

**VERONIKA SPIRA**

**God, Evil, and the Saviour:  
Hermeneutics and the Reconstruction of a Character  
In Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.**

The paper was read on an international conference  
in Pannonhalma, Hungary 4<sup>th</sup> July, 1991  
Published in: *Literary Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics*  
Ed.: Tibor Fabiny, Szeged 1992. pp.217-225.

**0. (Objectives)**

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct Bulgakov's interpretation of God, Evil, the Saviour and of man on the basis of the text of his novel *The Master and Margarita*. We will approach this task in two phases. In the first part we will attempt to cast light on the fact that Bulgakov's novel itself is concerned with one of the most basic hermeneutical problems: the authentic reconstructability of the Gospels, and the possibility of a genuine 'hermeneut.' Preliminary conclusions will be reached which will bring us closer to our stated aim. In the second part we will answer the question why the reconstruction of only one character is contained in the title.

**1. (Hermeneutic Problems in The Novel)**

**1.1 (The Basic Hermeneutic Situation)** Of the 32 chapters of *The Master and Margarita*, four take place in ancient Jerusalem (chapters two, sixteen, twenty-five and twenty-six) relating the story of Christ's life from his interrogation by Pilate to the Crucifixion and interment. Pontius Pilate and Matthew the Levite figure very strongly in this narrative. The former, contrary to what we are told in the Gospels, is secretly a disciple of Christ (Yeshua) who, due to his fear of the emperor, does not acquit the wandering philosopher of the charges levelled against him. Later, however, again against the testimony of the Gospel, he takes revenge upon Judas because of the death of Yeshua. Matthew the Levite is the only disciple of Jesus, the „twelve disciples” proving to be fictitious, and also the only Evangelist. Of his notes, recording the sayings of his Master, Yeshua says: 'I once caught a glimpse of that parchment and I was horrified. I had not said a word of what was written there. I begged him: Please burn this parchment of yours. But he tore it from my hands and run away' (Bulgakov 1969, p.28). These notes of Matthew the Levite served as the basis of misunderstanding, falsification and fabrication. The basic hermeneutic situation of the novel is therefore the following: our knowledge about Yeshua's life and teaching is inaccurate, false and misleading because the first notes taken about them were already unreliable.

**1.2.** (The New „Evangelist” or the Perfect Hermeneut) The title character of the novel, the Master, remote both in time and place from the situation described above (living in the city of Moscow, two thousand years later) attempts authentic reconstruction of both the character and the story of Yeshua. His work, as finished, turns out to be identical with the story as found in the four chapters mentioned above (chapters two, sixteen, twenty-five and twenty-six). Bulgakov considers the Master to be the perfect hermeneut – his work being the perfect Gospel. What is the Master’s secret; who is the absolute hermeneut in Bulgakov’s view; and what is an authentic reconstruction?

Formerly the Master had worked as a historian in a research institute, until some unexpected luck at gambling brought him a large sum of money. Taking advantage of the independence offered by this windfall, he abandons his job and sets about accomplishing the task which has always fascinated him, the writing of novel about Yeshua Ha-Notsri and Pilate. The Master, a placid and feeble young man, lays obsessive siege to the impossible in a small basement flat (rather than in the usual garret). Several signs and mysterious coincidences lead to the conclusion that his quest has been successful. The first of these is found in chapter two. Woland, with all the accuracy of an eyewitness, conjures up the interrogation of Yeshua before Pilate. This vision, as later becomes obvious, is identical word for word with the first chapter of the Master’s novel, without, of course, Woland knowing in the least of the existence of either author or work. The next sign is Ivan’s vision in the sanatorium, consisting of the continuation of Woland’s story – entirely without collaboration from Woland: the ascent to Golgotha and the Crucifixion (chapter sixteen). A mysterious coincidence takes place here too: Ivan’s vision is identical to chapter two of the Master’s novel. Most important of all, however, is Yeshua’s message in chapter twenty-nine. Having read the Master’s novel, he presents both to the Master and to his lover an eternal tranquility and rest (*op. cit.* p. 379).

