



The Apocalyptic Vision of Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita

Edward E. Ericson, Jr.

In this excerpt, Ericson posits that Russian Orthodox Christian doctrine is the fundamental context in which *The Master and Margarita* must be understood. Overview published in *The Apocalyptic Vision of Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita*, pp. 9-24. Lewiston, Australia: Edwin Mellen Press, 1991.

From the archive section of
The Master and Margarita

<http://www.masterandmargarita.eu>

Webmaster

Jan Vanhellemont
Klein Begijnhof 6
B-3000 Leuven

+3216583866
+32475260793

The premise of this book [*The Apocalyptic Vision*] is that the key clue to discerning the pattern which runs through ***The Master and Margarita*** is orthodox Christian doctrine, particularly as it is expressed by Eastern (specifically, Russian) Orthodoxy. That theological context will be discussed in Chapter Three. This chapter sticks to the novel. However, for all of their apparent differences, these two chapters fit together as a unit and should be read as such.

It must be understood that all of orthodox Christian theology, whether Western (Catholic and Protestant) or Eastern, agrees on central doctrines. The Apostles' Creed is a fair summary applying to both. Both belong to the Occident, not to the Orient--that is, to Europe and its Christianity, not to Asia and its distinctive religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, and others). But it must also be understood that there are some not insignificant variations between the branches of Christendom. When these differences surface, it is to the Eastern, not to the Western, part of Christendom that we must look for light on ***The Master and Margarita***. Thus, one who is reared on Western Christian theology or has studied it may easily misread Bulgakov's theological references and borrowings.

The above distinction may be seen most pointedly in that area of theology which is of special interest to the Eastern Christian Church: eschatology, the doctrine of last things leading to the consummation of human history. The Eastern Church pays more attention than the Western one does to the apocalyptic vision of judgment and resurrection. This doctrinal matter, as we shall see, figures substantially in ***The Master and Margarita***.

But, first, let us observe simply that all of the essential elements of the Christian world view are to be found in the novel: the creation of man in the image of God, human depravity, a moral universe in which beliefs and actions have their inevitable consequences, divine providence, a personal God who intervenes in human history, a personal Devil who does likewise, the intimate relation between the supernatural and the natural realms, the centrality of the Incarnation (God taking on human form), the vicarious atonement by Christ through his death and resurrection, Christ's descent into hell, Christ's intercession for sinful man, the forgiveness of sin, the judgment of evil, the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting, heaven and hell. This list is virtually a summary of the venerable Apostles' Creed, which antedates the split between the Eastern and the Western Churches.

Beyond this list of Christian teachings, we have internal evidence from the novel of Bulgakov's familiarity with and interest in religious matters, some of them abstruse. In the very opening chapter Bulgakov mentions Philo, Josephus Flavius, and Tacitus; the Egyptian god Osiris, the Phoenician Tammuz and Adonis, the Babylonian Marduk, the Aztec Vitli-Putzli, the Phrygian Attis, the Persian Mithras; and the religious thought of Kant, Schiller, and Strauss.¹ And, of course, four chapters of this novel are devoted to a retelling of the story of Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate.

Almost all critics who have commented on ***The Master and Margarita*** have recognized Bulgakov's interest in matters religious. The question is what to make of it. Probably the most common general approach is to say that Bulgakov makes free use of these materials, especially the biblical ones, for purposes of allusion but that any religious viewpoint which he may be expressing is pointedly not one which could be called orthodox. Maybe it is some heretical strain like Gnosticism or Manichaeism; but it is not orthodox Christian. To this issue we shall return at various times.

We can begin to penetrate this complex novel by breaking it down into its three distinct strands of plot--though they are intertwined and not kept separate. The first plot to surface is the appearance in Moscow of the Devil and his retinue. The second plot is the story of Pilate and Jesus, focusing on the latter's trial, death, and burial. The third is about two Muscovites: a man without a name, who is called simply the Master and who is writing a novel about Jesus and Pilate, and a woman who loves him, named Margarita. These two characters interact with the supernatural characters of the other two plots, and it is their story, the title plot, which pulls all three plots together. The result is an artful orchestration of the three plots which imposes a unity upon the extremely divergent basic materials.

Thus, the natural and the supernatural realms are inextricably bound together. And this is surely the main theme of the novel, the one which comprehends all others. God and man are bound together. Reality cannot be circumscribed by nature alone. Any outlook which denies the ontological reality of the supernatural--classical Marxism, for instance, or any variant of it operative in the Soviet Union--is therefore pathetically inadequate to explain the reality of the human condition.

The novel both opens and closes with an emphatic insistence on the facticity and historicity of the events and personages described therein. When in the opening pages Satan appears to two writers who are good Soviet atheists, their immediate reaction is, "It can't be!" (p. 4). Indeed, it cannot be--according to their view of reality. Bulgakov's comment, *in propria persona*, is, "But alas it was &" (p. 4).

Or was that Bulgakov speaking? Or a narrator separate from the author? It is a critical commonplace to draw a sharp distinction between an author and his narrator; this approach often yields fruitful results and is sometimes positively necessary. Critics have brought up the matter with regard to this novel.² Whereas the question of who tells the Pilate chapters is a difficult one, which will be discussed later in this chapter, the issue at hand is the narrator of the Moscow chapters, which comprise the bulk of the novel. As interesting as the discussions of the narrative voice(s) are, no earth-shaking conclusions come out of them. The narrator's voice does seem sometimes ironic and knowing, sometimes naive, and so on. But Bulgakov loves to play tricks and can change his tone and mood to fit the occasion and his whim. So it seems fair to blur the distinction between Bulgakov and his narrator, treating the two as the same.

In any case, there can be no question that, when in the opening chapter the two writers try to persuade Satan that Jesus Christ never existed (the official Soviet line), the Devil imperiously controverts them: "Jesus did exist, you know. & It's not a question of having an attitude. & He existed, that's all there is to it" (p. 14).

