



**Bulgakov's Master i Margarita:
Post-Romantic Devil Pacts**
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In the following essay, Testa traces the development of the devil figure in post-Romantic European literature and Bulgakov's use of the devil in *The Master and Margarita*. The Evil One is gone, the evil ones remain. Den Bösen sind sie los, die Bösen sind geblieben.
Published in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 24, no. 3 (fall 1990): 257-78.

From the archive section of
The Master and Margarita

<http://www.masterandmargarita.eu>

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I. the Diffraction of Evil

The first half of the nineteenth century was characterized by a high degree of epistemological optimism. The systems of philosophical idealism (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel), which placed the self at the center of material reality, not only played an influential role as cultural vehicles of a certain centripetal view of the world, but, even more importantly, were in and of themselves the expression of an atmosphere in which ontological primacy went to a self-founding--and thereby necessarily world-founding--concept of the self. So, for example, Novalis could write that Nature "is an encyclopedic systematical index or plan of our spirit."²

In spite of its often politically conservative, at times even outright reactionary political implications and interpretations, the philosophical anthropocentrism of the Romantic period in a sense relayed and brought up to date the basic postulate of Renaissance and Enlightenment: namely, the notion of man preceding all things. However variously the Romantic quest for infinity and union with the Cosmos may have been experienced and interpreted, existentially or politically, it represented in all cases a striking form of solipsism: the subject's partner became no lesser a being than the whole Universe itself. It may be suggested that Flaubert's Saint Antony, with his painstakingly and maniacally narrativized disintegration of the self, rendered virtually to perfection the archetype of what could be called the Romantic self's orgasm with and in the Cosmos;³ and there can hardly be a doubt that Antony's position as the "Self in the Desert" was a metaphorical representation of the subject's founding role in idealistic epistemology. For the Romantic soul, the world may have been as rich and full of signs as a fairytale-like "speaking landscape," or, by contrast, as barren and silent as an existential desert of the Thebaid; but the self always stood firmly in its center--if only to yearn for the fulfilling experience of the moment when the limiting necessity of "saying I" could be deposed. The enthusiasm of the time for the typically Romantic theme of the pact with the devil reflected its intoxication with what can only be termed, in the widest sense of the word, the humanistic world view of an epoch passionately desiring to be "chercheuse d'infini."

It is not surprising that the pacts with the devil of the Romantic epoch should have been tributary to this form of subject primacy. When examining the Romantic pacts, one has the impression of working in an almost complete vacuum of social and moral responsibility; it is as though the very fact of celebrating individualism had made the Romantic pact with the devil morally neuter, and an interest even in the protagonist's most self-centered deeds were always justified. In this sense, one could refer to pacts such as are to be found, among many others, in Balzac, Gogol', Nerval, Leopardi, Gautier, and so on. Goethe's *Faust* represents, of course, the very apotheosis of such a bracketing of the moral aspect for the sake of the foregrounding of diverse existential questions. In a sense, Romanticism certainly proved to be the swan song of individualistic anthropocentrism in Western civilization.

The second part of the century changed things dramatically. At whatever point in time we wish to place the epistemological shift, and to whatever complex convergence of social and scientific causes we prefer to attribute it, it is a fact that, as time went on, the experimentation with innocent individual desire and its morally neuter demonic sponsoring gradually waned. The scientific, industrial, social evolution which took place after 1848 fragmented the devil: the part of it which was to remain problematic became interiorized (in the direction already sketched, for example, by Balzac's *La peau de chagrin*⁴ or Flaubert's *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*), and its superficial features were abandoned, to return only, emptied of all intellectual significance, in mass-produced literature. Pushkin could still experiment playfully with the demonic contract in *The Queen Of Spades*, and offer a convincing portrait of man's subconscious drives by translating them into the apparently light-hearted language of a purely Schlegelian *Witz*.⁵ By the time of Dostoevskii, however, Romantic irony had long disappeared from the world--in a supra-personal, supra-national process which went far beyond conscious individual choices in matters of aesthetics. The Romantic individualistic

foregrounding used traditional narrative structures in order to experiment with certain aporias of desire; postromantic works discarded those structures altogether, neglected problematizing desire, and focussed instead on finding new ways of addressing the transcendently evil side of humanity. Postromanticism shifted the focus from a restricted, agnostic curiosity toward a solipsistic demonic desire to the moral inquiry into humanity's individual and collective responsibility toward ontological evil.

What this implies for narrative plots is that, starting in the second part of the nineteenth century, literature has devaluated the devil as a personification of the demonic, as its anthropomorphic catalyst. Dostoevskii's *The Demons* and *The Brothers Karamazov*, with Ivan's visions and the parable of the Grand Inquisitor, Thomas Mann's *Doktor Faustus*, and virtually the entire opus of Bernanos, are perhaps the most eloquent literary landmarks exemplifying the generalized--and increasing--diffraction of the originally unified Evil One into the human souls.