**1.3.** (Beyond Religion and Science: Bulgakov and Berdyaev) From several points of view the Master is an unusual hermeneutist: in his case the interpretation of tradition is not bound to texts: indeed he rejects these as misleading. His 'preliminary knowledge' however – Gadamer’s 'historical horizon' – is extensive, in terms of both primary and secondary sources. It is this very grasp of the sources that leads him to consider them useless. In his search for absolute truth the Master reaches beyond both science and religion and becomes an artist, creating the missing, authentic text. His discovery that the 'absolute hermeneut' is the creative artist reveals Bulgakov as a disciple of Berdyaev. It was the Russian philosopher who put creation at the summit of cognition, theology and ethics. In his paradoxical ethics *The Destiny of Man* (O Naznachen’ii Cheloveka. Opit Paradoksalnoi Et’iki 1931; English trans. 1937), but already in his *Smisl Tvorchestva* (1916), Berdyaev outlines a world view at the highest point of which stands God the Creator. He is the ideal type of the artist creating the world from the 'Ungrund' (in Böhme’s conception of the word), the primeval Nothingness, from ancient chaos (Berdyaev 1959, pp. 23-35.). According to Berdyaevian anthropology man can ascend to God; he can be deified if, after comprehending the ethics of law (Moses and Kant), and of redemption (Christ), he comes to understand the essence of the ethics of creativity (the Creator), becoming himself a creative man (Berdyaev 1959, p. 32). The Master will be able to rise above the Historian, the Evangelist and other hermeneuts because he has chosen, as his means of cognition, art: creation, the human activity closest to God, replete

with many mystical elements. Moreover, the Master is not just one artist among many, but one who is chosen – in whom all human cognition is unified, religion, science and art. In Bulgakov's view the perfect hermeneut is able to harness creativity not just to 'create', but to 'recreate', recollect and reconstruct. Bulgakov's chosen artist is therefore able to recollect or to reconstruct truth which was otherwise imperfectly bequeathed to us.

**1.4.** (Paradoxes in Bulgakov's conception of hermeneutics. Totalitarian power as hermeneutical problem). The conception of hermeneutics evident in the novel contains several paradoxes from a philosophical point of view. The most obvious is that, on the one hand, Bulgakov seems to assert that there is absolute truth which can be perfectly reconstructed, and on the other, in response to the challenges of his time, he radically reinterprets all former truth and interpretation. This contradiction casts light upon an essential problem in the interpretation of the novel itself, the explanation that, in the 1930's when *The Master and Margarita* was being written, the totalitarianism prevailing in both East and West represented something entirely new in history forcing us to reinterpret the past, indeed humanity itself. In this regard Bulgakov seeks to answer the following question in his novel. What if totalitarianism represents the final, inevitable stage of human history? What if individual vulnerability and human frailty can never transcend power? Will former values henceforth become invalid? What, then, will be the subsequent meaning of God, the Devil, the Anti-Christ, the Country of God, Sin and the Last Judgement?

Taking as his point of departure the phenomenology of totalitarian power Bulgakov attempts in his novel to reconsider the whole nature and direction of human history, along with the basic concepts of Christianity, thereby creating a new world-view taking into consideration the facts of the new era. It is this that leads Bulgakov into an unusual 'hermeneutic situation' in Gadamer's sense of word (cf. Gadamer *op. cit.* p. 214). It is not a tradition as an 'alien opinion' that calls up his prejudices on the subjects of man, humanity, redemption and art, urging him on to the task of interpretation (*ibid.* p. 214), rather it is the present, which initiates his questioning of the past which lies within him, the long past and the future. This is the topic of *The Master and Margarita*.

**1.5.** (Paradoxes II. The reconstructability of truth and the chaotic nature of existence: Bulgakov's 'diptych') The existence and rejection of absolute truth, its inaccessibility to revelation and its reconstructibility, these paradoxes appear in manifold forms in the Master and Margarita. The four chapters set in ancient times (the novel of the Master) seem to prove the existence and the revealability of absolute truth, while the Moscow chapters suggest that the world is uninterpretable, chaotic, irresistibly staggering towards disaster. *The Master and Margarita* is thus a two-panelled Gospel, a diptych. The two novels contained in it are related in a similar way, in Bakhtin's interpretation, to the two halves of the late Roman double frescoes in Pompeii. One is always a solemn, elevated representation of a myth, while the other is its travesty (Bakhtin 1976, p. 232). One half is a faultless reconstruction of the beginning, the story of Jesus and Pilate, suggestive of the eternal duration of values, while the other is a grotesque, comical report on the End, the ultimate fall of such 'eternal values'. All in all, however, one might say that Bulgakov's novel is 'open' in the sense given to the term by Umberto Eco (1962), in which ambiguity plays a decisive role. The conclusion of the work is no less open, not only to final disaster

but to redemption, too. Bulgakov's answer to the question posed above allows for the possibility of both a 'yes' and a 'no'.