The end of the novel, the Epilogue, returns to the theme of facticity. After all of the cavortings of Satan and company are concluded, the "educated and cultured people" (p. 383) reject the incontrovertible evidence that supernatural powers had visited their city. "A reason was found for everything, and one must admit that the explanations were undeniably sensible" (p. 385). (Surely, here the narrator is ironic and knowing, not naive.) The problem, though, is that the events were supra-sensible; they were beyond the range of normal empirical investigation, so that, at best, "nearly everything was explained away" (p. 387, emphasis added). The naturalistic explanations are clearly unsatisfactory and incredible--long-distance hypnotism, mass hypnotism, astounding feats of ventriloquism, and the like. Readers easily sense that Bulgakov wants them to see that these "plausible" reasons are the truly implausible ones.

Thus, early and late, Bulgakov separates himself from those who hold a naturalistic, materialist world view, and in the Epilogue he even mocks them:

But facts, as they say, are facts, and they could not be brushed aside without some explanation: someone had come to Moscow. The few charred cinders which were all that was left of Griboyedov, and much more besides, were eloquent proof of it.

(p. 383)

In this envelope structure of anti-naturalism is a plain warning by Bulgakov about how his novel is *not* to be read. Therefore, it is ironic, though obviously anticipated by the author, that a good number of the published readings of the novel have fallen victim to precisely the error which the author was at pains to warn against.

Closely related to this theme of natural-supernatural interaction (Orthodoxy makes the point most emphatically) is the insistence on divine providence, another subject which appears near the beginning and the ending of the book. God controls the world which he has made, and he intervenes in the affairs of men and women, those beings whom he created in his own image. Satan early drops broad hints about providence when he queries the two atheistic writers: "But this is the question that disturbs me--if there is no God, then who, one wonders, rules the life of man and keeps the world in order?" (p. 10). This being, superior to humans, must chortle inwardly as he receives the reply, "Man rules himself" (p. 10). He remarks the folly of such a view, since "to rule, one must have a precise plan worked out for some reasonable period into the future" (p. 10), which mankind clearly does not have. Satan then ominously suggests that a sudden death can end a man's life when he least expects it, and he goes on to prophesy the imminent death of one of them, the literary authority Berlioz. And, shortly thereafter, the death occurs, just as Satan had foretold. Satan knows of the reality of the supernatural realm which Berlioz and his fellow naturalists deny.

Not only so, but Satan knows more: that it is God and not Satan who ultimately rules. He announces his own limitations (p. 283). His department may be large; but it is only one

department, and it has limits. The point is made very sharply in an earlier version, the rough draft dated 1934. In it the last conversation between Woland and the Master goes as follows:

"I have received instructions concerning you. Very favorable ones. In general I can congratulate you--you have succeeded. I was ordered &"

"Can they really order you?"

"Oh, yes. I was ordered to take you. &"³

It is the Devil himself who assures the heroine, Margarita, of the operation of a benevolent divine providence: "All will be as it should; that is how the world is made" (p. 379).

If it is correct that Bulgakov wished to highlight the theme of the intermixture of the natural and the supernatural, how in terms of fictive technique could he go about doing so? He chose as his primary vehicle the deployment of fantasy--fantasy always mingled with realistic accounts. Bulgakov had demonstrated in works prior to *The Master and Margarita* a taste for a Gogolian strain of fantasy. But in this culminating work he puts this device to the service of a larger, cosmic purpose than it serves elsewhere.

Late in the novel Bulgakov says that "tiny grains of truth were embellished with a luxuriant growth of fantasy" (p. 338), and therein he provides a clue not only to how the novel is to be read but also to the difficulty in discerning the novelist's intent. One must see through the camouflaging effect of the luxuriant fantasy. (Sometimes critics get lost in it.) Bulgakov's vision of life is presented subtly, suggestively, allusively; but it is there, to be discovered by the persevering reader.

The context of the clause quoted in the preceding paragraph is significant. Unbelieving Muscovites pass along wild rumors about the strange events which they and their fellow citizens have experienced. But even in their inaccurate accounts there is present the element of abiding truth, though they do not have eyes properly trained to see it.

Not only is the fantasy an obstacle to immediate perception of Bulgakov's purpose, but the author compounds the reader's problem by his ongoing but eccentric use of symbolism. Much of this study is, therefore, of necessity devoted to explicating this intricate symbolism. The novel is loaded with details which have no apparent significance, apart from a symbolic reading. It is precisely because of the symbolism that Bulgakov is able to insist on calling his fantastic tale "a true story" (p. 212), a "truthful account" (p. 390). It is worth noting that these two assertions are placed strategically at the ends of Book I and Book II, respectively. The story is true because what is represented symbolically in the novel is the story of human life in all of its richness and complexity.

Of all of Bulgakov's devices for intentional obfuscation, perhaps the most perplexing one is that the symbols do not hold steady throughout the novel but keep shifting. The best image is that of a kaleidoscope. The task is to sort out the kaleidoscopic melange of multi-layered and overlapping levels of meaning.

The use of parallels is a familiar device in Bulgakov's works. For example, in his play *A Cabal of Hypocrites* Bulgakov draws parallels between King Louis XIV and Stalin, theistic religion and atheistic Communism, priests and the literary establishment, the Cabal of the Holy Writ and the Union of Soviet Writers, and Molière and himself.⁴ But these parallels hold steady in a way that the symbols in *The Master and Margarita* do not. A work which relies on parallelism to convey its meaning sometimes seems to cry out for an allegorical interpretation, that is, one in which the correspondences hold steady throughout. But *The Master and Margarita* does not yield itself to that kind of neat schematization; its correspondences do not hold in a constant one-to-one relationship throughout.