These circumstances seem to spell the beginning of the end for the theme of the demonic contract. Because the devil analyzed by modernity--*the devil in man* allowing some of the most profound insights into human nature ever achieved by Western culture--is, by definition, no longer the devil outside man with whom a bargain can be struck. The devil appearing to Ivan Karamazov is presented explicitly by the narrator as "a nightmare," the product of the character's "illness" (part IV, bk. XI, ch. 9).⁶ Its existence is for Dostoevskii a true metaphysical one; but its concrete appearance to man is filtered by man's own pathological consciousness. The devil, for Dostoevskii, exists "as such"--but it certainly does not exist with the specific anthropomorphic traits which Ivan's imagination lends to it. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the presence of evil is the matter of a game of reconstruction: the reader has to piece it together with all the fragments of materialism, selfishness and lack of cosmic love distributed, with varying degrees of moral sanction, among the brothers Ivan, Dmitrii, and Smerdiakov (as well as old Karamazov himself). The devil of the Karamazov's--and of all humanity--is a figure created in a mirror-game: not in the least less *real*, but certainly very much less *personified*, than its counterpart of the Romantic period. For Dostoevskii, the devil has become too complex to be accommodated in the monodimensional pattern of a pact.

Indeed, in modernity there seems to be the persisting conviction that catalyzing univocally the notion of evil in a specific, extra-human character would rather subtract than add to the poignancy of the human's choice in the face of evil. Even for the author who in our century has most adamantly upheld and thematized the existence of the devil, Bernanos, the anthropomorphization of the principle of evil has never seemed to be a viable literary procedure, solid enough to become the support of a demonic plot/pact. In these circumstances, the devil-compact today not only seems to be aesthetically outdated, poor literature; on the philosophical level, it also appears as a form of moral escapism, a dangerous game with the principle of evil itself, prompted only by the public's boredom--or, on the authorial side, by a purely commercial interest in hardly problematic recesses of human desire.

This development, however, far from impoverishing the introspection into the reality of the human psyche, has served the purpose of refining and deepening the analysis and rendering it more adequate to the new epistemological epoch. In shifting from the Romantic problematization of desire to the modern problematization of the moral choice, man becomes eventually, in the full sense of the word, a social being--i.e., a planetary, global being. Something, undoubtedly, has been lost: on one hand, the possibility of developing lavishly brilliant, often humorous and even light-hearted devil figures in early nineteenth-century tradition; on the other hand, we also miss today the opportunity to probe some disquieting recesses of human desire--be this Faustian or hedonistic, intellectual or frivolous, selfless or selfish. But what has been gained in the course of the modern and post-modern reaccentuation outweighs the loss: no longer a literary character, the devil can today be more

openly and objectively the Other within the conscience of man. As Espronceda's devil had already convincingly claimed in *El diablo mundo*:

*You engendered me, you mortal, and even gave me a name; in me you put your own torments, you put your rancor into my soul, your anxiety into my mind, your fury into my breast, your blasphemy on my lips & and I am a part of you, I am the sleepless spirit that excites you and raises you from your nothingness to Other regions, with thoughts of an angel, but with a man's pettiness. & And my Hell is the heart of man.*⁷

This is the direction promising intellectual enrichment. Indeed, today the writers who believe in the existence of the Evil One do not allow it to appear as a character in the text; rather, they depict it as a force that can turn the single humans into as many "splinters" of evil--Evil Ones.

It would then appear that in recent times, without exception, the very proposal of the story of a pact had been aesthetically "bad taste"--if not even, in Sartrean terms, morally a sign of "bad faith" altogether. It would seem that the last aesthetically and morally viable pact with the devil in literature should be traced back to some remote pan-European Romantic past.

Only, this is not so. The middle of the twentieth century offers us one of the most disruptive pact stories written since the inception of the genre--disruptive, in any case, for our established canons and schemes. This text happens to be saturated with lavishly brilliant, often humorous, light-hearted devils, while being, at the same time, fully tragic in its foregrounding the question of man's moral choices, in its depicting the reduction of desire to desire for survival in a massified, dehumanized world. The text I am alluding to is Bulgakov's kaleidoscopic *Master i Margarita*.

li. Utopia in Times of Anguish

I would like to be God just to play practical jokes.

Flaubert at age seventeen⁸

The Great Hoax. Satan.

("Veliky kanuler. Satanà.")

Bulgakov⁹

Bulgakov's last and most important novel, the one at which he worked for more than the last decade of his life, leaving it partially unfinished at the moment of his death in 1940, is a work of an excruciating complexity, comparable, in its intertwining of realism and myth, tragic and ironico-grotesque episodes, divine and profane, antiquity and present times, only to Goethe's *Faust*--by which it was inspired.

It would be impossible to address in the space of a few pages the whole spectrum of questions raised by the novel of the Master.¹⁰ Accordingly, the topic which I intend to address here is a limited one: namely, the historically peculiar interaction between desire in the text and a "new" form of the devil pact tradition.

For Bulgakov, the aspect to be foregrounded in the text is not the economy of human desire, but the difficulty of its practical fulfillment. The second main feature of the novel is that its demon appears as a morally recuperated authority, redressing the wrongs caused by humans in an essentially dystopic world. As a consequence of these two facts, the Master's Utopia is a land where the desire for a materially humane life is limitlessly fulfilled. We will also notice how much at variance Bulgakov's reaccentuation of the demonic theme is with respect to his alleged model--Goethe's restless Faust.

The ultimate question asked by Bulgakov's demonic novel resembles the one proposed by Hölderlin's poetry: "To what purpose poets in times of anguish?"--"Wozu Dichter in dürtiger Zeit?" To what purpose poetry, humanism, Utopia, in times of anguish and distress? Bulgakov's answer is that Utopia must be upheld more than ever precisely in those times; that precisely in times of suffering man must shake off the temptation to let himself slide into a moral Limbo--into the comforting, but stagnating reduction to mere survival.

