig herd, after which they are driven off a cliff to drown in a lake. See Matthew 8:28–34, Luke 8:26–39, Mark 5:1–20. An abstract from Luke's account (8:32–39) serves as the epigraph to *Demons*.

53. For a defense of the "privation theory of evil" by a contemporary philosopher, see Samuel Newlands, "Evils, Privations, and the Early Moderns," in *Evil: A History*, ed. Andrew P. Chignell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 273–305.

54. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 273.

55. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 273.

56. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 234.

57. Bulgakov, "Russkaia tragediia," 504.

is celestial nothing—the heavenly abyss. This space is characterized by profundity rather than artificiality, by "pregnancy" rather than entropy, and by the divinization rather than the dissolution of matter. The underground cannot contribute to the life-giving objectives of the heavenly abyss, for it resides in an absence that is too far removed from the radiance and reality of God's being. Evil may corrupt the good, but it cannot compromise goodness. The heart is split between a heavenly womb and an underground tomb. Never the two shall meet.<sup>58</sup> To be human is to be "created a son of abysses."<sup>59</sup>

### Creation *Ex Ouk On*

There is more to say of nothing. Bulgakov aims to explore with greater precision the disembodied gorge towards which the underground catapults. Bulgakov's Underground Man is not in pursuit of a dynamic—that is, a relative—nothing. He seeks a more robust absence than *mē on*. This is a space deprived of any energy or potentiality that one could trace to God. Bulgakov follows Plato's terminology. He invokes the most forceful negative article in Greek—"ou"—to accentuate the aridity of this oblivion. The Underground Man yearns for the nonbeing or nothing of "*ouk on*," "the limit beyond which lies dead-end bottomless nonbeing, 'the outer darkness' [*kromeshnaia t'ma*]."<sup>60</sup> Bulgakov is not equating *ouk on* with the "outer darkness" of hell, though *ouk on* is adjacent to the infernal deep. The underground, for Bulgakov, points to an absence so deaf and desolate that it resembles the traditional Christian account of "pure, empty nothing, nonbeing before the world-creation."<sup>61</sup> Here is the *ouk on*.

The underground facilitates Bulgakov's attempt to distance himself from the philosophical school of Neo-Platonism. In *Unfading Light*, he goes so far as to label this tradition the "hostile competitor" of Christianity.<sup>62</sup> According to Bulgakov, Neo-Platonism presumes that creation is an "involuntary emanation"—or emission—from an abyss that was seminal and internal to God. He saves his most vehement critiques for a particular vein of Neo-Platonic thought that runs from Boehme to German Romanticism to Russians like Berdiaev. For these

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58. Some might ask how this dualistic conception of the soul aligns with Bulgakov's eschatological optimism. Bulgakov believed that all souls as well as all of the soul would be saved at the end of time. This article assumes that the answer lies in the *ouk on*, an idea explored in ensuing sections. The underground of the soul and its consistency as "rebellious nothing" are contained within a deeper "nothing" that Bulgakov calls the *ouk on*. God, according to Bulgakov, creates the *ouk on* to make space for human freedom. The *ouk on* gives humans the potential to pervert God's will but is not itself a perversion. We may speculate: if the borders of the underground belong to God, then this interior tomb can be universally raided and redeemed by Christ. Bulgakov seems to assume that if God admits the most profound iteration of nothing into His being in the beginning, then God will admit all souls into Himself in the end. For an overview of Bulgakov's beliefs on universal salvation, see Paul L. Gavriluk, "Universal Salvation in the Eschatology of Sergius Bulgakov," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (April 2006): 110–132.

59. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 188.

60. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 186.

61. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 234.

62. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 164.



thinkers, Neo-Platonic emanations were grounded in a morally flawed, primordial abyss of nonbeing. According to Bulgakov, they held that "nothing" evolved dialectically to resolve its deficiencies over time.<sup>63</sup> The combination of automatic emanations, "evolutionary dialectics," and primeval voids contained a more ambitious agenda than the explanation of the genesis of the world. One could also comprehend the problem of evil, or the disparity between the imperfections of creation and the goodness of the Creator. The question of evil was indeed integral to Berdiaev's enthusiasm for the savage liberty of Boehme's abyss, the *Ungrund*. He reasoned that if freedom and chaos were prior to God, then "God is not responsible for the evil that comes from [freedom]."<sup>64</sup> God may not be liable for evil, but neither is God wholly good. Berdiaev regarded such concessions as worth the cost. The idea of a self-upgrading "nothing" awarded him an explanation for evil, an alibi for God, and an assurance that the cosmos could one day defeat the "suffering of the *Ungrund*."<sup>65</sup>

Bulgakov saw a risk in explaining away the mysteries of creation and evil in this manner. Berdiaev and his predecessors, in Bulgakov's opinion, allowed evil to become so integrated into the nature of things that it reflected a more fundamental moral ambiguity within the God who created the world. One could mask the damage by intoning panegyrics to freedom, creativity, and final reconciliation. But to naturalize moral error through the mechanical gears of "evolutionary-dialectics" does not solve the problem of evil. It makes the problem worse. Evil no longer appears inexcusable but merely inconvenient. Contemptible acts seem natural, and the cosmos—impersonal. Under such circumstances, one cannot call God good. Original sin does not exist. There is origin-less sin. Bulgakov was convinced that a "repugnance towards the flesh" was a fitting response towards such an immensely flawed world.<sup>66</sup> One cannot rejoice over God's creation as if it were a beneficent gift. And it is difficult to conceive of a divine gift as such. Bulgakov worried that emanationism rendered the idea of receiving a gift from a transcendent God unintelligible by blurring the line between God and world, giver and gift. Neo-Platonism, in his view, tends toward pantheism. Moreover, since pantheism jettisons belief in a transcendent level of reality, Bulgakov conflated pantheism with atheism.<sup>67</sup>

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63. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 152–155.

64. Berdiaev, "Unground and Freedom," 258. Berdiaev had reached this conclusion by the time that he wrote *The Meaning of the Creative Act*. The introduction states, "For the greatest of the mystics, Jakob Boehme, evil was in God—and it was falling-away from God; in God was the source of darkness—and God was not responsible for evil" (Berdiaev, *The Creative Act*, 15).

