



The Gnostic devil in Bulgakov's "Master and Margerita" Marc Neining

A comparative study of the devil figure in Goethe's "Faust" and the presentation of the devil in the bible. The focus lies on on Bulgakov's devil figuration, however. The essay also deals with the Gnostic aspects in "Master and Margarita".

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There is a consensus among scholars that, in his work *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov created a complex and multi-layered novel. On the first narrative level the reader is confronted with three interlinked plots. Secondly, the novel has a broad "mythical framework" which contains Biblical and Christian tradition; especially the role played by the devil throughout history is essential.

Furthermore, *The Master and Margarita* is a parody of Soviet society, appared with philosophical elements. This combination can lead to certain confusion, since the connections and interrelations are often obscure (1), e.g. the relation between the Moscow chapters, the Yershalaim chapters and the novel written by the Master: how are Woland's story (Chapter 2) (2), Ivan's dream (Chapter 16) and the Master's novel (Chapters 25 and 26) related to each other, and how are they related to the Epilogue of the novel? How can it be that Ivan dreams and the Master writes about the same thing, an event that happened two thousand years earlier?

These questions remain unclear (3). Testa summarizes its complexity neatly when he says "[it] is a work of excruciating complexity, comparable, in its intertwining of realism and myth, tragic and ironico-grotesque episodes, divine and profane, antiquity and present time, only to Goethe's *Faust*" (Testa 262).

Its relation to other works and traditions, namely the one mentioned above and the Bible, are vital for an understanding of the novel. In addition, a profound knowledge of Soviet society in Moscow of the 1930s and Bulgakov's personal history and background would be necessary to provide a full understanding. This is hardly possible in a short essay, but this background is the basic cause of the multitude of approaches and interpretations and, accordingly, the confusion and contradictions.

The rich relations and borrowings from *Faust* and biblical tradition are obvious. But, of course, Bulgakov did not just copy these other stories and 'recycle' them to a new one. He does borrow characters and elements but he takes them out of their original setting and puts them in a new role: he reinvents them. This contributes highly to the characters complexity, as they inevitably are loaded with previous conceptions. This becomes very clear in the figures of Yeshua/Jesus and Woland/Satan and his entourage and also in their relation to each other. Bulgakov's Yeshua, introduced in the second chapter of the novel, is by no means the glorified redeemer, as is how we tend to see Jesus Christ (4). Bulgakov's Yeshua does not have 12 disciples but one. For this one, Levi Matvei, Yeshua is the absolute center of his world. He writes down on a parchment everything Yeshua says and does, but "nothing that was written there did [Yeshua] ever say" (p.16). This is due less to misunderstanding but more because of his fanatic adoration for Yeshua; that is, Levi Matvei depicts him as superhuman. Apparent from Levi Matvei's behaviour, we can assume that, for him, Yeshua is the redeemer, the Messiah.

Therefore he wants to glorify him and consequently puts Yeshua in the active role of a revolutionary and hero. It is Levi Matvei's fault that people "muddle" up what Yeshua said and through this he is partly responsible for the accusations towards Yeshua. The result is Yeshua's confrontation with his judge who appears in the persona of Pilate. Levi Matvei creates a myth around Yeshua. Although it is not explicitly said, in *The Master and Margarita* Levi Matvei's writings are the source for the later gospels and, henceforth, the resulting images of Jesus Christ are those which endure. One could even say his parchment represents *The book of Q* (5). We learn not only from Berlioz, but also from Woland "that absolutely nothing written in the gospels ever happened as an actual fact" (p.33), and the latter appears to be the ultimate source. This constitutes the connection between Levi Matvei's writings, the gospels and consequently the myth of Jesus Christ in the modern world – which is here Soviet Moscow in the 1930s. Here the

existence of Christ is denied. But as the Master's novel and the conversation of Woland and Berlioz shows, the myth of Jesus is still present. Furthermore, Bezdomy is supposed to write anti-religious poems. Herein lies a fine irony, since even anti-religious literature keeps the religious elements present and alive.