Thus, at one time the Master is a disciple of Yeshua Ha-Notsri (Jesus of Nazareth), and at other times the Master is followed by Margarita and Bezdomny. At yet other times he represents variously the Creator, Everyman, and Bulgakov himself. (We shall examine in Chapter Six the autobiographical component in the novel.) Pilate at times represents oppressive state authority, presumably including Stalin, and at other times he is a follower (or a quasi-follower, a searcher) after Jesus. He has his own faithful disciple, the dog Banga. Margarita sometimes represents mankind, sometimes the Virgin Mary, sometimes the Church, sometimes the female principle, sometimes Bulgakov's wife Elena. Satan (Woland) is sometimes his literal self, sometimes Stalin; at other times, through parody (the ultimate parody), he represents God. A further complication is

that a character may play more than one role at the same time.

The symbolism in the novel is not at all limited to the correspondences adhering to the characters. However, the symbolism attaching to the sun, the moon, roses, colors, and so on does not share in the shifting nature of that involving persons.

Although these correspondences may seem fanciful or even untenable when presented as bald assertions, they will become credible as the explication of later chapters proceeds. For now, though, let us ask why Bulgakov developed this elaborate kaleidoscope of symbolic correspondences. The answer, I believe, is to be found in Christian theology--again, particularly, Eastern Orthodox theology. Life, for Bulgakov, cannot be explained neatly, mechanistically. It always contains the element of mystery, and mystery is at the heart of Christian theology. The supernatural realm is beyond man's exhaustive knowledge; man can approach it only through metaphors, analogies, symbols--as parts of the next chapter will explain.

As though things were not difficult enough by now, there is an additional major complication. The correspondences in the novel are not only shifting ones; they are also generally oblique, often even skewed and distorted. For instance, Yeshua Ha-Notsri has only one disciple, Matthew, instead of the biblical twelve. There is only one account of Jesus' life, Matthew's, instead of the canonical four. Then, Matthew takes on the role of other individual disciples, as well. Bulgakov transfers Peter's denial of Christ to Matthew; he has Matthew, not Nathaniel, sitting under the fig tree. The four devils who accompany Satan to Moscow represent all of the fallen angels, though they do so asymmetrically. Similarly, the Master and Margarita represent mankind only in a fragmentary and asymmetrical form.

The obliqueness of the symbolic correspondences allows Bulgakov a kind of economy. He can use just a few details to stand for much. He needs to use only enough to suggest the parallel.

The reason why Bulgakov's correspondences can be called oblique and yet be considered legitimate is that the author relies heavily on parody. Indeed, the principle of parody is well-nigh omnipresent in the novel--almost as all-pervasive as the moon. And there is a direct relationship between these two. Most of the events happen "by the light of the moon, deceptive as it always is" (p. 460). The moon has no light of its own but merely reflects and in a sense imitates, or parodies, the light of the sun. Thus, in ***The Master and Margarita*** it is quite often the case that events and characters are not seen in their true aspect but only through the filter of the dim and inevitably distorting light of the moon. Moonlight is Bulgakov's device for presenting St. Paul's dictum, "Now we see through a glass, darkly" (I Corinthians 13:12). It is easy to misapprehend that which is seen only by moonlight.

The sun-moon antinomy serves two other purposes in the novel. One is that these heavenly bodies serve as natural symbols for the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness. When the moon is shining, men and events are under the influence of Satan. Satan's Ball occurs at midnight. In contrast, good events, such as Margarita's daily visits to the Master at noon, occur by sunlight. Jesus' death, an event which all believers in him consider the supreme good, occurred during daytime hours, with the moon absent.

A second purpose of the sun-moon antinomy is that it serves as an imagistic device to help unify the disparate elements. A Soviet critic has observed, regarding "the master's beloved Moscow and Pontius Pilate's hated, barbarous Jerusalem," that it is the presence of the sun and the moon that "artfully links the episodes so remote in space and time. & The two heavenly luminaries, alternately shedding their light on earth, almost become participants in the events, active forces in the novel."⁵

Similar to the sun-moon imagery and directly related to it is the substance-shadow juxtaposition. As usual, Bulgakov waits until late in the novel to offer the following explanation, spoken by Satan to Matthew when the latter is sent on a mission to earth by his now glorified Master, Yeshua:

You spoke your words as though you denied the very existence of shadows or of evil. Think, now: where would your good be if there were no evil and what would the world look like without shadow? Shadows are thrown by people and things. There's the shadow of my sword, for instance. But shadows are also cast by trees and living beings. Do you want to strip the whole globe by removing every tree and every creature to satisfy your fantasy of a bare world? You're stupid.

(p. 357)

As evil is the shadow of good, so Satan is offered as the shadow of God. However, shadows do not have an independent existence of their own; they depend upon the substance for their very existence. Bulgakov is no Manichaeist, who posits eternally warring and equally powerful Forces of Good and Evil in the universe. As has been noted earlier, Bulgakov's Satan is the very one who acknowledges that he operates just one department and is not omnipotent (p. 283). He never declares his independence from God. Just the opposite is true. Woland is well aware that he is an instrument whom God uses to carry out his purposes on earth, regardless of Satan's preferences.

It was St. Augustine, himself at an early time in his life a Manichaeist, who formulated the classic Christian statement on the subordinate and dependent status of evil in relation to good. Two brief citations suffice for our purposes: "& evil has no positive nature; what we call evil is merely the lack of something that is good"; and "& absolutely no natural reality is evil and the only meaning of the word 'evil' is the privation of good."⁶ The general context for these passages includes, interestingly, a discussion of angels, particularly fallen angels, in which Augustine makes precisely the point that God uses the Devil's wickedness for his, God's, own good purposes. In the same general passage, while discussing good and evil, fallen and unfallen angels, Augustine also discusses light and darkness, sun and moon. It is not necessary to demonstrate that Bulgakov drew directly from Augustine on these matters, though he was so learned that he almost surely knew this eminent Church Father first-hand. The point is that this conjunction of ideas and images is natural and fitting for use by an orthodox Christian.