65. Berdiaev, "Unground and Freedom," 253.

66. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 179.

67. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 50–51, 189. Bulgakov was, of course, aware that the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814) was accused of atheism for his pantheistic sympathies. Bulgakov mostly agreed with these criticisms. In some ways, he goes a step further. Bulgakov associates emanationism with atheism. He claims that if "the world is the *mē on* of God—we arrive at pantheism with either the acosmism or atheism that springs from it" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189). Bulgakov argues that pantheists, like atheists, lack a direction or "object" to which to pray. Bulgakov is clear: "where there is no prayer there is no religion" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 25). Bulgakov links Berdiaev's cosmology with Fichte's pantheism, and, implicitly, with his atheism (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 487).

He did not take Berdiaev as the fearless critic of atheism for which he is often assumed and celebrated.<sup>68</sup>

Berdiaev invoked the underground to define history as an escalating series of automatic emissions from a dynamic "nothing." The first emanation was God. Bulgakov, by contrast, is not concerned with the relationship between the underground and an abyss that is prior to God. There cannot be anything before God, as far as he is concerned. Bulgakov is more narrowly focused on the nothing that existed at the beginning of the world. He employs the underground to uphold the idea that God creates from a void so empty that the world must be the result of a volitional "fiat" rather than an emanation.<sup>69</sup> His contention, therefore, is that "the world is created out of nothing in the sense of *ouk on*."<sup>70</sup> Following St. Athanasius, Bulgakov proposes that only a universe fashioned in such audacious freedom could produce creatures free to "dissolve again into nonbeing."<sup>71</sup> He was convinced that only a world created out of nothing—*ex nihilo*—could be revered or rejected as a gift. An emanation was too "passive" to be good.<sup>72</sup>

One reason that emanationist frameworks attract adherents is that the idea of something coming from nothing seems preposterous.<sup>73</sup> Scientists have unearthed subatomic fields that

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68. This section and those that follow synthesize many passages from *Unfading Light*. In Part I, Chapter III, Bulgakov outlines the problems—Neo-Platonism, nothingness, and materiality—which he attempts to solve in Part II. Most of our attention focuses on Part II, Chapter I. Here, Bulgakov explores the relation between "creaturely nothing" and the underground (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 186–192). A more exhaustive account is required for the decision to include Part II, Chapter II, wherein Bulgakov introduces the concept of Sophia. Bulgakov aligns Sophia with the Orthodox notion of uncreated, divine "energies" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 220). These energies presume a different definition of "emanation" than the Neo-Platonists whom Bulgakov critiques. Divine energies proceed from the uncreated divine essence while maintaining their status as uncreated. Unlike the divine essence, divine energies radiate through the world; they are accessible to creatures. The problem is that Bulgakov's notion of Sophia seems to contradict the version of creation *ex nihilo* that he outlined in Chapter I. In Chapter II, he leans towards creation *ex deo*—creation out of God—rather than creation *ex nihilo*. He appears to portray Sophia emanating into the *ouk on* rather than God creating *mē on* from *ouk on*. These contradictions are beyond our purview. One might suspect, nevertheless, that Sophia is the person who creates *mē on* out of *ouk on*. This is not to suggest that Sophia is the lowly, contingent demiurge of Neo-Platonism. Her uncreated perfection intimates that she has been filtered through the Orthodox notion of divine energies. This explains why Bulgakov returns to his prior conception of creation *ex nihilo* without noting a contradiction (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 241, 243). This essay thus assumes it is justified to relate later passages on the difficulty of conceiving and reaching *ouk on* to previous reflections on the underground (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 239–243; 266–270). On divine energy and essence, see David Bradshaw, "The Concept of the Divine Energies," in *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy*, eds. Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Christoph Schneider (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2013), 27–49.

69. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 212.

70. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

71. This is a quote from Athanasius. Athanasius was also an advocate of divinization, a theory equally important to Bulgakov (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 472).

72. Bulgakov contends that if the world is an emanation, one must assume that the world "passively diffuses"—rather than "manifests"—"divine light" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 184).

73. Bulgakov's allegation of Neo-Platonism as a "hostile competitor" to Christianity is hyperbolic. While Gnosticism understood matter as too defective to participate in the Good, even a version of Neo-Platonism as extreme as Gnosticism followed the wisdom of the classical world: the intellect "participates" in the Good because it proceeds or pours forth from the Good. The "participatory ontology" of Ancient Greece and Rome,

seem to verge on nothing.<sup>74</sup> However, none have discovered an expanse free of energy or being. Unlike the relative nothing of *mē on*, total nihil is too negative to occupy a position within a causal chain. "Nothing can come from nothing," Parmenides averred.<sup>75</sup> Bulgakov is aware that his support for the very concept of creation *ex ouk on* (or *ex nihilo*) is exceedingly difficult. He claims that the "ancient elder Parmenides" will ever "[raise] his voice anew," "insisting only that which is ... *mē on* ... exists; there is no *ouk on*."<sup>76</sup> The *ouk on* is a "limit concept" (*predel'noe poniatie*) so onerous that it will stretch any philosophical thread close to the breaking point.<sup>77</sup> Bulgakov knows that he is in for philosophical turbulence.