There is no doubt that the Bulgakov's Yeshua is related to Jesus Christ. But Bulgakov seeks to reinvent him and set him in a new light. We can also see this in the use of the name "Yeshua" and not "Jesus". Yeshua has no apparent supernatural powers (6), but a very good intuition, sensibility and perception. The decisive aspect of the figure of Yeshua is, after all, that he is in the first place not presented as the Messiah, but as a very human wandering philosopher, albeit one of great eloquence. Though Yeshua believes in one god, he is in no way the revolutionary enunciator of the new kingdom of God; he talks about a kingdom of truth. He is afraid of physical pain and does not want to die at all. He even asks Pilate, with a somewhat naïve hope, to let him go. Finally, Yeshua's death is not very sensational. Except for his disciple Levi Matvei and some soldiers nobody is there. The aspects mentioned above stand in crass contrast to Jesus depicted in the Gospels and the Jesus-myth.

In the end, however, Yeshua gains light and even becomes the head of "the department of the metaphysical good" (Krugovoy 97). His disciple Levi Matvei and, though only after 2000 years, Pilate also gain light, what makes Yeshua to a redeemer figure in the end. I think that Yeshua gains light not so much because of his faith in the one God, but because of his faith in the good. He, the philosopher, claims that all people are good. He even continues to claim this after he has been beaten and under the threat of death. He includes Mark Ratkiller, who has beaten him up as well as the traitor Judas and Pilate, who becomes a secret admirer of Yeshua. The claim that all people are good relates to the concept of a divine spark, the small, godly realm of light in mankind.

Yeshua also seems to stand somewhere out of this world. He is still subjected to it, as his fright of death clearly shows, but he is already anchored in the spiritual realm. In his conversation with Pilate he shows fear; after all, he is still just a human being. But he is not frightened because of Pilate's authority. It is as if he sees through the principles of the world and beyond, into a realm of a higher order. Yeshua realizes that Pilate cannot really harm him since he has realized that this world is not the limitation of existence; Yeshua's claim of the goodness of all man sounds absurd, but it is his recognition of the divine spark and therefore the revelation of the realm of light to him. Even in the face of torment, injustice and death he retains his hold on this faith. He shows that freedom is not only a condition of being, dependent on outer circumstances, but a choice. We can say Yeshua gained knowledge or: Gnosis - the key to enter the realm of light.

We find the reinvention of Jesus into a new role is repeated in a similar way for Bulgakov's Satan figure. But the figure of Woland is even more complex, as the tradition, role and function of the devil has changed over the times. Apart from the 'classical' devil, based mainly on the New Testament and fully formed in the Middle Ages, Bulgakov's devil is obviously related to Goethe's Mephistopheles in Faust, as the epigraph at the beginning of the novel makes clear. From the beginning Woland has a background, even before one line has been written about him. The resulting complexity and multi-referentiality of Woland lead to a broad spectrum of viewpoints upon him, briefly listed by Haberer: some see him as a classical devil figure, completely settled in the realm of evil; on the other side we find those who "find Woland quite a sympathetic character" (Haberer 383, Fn 7). Though the epigraph from Faust says nothing about Woland's role as devil and his relation to evil, it shows that he is not in the tradition of the Christian Satan - he is not the opponent of God.

But Woland, in his role as devil, still belongs to and also represents the realm of evil. But what is this evil then? What is his nature? I would argue that Woland represents the

spiritual realm on earth. He is, like Mephistopheles, an agent of God. In the Old Testament, the concept of a devil as an opponent of God does not exist (Pankova 2). Wright points out that the word "Satan" in the Old Testament means adversary, which further indicates a certain duality. But this adversary is still one of God's angels and not his enemy. As Pankova points out, the Satan of the Old Testament is rather an adversary of man than of God. In Exodus we find a "destroyer" (Exodus 12:23) and in the Second book of Samuel we have an "angel who was working destruction among the people" (Sam.24). In both cases this 'evil angel' is only an instrument of God; Satan is not personified yet. The first encounter of man with Satan takes place in Zechariah (7), where he acts as the accuser of Joshua before God (Zech. 3: 1- 2, see also Pankova 4 f.). There is another direct reference to Satan in 1 Chronicles 21:1.

In the book of Job we find the greatest development towards a devil figure, as "in Job Satan is [...] a personality with the function of accusing, opposing and harming human beings" (Russell 36, quoted after Pankova 6). This 'evil angel' already shows independence and free will, though he is still in God's service and ultimately subject to him. On the other hand, God himself contains evil elements, which we can see in the genocide of the Egyptian first-born in the Exodus passage mentioned above. Throughout the Old Testament God appears as jealous, arbitrary, selective and even cruel – it is a two faced god. I agree with Pankova in that elements for the development of the devil- figure lie here, as there is a conflict between the benevolent God and some of his godly actions.