It is in this context that we must understand the epigraph to the novel: Say at last--who art thou? That Power I serve Which wills forever evil yet does forever good.

This epigraph is borrowed from Goethe's *Faust*. Critics have expended considerable energy exploring the relationship between ***The Master and Margarita*** and *Faust*. An early and often-cited article on this subject is Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor's.⁷ Details in later chapters will demonstrate that, however important *Faust* was in the early stages of the writing of the novel--and it certainly played a major role then--it has only a tangential relationship to the final version of ***The Master and Margarita***. There are just too many divergences on crucial matters, and it is not very fruitful to extend to Woland the treatment of Mephistopheles by Goethe. Also, the Master turns out to be most unlike Faust. The only human being who somewhat resembles Faust is Margarita. But, then, what happens to any ostensible connection between her and Gretchen? Frieda, a minor character, comes closer to a linkage with Gretchen than Margarita does. In short, it seems that Bulgakov Christianizes the epigraph which he takes from *Faust*. It is not Goethe but Orthodox theology which serves to illuminate the heart of Bulgakov's novel.

It must be noted that a number of critics have chosen to label Bulgakov a Manichee. Ellendea Proffer, for one, asserts that "there can be little doubt" that Bulgakov "was influenced" by the Manichaeist "way of explaining the world."⁸ (Her vagueness here is not unusual for critics on this subject.) Glenn sees Bulgakov as "very close to a Manichaeist position. &"⁹ (Again, note the vagueness. How close is *very close*?) T. R. N. Edwards says, "Hatred of worldly things and joy in destruction point towards a definite Manichaeism in ***The Master and Margarita***. &"¹⁰ Both Glenn and Edwards go on to note that early in the novel there appears a reference to Herbert Aurilachs, described as a ninth-century necromancer.

A full article, by Laszlo Tikos, has been devoted to this single reference.¹¹ Insisting that the proper spelling is Gerbert Aurillac (an insistence which Proffer dismisses, along with the article in general)¹² and that he belongs to the tenth century, Tikos makes the case that "Bulgakov incorporated a mass of information about Gerbert into the major philosophical outlook of the novel."¹³ The Tikos article is one of several efforts to support the notion that Bulgakov adheres to one or another heretical offshoot from Christianity. However, the evidence from the novel, which will be marshaled in later chapters, suggests that Mikhail Bulgakov would agree with Sergius Bulgakov that "world-denying Manichaeism & separates God from the world by an impassable gulf and thus makes the existence of God-manhood out of the question."¹⁴ Mikhail is no more a Manichee than Sergius is.

Regarding the passage in which Herbert Aurilachs is mentioned, we may simply make the point that, in the novel, some of his manuscripts have been unearthed by the National Library in Moscow and that Professor Woland, as the only specialist in black magic, has been invited to decipher them. This is flimsy evidence upon which to develop an interpretation of the whole novel. On this evidence alone, one could as easily, or more easily, argue that Bulgakov's view was diabolism. Even in a Christian interpretation, Satan (Woland) would be the perfect choice to decipher the works of a black magician. All of these monkeyshines should be understood quite readily as Satan's

twittering explanation to the atheists about why he is in Moscow; the matter is never again mentioned in the novel.

Related to the idea that ***The Master and Margarita*** is Manichaeism is the idea that it is Gnostic. Wright's influential book posits this view (actually, one variant of it, since the variants are many). And his definition of Gnosticism is close to that of Manichaeism. The distinction, for what it is worth, is that standard Manichaeism sees two forces, those of Good and Evil, as eternal and equal in power, ever warring against each other for control of the universe, whereas Wright's brand of Gnosticism has the forces of good and evil struggling against each other but still under a reigning God. So Wright asserts, "Bulgakov, it would seem, aligns Woland with darkness or evil, Ieshua with light or good, leaving both of them as subordinate to the only God, in whom good and evil are one."¹⁵ Elsewhere, Wright comments,

*Healthy gnosticism, a total acceptance of good and evil as necessary for mankind, is seen as a positive force, as opposed to doctrinaire narrow-mindedness; one only need have faith that "everything will turn out right." There can be little doubt that this reflects Bulgakov's own religious attitude, for he has no time for orthodoxy in any area of life: it is the thinking, struggling man whom he admires, and this book is ultimately an expression of his whole life.*¹⁶

All who succeed Wright in commenting on ***The Master and Margarita*** will be in debt to him. But his viewpoint strikes me as quite wrong, though at least he does look to religious categories to explain the novel. Is it self-evident, on the face of things, that orthodox Christian doctrine is narrow-minded? Wright announces, "It will be obvious that Bulgakov's whole conception is broader than that of Christianity."¹⁷ But is it readily apparent that a failed old sectarian notion is to be considered broad, broader than a Christianity which has survived intact for two thousand years? Wright's first piece of evidence is that the Yeshua of the novel differs from the Jesus Christ of the New Testament--as if Yeshua were Bulgakov's creation and not the Master's, as if Yeshua were Bulgakov's own picture of the historical Jesus Christ. (More on these matters shortly.) And one does wonder to what kind of God Bulgakov was praying at the end of his life in his final words, "Forgive me, receive me!"--which matter Wright mentions.¹⁸

Wright forthrightly acknowledges, "I have several times been taken to task for claiming that Bulgakov had a "gnostic" view"; and he adds modestly, "& indeed the question is a confusing one."¹⁹ Wright admits even, though a bit cryptically, that "& in ***The Master and Margarita*** we cannot follow gnosticism to its extremes."²⁰ Further, he notes, regarding the common Gnostic notion of crediting the Devil with creating the world, "No such implication is present in Bulgakov."²¹ But his point remains, in terms of this novel, "not that good will overcome evil but that both are equally right and necessary within God's creation."²²

Wright is not alone in ascribing Gnosticism to Bulgakov. Edwards seems to have drunk at Wright's well. Beatie and Powell also seem to suggest that Gnosticism is at the root of Bulgakov's vision.²³ The main observation to be made here is that basic to Wright's view is that Bulgakov was a religious writer. The question is to which religious view of life and the world he adhered.