**1.6. (Summary).** Let me now summarize to what an investigation of the hermeneutical problems of the novel has led us. First of all, it can be seen that Bulgakov's images of God and man were formed under the influence of the ideas of Berdyaev. Creativity is the highest value; creation is of divine origin and nature; the essence of God is to be found in his being as Creator. Only as a creator can man be deified, partake of final secrets, learn the full truth. This is why the Master was able to succeed as nobody before him in the authentic recreation of Yeshua's story.

The harmony of the world in the spirit of creativity is disturbed, however, by the Devil: by evil, identifiable with earthly power. After Berdyaev, Bulgakov holds that this has its origin in the 'Ungrund', God therefore not being responsible for its existence (Berdyaev *op. cit.* pp. 23-24, esp. p. 29). Power in its ultimate totalitarian form becomes uninterpretable and chaotic, turning the world into a scene of paradoxes, rendering doubtful the meaning of creation. Recognizing the qualitative newness of totalitarianism in world-historical terms, Bulgakov attempts to reinterpret the main symbols of European Civilisation and of Christianity. It is as a result of this that duality and ambiguity emerge as the two most important structuring principles in the novel which, furthermore, arrange Bulgakov's world view between two poles, those of the Beginning and the End, while leaving open the door to both ultimate disaster and to redemption.

We shall now examine how Bulgakov reinterprets these things in *The Master and Margarita*, beginning with the Saviour and following with the Devil.

## **2. (The basic concepts of Bulgakov's theology)**

**2.1. (The Saviour I)** We have already established that at the summit of Bulgakov's world view stands God, whose presence is only to be inferred in the novel itself. Yeshua on the other hand is represented by two figures: his 'historical' self Yeshua Ha-Notsri, the protagonist of the Master's novel, and then again as a 'transcendental' version of himself. Like God this latter figure does not actually appear in the novel, but we know that his symbol is moonlight, aside from the fact that he appears in vision both to Pilate and to Ivan: we see him engaged in conversation with the redeemed hegemon while walking along a moonbeam; he it is who sends Matthew the Levite as a messenger to Woland in order to arrange the final fate of the Master and Margarita.

How can we describe the protagonist of the Master's novel, Yeshua Ha-Notsri? Bulgakov readily accedes to the conception of Christ passed down in Russian literature and philosophy of religion, that of Dostoevsky and of Berdyaev, above all in his embodiment of love and the principle of indulgence. He considers as alien to Jesus' character the avenging Christ figure of the *dies irae*, who carries out the wrath of Jehovah. What distinguishes Bulgakov's Christ-image from that of Berdyaev, on the other hand, is that beyond his embodiment of love and mercy, Yeshua has created a system of philosophy in whose spirit he is able to live. Besides being a founder of religion, he is an intellectual. So Bulgakov's Gospel-inspired Saviour unifies in himself two phases of

Berdyaev's ethics of redemption and of creativity, that is, meekness and mercy, sovereignty and creative power.

**2.2.** (The fall of the Saviour I and the Devil) In Bulgakov's interpretation the Saviour's adversary is earthly power in place of the traditional figure of the devil. Following Tacitus, Bulgakov describes the suffocating atmosphere of the reign of Tiberius: the intimidation, and the use of denunciations and the law on high treason as devices of terror. That is how Jesus's story becomes a model: because of struggle of goodness, creativity, and human sovereignty with power is quite essential. Contrary to the New Testament, it is for opinions about state power that Yeshua has to die in the Master's novel.

"I said that ... all power is a form of violence exercised over people, and that the time will come when there will be no rule by Caesar nor any other form of rule. Man will pass into the kingdom of truth and justice where no form of power will be needed" (Bulgakov *op. cit.* p. 36).

These words might seem anachronistic, forcing topicality on Christian tradition. Was infringing the power of the state really the highest sin in Jerusalem of those days? Yet it is not really a distortion of the historical evidence. Renan had long before stressed the subversive and revolutionary qualities of the historical Jesus in his *Vie de Jesus* (First edition 1863). Bulgakov amplifies this tendency, and shows in Jesus an archetype of the struggle against the evil of the earthly power.