## Nothing Doubled

The occasional ambiguity of Bulgakov's musings might be forgiven as the by-product of logical or linguistic pressure. He is explicit, nevertheless, that "God himself is the cause of nothing."<sup>78</sup> Some forms of nonbeing remain impossible. Yet, contra Parmenides, Bulgakov

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and its under-riding metaphor of "overflow," justified creation-as-emanation in the eyes of many Neo-Platonists. Christian theologians affirmed this basic ontology of participation. They simply used creation *ex nihilo* to ensure that the soul's sharing in the Good—or in God—does not mean that the soul is identical with the Form of the Good. The world is gift. The emphasis that participatory metaphysics places on divine excess continued to put pressure on the axiom, in theories of creation *ex nihilo*, of a divide between Creator and creature, as evidenced by the emanationist language of the Christian mystic Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite or a medieval theologian like Bonaventure. As Bulgakov's argument unfolds, he moves closer to the synthesis of emanation and creation *ex nihilo* outlined by Pseudo-Dionysius, "the mysterious author of 'the Areopagiticum'" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 190). See also W. J. Sparrow Simpson, "Introduction," in *Dionysius the Areopagite on the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: SPCK, 1920), 14. Theologians have recently demonstrated an openness to Neo-Platonism. See John Milbank, "Christianity and Platonism in East and West," in *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy*, eds. Constantinos Athanasopoulos and Christoph Schneider (Cambridge, UK: James Clarke, 2013), 158. This tendency has led some, like Kathryn Tanner, to acknowledge that creation *ex nihilo* is a "mixed metaphor" of "natural and personalistic images." Kathryn Tanner, "Creation 'Ex Nihilo' as Mixed Metaphor," *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (April 2013): 138. Creation out of nothing, some claim, chastens two classical notions of cosmic origins: creation-as-emanation and creation through pre-existing materials. See Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 68.

74. The "zero-point energy" of the Higgs field, and its elusive particle the Higgs boson, does not signify a wholly empty, inviolate expanse in which there is *no* substance, *no* energy, and *no* movement. The term, zero-point energy, identifies the lowest level of substance, energy, and movement possible. Nevertheless, some scientists, like Lawrence Krauss, continue to refer to subatomic particles as *nothing*. Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012). For philosophical or scientific reflections on nothing, see Roy Sorensen, *Nothing: A Philosophical History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022); Andrew Davison, "Looking Back toward the Origin: Scientific Cosmology as Creation 'ex nihilo' Considered 'from the Inside,'" in *Creation 'ex nihilo': Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges*, eds. Gary Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 367–382.

75. This article invokes the term "being" in the Platonic rather than in the Heideggerian sense.

76. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 190. Plato assumed that the world was created from preexisting elements rather than from nothing. See "Timaeus," in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), 1238. In Genesis 1:1–2, God creates from preexisting waters.

77. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 234.

78. This is a quote by St. Maximus the Confessor that Bulgakov takes from S. L. Epifanovich, *St. Maximus the Confessor and Byzantine Theology* (Kiev, 1915), 260–61, quoted in *Unfading Light*, 470, nt. 10.

asserts that something can come from a radical iteration of nothing.<sup>79</sup> What follows is a remarkable formulation of creation *ex nihilo*. Bulgakov contends that God opens up the void by "[outlining] a circle of His intentional inaction as the realm of creaturely freedom." The cosmos begins when God creates nothing in a moment of "divine self-exhaustion" (*bozhestvennoe samoistoshchenie*) or self-delimitation.<sup>80</sup> The "perfect nothing, which God calls into being," is the *ouk on*.<sup>81</sup> The ensuing step is the "conversion" of *ouk on* into *mē on*. God creates the conditions for the world to emanate from meonic nothing. The maxim "nothing comes from nothing" (*mē on* from *ouk on*), in Bulgakov's hands, upholds rather than contests creation *ex nihilo*.<sup>82</sup>

However ingenious his thinking, problems persist. The notion of God fashioning a chasm of nonbeing as desolate as *ouk on* is perplexing, though it does have profound meaning.<sup>83</sup> The maximal language that Bulgakov associates with the *ouk on* can make matters worse. He frames the *ouk on* as "perfect nothing" (*sovershennoe nichto*), "pure nothing" (*chistoe nichto*),

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79. Bulgakov distinguishes between nonbeing as it relates to the concept *and* to the activity of "the absolute." He thinks Parmenides underestimates the extent to which the "activity" of the absolute can interact with *ouk on* (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 188).

80. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 209. The theory that God created the world from nothing by withdrawing into Godself is not unique to Bulgakov. The idea originates in the Kabbalism of the Jewish scholar Chayyim Vital (1543–1620). For a history of the doctrine of divine "zimzum" (or "contraction"), and its influence on modern theological and philosophical discourse, see Christoph Schulte, *Zimzum: God and the Origin of the World*, trans. Corey Twitchell (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

81. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 239.

82. The formulation, "nothing from nothing," should not be taken too literally. Bulgakov is reluctant to call *mē on* "nothing," even if it is a form of relative nothing or non-being alongside *ouk on*. Bulgakov seems to equate *mē on* with the potentiality that is associated with energy, a kind of background energy that is too fungible to manifest as a "thing." *Ouk on* is more paradoxical; it is a form of potentiality that is devoid of energy. Bulgakov refers to *ouk on* as nothing (*nichto*) and to *mē on* as no-thing or something (*nechto*). He does not want to stray too far from the standard definition of creation *ex nihilo*: the creation of something from nothing. While "nothing from nothing" is rhetorically powerful, it is more accurate to say that Bulgakov espouses the creation of no-thing from nothing.

83. Absences, voids, abysses are philosophically timely. Slavoj Žižek argues the fact that everything comes from and hurdles towards nothing suggests that the universe is grounded in a "pre-ontological" nothing. From here, Žižek reformulates the paradoxes of the Freudian death drive within a cosmic context. He insists that being arises from the primordial void when "division divides itself from itself." Slavoj Žižek, *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism* (London: Verso, 2012), 15. The birth of being and the drive towards the void are simultaneous. For Žižek, no thing or subject can survive such negativity other than an "obscene, 'partial object,' " sustained by the "Holy Spirit" of negation (Žižek, *Less Than Nothing*, 5). Žižek is not entirely serious. He plays with religious concepts as would Lacan. He assumes that God is a fictional Other that one uses to grasp reality. Mikhail Epstein also sets forth a "theology of the vacuum," but with greater sincerity and optimism than Žižek. See Mikhail Epstein, *Religia posle ateizma. Novye vozmozhnosti teologii* (Moscow: ACT Press, 2013), 323–327. Epstein may concur with Žižek that the doubling of negatives is integral to the capacity to create something from nothing. But he is more willing to equate two "nots" with a real positive. He insists that affirmations which result from negations constitute ideal metaphysical environs in which a subject or personality is destabilized rather than destroyed. This instability opens life-giving possibilities. Nothing, for Epstein, creates a person in a way that it does not for Žižek. Epstein's statement that "nothingness itself contains the beginning of its own nothingness" should not be understood to endorse agnosticism (Epstein, *Religia posle ateizma*, 327). God, for Epstein, is a "Suprasubject" (*Sverkhsob' 'ekt*), who, like human subjects, is constituted by dynamic nots, including the difference between a subject and that which a subject creates, which, in God's case, is a human subject (Epstein, *Religia posle ateizma*, 349–351). Epstein implies that God is "born" from nothing but leaves this nothing a metaphysical mystery.