We have seen earlier that Bulgakov's Satan insists both upon the reality of the supernatural realm (how could he not, being of it?) and also upon his own limitedness and the ruling power of God. We turn now to the role of the Devil in Bulgakov's use of the principle of parody in this novel. The Devil has always had a strong appeal to the Russian imagination; literary depictions of him by Dostoevsky, Lermontov, and Andreyev, among many others, come readily to mind. Similarly (and probably related), the Russian Orthodox Church has been readier than Western branches of Christendom to give the Devil his due. In his other writings Bulgakov frequently depicted the Devil. He entitled an early story "Diaboliad." In ***Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel*** an editor, Rudolphi, appears to Maxudov, the writer-hero, in the guise of the Devil, Mephistopheles. In the same novel Maxudov is spared from suicide through the indirect influence of the Devil, as the hero delays action at the crucial point in order to hear Mephistopheles' lines in a recording of an operatic version of *Faust*.

However, in ***The Master and Margarita*** Bulgakov puts his long-standing fascination with the Devil to a special use, one in which parody is paramount. In a novel dominated by the symbolism of moon and sun, it should not be surprising that the Devil figures prominently. One of the main things to understand about Bulgakov's treatment of him is that he comes to embody the supreme parody: Satan standing in the place of God. Sometimes, as we have noted, he acknowledges his subordination to God; in those cases, he conforms to the role assigned to him by traditional Christian teaching. At other times, and more often, his dealings with men are a parody of God's

dealings with humans as understood by orthodox Christianity.

Satan, who traditionally was able to assume any disguise, even that of an angel of light (II Corinthians 11:14), comes to Moscow in the form of a man, directly paralleling the Incarnation of Christ. His disguise is that of a professor, not a carpenter or meek servant. In the Satanic incarnation Bulgakov's character comes to Soviet Moscow: the capital of atheism, as it were. But atheists do not believe in the Devil any more than they do in God. To accept his reality would be to break out of the naturalistic mode of thinking, just as much as if one were to accept God's reality. Hence, they reject him, and they deny to his face--and despite overwhelming evidence, some of it solidly empirical--the reality of his existence. As Jesus "came unto his own but his own received him not" (John 1:11-12), so Satan comes unto his own, but they know him not.

At the same time, Satan's appearance as a parody of God does not eliminate, according to Bulgakov's treatment of him, the reality of his status as the Devil according to traditional Christian understanding. He remains, in some of his manifestations in the novel, the Prince of Darkness in his own right. His power over God-rejecting humanity is apparent throughout. His confident assertion that "nothing is hard for me to do, as you well know" (p. 349) coincides remarkably well with St. John's observation that "the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (I John 5:19, New English Bible). He has successfully persuaded men to exchange the truth of God for a lie (Romans 1:25).

Still, some aspects of the traditional Devil are more prominent in this novel than others. Specifically, there is little, if anything, here of the tempter. (One thinks, by way of contrast, of the tempting of Eve and Adam or the testing of Job.) No character in *The Master and Margarita* sins because of Satan's initiative. Certainly, the reality of the Devil is never used to excuse a human being from responsibility for his own wrongdoing. What does occur is that Satan dispenses a painful justice to those who deserve it. They are the ones who fall into his department of cosmic responsibility. Never are the punishments inflicted by Satan meted out arbitrarily.

In both of his major aspects, his appearance in his own right and his presence as a parodistic parallel to God--actually, in the combination of these two aspects--Satan's existence is "The Seventh Proof," which is central to the novel and our understanding of it. Bulgakov gives this title to one of his chapters. It is surprising how little this subject of the seventh proof has been treated by Bulgakov's critics. Piper is one who does refer to it, but his calling it "the seventh proof of the existence of good and evil and of the inadequacy of reason"²⁴ is not at all satisfying.

In his opening conversation with the two Soviet literary men, Berlioz and Bezdomny, Satan speaks of the traditional five proofs of medieval scholasticism for the existence of God and of Immanuel Kant's refutation of them. But, offers Woland, Kant then outdid himself: "& he completely demolished all five proofs and then, as though to deride his own efforts, he formulated a sixth proof of his own" (p. 9)--the moral argument.

The mention of the five proofs is apparently a reference to the Five Ways of St. Thomas Aquinas. However, Thomas's Ways do not correspond directly with what Kant sought to disprove. In fact, one of Thomas's Five Ways is very close to Kant's own moral argument, and some of Kant's attacks were directed against proofs developed by other medieval scholastics. Actually, scores of proofs for the existence of God were offered in the Middle Ages. The facts of the history of philosophy need not detain readers of a novel in which all sorts of things are askew. We must recognize, though, that these proofs have to do with the subject of the existence of God, not merely with the existence of good and evil and certainly not with "the inadequacy of reason."

Bulgakov goes Kant one better and offers a seventh proof for the existence of God. That proof is the existence of the Devil. As the existence of the shadow proves the existence of that which casts the shadow and as the existence of moonlight presupposes the existence of sunlight, so Satan's existence bears witness to God's existence. And how, Bulgakov wants to say, can man, even atheistic Soviet man, deny the existence of Satan? Evil is too palpable and personal to allow such a denial. In terms of the novel itself, those who deny to the end cannot be credited and shall not be saved. Only those who do not believe in the reality of the Devil are punished by the Devil.

Bulgakov's concentration on the reality of Satan is his method of indirection for propounding the reality of God. Bulgakov knows that it is no more difficult to believe in the reality of God than to believe in the reality of the Devil--and really no easier. The watershed issue is the reality of the supernatural realm. Once that fact is granted--in whatever form, however fragmentary or badly distorted, so goes the burden of the novel--the rest of the Christian world view follows with

comparative ease.