For the Jewish people this conflict increased and became very essential through the Babylonian exile, as now God seems to turn against his own chosen people. In the exile the Jews came into contact with the dualistic ideas of the Babylonian religion of Zoroaster. This caused a "highly significant change in the conception of Satan" (Vatter 50, quoted after Pankova 9). The result was the conception of two absolute principles; God represents the absolute good, Satan represents absolute evil and takes over all the 'bad sides' of God. In the apocryphal writing Satan became the fallen angel and the opponent of God – he is expelled from God's side and no longer in his service.

The expulsion of the 'evil angel' from 'heaven' marks the last step toward a dualistic worldview. Early Christianity, still in the tradition of Judaism, picked up on this and created the concept of the devil as the Arch- fiend of Jesus Christ. (Pankova 9 f.). In the development of Christianity Satan became the embodiment of evil, the absolute enemy of God and man. Woland is, to some degree, in the tradition of the Old Testament and the apocryphal writings. But already here the differences become obvious. He is not an absolute destroyer and corrupter of man, neither is he the enemy of God. Let us compare this now with the devil in Goethe's Faust, the other big influence for the development of Woland - Bulgakov's novel is full of allusions to Faust .

Mephistopheles is insofar in the tradition of the Old Testament, as he a harm-doer of mankind, but he is more subtle and sophisticated than the Satan of the Old Testament. In Job the devil torments his victim; in Faust the devil is a tempter trying to lure his victim. As Satan in Job, Mephistopheles is executing his experiment with Faust with the consent of God. The difference to Job is the pact between Mephistopheles and Faust: Faust agrees to this experiment and therefore is an equal partner (8). Woland is definitely closer to the latter devil figure, but he contains a new element to the devil concept: he shows benevolence to some individuals, especially to Margarita and the Master. Mephistopheles gives Faust everything he ever wanted - higher knowledge of the world and beyond. But his motives are still devilish and aim to corrupt Faust. We should not forget though, that Woland also harms people seriously and in a quite arbitrary manner, e.g. Bosoi, Varenukha or Rimsky.

In Faust there is a break with the tradition of the Old Testament, as he no longer belongs to the "echten Göttersöhnen" but is a "Geist der verneint"(Faust 18). He is still subordinate to God, but already quite loosely. He is an independent figure, not belonging

to God's court; he acts more as a counterpart to God than his opponent. God praises " [das] lebendig, reiche Schöne. Das Werdende, das ewig wirkt und lebt" (Faust 18), whereas Mephistopheles claims "besser wärs, dass nichts entstunde" (Faust 46). Mephistopheles is not opposed to God, but to his creation and therefore mankind. As Krugoyov points out, Mephistopheles is also a "local daemon of Christianity" with limited possibilities (Krugoyov 77). He is not the devil in the sense of Lord of Darkness.

Mephistopheles himself says: " Das Heidenvolk geht mich nichts an, Es haust in seiner eigenen Hölle" (Faust 191). Woland, on the other hand, represents a universal devil. The 'evil angel' in the Old Testament represents the destructive and harmful side of the supernatural forces towards man. This is reflected in Woland; it is a vital aspect of his nature, as we see in particular see in Chapter 28 – The final adventures of Korvyov and Behemoth. In the apocryphal writings and the New Testament, the devil progresses from an opponent of man to the opponent of God. But the devil also becomes a necessity. God is the absolute good; therefore evil needs an explanation. It is manifested and personified in Satan, the fallen angel. Christianity could not even exist without the devil, since then the death of Jesus Christ would be meaningless. The fall constitutes the existence of a second kingdom. It establishes a dualistic view on the world. But a precondition of the fall was unity, or wholeness. As we will see below, Bulgakov adopts this theme, but he also introduces a major change.