"ultimate emptiness" (*okonchatel'naia pustota*), or the "absolute null of being" (*absoliutnyi nul' bytiia*).<sup>84</sup> The question becomes: how can the fullness of being, or God, create "the full negation of being?"<sup>85</sup> Accusations of metaphysical absurdity can be assuaged by noting that Bulgakov is working with a more qualified conception of "pure nothing" than it sometimes appears. Not once does Bulgakov refer to the *ouk on* as "absolute Nothing" (*absoliutnoe Nichto*). God as absolute reality precludes absolute—capitalized—Nothing. Bulgakov, as stated, deemed that pantheism's identification of God with everything was tantamount to atheism. Conversely, absolute nothing is only possible if God does not exist. Therefore, the *ouk on* must be a different type of nothing, one that stands in relation to creation and to the possibilities of free will and evil. That relation is what Bulgakov is trying to explain. For him, the *ouk on* is neither located before nor outside God but at the "edge of Being," the edge of God. Here lies a simple nothing that is wholly devoid of the potentiality associated with the formless energies in a cosmic vacuum. Bulgakov is, however, willing to concede that *ouk on* retains a causal link to the source of all potentiality in God, so long as one does not reduce the mystery implicit within the origins of "pure nothing" to a finite process of cause and effect. We can risk saying that, for Bulgakov, the *ouk on* "contains" potentiality, but it is of a more ephemeral or derivative sort than the vitality of *mē on*. The emptiness of *ouk on* provides space, and thus the possibility, for creatures to accept or reject *mē on*, or the potentiality that God has gifted. The *ouk on* is not absolute nothing, but the bleakest echelon of relative nothing.

Even this more limited understanding of the "dark foundation of the cosmos" remains more radical than most philosophers would dare conceive.<sup>86</sup> Bulgakov must admit that creation *ex nihilo* "remains a riddle ... a miracle, a mystery," an enigma.<sup>87</sup> He does not offer an exhaustive or rational explanation for the origin of the world, for to do so is impossible and counterproductive. Yet Bulgakov will not settle for fideism. He insists that "to identify what has been accomplished is for human consciousness fully in keeping with its powers."<sup>88</sup> Creation is not explicable so much as intelligible. One has to reason "indirectly," by "illegitimate" (*nezakonnoorozhdennyi*) means.<sup>89</sup> One must travel underground. It is at this point that Bulgakov refers to the experience of those who carve out a space in the bastard underbelly of existence. As he writes:

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84. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 207–208, 191.

85. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

86. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 267. Smith's translation—"dark, mute foundation"—emphasizes the "deafness" of the *ouk on*. I have rendered the translation more literally, as the "dark foundation of the cosmos" (*temnaia osnova mirozdaniia*).

87. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

88. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

89. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 190. Bulgakov notes how Plato, in the *Timaeus*, assumes that *ouk on* is accessible to thought via negation but fails to insert *ouk on* prior to creation. Bulgakov implies that one requires the more experiential or rebellious negation of the underground to make such a cosmic induction.

The absolute null of being as its sole pure possibility without any actualization remains transcendent for the creature, which always represents the indissoluble alloy of being and nonbeing. But this "outer darkness," this naked potentiality [*golaia potentsial'nost'*], in the underground of creatureliness, is like some second center (pseudo-center) of being, competing with the Sun of the world, the source of its fullness. For the heroes of the underground it has a unique attraction; it summons in them the irrational, blind will towards nothing, a dizzying yearning for the abyss. ... The kingdom of nihilism, the cult of nothing, hell, exists only at the expense of the positive forces of being, by an ontological theft.<sup>90</sup>

The "heroes of the underground" reverse the order of creation. They begin by misconstruing *mē on* as a howling vacuum of indeterminate potentiality. Since "pure possibility" is "not actualizable," or actualizable as nothing, it lacks the one capacity that matters most: the ability to sustain and contain material existence. De-creation is synonymous, for Bulgakov, with dematerialization. "Naked potentiality" breaks the "indispensable alloy" of materiality and nothing, matter and *mē on*.<sup>91</sup> Comprised of "pure"—brute—possibility, the underground is preset for a cosmic rewind. One witnesses "the metaphysical annihilation of being, the decomposition of the *mē on* into the *ouk on*, the plunging of the creature into its original, dark nothingness."<sup>92</sup>

### Facing the Self, Facing the Darkness

We can now determine how Bulgakov perceives the underground to develop within its full psychological and cosmic backdrop. The underground is for those who act as if their creatureliness is absolute. Enthusiasts of the underground resemble pantheists, from whom they can be distinguished by their zealous solipsism. Underground-dwellers withhold their attention from any object other than the bare vitality that resides within their individual selves. To choose the underground is thus to affirm "oneself in one's own selfhood."<sup>93</sup> The heroes of the underground wall themselves within the pure interiority of their own consciousness to

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90. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 191.

91. Bulgakov also describes evil as the "the actualization of nothing" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 267).

92. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 207.