A. the Devil as Universal Pícaro

The devil appears in *The Master and Margarita* as the unmasker of the vices of humanity. The *razoblachenie* of the tricks performed by the uncanny magician Voland, ironically promised in chapter 12, turns out to apply instead to the dishonest tricks of the human world. The appearance of the foreigner-devil and of his retinue in the Moscow section of the text is the laying bare of the tricks, the "black magics," which man organizes in society. The images of reality and illusion are here reversed: what at first appears as magic is but sound justice; what appeared as reality is but the swindle, the demonic lie, of an essentially dystopic social structure. Such a procedure--the utilization of the Stranger as relativizer of the ambience described--is, per se, not a new one; the devil has often played this role in literature. What is peculiar in the present context is that Bulgakov upholds until the end the devil's moral claim to act in the name of another Order, more perfect than the human one.

In essence, the Moscow string of narration of *The Master and Margarita* is the story of how local historical reality literally does not allow the material conditions for the survival of the belated historian-humanist--the Master who has dared to write a novel about the crucifixion of man in the totalitarian system of the Roman empire. The two distinct plots of the novel reinforce and reflect each other in a specular structure which, beyond the obvious differences (stylistic above all), stresses the common nucleus of problems lying at the core of Bulgakov's preoccupations. The structure of the double novel was perhaps never more appropriately used than in the present case--the case of a novel about the devil, the double of man *par excellence*.

The unifying element of the composition is Voland: the "mysterious stranger" knows the Master's text by heart--and quotes its full first chapter to the baffled members of the MASSOLIT who just declared in public their atheism. In *The Master and Margarita*, the devil is the *perpetuum mobile* which activates all the internal references between the two planes of the novel. He connects the parallel levels and allows the readers to glide from each of them to the next. In this movement between epochs, Voland literally creates the space for the evocation of the ideal Utopia: namely, the epoch of the Romantic humanism of the early nineteenth century, culturally influenced by Goethe and artistically dominated by the ironic

genius of Pushkin. He is present incognito in the Ershalaim section;¹¹ and in the modern voyage to Moscow he certainly outbids and outclasses the evil of man--thereby justly punishing it. And the "third level" of the Utopia in candlelight, the lovers' "Eternal Home" distinguished by the "Venetian windows" and the vine,¹² is entirely his creation.

In the midst of this complex orchestration of themes, epochs, and ciphered literary allusions, there are two constant features: the jolly, grotesque comic of the Riders of the Apocalypse who (a novelty in the genre) accompany Voland; and, by contrast, the devil's own deadly stern irony toward human assumptions and presumptions. The devil comments scathingly on all human endeavors. It is difficult to render the exact stylistic atmosphere created by the alternation of the two effects; both converge toward the creation of a polyphonic discourse relativizing the soundness, the solidity, the ultimate reality of human "reality." Clearly, the devil is here the Outsider who "makes strange" the world and emphasizes the distortions which hypocrisy and habit had automatized.

Bakhtin analyzed convincingly the function of the Outsider in the development of the novel as a genre. As he writes,

*The rogue, the clown and the fool create around themselves their own special little world, their own chronotope. & Essential to these three figures is a distinctive feature that is as well a privilege--the right to be "other" in this world. & Therefore, they can exploit any position they choose, but only as a mask. & These figures are laughed at by others, and themselves as well. Their laughter bears the stamp of the public square where the folk gathers. They re-establish the public nature of the human figure. & The novelist stands in need of some essential formal and generic mask that could serve to define the position from which he views life, as well as the position from which he makes that life public.*¹³

Bakhtin's description can help us grasp better the causes and implications of the disconcerting polyglossia, or mixture of styles, in Voland's voice: tragic and comic at the same time--in one word, *uncanny* (or grotesque). This is the deep-level reason underlying what has been called the "carnivalization" at work in ***The Master and Margarita***.¹⁴

The Outsider, the one whose glance relativizes the world which is described, in the history of the novel quickly precipitates in the well-known mold--that of the pícaro. As Bakhtin puts it, "The next stage in the transformation of the rogue, clown and fool occurs when they are introduced into the content of the novel as major protagonists. & [T]he major protagonist is almost always the bearer of the authorial point of view. & In one form or another & all the aspects we have analyzed appear in the "picaresque novel"."¹⁵ Bulgakov's Voland, opposing and destroying much less divine theodicy than the castle of human lies, is the obvious textual marker of the author's desire for a less perverse world. In ***The Master and Margarita***, the devil is the pícaro--the "unholy fool"--who tears the clothes away from (i.e., quite literally "lays bare, unmask") the Soviet version of mankind.

Voland descends from the ancient fools, of whom Bakhtin writes:

*& the author needs the fool: by his very incomprehending presence he makes strange the world of social conventionality. By representing stupidity, the novel teaches prose intelligence, prose wisdom. Regarding fools or regarding the world through the eyes of a fool, the novelist's eye is taught a sort of prose vision, the vision of a world confused by conventions of pathos and by falsity.*¹⁶

Voland is the potentiation of such fools, in charge of redressing wrongs. His stature has grown so much that it has overgrown the human protagonists of the novel. He has become a gigantic, omnipotent universal pícaro. His ontological status only barely falls short of being that of an exterminating angel in the Lord's service.¹⁷

In fact, in his endeavor to fulfill the Lord's plans as they are transmitted to him by Levy-Matvei, the disciple of Ga-Notsri, Voland does not even remotely seem to want to thwart the desires of Margarita and of her Master.¹⁸ The epigraph from Goethe's *Faust*: "I am a part of the force that would / Do *evil* evermore, and yet creates the good" must then be read with a certain circumspection.¹⁹ But why should this be surprising when dealing with that which is, per definition, Other? The Other reveals itself always slightly displaced in relation to where we would expect to find it. Bulgakov's allusions are always "almost, but not quite" exact quotes: there is always a margin of irony between text and subtext.