In Faust the devil figure of Mephistopheles is also a necessity, as God himself states in Vorspiel im Himmel : "Des Menschen Tätigkeit kann allzuleicht erschaffen. Er liebt sich bald die unbedingte Ruh, Drum geb' ich gern ihm den Gesellen zu, Der reizt und und wirkt und muss als Teufel schaffen." Here the devil is not only an explanation for evil in the world. He is an agent of God, though Mephistopheles himself would probably deny this statement. Evil is necessary to keep the mankind striving towards the good. As Haberer says, only by overcoming the devil Faust can achieve to his goal. Here we might find one aspect that helps us understand the famous passage from Faust, which also is the epigraph at the beginning of Bulgakov's novel:

Faust: Nun gut, wer bist du denn?
Mephistopheles: Ein Teil von jener Kraft,
Die stets das Böse will und stets das Gute schafft.
(Faust 47)

In the cosmic whole the devil has an essential function: "Sunde, Zerstörung, kurz das Böse" (ibid.) in the world enables man to choose and to act in the right way. In this way the evil is a means of liberation. Only through the existence of evil can man emancipate himself and become responsible for himself and his fate. Man has to overcome evil to gain light; it is not granted by following laws and dogmas. It is an active choice. In Faust the devil tries to prevent man from growing; it is Mephistopheles' aim to lead Faust from the right path and to stop his attempt to achieve a higher order. Mephistopheles works with "two kinds of weapons, one material and the other one intellectual" (Haberer 386).

He is fulfilling Faust's desires and thereby tries to lure him into sloth and lethargy. Haberer goes on: "The intellectual weapon is more subtle: Goethe's devil assume the more attractive role of the modern skeptic who, through mockery, attempts to annihilate all higher values" (ibid.). Herein lies the major difference from Woland. True, Mephistopheles might be sarcastic and mocking, but his main role is that of a tempter. Woland is the opposite. Temptation plays a minor role; his main weapon is mockery. Where Mephistopheles tries to lull his victim, Woland is tearing them out of their delusion. His aim is the "unmasking of the vices of humanity" (Testa 263). Here we find a medieval feature of Woland, that of the rogue of carnival. As in medieval carnival he uses parody and mockery to publicly expose the superficiality of Soviet society (Tumanov 51). He lays bare the reality beneath ideology and shows that the people haven't changed, after all (p.101). The "homo sovieticus" (Tumanov 58) is an opportunist, either submitting to the system or,

even worse, serving it for personal advantage. With his actions Woland serves higher values, as he unmasks the hell of absolute materialism. It is hell because it deprives man of freedom – physical and mental.

Man becomes a slave because "love, faith and art" (Tumanov 56) are chained. Therefore Woland is a reversal of Mephistiopholes. They are both devils, both mocking and tempting man. But their goals are quite different. Mephistopheles wishes to annihilate the world and life, "denn alles was entsteht, Ist wert dass es zugrunde geht. Dr um besser wär's, dass nichts entstunde" (Faust47). Woland, on the other hand, is no enemy of life.

Furthermore, he promotes the spiritual realm, which is completely denied in materialistic Soviet society. This society comes closest to Mephistopheles' vision of annihilation. Woland, on the other hand, provides evidence that there is more. His aim is not to annihilate, but to reveal a higher order and the existence of God. With his evil doing he reveals the evil inherent in Communist ideology and in addition he lays bare the effort to deny that fact. Soviet Moscow is not paradise on earth and there is no way that it ever could have once been one; and it is Woland who demonstrates that. Therefore I see him not only as the personification of evil but also as the mirror of evil. He shows the Muscovites' real face and exposes what, according to ideology, is no longer there: greed, corruption, egoism and so forth. He reveals that ideology itself is a warm blanket, that somehow always seems to be too short. Woland and his entourage are not very restraining in their efforts. Two persons die, several others fall into the hands of 'them', that is the NKVD, and some are driven insane, though only temporarily. They further destroy some buildings and embarrass quite a few ladies. This is Woland's way of working good through evil. We might be tempted now to claim that he is not representing evil, but that he is a just punisher and people get what they deserve. But we cannot ignore his arbitrariness. Certainly, his primary element is evil. But his evil is necessary, because only its existence and man's knowledge of it liberates man, as only then can man learn and grow.

In the end, however, Soviet Moscow basically stays the same. Everything that occurred during the visit of the devil is explained in a rational way. These explanations are quite far-fetched and even absurd, but ideology seems to triumph. I agree, however, with Tumanov, who sees Woland as an "allegory of freedom"(Tumanov 61), that things as they are in the moment are not eternal and changes are possible.