93. Bulgakov claims: "to want oneself in one's own selfhood, to lock oneself in one's creatureliness as in the absolute, means to want the underground and to be affirmed in it" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187). Bulgakov, in my view, interprets the underground through the subject-object relation, the beloved philosophical tool of German Idealism. He follows Hegel's assumption that all conscious subjects attempt to know objects in the world. Hegel assumed that if a subject tries to know an object that is not sufficiently distinct from the subject—or is devoid of content—then the subject self-dissolves. The underground similarly emphasizes how subjective action devoid of an object is powerless. Brandon Gallaher argues that Bulgakov's notion of creation *ex nihilo*—as a subject moving towards an utterly distinct object of pure nothing—models his debt to Hegel. See Brandon Gallaher, "Bulgakov's Chalcedonian Ontology and the Problem of Human Freedom," forthcoming. We might go so far as to say that the Underground Man shows how only God can move towards an object as empty as *ouk on* and not self-destruct. See Hegel's account of the transition from Stoicism to Skepticism in Georg Wilhelm

avoid any feedback, any hint of criticism or dependency, which activity involving matter and flesh inevitably produces. They shackle themselves with breathless self-justifications only to divulge a deeper insecurity, the "pain of impotence and lack of talent."<sup>94</sup> The underground cannot deliver on its promise of self-sufficiency. Any pretense to the ardor of eremitic cave-dwellers descends into banality. Putrefaction rather than divinization sets in. One can discern within the interplay of self-doubt and metaphysical ambition a yearning for an oblivion from which there is no return. A space shaped by a vendetta against creatureliness, for Bulgakov, is a void that is more sweeping than death, more consuming than raw possibility. The "cult of nothing" hopes for complete estrangement from God, for total de-creation, for a darkness so outermost that one cannot hear weeping and the gnashing of teeth. Naked potentiality faces the deafening silence of the *ouk on*.

What began as a project of self-affirmation, Bulgakov insists, crescendos in a botched "metaphysical suicide."<sup>95</sup> The underground illustrates a central point from *Unfading Light*: the bid "to get out of the inflamed circle of being" discovers that it "can never get to the end" of being.<sup>96</sup> Those who flee underground never reach pure nothing. They wind up "twisting and turning convulsively" in the cacophonous pseudo-nothing of the underground.<sup>97</sup> The closest comparison, for Bulgakov, is hell. In the underground, as in hell, one "cannot say with full sincerity: die, for already in the very act of affirmation towards nonbeing it realizes itself as being."<sup>98</sup> The enduring shadows of the "infernal underground" confirm that even the most abysmal negations presuppose a "positive [expression] about being."<sup>99</sup> Bulgakov implies that the underground does not only overestimate what creatures can achieve. The paragons of the underground are doomed, because the God-free gorge for which they fantasize does not exist. They are working, we might add, with a mistaken notion of *ouk on* as absolute nothing.

Some would insist that the incapacity of the underground to annihilate being proves that the world is the product of a simple emanation. Bulgakov, ever the optimist, presumes that the failures of the underground offer indirect evidence that the world is created *ex nihilo*. The logic is simple. If the sole desire of the underground is to undo what God creates, then Bulgakov assumes it is plausible for an inexplicably stark void to occupy a seminal role at creation. The fact that mortals cannot act on such a severe gradation of nothing is expected. Pure nothing is "transcendent for the creature," but not for God. And yet, Bulgakov contends that the *ouk on* cannot be so perplexing as to verge on metaphysical nonsense. He assumes that if one can

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Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 117–123.

94. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187.

95. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268.

96. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268.

97. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268.

98. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268.

99. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 109.

identify an "affirmation" of being in the hellish underground, then one can do the same in a yet more cavernous abyss. This lower circle of nothing—the *ouk on*—would have to be so depleted of potentiality that it could not emanate from God. The covert affirmation of pure nothing is that God created it through a radical act of free will.

It is worth recalling that the chief blunder of the underground is its inability to eradicate what God has made so as to allow for renaissance and self-divinization on the other side. From this vantage point, Bulgakov makes bolder assessments on the accessibility of *ouk on*. A blank metaphysical slate, he reassures us, cannot literally be "caught by the senses" (*chuvstva*).<sup>100</sup> And yet, Bulgakov implies that the *ouk on* can be "felt" (*oshchushchaetsia*) or "touched" (*oshchupat'*) intuitively in the underground.<sup>101</sup> Bulgakov's reading of *Demons* provides direction on how to frame the "experience" of pure nothing. In the suicide note left by Stavrogin, which Bulgakov considered the consummate confession of a derelict personality, he divulges that "all that poured out of me was denial." Eventually, he admits that "not even denial came out."<sup>102</sup> He was not divine but "small and sluggish." Bulgakov intimates that the semblance of dynamism that de-creation proffers cannot go on indefinitely. The thrill of ontological larceny succumbs to sloth. Bulgakov does not make the point explicit, but we might assume that the boundless "vulgarity" (*poshlost'*) of the underground is undergirded by a similar expenditure.<sup>103</sup> In the inertia that precedes the "cold of death," space-time slows, congeals, and flattens.<sup>104</sup> Creeping stagnation in the underground reveals its environs as a façade, a bottomless surface, distended over an ultimate emptiness.<sup>105</sup> Here "the abyss of the *ouk on* is felt." The failure of the underground to identify alternative life-resources upholds, in the strongest sense, nature's "unceasing whisper: you do not have the root of your being in yourself; you are created."<sup>106</sup> Thus is creaturely life a relief from despair.

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100. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 240.

101. He writes: "in the cold of death ... the abyss of *ouk on* is felt [*oshchushchaetsia*]" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 191). Further, "in order to reach the *ouk on* one has to peek behind the coulisses of being so to say, or by remaining on its facial surface, feel [*oshchupat'*] its underside" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 240).

102. Bulgakov quotes Stavrogin's note directly ("Russkaia tragediia," 512).

103. In the segment, "What is Matter," Bulgakov uses horizontal images—"coulisees," facial surfaces, or flat drawings—to tease out the "illegitimate judgement" by which creation *ex nihilo* is perceived. The metaphor of flatness, in my view, can elucidate prior associations which Bulgakov makes between the *ouk on*, the underground, banality, and the "coldness of death" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 240–241). Dmitry Merezhkovsky describes the demonic in Gogol's art as "eternal flatness, eternal vulgarity." See Dmitry Merezhkovsky, *Gogol' i Chert* (Moscow: Issledovanie, 1906), 2. Bulgakov likens the demonic vulgarity of the Underground Man to the hapless opportunist Khelstakov from Nikolai Gogol's *The Inspector General* (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 187). It does not seem too far-fetched to presume that Bulgakov is extrapolating from the spatial-temporal paradigm put forth by Merezhkovsky in his reflections on Gogol. Bulgakov was an acquaintance of Merezhkovsky and a contributor to his journal *Novyi put* [New path]. Thomas Allan Smith, "Translator's Introduction," in *Unfading Light* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), xxii.

104. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 191. Stagnation in the underground literalizes and parodies Bulgakov's notion of divine "self-exhaustion" prior to the creation of the *ouk on* (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 209).

105. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 291.

106. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 181.



The Underground Man cannot be dismissed as fiction. He is proof, for Bulgakov, that "everything living [experiences] the temptation of metaphysical suicide."<sup>107</sup> This "vertiginous urge downwards" accommodates the Serpentine temptation in Genesis to be "like gods" but does not linger to hear God's sentence.<sup>108</sup> One exiles oneself from the Eden. Neither is it necessary to wait for the afterlife to perceive that "metaphysical pessimism" descends into "insincerity and hypocrisy."<sup>109</sup> Entombment in the underground will suffice. Bulgakov saw the underground as an experiment from which one can induce human morality, interiority, and origins. Creation *ex nihilo* remains an enigma. Yet the underground shows that creation out of nothing—or the creation of nothing out of nothing—is plausible by appealing to experience.<sup>110</sup>

## The Question of Naked Potentiality

Bulgakov agreed with Berdiaev that naked potentiality comprised the underground of the soul.<sup>111</sup> He conceded that baptism into this underground was an ill-fated attempt to be reborn within a primordial cosmic chasm. Bulgakov departed, however, from the assumption

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107. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268.

108. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268–269.

109. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 268.

110. Decades later, Bulgakov returns to the relation between creation and self-destruction while contemplating the end of all things. In "The Problem of the Conditionality of Immortality" (1936–1937), Bulgakov criticizes a new theory of human destiny: conditionalism. Conditionalism abandons the idea that the human soul is naturally eternal. See Sergei Bulgakov, "The Problem of the Conditionality of Immortality," in *The Sophiology of Death: Essays on Eschatology: Personal, Political, Universal*, ed. and trans. Roberto J. De La Noval (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), 41. Hell, for conditionalists, does not exist. What awaits humans is either heaven or annihilation. While Bulgakov is no friend to the doctrine of hell, he regards conditionalism as more troubling, in some respects, than the idea of eternal torment. He is perturbed by the conditionalist belief that humans are free to take their own souls out of existence. It is as if conditionalists assume that humans can commit "metaphysical suicide" (Bulgakov, "The Problem of the Conditionality," 67). However, Bulgakov is confident that humans cannot obliterate themselves any more than they can act on the *nothing* from which they were made. He writes: "surely as man cannot create something from nothing, so too he cannot plunge any being into non-being, dissolve it into nothingness ... humanity can transform the modes of being and destroy its given forms, and in this sense the destructive energy of man is empirically not limited. But ontologically this energy remains powerless: the world is upheld by God in its being and it cannot be returned by man to the abyss of non-being, to the darkness of nothing" (Bulgakov, "The Problem of the Conditionality," 67). Bulgakov continues to assume, late in his career, that the impossibility of metaphysical suicide implies that God alone can create from nothing.

111. Berdiaev prefigures the "tehomitic theology" of Catherine Keller. Her book, *The Face of the Deep*, deconstructs creation *ex nihilo* by focusing on its failure to eradicate the "aboriginal potentiality" of the turbulent waters or "tehom" prior to creation in Genesis. See Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003), 76. Keller replaces *creatio ex nihilo* with *creatio ex profundis* (Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 155–238). She hopes to re-release the "self-organizing potentiality"—the "feminine" "chaoplexity"—of the primordial "Deep." Keller would criticize Berdiaev's trust that God will harmonize the tehomitic abyss in the eschaton. He would remain beholden, in her view, to the "masculine" fixation—epitomized in creation *ex nihilo*—with "chaoskampf" (Keller, *Face of the Deep*, xix). Bulgakov might critique Keller's "Deep" as more violent than she assumes. Indeed, military analysts have highlighted "chaoplexity" as an effective strategy to annihilate enemies in battle. Christopher R. Papparone and George L. Topic Jr., "Dealing with Chaoplexity," *Army Sustainment* 45, no. 5 (2013): 6. Much rides on the nature of the "khôra" or "receptacle" in Plato's *Timaeus*. Bulgakov associates *khôra* with the emptiness of *ouk on* while Keller and Berdiaev link *khôra* with untamed potentiality.

that the underground constituted authentic, divinely charged depth. The heroes of the underground exposed naked, raw potentiality as emaciated rather than purified, because it was grounded in a void wholly lacking in potentiality. The fact that naked potentiality was the epiphenomenon of *ouk on*, moreover, confirmed that raw possibility traveled in one direction. Like a "centrifugal force," Bulgakov assumed that naked potentiality flung everything it touched far from the reservoir of God's being.<sup>112</sup> The *ouk on* was not at the core of God; it was at the edge.<sup>113</sup> The liminality and emptiness of *ouk on* together revealed the "freedom" of naked potentiality as too insubstantial and feral to be useful.<sup>114</sup> A potentiality so denuded or cheapened, in his view, merely "[begat] towards isolation" and loneliness.<sup>115</sup> Bulgakov could not justify the limitless liberty of the underground and any resulting evil as a tragic necessity. He could only conceive of the underground as "tragic" in order to dismiss the idea that its ruinous energies could be repurposed for good.<sup>116</sup> The underground was evidence that evil lacked a natural abode in the heart, in the cosmos, and in God.

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112. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 269.

113. In spherical space, only the center is deep. Nevertheless, the *ouk on* is deep in the sense that it is "the bottom of hell"—the foundation of the underground (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 234).