Viewing Satan both as a parody of God and as an agent of divine providence vitiates an error made by some critics that Satan is a sentimentalist with a good--and soft--heart. Raymond Rosenthal, for example, entitled his early review "Bulgakov's Sentimental Devil."²⁵ Ewa Thompson writes at some length of "the sympathetic light" in which Bulgakov presents Woland and of "the devil's generosity." She links Bulgakov's character with the Romantic fascination with Satan, the kind of heroic character with "a redeeming aura about him," whose "greatness makes him unfit for condemnation, so to speak."²⁶

However, Satan is not a sentimentalist who violates his own devotion to evil for the sake of the appealing Margarita and her Master, nor is he a "good guy" incognito. It is true that he does what would generally be called good deeds. But he does not do them out of compassion or weakness of will. His "kind" acts are those willed by God, not by himself. Far from being a sentimentalist, he executes an impartial justice. He punishes those whose actions have brought their own bad consequences upon themselves. He spares those who belong to the realm of light and not to his realm of darkness; he is not allowed to touch such persons. The God who knows the number of hairs on one's head will not allow the Devil to bring harm to the heaven-bound. In sum, there is nothing in Bulgakov's depiction of Woland which violates orthodox theology.

The time setting offers *prima facie* corroboration for the idea that Satan's incarnation in modern Soviet Russia is a parody of Christ's Incarnation in ancient Palestine. In both cases the time is the second half of Holy Week, the climax of the Incarnation, which provides it with its ultimate meaning and which ushers in the joy of Easter Sunday. The story of Yeshua opens in sunlight, on the morning of Good Friday. There is a reference back to Jesus' dinner with Judas on Wednesday night. Christ's resurrection is not told in the novel, for a reason which will soon become clear. However, by the end of the novel, when we see the risen Lord, it is logical to accept that resurrection and to assign it to the traditional time of Easter Sunday morning. It is significant that Bulgakov carefully keeps Satan and his retinue from sharing in the joy of that day.

Woland comes to Moscow on Wednesday--significantly, at sunset. His magic show at the Variety Theater occurs on Thursday (night, of course). Satan's Ball, or Rout, is held on Friday night, the night when God, in the person of Jesus, is said to have descended into hell following his death on the cross. Temporarily, it seems that the forces of evil have triumphed. At sunset of Saturday, Satan and his host must leave: the Russian Orthodox retained for their ecclesiastical calendar the Jewish system of starting a new day at 6:00 p.m. and not midnight. Thus, Sunday, Resurrection Day, the day of Christ's victory over death and hell, formally began at 6:00 p.m. Saturday. (It is true that in certain places Bulgakov makes use of the fact that the Easter service of the Orthodox Church focuses on midnight.) The Master and Margarita are reunited on Good Friday night, the first fruits of Christ's victory through his death and resurrection. The novel ends with the transfiguration of the pair (more about transfiguration in the next chapter) and the disappearance of Satan and his henchmen into the abyss--at dawn of Sunday. No natural, earthly events take place on Sunday; it is a day of the supernatural, the eternal day.

An understanding of moon and shadow imagery and of Satan as a parody of God will also clear away what seems so far to have been the major stumbling-block to a correct reading of ***The Master and Margarita***: the unorthodox, apocryphal picture of Jesus. Yeshua is guilty of a cringing weakness which ill suits the Son of God, and he holds notions which are at odds with the teachings of the Jesus of the New Testament. (The character of Yeshua will be treated in detail in Chapter Five.) How, it might well be asked, can one argue for an orthodox Christian interpretation of the novel when the picture of Jesus is obviously far removed from that given in the Gospels? It is not surprising at all that many critics, while recognizing clearly Bulgakov's deployment of traditional Christian materials, conclude that his message lies outside the mainstream of Christian thought--let it be Manichean, Gnostic, some version of secular, or whatever.

The key issue here is one of technical narrative point of view. Who is it who tells the story of Pilate and Yeshua? Whereas the issue is somewhat cloudy, one thing must become crystal clear: Bulgakov does not tell it. The Jesus depicted is not Bulgakov's but someone else's.

There are three sections (four chapters in all) of the Pilate-Yeshua account. One is presented orally by Woland. Another is drawn from the poem by Bezdomny (whom the Master calls his disciple and whose name Mirra Ginsburg translates literally as "Homeless"). The third is a direct recording of part of the Master's novel. Since the Devil says, late in the book, that he has read the Master's novel, it could be that in his chapter he is quoting from it. It is less easy to transfer the Master's

words to Bezdomy. One must not rule out the possibility that Bulgakov's strategy is again one of deliberate obfuscation.

What is important to see here is that all three fragments cohere. Further, the style is consistent from one fragment to another, and it is a style different from anything in the Moscow chapters. So a good case can be made for single authorship of all three fragments. If so, the choice of author would have to be the Master. (The possibility that Bezdomy is the author will be discussed in the chapter about him.) If this ascription of authorship is correct, one must keep in mind the troubled nature of the Master's personality and therefore make a very sharp distinction between that fictional character and his creator, the novelist Bulgakov.

At the same time, whether the Pilate-Yeshua accounts come from three minds or one ultimately matters little. What is necessary to understand is that all three fragments have a sublunary origin. Their consistent distortion of the New Testament account arises because reality is now being perceived through the filter of diabolical influence, that is, perceived in the distorting light of the moon. Prominent among Bulgakov's early purposes for his novel was to write "The Gospel according to the Devil."²⁷ That early purpose would still be served in the final version if the author of the "Gospel" were to be under the influence of the Devil.