As Siniavskii put it in his book dealing with "us in the shadow of Gogol" (or: us, dealing *with* the Shadow *in* Gogol): "All is wrong and out of place--right there is where the devil is hiding" ("Vsë ne tak i ne to--tut-to i skryvaetsia chort").²⁰

The devil is, by definition, in the margins of reality; only then is it true to its nature. Of course, Bulgakov's Voland rises in arms against the distopia of the Stalin epoch; he dispenses the yearned-for "Schubertian" idyll to the worshippers of the innocent past. But how "evil" is he ultimately? To what extent does he advocate true criminal acts in order to promote the Lord's designs? What is the nature of his relationship with the forces above him--forces which, in ***The Master and Margarita***, are subjects of a radical silence? The mythico-prophetic novel does not answer these questions univocally; and Voland, the image of the wrong-and-out-of-place, the incarnate neither-nor, disappears with his ambiguous retinue in the silence that surrounds the text, taking Bulgakov's secret with him into the abyss "without cliffs, without mountain top, without moonlit path"--without the dawn promised to the Master and to Margarita.

B. Utopia and Despair

Of course when people are as completely spoiled ["ogrableny"] as I and you are, they seek salvation with the Force Beyond ["u potustoronney sily"]!

The Master, ch. 30

The Master and Margarita, the mythico-picaresque novel, has a dimension that transcends irony, the polyglossic interplay of levels of narration which can be detected in Voland's relativizing role. Such a dimension develops, as Barratt aptly puts it, in the space "beyond parody":²¹ there appears the earnest visage of Voland's absolutizing role. In other words: there is one element, in ***The Master and Margarita***, which does *not* undergo carnivalization. This element is the final Utopia granted to the lovers--the eternal refuge to which they are led by Voland. And Voland himself, as earnest Mentor, operates parody, without being subject to it.

There are two stages of Utopia which are addressed in the novel. There is a regressive one, consisting in the mere reinstatement of the two lovers in the basement in which they had spent their "Golden Age" (another allusion, incidentally, to the early nineteenth century)--and a progressive one, located in the mythical, undefinable locus of "Peace" which, according to God's messenger Levy Matvei, lies somewhere between the historical world and the world of

"Light."

The first of the two Utopias is activated at the end of the Great Ball at Satanà's, when Margarita, as a reward for having played hostess at the Muscovite Sabbat, is allowed to formulate a desire. This desire is kept secret.²² In any case, the Master, for his part, is not willing to express a desire actively. He says that he "no longer wishes for anything in life," except for seeing Margarita.²³ Nothing around him interests him; he has been broken ("menia slomali"), and he wants to return to the basement.²⁴ He has even come to hate his own novel: he has suffered too much because of it.²⁵ He completely renounces life and would be perfectly content to vegetate along, begging ("nishchestvovat") in order to survive. Even though he is attached to Margarita, he still thinks it would be best for her to abandon him before it's too late: "Leave me, or you will be doomed with me".²⁶

When, according to the Master's reduction of desire, the two lovers are finally returned to the basement, everything looks just as it used to be²⁷--but it really is not. Utopia cannot be made retroactive, in spite of Voland's omnipotence, because the Master does not believe in its effectiveness--he is too tired to believe in anything. There can be no question of projecting a utopic image onto such a crushed human being--or, as Margarita calls the Master, "a being of little faith, unhappy" ("malovernny, neschastny"). Utopia here fails by default of the desire meant to support and sustain it. The loss of life due to the investment of past desire is irretrievable.

Accordingly, those who, *in excelsis*, decide the destinies of the humans, have in store a different kind of Utopia for the historian-writer and his beloved. As the Supreme Authority, through Levy Matvei, tells Voland on the terrace high above Moscow:

--He has read the Master's work & and asks you to take the Master with you and to reward him with peace. & He has not deserved light, he has deserved peace. &²⁸

The words "he has not deserved light, he has deserved peace" have (justifiably) stimulated a considerable amount of speculation. Why should there be a distinction of the two principles? And, even if the notion of a "two-tier" Utopia (Limbo, Purgatory before Paradise?) were perfectly evident, why would the Master's striving have only earned him the lesser recompense? Let us first examine the concrete traits which the narrator lends to Utopia in the novel.

During the final ride through the air in "Forgiveness and Eternal Refuge" (ch. 32), Voland tells the Master:

That which I offer to you both, and that for which Yeshua also asked for you--is better still! &

Then Voland waived his hand in the direction of Ershalaim, and it became dark.