114. In his late autobiographical work, *Self-Knowledge*, Berdiaev tackles the assumption, widely held by his contemporaries, that his views of the *Ungrund* are identical to those of Boehme. While Berdiaev aligns himself with Boehme's definition of the *Ungrund* as a "primitive, pre-ontological freedom" (*pervichnuiu, dobytiistvennuiu svobodu*), he insists that his understanding of the relation between primordial freedom and God differs from Boehme's. He writes: "according to Boehme the freedom of the *Ungrund* is in God [*v Boge*], as His dark beginning, whereas I conceived freedom to be outside of God [*vne Boga*]. More precisely, freedom exists outside of 'Gott' [or God] but not outside of 'Gottheit' [or Godhead]; for, about the ineffable Gottheit, nothing can be thought." Nikolai Berdiaev, "Samopoznanie: opyt filosofskoi avtobiografii," *Sobranie sochinenii* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1949), vol. 1: 113. Of course, it is possible that any difference between Boehme and Berdiaev on the *Ungrund* was initially more minimal than Berdiaev suggests. Regardless of whether Berdiaev is telling the truth, Bulgakov would have seen the spatial and temporal language that Berdiaev continued to ascribe to the *Ungrund* as revealing. He would have balked at the idea that a primal freedom can exist outside ("*vne*") and before ("*do*") God and not serve as an ontological source—a Boehmian "first divinity"—that remains partly within God. There is an argument to be made that the later Berdiaev remained a firmer disciple of Boehme than he intended.

115. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 208.

116. According to Joshua Heath, Bulgakov alternates between two definitions of tragedy. First, Bulgakov understands tragedy as the "opposition of good and evil," or the "confrontation of being with the 'nothing' 'from which' the world was made." Second, he invokes tragedy as "diremption," or "the separation of what ought to be joined in love." See Joshua Heath, "The Eternal Sacrifice," *Modern Theology* 41, no. 1 (January 2025): 143–166, esp. 144. Heath explores how Bulgakov's conception of tragedy as diremption sublimates and transforms the other definition of tragedy. Heath reads Bulgakov to suggest that Christ's cry of dereliction does not imply tragic separation within the Trinity; rather, this is the moment in which the Trinity overcomes any dualism between good and evil, a dualism that would, moreover, jeopardize the absolute nature of the good. On the cross, evil is not reproduced; it is transformed. Instead of punishing or forsaking the Son, as if He were a typical sacrifice, the persons of the Trinity co-mourn or "co-die" with the Son (Heath, "Eternal Sacrifice," 153). The Trinity thus responds to the threat of diremption in a manner that reaffirms the perfection of its unity. God admits that which God is not (i.e., evil) without taking on an external imperfection or conceding one internally. As Heath writes, Bulgakov assumes "only that identity is absolute, which is constituted by the admission of what it is not" (Heath, "Eternal Sacrifice," 153). I would add that the principle of extravagant—or absolute—admission applies to God's dealings with primordial nothing. My article also attempts to explain why Bulgakov cast the tragic conflict between good and evil in terms of the struggle of being with nothing. A battle so defined, it would seem, is not endless. If evil is based in nothing, then it is too compromised to exist indefinitely.

Berdiaev and Bulgakov defined *mē on* as the invisible fuel of creativity and life, but they diverged on specifics. Berdiaev equated *mē on* with naked potentiality. Bulgakov saw naked potentiality as closer to *ouk on* than to *mē on*.<sup>117</sup> Meonic nonbeing, in his view, was "something" (*nechto*) with ontological reality, in contrast to the empty nothing (*nichto*) of *ouk on* and its "rebellious nothing" of pure possibility.<sup>118</sup> The potentiality of *mē on* was not unreal so much as "something" unknown. Bulgakov, nevertheless, *was* certain that *mē on* did not presume a vision of time and space, like the underground, which plagiarized creation *ex nihilo*. As he wrote, *mē on* was "not creativity out of nothing but creativity in nothing out of divine something."<sup>119</sup> Berdiaev assumed that *mē on* propagated itself because it was uncreated. For Bulgakov, *mē on* was creative because it accepted its status as created.<sup>120</sup> Meonic freedom radiated from the point at which God fashioned "something" out of nothing as a radical display of love.<sup>121</sup> The primary qualities of *mē on*—"nonmanifestation and nondefinition"—thus pointed to a surplus of perfection rather than an excess of deficiency.<sup>122</sup> Meonic nonbeing, whatever it was precisely, could be no less than a celestial spring that nourished the "whole wealth and fullness of being" in all its materiality.<sup>123</sup> The sublimity of the created *mē on* also accentuated that the *ouk on*, for Bulgakov, was not evil. Only the attempt to return and create from the *ouk on* was evil. By itself, the *ouk on* signaled that the "world was founded by a cross" of measureless humility. The Absolute provided space for creatures to make moral decisions rather than assert its absoluteness over creation.<sup>124</sup> Creation *ex nihilo*, in all its layers, comprised an unrepeatable act of grace.<sup>125</sup>

Berdiaev saw little distinction between divine and human creativity. Each drew from an internal expanse brimming with uncreated potentiality. He suspected that any teaching which insisted otherwise might have originated in the "desire to humiliate humans."<sup>126</sup> On such points, Bulgakov thought that Berdiaev could not have been further from the truth.<sup>127</sup>

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117. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

118. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 188–189.

119. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 208.

120. Bulgakov writes: "the *mē on* is pregnancy, the *ouk on* is sterility" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189).

121. Bulgakov refers to *mē on* as "the essence of creatureliness" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 191).

122. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

123. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 189.

124. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 185.

125. Brandon Gallaher's explanation of Sophia as a "divine energy field" underscores Bulgakov's preoccupation with energy (Gallaher, "The Problem of Pantheism," 154–155, 163). I suggested previously that Bulgakov invokes Sophia as a divine "person" who creates the *mē on*. It is also plausible that Sophia accentuates the uncreated aspect of the background energy in the universe. *Mē on*, for Bulgakov, emphasizes its created nature.

126. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), 26.