Eastern Orthodox theology emphasizes that fallen man is enslaved by the Devil and that he cannot see the truth whole apart from divine revelation and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Although the Master sometimes corresponds to author Bulgakov, the correspondences are constantly shifting. Both do write about Jesus Christ, but they do not write the same things. It would be as serious a mistake to identify this author and his main character as it would be to fuse (and thus confuse) Swift and Gulliver. If Bulgakov has the Master writing under the influence of the Devil, then we are to perceive the Master's account, however stimulating and revealing, as ultimately untrustworthy, as not Bulgakov's own view.

Whereas Bulgakov's use of parody is seen nowhere so clearly as in the character of Woland, this same principle is present in the story of Pilate and Yeshua. The Master's novel is the moon-inspired parody of the story of the Sun of Righteousness. As God inspired the stories of the four Gospel writers, so Satan inspires the story of the Master. Thus, as the orthodox accept the Bible as God's Word while not denying human authorship, so we are to accept the Pilate-Yeshua chapters as both the Master's novel and the Gospel according to the Devil. The Master wants to see the truth, but he cannot escape the control of that Power who holds all men in thrall.

Once the symbolic correspondences are sorted out and once the veil of parody is penetrated, we see that Jesus is as surely God's minister of mercy, love, and grace as Satan is God's minister for justice, power, and retribution. The Master perceives some of this reality about Jesus. He has an abiding fascination with him. But his perception is fragmentary and distorted. He cannot see the truth clearly.

It is interesting to note which details Bulgakov singles out for inclusion in the Master's novel. They are not arbitrarily selected. Yeshua's apocryphal lines about cowardice as one of the worst sins, however they are to be explained in theological terms [&], certainly highlight Bulgakov's intermittent satire of Soviet society. His assertion that all people are good, while perhaps jarring to Western ears, fits rather well with the Eastern Orthodox concept of the ultimate deification of humans [&].

What is really interesting, though, is that, regardless of details which diverge from the biblical accounts, enough canonical details are included, whether exactly or inexactly, for every reader to recognize Jesus in Yeshua. Pertinent here is St. James' observation that "the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19). At the very opening of the novel, Bezdomy's poem is being criticized by editor Berlioz because it depicts Jesus not as pure myth and superstitious invention but as "& well, completely alive, a Jesus who had really existed, although admittedly a Jesus who had every possible fault" (p. 5). Here is a clear clue about how to read the not-always-flattering account of Yeshua which will appear in the Master's novel-within-the-novel. The Master's Jesus is filtered through a diabolical distortion. Even so, this distorted Jesus is a Jesus who is both alive and recognizable. In theological terms, we would say that even persons under diabolical influence remain, by virtue of creation, image-bearers of God and therefore have some perception, however dim, of the truth. Again, parody is the operative principle.

Bulgakov, then, is not the immediate author of the three fragments of the Pilate-Yeshua story. However, he--and not one of his characters--is the direct source of one depiction of Jesus Christ.

That is, Jesus appears in ***The Master and Margarita*** outside of the novel-within-the-novel. Specifically, he reappears at the end of Bulgakov's (not the Master's) novel, when the eternal fates of the main characters are being decided. In this reappearance he does not exhibit any of the faults which were evident in the apocryphal, sublunary account(s). He is now the risen and glorified Lord. Technically, he does not appear, not *in propria persona*. But he sends Matthew on a mission, carrying orders to Woland. What we learn of him through Matthew's reportage of his statements is quite different from the flawed Yeshua of the earlier chapters. He is now emphatically the voice of final authority. Similarly, Pilate reappears in the final chapters, that is, outside the novel-within-the-novel. As both representative man and an individual, he is real and has an eternal destiny and cannot therefore be relegated to the status of apocrypha, any more than this late-appearing Christ can.

This larger life of Jesus helps us understand why Bulgakov chose for the Master's hero the Aramaic name of Yeshua Ha-Notsri: Jesus of Nazareth, not Jesus the Christ, or the Messiah. The Master's depiction gives us only the humanity of Jesus, not his divinity. A further purpose served by the Master's skewed account is that we receive a fresh view on an old topic about which all have their judgments and pre-judgments. Thus, Bulgakov removes the story of Jesus from the dustbin of stale doctrinal formulations. Whereas Bulgakov's final picture of Yeshua is as the resurrected Lord, the Master's depiction of Yeshua emphasizes and underlines the literal reality of the Incarnation. The fault of the Soviet atheists, Bulgakov surely knows, is to deny the literal reality, the historicity, of Jesus. Jesus really did exist, Bulgakov's Satan said. The common fault among Christian believers, despite their theology, is to think of Christ as God but not to be able to visualize Jesus as man. Bulgakov seems at pains to avoid both erroneous extremes and thus to present the theologically orthodox view of the God-man. Also in keeping with orthodox theology, the final vision of Jesus is of one who conquered death and still exists.

The Master and Margarita is a one-of-a-kind work, *sui generis*. Thus, the hunt for a genre or sub-genre to which to assign this novel, interesting though such a search might be to specialists, does not offer much to the illumination of the work. At the same time, it is clear to the student of all of Bulgakov's works that this novel grows out of the same artistic imagination that the others do. As Ullman says, "***The Master and Margarita***, Bulgakov's best and most ambitious work, is, in a sense, a companion to all the others."²⁸ Because other commentators have done excellent work in pointing out the parallels, both formal and thematic, between ***The Master and Margarita*** and those other works,²⁹ I shall forego an extensive treatment of these parallels, though I shall mention in the final chapter some interesting parallels with ***The White Guard***.