--And there too,--Voland pointed behind them,--what can you do in the little basement?--The sun, fragmented in the glass, went out.--To what purpose?--Voland continued convincingly and softly,--Oh, three times romantic master, really you do not want to go for walks during the day with your friend under the cherry trees, which are now starting their first bloom, and

*listen in the evenings to the music of Schubert? Really you will not find it pleasant to write, in candle light, with a goose feather? Really you do not want, like Faust, sit in front of a retort in the hope that you will manage to create a new Homunkulus? Go there, go there! There is already waiting for you a house and an old servant, the candles are already burning, and they will soon go out, because you will promptly meet the dawn. Follow this path, master, this one! Farewell, it is time for me to go!*²⁹

The third historical level of the novel, the golden period of Romanticism, to which the narration has constantly made oblique, ciphered references, returns here in its full form; it reveals itself as the ultimate utopian support for desire, interposed between Ershalaim and Moscow. All references accumulated in this final section, literary, social and technological (from the cherry orchard to the goose feather, from the "old servant" to the "wrong-and-out-of-place" ironic confusion of Wagner with Faust) point at a foregrounding of the period of the Romantic humanism of the Russian late eighteenth-early nineteenth century--as Utopia.

This, however, is precisely the acutely disquieting point in Bulgakov's novel. Such a Utopia can only be realized as a result of a pact contracted with the devil.³⁰ There must be something problematic for Bulgakov in the Master's and Margarita's existential choices, if the final Utopia they are granted explicitly remains in the sphere of the demonic and has no access to the "light" to which even Ponty Pilat is admitted.

The novel, then, denounces the Master's *passivity* toward the pursuit of his humanist ideal. His desire for humanity is not sufficient to motivate his actions, past the miraculous end of his vicissitudes. The Master ceases to have faith in Light (Utopia) in times of suffering and distress; he no longer believes in the meaningfulness of witnessing for man. He answers negatively Hölderlin's question about the sense of "Dichten" (writing, creating): "Dichten" is impossible in times of anguish. Accordingly, he is only rewarded (as Voland has carefully pointed out) "according to his faith": he only receives a non-negative, "demonic" version of Utopia. The Master's retreat from *poiésis* entails a final destiny that is the opposite of the one imagined by Goethe: "less light." This explains why the lovers' apotheosis is performed in the novel within the lunar, not the solar sphere.

The contrast figure to the Master is Ieshua. Ieshua is the ultimate Witness. He thinks nothing of dying to uphold his own view of a pacifist Utopia.

--And now tell me [asks Ponty Pilat], how come you use all the time the words "good people"? Do you call everyone that, by any chance?

*--Everyone,--answered the prisoner;--there are no evil people on Earth.*³¹

The further course of the dialogue between Ieshua Ga-Notsri and Pilat merely reinforces the recklessness with which the accused stresses his transcendental views--in spite of Ponty Pilat's partly commonsense, partly truly sympathetic remarks. Hence, it has been justly pointed out that the Master and Ieshua, in spite of certain common features (essentially, the persecution, the "crucifixion" they undergo), are really different, in some way even opposite, characters.³²

Ieshua Ga-Notsri is the humanist of the first historical level, who believes in his Utopia, in his "kingdom of Truth" ("tsarstvo istiny")³³--and who acts for it, to the very end. The Master is the humanist of the third historical level, who believes in the past Utopia of the second one, and who would like to see it reproduced--but does not (any longer) have the courage to

concretely fight for its realization. Stagnation in a basement is his only alternative, and even when Margarita daringly makes a pact with the devil and obtains supernatural support, he still only uses such supernatural support for an anamnesis of the past. Since he desires to go back a few months in time, the devil brings him back to the extent of his power--to the first third of the nineteenth century. The Utopia enjoyed by the Master is a Utopia away from the front--away from the struggle; it is a retrospective, rearguard Utopia. The Master's desire has been paralyzed in its inception: the very gesture of desiring has been frozen by fear. "They broke me, I'm sad ["mne skuchno"], and I want to go to the basement."³⁴ Man's desire is here reduced to the immobilization in a half-uterine, half-funereal Hades.

In *The Master and Margarita*, desire is undermined, rendered impossible, by the impossibility of its practical fulfillment. The process is blocked before it can take place. Desire is foregrounded not as a movement, but as an empty slot. This is the world of difference separating Bulgakov's novel from the canonic "texts of desire" of the nineteenth century--including, of course, Goethe's *Faust*.

iii. the Polyphonic Text: Innovation and Tradition in the Demonic Genre

Invisible [and free]! Invisible [and free]!

(Censored in the Moskva edition of 1966)

Margarita, ch. 21: "The Flight"

The question which Goethe's Faust proudly asked of Mephisto: "What do you have to give, poor devil?" could be answered in a thousand different ways by Bulgakov's Volland. The two Muscovite lovers lack everything in a material sense. Above all, they lack freedom: the freedom to write, live, love, defend themselves against their enemies. Even dreaming of Utopia seems inconceivable to the Master. This situation implies that the weight of problematization is shifted from desire to the possibility of its fulfillment.

This is the point where historical perspective on the theme of the pact with the devil becomes indispensable. The turning away from the problematization of desire, and toward the problematization of the ways and means of its fulfillment indicates, in a sense, but a reverting to a long-standing pre-nineteenth-century tradition. The awareness of the diachronic dimension of the genre can help us to put in perspective and explain the striking incompatibility of Bulgakov's novel with, for example, a work such as Goethe's *Faust*--to which it would seem to be heavily indebted.³⁵ Goethe's philosophico-allegorical poem was itself a novelty, a turning point in a diachronic succession. *Faust* was a historical phase of the genre, dialectically tied to its predecessors, and by no means its supra-temporal model. And, as for Goethe's successors, Bulgakov was neither the first nor the best-known writer to reverse some of Goethe's innovations.