127. Georges Florovsky labels Berdiaev's *Creative Act* as a "new phase of utopianism." He criticizes Berdiaev's emphasis on interiority for paying scant attention to asceticism. See Georges Florovsky, *Ways of Russian Theology* (Part Two), *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky*, ed. Richard S. Haugh, trans. Robert Nichols (Vaduz, Liechtenstein: BUCHER-VERTRIEBSANSTALT, 1987), vol. 6, 275. Bulgakov is preoccupied with the Hegelian aspects

The inability of humans to reduce themselves to nothing illustrated, for Bulgakov, that God alone contained the freedom to create from nothing. Bulgakov regarded this limitation as empowering. The "gulf" between humanity and God—between "image and Prototype (*Pervoobraza*)—was a foundation necessary to affirm the dignity and trajectory of the human creature. Bulgakov assumed that humans could only "become god," as Athanasius had envisioned, so long as God was starkly different from them.<sup>128</sup> There had to be a real Prototype, a truly transcendent object, toward which people could aspire. According to Bulgakov, the distinction between God and the world functioned as a receptacle for evil, without which evil was redistributed within divine and human hearts. It is true that Berdiaev tried to address these depths—but Bulgakov remained skeptical of those efforts. For him, if Berdiaev seemed ambiguous as to whether it was freedom or determinism—creativity or History—that saved, it was because Berdiaev was more cynical about the capacity of humans to manage their depths than he let on.

Berdiaev was intent on giving humanity a promotion. But, in Bulgakov's view, this would be an artificial or ineffectual advance.<sup>129</sup> Berdiaev made creatures seem better by making the Creator seem worse. God was no longer Absolute. And the demotion of Divinity came at the cost of the human capacity to achieve divine perfection. So it was that Bulgakov, in the end, disparaged Berdiaev's creative act as a parody of creative freedom.

## Conclusion

Ancient Greece did not have a number for zero.<sup>130</sup> Hellenic ambiguity towards numerical naught was consistent with a larger metaphysical misgiving towards radical absence. Berdiaev and Bulgakov, as Orthodox thinkers immersed in the Platonic tradition, inherited the pervasive Greek perplexity at nothing. Each saw the Underground Man's failure to reduce himself to a cipher in the recesses of his mind as proof that absolute nothing was metaphysical nonsense. The underground became an opportunity to analyze more moderate gradations of nothing within human interiority, and, ultimately, within the primordial void out of which God created the world. In this way, their inquiry into "deep psychology" matured into "deep theology."<sup>131</sup>

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of Berdiaev's utopianism. At the same time, he illustrates how Berdiaev's fascination with the *Ungrund* may be guilty of the same metaphysical pessimism that Berdiaev famously attributed to Gogol. Berdiaev wrote, "the tragedy of Gogol lay in the fact that he never could see and depict the human, the image of God in man." Nikolai Berdiaev, *The Russian Idea* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 8.

128. Bulgakov intimates that the Athanasian aphorism, "God became human so that we might become god," does not suggest that God is no longer Absolute. Indeed, God must remain God for the formula to work.

129. Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 487, nt. 3.

130. Robert Kaplan, *The Nothing that Is: A Natural History of Zero* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 17.

131. Yuri Corrigan, "Dostoevsky's Depth Theology," Forthcoming in *The Oxford Handbook of the Russian Novel*. Natural theology is the use of the natural world or experience to reason inductively about God.

Bulgakov did not deem the deep theology of Berdiaev a success. He criticized Berdiaev for extolling freedom and creativity as a panacea while evincing a more basic trust in automatized processes to usher God, humanity, and their unruly interiors to the appropriate terminus. Berdiaev fetishized the verticality, mystery, and vitality of the Deep.<sup>132</sup> He believed in creativity, not in creation.<sup>133</sup> As a result, his project was thwarted by naivete, contradiction, and, most troubling to Bulgakov, a strained relation with the horizontal nature of material existence. Berdiaev may have rejected, in theory, the assumption that any stratum of being or nonbeing could be independent of divinity. But in Bulgakov's view, Berdiaev continued to be unduly captivated by the prospect of unmediated access to potentiality, and this fascination or fantasy prevented him from entertaining more paradoxical shades of nonbeing like the *ouk on*. Once again, Bulgakov pointed out how Berdiaev paid a heavy price for such imaginings: if God was not free, neither were humans. Evil, moreover, permeated farther into reality than Berdiaev cared to admit.

Bulgakov, in response, developed a vision of interiority that was not juxtaposed to the texture of creaturely life. He contended that the material world, despite the challenges and seductions it presents, was an unfathomable gift along with the nothing on which it rests. This gift could be celebrated in the heavenly abyss of one's soul. One could, as with any gift, decline. But there was a catch. One refused to believe in the inexplicable event of creation from nothing at the risk of entertaining a more literal irrationality in the underground. Bulgakov presupposed that the underground emerged from the illusion that one could exist at all, acting as if what one owned were not a blessing from God. The underground was foremost not a failure to create but a failure to receive the creation as a gift and its creator as the giver. Bulgakov was adamant that this was a giver who was worthy of being accepted. For him, there could be no dark source, no tragedy, in God.<sup>134</sup> Evil remained a mystery, like creation *ex nihilo*. Not knowing everything was no excuse for failures in gratitude and humility. One could be thankful that evil did not have "a place in this universe" because its energies moved away rather than towards the center of reality.<sup>135</sup> One could also hope that if history began with the admission of nothing, then it would end with a more astonishing reception: the salvation of all.

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132. *The Meaning of the Creative Act* begins with the lines: "The human spirit is in prison. ... The true way is not a movement to right or left in the plane of 'the world,' but rather movement upward and downward on lines of the ultra-worldly, movement in spirit and not in 'the world' " (Berdiaev, *The Creative Act*, 2).

133. For this distinction I am indebted to Rowan Williams. Williams intuited the profundity of Bulgakov's thought long ago, juxtaposing it to the "emptiness" of Berdiaev's rhetoric. See Todd Breyfogle and Rowan Williams, "Time and Transformation: A Conversation with Rowan Williams," *CrossCurrents* 45, no. 3 (Fall 1995): 293–311.

134. Bulgakov insists: "[I]t is impious and absurd to speak about 'tragedy in God'. [...] God is at liberty to introduce himself into the tragic process of world history, while remaining in himself and for himself free from it. This is why in the Absolute itself there is no place for tragedy, which is rooted in the antagonism of the shattered forces of relative being" (Bulgakov, *Unfading Light*, 186). Later in his career, Bulgakov entertains the idea that there exists "tragedy in God." However, he invokes divine tragedy in a very different sense than does Berdiaev (see footnote 119).

135. Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 101.

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