But there is one matter of parallelism which it is useful to note at this point. The conscious distortion of the facts of the Pilate-Yeshua story is analogous to distortions of historical materials in others of Bulgakov's works. Perhaps the clearest example is the treatment of Molière. Bulgakov had written a factual biography of Molière, but in his play ***A Cabal of Hypocrites*** he deliberately distorted those very facts. Ellendea Proffer has commented:

Bulgakov, who had done extensive research on Molière, both for the play and for the biography, certainly knew his facts. In the play, however, names of real persons are changed, and fictitious characters and events are added. Actual events described one way in the biography are given a completely different coloration so that the ban [of Tartuffe] occurs near Molière's death, when in actuality it occurred long before. &³⁰

She adds that, despite the historical inaccuracies, "Bulgakov tried to convey accurately the atmosphere of France under Louis XIV."³¹ The resemblance to the handling of the Pilate-Jesus story is obvious. This parallelism of distortion helps render untenable the view that Bulgakov gives us in Yeshua his actual personal view of the Jesus of the Gospels.

A similar device of indirection may be seen in Bulgakov's treatment of the Whites in such works as ***The Days of the Turbins***, ***The White Guard***, and ***Flight***. Although he ostensibly condemns the Whites as decadent, he subtly shows his sympathy for the Whites by his failure to glorify the Reds of the Revolution. This left-handed praise of the Whites, the only kind possible in the political atmosphere of the time, seems analogous to the depiction of a Jesus with all possible faults, yet a Jesus who truly lived.

The stratagem employed in these instances is best explained by Bulgakov himself in his ***Molière***:

Molière decided to resort to another method of bringing his play back to life. This method has long been familiar to playwrights: under powerful pressure, the author deliberately mutilates his work.

*It is an extreme method! Thus a lizard, caught by the tail, breaks off the tail and escapes. For every lizard realizes that it is better to live without a tail than to lose its life altogether.*³²

The task of the reader, then, is to discern the principles upon which Bulgakov does his work of "mutilation" in ***The Master and Margarita***. This chapter contains one understanding of what those principles are. Sooner or later, Bulgakov believed, his work would live. The task of discernment is no easy task, and it is evident why there is as yet no consensus on how to read the novel.

Notes

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, tr. Michael Glenny (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 5, 6, 7, 9. Further references to the novel are cited in the text.

See especially Ellendea Proffer, "On *The Master and Margarita*," *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 6 (Spring 1973), 533-64; Barbara Kejna-Sharratt, "Narrative Techniques in *The Master and Margarita*," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 16 (Spring 1974), 1-12; Vida Taranovski Johnson, "The Thematic Function of the Narrator in *The Master and Margarita*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 15 (Summer-Fall 1981), 271-86.

Cited in Marietta Chudakova, "*The Master and Margarita*: The Development of a Novel," *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 15 (1978), 195.

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Early Plays of Mikhail Bulgakov*, ed. Ellendea Proffer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1972), pp. 349-418.

V. Lakshin, "Mikhail Bulgakov's Novel *The Master and Margarita*," *Soviet Studies in Literature* 5 (Winter 1968-69), 11-12. Tr. and rptd. from *Novy Mir*, 1968, no. 6.

Saint Augustine, *The City of God, Books VIII-XVI*, tr. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1952), pp. 201, 220. (Vol. 14 of *The Fathers of the Church*.)

Elisabeth Stenbock-Fermor, "Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Goethe's *Faust*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 13 (1969), 309-26.

Ellendea Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), p. 552.

Michael Glenny, "Existential Thought in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 15 (Summer-Fall 1981), 248.

T. R. N. Edwards, *Three Russian Writers and the Irrational: Zamyatin, Pil'nyak, and Bulgakov* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 176. Edwards sees Manichaeism as only one influence of Persian ideas on Bulgakov. He also espies Manichaeism elsewhere in Russian literature, including Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Laszlo Tikos, "Some Notes on the Significance of Gerbert Aurillac in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 15 (Summer-Fall 1981), 321-29.

Proffer, *Bulgakov*, p. 637.

Tikos, pp. 322, 325. Besides the Tikos article, for information on Aurilachs see Henry Charles Lea, *Materials toward a History of Witchcraft* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1957), Vol. I, p. 150.

Sergius Bulgakov, *A Bulgakov Anthology*, ed. James Pain and Nicolas Zernov (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p. 150.

A. Colin Wright, "Mikhail Bulgakov's Developing World View," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 15 (Summer-Fall 1981), 163. As gratuitous and speculative as I consider this statement to be, at least it avoids the error of making Woland into a sentimentally good fellow.

A. Colin Wright, *Mikhail Bulgakov: Life and Interpretations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,

1978), p. 270.

Wright, *Mikhail Bulgakov*, p. 262.

Wright, *Mikhail Bulgakov*, p. 253.

Wright, "Mikhail Bulgakov's Developing World View," p. 161.

Wright, "Mikhail Bulgakov's Developing World View," p. 162.

Wright, "Mikhail Bulgakov's Developing World View," p. 161.

Wright, "Mikhail Bulgakov's Developing World View," p. 161.

Bruce A. Beatie and Phyllis W. Powell, "Story and Symbol: Notes toward a Structural Analysis of Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 15 (1978), 250.

D. G. B. Piper, "An Approach to Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 7 (April 1971), 143.

Raymond Rosenthal, "Bulgakov's Sentimental Devil," *New Leader* (November 20, 1967), 18-19.

Ewa Thompson, "The Artistic World of Michail Bulgakov," *Russian Literature* 5 (1973), 57. 59.

Chudakova, p. 178. See also Proffer, *Bulgakov*, p. 525.

Judy C. Ullman, "The Conflict between the Individual and Authority in the Works of Mixail Bulgakov." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1976, p. 163.

Ellendea Proffer, with her encyclopedic knowledge of Bulgakov's life and works, is very helpful on this subject, especially in the chapter on *The Master and Margarita* in her book *Bulgakov*. Shirley Gutry has written a full dissertation on these parallels: "An Approach to *The Master and Margarita* through the Creative Prose and the Letters of M. A. Bulgakov." Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 1976.

The Early Plays of Mikhail Bulgakov, pp. 356-57.

The Early Plays of Mikhail Bulgakov, pp. 357.

Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Life of Monsieur de Moliere*, tr. Mirra Ginsburg (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1970), p. 115.