Rather, the point of Bulgakov's major varying innovation with respect not only to Goethe, but to the whole genre, must be identified in the combination of the *problematization of fulfillment* with an unprecedented *salvation* (i.e., moral justification) of the hero. ***The Master***

and Margarita conserves the focalization on the traditional exchange of services, but innovatively combines it with the Goethean *Erlösung*.

This is the area in which the story of Margarita and her lover truly crosses genders/genres. This feature is even more important than the (without a doubt, important) ones already stressed by the critics--namely, that we here witness a woman striking the deal; that there is never any question of a soul's salvation being at stake; that the service provided by the human comes before the one assured by the devil; that there is complete vagueness as to the kind of return the human is to expect; that the "pact" is truly engaged on behalf and for the benefit of someone else, and so on. All these facts are ultimately, in historical perspective, less essential than the general dynamics in the genre which they illustrate.

Medieval Christian texts had foregrounded desire in order to condemn its demonic fulfillment. They had problematized the rapport between desire and faith. The very project of expanding the self to "cover the world" was the target of the ideological attacks marshalled in the 1587 Protestant Faustbook published by Spieß. There, desire was evil, and the desiring self was condemned to eternal punishment. Two centuries later, Klinger's *Fausts Leben, Taten und Höllenfahrt* sketched an only partially different state of affairs: certain forms of desire were laudable, some others were not--the epitome of guilt being human *hybris*, the "noble arrogance" consisting in the claim to be able to judge the universe and improve it. In the long run, Klinger's Faust was also condemned--even though, typically enough for a *Sturm und Drang* hero, he managed to find in his own punishment yet another reason for self-glorification.

Goethe's work, then, had been consequent in reversing *both* moral signs. Goethe had inverted the judgment to be passed upon human desire--which had become for him unconditionally "good" as a whole, even when its *Streben* implied evil collateral consequences³⁶--and had *also* granted the desiring human being access to salvation. The German Romantics' complaint about the "Catholic smack" of Gretchen's apotheosis had, in essence, failed to recognize the internal coherence of Goethe's conception; and the Romantics' own failure to produce a Romantic counter-Faust of a stature comparable to the all-too-"classical" one may have had more than a little to do with an inadequate elaboration of the necessity of a balanced relationship between the function of desire in the demonic work and the moral judgment to be passed on the human's association with the devil.

The Master and Margarita should thus be viewed as a work which returns to a traditional--i.e., pre-modern--relationship of the self with desire. In Bulgakov's text, desire is a given; only its realization is problematic. This does not differ substantially from the striving of Gautier de Coinci's Theophilus. And when Theophilus recites: "Tolue m'a ma seignorie" ("[The bishop] has taken away my domain from me"),³⁷ one cannot but hear the echo of the crushed Master's complaint: "When people have been as completely spoliated as I and you have, they seek salvation with the Force Beyond!"³⁸ This radical break with the problematization of desire typical of the Romantic period is the bridge that links the Master with times far preceding the Goethean *novelty* and *exception*.

On the other hand, however--and this *is* the obvious difference opposing the Master to Theophilus--in Bulgakov's demonic novel the two heroes are innocent; accordingly, their salvation is maintained. On this point Bulgakov conserves and subsumes Goethe's development. In fact, he goes farther by one--and final--step: he makes Voland, the medieval cavalier, a direct agent of God. At this point, the reversal vis-à-vis the traditional structure (of, for example, Spieß's book) comes into full light: the desire prompting the human to the pact is no longer sinful, but humane; therefore, the pact with the devil is also good, and it deserves remuneration. Punishment is only deserved, and incurred, by human obtuseness, which is commanded by "desires" of a base and grotesque type. The desire of the truly humane part of man (not only spiritual, but material as well) deserves the alliance of the

Highest--and the help of a whole band of variegated *mal'ák Jahwe*.³⁹

With respect to the literary proto-history of the genre, the transmutation of values is, in ***The Master and Margarita***, an accomplished fact. In modern Moscow, the inversion of the moral sign, the valorizing image of the Other, runs full circle. Yet, at the same time, the complexity of the interplay of subtexts and the reshuffling of the foregrounded elements show us that, paradoxically, such a reversal takes place within a narrative structure that sends the reader back to a pre-modern view of desire. And such return to the origins strikes us as being even more complete when we realize that, in a remarkably parallel move, even the devil image activated by Bulgakov is a pre-Christian, Biblical one. The conflicting pulls toward tradition and re-accentuation create, in ***The Master and Margarita***, a complex cipher which is to be read, perhaps more than in the case of any other novel, in the polyphony existing between the *analogy with* and the *difference from* the similar--with and from the whole literary corpus which, crossing literary and cultural traditions, revolves around the demonic pact as a subtext.