As I noted above, Yeshua represents the realm of light, and I also introduced the idea that Bulgakov's novel contains elements of Gnostic conceptions (9). I would argue that Bulgakov's novel contains a cosmology, which strongly resembles that of Gnosticism. In that order Woland is Yeshua's antipole - he represents the shadows. I see both as agents of God. As Tumanov puts it, Yeshua and Woland are colleagues (Tumanov 52). Woland works on earth, Yeshua is the connection between earth and the realm of light. Therefore he can be seen as a redeemer figure, an element inherent in many Gnostic sects. Yeshua does not bring salvation but he shows the way to achieve it. Salvation is to enter the realm of light; with the use of this motif Bulgakov adopts the basic goal of Gnosticism. The realm of light, or, to use the Gnostic term, the plenora, is the realm of the real God. The plenora cannot be grasped by human mind. It is outside of everything man could imagine – it is outside of our cosmos, free from any sort of substance. Therefore God is a God who is not. God in Master and Margarita is absent. What proves his existence is actually Woland - he gives the seventh proof (10) – he is the means by which man can know that there is a higher order. Man cannot grasp God, so there is only the devil left. This might be the most crucial function of Woland. His evil is the only way to come to good, which is the light. This is also reflected in Levi Matvei's statement: "He [the Master – M.N.] has not earned light, he has earned peace" (p. 305); access to the realm of light is the ultimate of what man's aspirations. But it has to be gained, and to do so it demands great efforts in life. The Master failed because he gave up. They broke him and he only wants to return to

his basement. He gave up all his visions and therefore becomes just another Mitläufer of the soviet system.

Woland's relation to God is difficult to elaborate. The consequence of the above discussion is that he is somehow in God's service. Woland himself speaks of "departments". He also willingly fulfills the order brought to him by Levi Matvei.

Woland can be seen as the master over this world: time and space are irrelevant for him; he knows everything that happens on earth. But he is completely bound to this earth, as his globe indicates. This world is the realm of shadows. Therefore we can see him as God's shadow (Wright 1165). In the Gnostic worldview he is the Lord over matter, since this world is a shadow of the realm of light. As the very being of matter is seen as evil in Gnosticism, Woland is consequently the devil. In general the devil, or demiurge, was a being hostile towards man. But in some Gnostic sects, the devil was seen in a more positive way than in Christianity, e.g. in Manicheanism. Woland has power over this world, but he is not omnipotent: he can destroy, even take life, but he cannot create. Here we find a contradiction of Gnosticism, in which the devil, or demiurge, also created the world.

Woland knows well his role and his limitations (p.242). Therefore I think he is quite aware of what he is and what he is doing. He is no unconscious instrument of God.

After all, I see Woland as the representative of the spiritual realm on earth; he is not an enemy of God. And as God is absent, he, together with Yeshua, is one of agents and the connection to the plenora. How evil he finally is remains uncertain. But we can state that he is necessary for man as a liberator. His final being might also remain unclear. Just when we think we got him, he sneaks in a backdoor. But he is the devil; it would be a great disappointment if he were not like that.

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Notes

1 See also Haberer 382-384: she briefly elaborates why and how there is so much confusion around the characters in *The Master and Margarita*.

2 These and all further references refer to the edition of Vintage Books of *Master and Margarita*.

3 I agree here with A.C. Wright's view, that the Yershalaim chapters are factual, though there remain certain doubts. Wright also gives no clear explanation of how the episodes are related with each other (Wright 1168 f.). Furthermore as I think an absolutely clear answer can't be given; every attempt for an explanation has to remain an assumption. However, most scholars identify the Yershalaim chapters with the Master's novel. See also Ericson 26.

4 This is from the perspective of the western world, where the roman-catholic and protestant churches dominate the view on Christ. Bulgakov might have had a view dominated by the Russian-Orthodox church. As I am not acquainted with that form of Christianity and its differences toward western Christianity, my analysis and conclusions are drawn under the background of the former.

5 The book of Q is the designation for an assumed original source for the later gospels. It got lost, but there is hardly a doubt that it existed.

6 Though it remains unclear why Pilate's headaches stop.

7 This is from a chronological viewpoint (Wright 1164).

8 Although in *Job* it is Satan who talks God into the experiment, whereas in *Faust* it is God's suggestion.

9 A survey of Gnosticism cannot be provided here, as the topic is itself enormous. However, the following literature contains some good summaries and introductions: LacARRIERE –*The Gnostics*; Förster – *Gnosis*, p.1-26; Groningen – *First century Gnosticism*. p. 1-18 and p. 176-185.

10 See Ericson p. 24, 28-29