However, Bulgakov's posthumously published novel on "Satan's great practical jokes" reminds us that the Master and Margarita--and Voland--have countless enemies. Who are these? They are a mass of brutish individuals, revelling in greed, blindness, conformism. They are the countless ones (whether belonging to the Soviet party's bourgeoisie or not) to whom Goethe's Mephisto referred when he said that human beings are no more advanced today than they used to be in the times of superstition: "The Evil One is gone, the evil ones remained." In sum: it seems to be a rashly optimistic assumption to establish--as Bulgakov does--that the "true" devil would be siding for intelligent, humane desire. What if it sided with the Moscow bureaucracy--or any of its equivalent avatars distributed all across the world? The novel of the paternal-protective Voland is still the compensatory fantasy of an optimist.⁴⁰

Iv. the Masquerades of Poshlost'

It is not surprising that the massification and banalization undergone by the notion of the demonic in recent years should have spurred a definite reticence (if not outright self-censorship) in serious literature, when it comes to themes demonic. I am not aware of any considerable anthropomorphic epiphany of the Other in literature after the appearing of Bulgakov's Voland. It could be, of course, that this is simply the effect of perspective--the deceiving impression that history, so to speak, slows down as we approach the examination of our own times, due simply to the fact that our excessive proximity to the events precludes an overall view analogous to the one which we have over past epochs. On the other hand, it could perhaps be claimed that the post-modern world has simply become too diversified and complex--even for such a complex notion as the Other.

I think, however, that in all fairness we should still attach some semantically negative meaning to the notion of the demonic. If we did not, what *Other* term could we use to designate the "other," truly evil phenomena of which we have empirical experience in the material and psychic universe? For, Ponty Pilat is right, and Ga-Notsri is deluded: not all people are "dobrye liudi". And the inevitable question returns: why has the anthropomorphic demonic disappeared from reality and literature alike? into what blank spaces, into what margins of reality has the Other nested, exerting on the world the most effective action--by sheer absence?

Flaubert's strikingly modern, and already postmodern, answer appears in the *Voyage en enfer* which he wrote when he was thirteen: "C'est que le monde, c'est l'enfer": the world is already Hell.⁴¹ For him, the only possible terrestrial omnipotence is set in movement by

human *bêtise*--a demonism not excited by greatness, but created by default. For Flaubert, Hell is the dwelling of a humanity turned *spiritually sub-human*. The final answer to the contemporary dispersal of the devil-pact tradition should be sought in this direction.

Or, as another writer who was active during the years of Flaubert's adolescence well saw: the devil is laughable--which means that he is ever-present and all-powerful. As Merezhkovskii put it, in Gogol'

& the devil is something that is begun and is left unfinished, but purports to be without beginning or end. The devil is the noumenal median of being, the denial of all heights and depths--eternal planarity, eternal banality [poshlost']. The sole subject of Gogol's art is the devil in just this sense, that is, the devil as the manifestation of "man's immortal banality," as seen beneath the specifics of place and time--historical, national, governmental, social; the manifestation of absolute, eternal, universal evil--banality *sub specie aeternitatis*. & Everyone can perceive evil in great violations of the moral law, in rare and unusual misdeeds, in the staggering climaxes of tragedies. Gogol was the first to detect invisible evil, most terrible and enduring, not in tragedy, but in the absence of everything tragic; not in power, but in impotence; not in insane extremes, but in all-too-sensible moderation; not in acuity and profundity, but in inanity and planarity, in the banality of all human feelings and thoughts; not in the greatest things, but in the smallest. &

& He was the first to understand that it is the devil who is the smallest thing that exists, and seems big only because we ourselves are small; that he is the weakest thing that exists and seems strong only because we ourselves are weak. & Gogol & was the first to realize that the self of the devil is not remote, alien, strange, fantastic, but is, rather, a very common, familiar, real and human, all too human self, the self of the crowd. &⁴²

In *Fusées* XVII, Baudelaire makes an observation that parallels closely Merezhkovskii's comments on Gogol':

One should not believe that the devil tempts solely brilliant minds. He certainly despises the imbeciles; but he does not turn down their cooperation. Far from that, he founds his greatest hopes on them.⁴³

(Baudelaire 1961, 1281)

The conclusion is unequivocal: the true servants of the *truly* evil Other are the imbeciles. *Bêtise, poshlost'*--and others.

All this complicates, rather than simplifies, the task. The devil--the truly evil devil--the Other behind the Others, behind the masquerades of nightmare and literature--(could it be defined as *the infinitesimal devil?*)--is "too stupid" for refutation.

The devil of *bêtise, poshlost'*, and others, is, as in Gogol's universe, merely laughable. Which means--that it is invincible. In today's post-systematic world, the only phenomenon that is and remains essentially "demonic" is human pettiness-stupidity.

Notes

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. W. Kaufmann (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), v. 2509.

Novalis [Friedrich von Hardenberg], *Werke* (München: Beck, 1981), p. 399.

Gustave Flaubert, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, in his *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Seuil Intégrale, 1964), I. Rimbaud was to write, in the same years, of the "dérèglement de tous les sens" (Arthur Rimbaud, *Oeuvres* [Paris: Garnier, 1960], p. 344).

Honoré de Balzac, *La peau de chagrin*, vol. X of *La comédie humaine* (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1979).

Pushkin by no means limited himself to the "ironic" (in Schlegel's philosophical sense) approach to the problem of the demonic: his "Scene from Faust" (1825) thematizes explicitly (as in Leopardi or Baudelaire) the inevitable unhappiness to which existential boredom condemns man; and the poem "Demon" (1823) features a mysterious interior voice slandering the beauty of life and advocating moral nihilism. Cf. Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, *Sochineniia v trekh tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1974), I and III.

Fëdor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, vol. IX of *Polnoe sobranie khudozhestvennykh proizvedenii* (Moscow, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1929), part IV, bk. XI, ch. 9.

José de Espronceda, *El diablo mundo*, ed. R. Marrast (Madrid: Castalia, 1982), pp. 183-85.

Flaubert, *Agonies IX*, in his *Oeuvres complètes I*.

This motto appears as epigraph on the first page of the manuscript of the novel in the version of 1932. At that time the title was still *Fantasticheskii roman*. Cf. Ellendea Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1984), p. 524 (photogr. reproduction of manuscript). All references will henceforward be to the following editions: Mikhail Afanas'evich Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita* (Frankfurt a.M.: Posev, 1969), and *The Master and Margarita*, trans. M Ginsburg (New York: Grove, 1967).

Rather: "the novel of the devil," the latter being its main character until as late as 1934. Cf. Anthony Colin Wright, *Mikhail Bulgakov: Life and Interpretations* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 259.

There has been a fair amount of speculation as to who the incognito devil was in that episode. The most reasonable assumption seems to be that he "was" Afrany, the chief of the secret police. Cf. Boris M. Gasparov, "Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi romana M. A. Bulgakova *Master i Margarita*," *Slavica Hierosolimitana*, 3 (1978), 234; and Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, p. 640, n. 28).

Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita*, p. 482.

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 159-61.

Cf. Lesley Milne, *The Master and Margarita: A Comedy of Victory*, Birmingham Slavonic Monographs, No. 3 (Birmingham: Dept. of Russian Language and Literature, Univ. of Birmingham, 1977), pp. 1-4; and E. Proffer: *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, pp. 531 and 636-37, nn. 9, 10. The carnivalization active in the novel through the figure of Voland is so strong that it irradiates into the domaine of all characters--first and foremost, to the Master as pseudo-

Faust, and to Margarita as pseudo-Gretchen. Carnivalization could be said here to be once more the indispensable prerequisite for the portrayal of the devil in modernity--a sort of price to be paid for the passage through the text of his figure of omnipotence. Hence, all tragic themes are here filtered through the lens of the opera, music, melodrama. To mention but one striking case: "Excuse, but maybe, by the way, you haven't even heard about *the opera Faust?*" (*Master i Margarita*, p. 173; emphasis added).

Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 163.

Ibid., p. 404.

A brilliant summary of this state of affairs is offered by V. Sergeevich's pointed statement: "The "unclean spirit" [one of the current denominations for the Other: "nechistaia sila", C.T.] cleans up left and right" (quoted in L. Milne, *The Master and Margarita: A Comedy Of Victory*, p. 19).

On this point see also Andrew Barratt, *Between Two Worlds: A Critical Introduction To The Master and Margarita* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 295.

On the differences between the two works, even, on certain points, their opposition, cf. Gasparov, "Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi," pp. 241-42; Margret Fieseler, "Stilistische und motivische Untersuchungen zu Mikhail Bulgakovs Romanen *Belaja Gvardija* und *Master i Margarita*," Slavistische Texte und Studien, No. 3 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1982), p. 266; and Barratt, *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 277-78.

Abram Terts (Andrei Siniavski), *V teni Gogolia* (London: Collins, Overseas Publication Interchange, 1975), p. 530.

Barratt, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 278.

Master i Margarita, p. 364.

Ibid., p. 364.

Ibid., p. 369.

Ibid., p. 370.

Ibid., p. 364.

Ibid., p. 376.

Ibid., p. 453.

Ibid., pp. 481-82.

Gasparov aptly points out that the Master's refuge is "suspicious"; it lies "in the sphere of Volland" ("Iz nabliudenii nad motivnoi strukturoi &," p. 243).

Master i Margarita, p. 37.

Gasparov, "Iz nabliudenii nad motivoi strukturoi," pp. 244-45; Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, p. 554.

Master i Margarita, p. 42.

Ibid., p. 369.

The apparent similarities between the two works turn out, upon more careful consideration, to be of little import indeed--either completely general ("man may err if need be, but he must not stagnate" Proffer, *Bulgakov: Life and Work*, p. 557; Barratt, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 291), or, at the opposite extreme, too minute and incidental, and debatable at best (Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor, "Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Goethe's *Faust*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, 13 [1969], 312-15, 320-23). The relationship between the two works is not that of a "+/-" use of isolated elements, but rather, that of a comparable orchestration and reaccentuation of common themes, aiming at altogether diverging goals.

More accurately than "good as a whole," one should perhaps describe it as "good enough to deserve, as a whole, the Grace of pardon."

Gautier de Coinci, "Comment Theophilus vint a penitance," in his *Les Miracles de Notre Dame*, ed. V. F. Koenig (Genève: Droz; Lille: Giard, 1955), p. 62, v. 199.

Master i Margarita, p. 461.

For the notion of *mal'ák Jahwe*, see Riwkah Schärf, "Die Gestalt des Satans im Alten Testament," in *Symbolik des Geistes: Studien über psychische Phänomenologie*, ed. C. G. Jung (Zürich: Rascher, 1948), p. 207.

Milne aptly defines *The Master and Margarita* as "a comedy of victory."

Flaubert, *Voyage en enfer*, in his *Oeuvres complètes* I.

Dmitriy Merezhkovskiy, "Gogol and the Devil," in *Gogol From the Twentieth Century*, ed. R. A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 57-59.

Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Y.-G. Le Dantec, C. Pichois (Paris: Gallimard Pléiade, 1961), p. 1281.