**2.3.** (The Devil and man's degradation) Even in the time-frame of the Beginning, in Jerusalem, power is value-destroying. This causes both Yeshua's death and Pilate's sufferings, as well as other catastrophies in the novel. It is, moreover, especially true of Moscow, in which power has taken a totalitarian form. Man, who – in his ideal form, as creator, is the double of God – here becomes a dwarf, a grotesque caricature of himself. Only two real human beings can be found in Moscow, the Master and Margarita. The others are ridiculous, pitiful, or malevolent amoebae.

All this, from the point of view of Bulgakov's anthropology, means that his image of man ranges from the human being deified through his own act of creation, to the protozoan degraded and deprived of every human quality through totalitarian power.

**2.4.** (The ambiguity of prophecy, The Saviour II, and blasphemy). It is crucial point of the interpretation of the novel that the writer leaves the implication of his novel open: they can point, as we had said, either to final disaster, or to redemption. But who can bring redemption in a world in which both Christ and God are meek, benevolent intellectuals? The solution is Woland. He is indubitably Bulgakov's most heretical, most blasphemous, and – on the strength of scholarship – most enigmatic character, although, on the basis of what has been said above, we must also acknowledge that his role is almost obvious. He is the 'other Saviour' invented and shaped beside the meek Creator and forgiving Christ; Bulgakov develops him in opposition to the newly apprehended lineaments of Evil, that is to power. Woland brings his own redemption, one conceived in revenge and consummated as punishment. It may be inferior to the principles of love and indulgence, according to all humanistic or Christian scales of value – this is, indeed, what Berdyaev contends. However, the practical exigencies of the age are inescapable. It is still necessary to rehabilitate Jehovah, the avenging God; Moses and the law; Kant and the wrathful, justice-bearing Christ of the *Dies Irae* – in other words, in Berdyaev's terms, the

ethics of law. Bulgakov's message, his gospel for his contemporaries, is articulated in this blasphemous Saviour. Woland's character suggests that there is still divine revenge, that there will be an escape from the prisons of power.

**2.5.** (The Saviour II, and the mixing of myth or "theocracy"). What can be said about Bulgakov's new Saviour? The writer constructs his figure in a labyrinth fashion. He follows the principle of "theocrasia", the mixing of myths which, appropriately enough, was a widespread phenomenon in the late Roman Empire (Burckhardt 1924, pp. 147-98). Woland unites in himself the black magician of medieval popular literature and folklore; Faust; Mephisto; the Devil; Jehovah (striking Sodom); the judging Christ of the *dies irae*; the Visitor of the gnostics; the Prince of darkness of Böhme. He is magus, devil, God, Christ, a visionary spirit common to gnostics and heretics, a hero of apocryphal and apocalyptic writings. This promiscuous interweaving of myths might seem blasphemous in intent, but it is not. When we examine his deeds, we find that this seemingly mysterious and multifaceted figure acts according to a very simple logic and system of values: he relentlessly avenges the sin he considers the worst of all, that is, time-serving, the allegiance to Evil, such as to repressive earthly power. His first victim is Berlioz, who is – in the symbolic logic of the novel – the Grand Inquisitor, the Procurator and governor of the Antichrist's empire. Baron Meigel, a professional informer, follows him, and is in turn followed by a long line of similarly repellent figures. But it is also through Woland's doing that Pilate takes vengeance on Judas, because the chief of the hegemon's secret police, Aphranius, is a version (alterego) of Woland as well (Gasparov 1978, pp. 198-251; Spira, 1989, pp. 104-117). Aphranius not only lures the hegemon to take revenge, but organizes its fulfilment as well.

**2.6.** (The position of the Saviour II, in Bulgakov's scale of values). What is the place of Woland, that is, of the principle of revenge, in Bulgakov's value-system? What is the relationship between the two redemptions he portrays, that of indulgence and that of punishment? On the one hand – and in this he is quite close to Böhme's conception – they are complementary "like light and darkness" as Woland himself puts it in Chapter 23 (*op. cit.* p. 378). On the other hand – and this is much more important – vengeance appears as a servant of Goodness. Woland arranges the fate of the Master and his mistress in accord with Yeshua's message. It is only a small detail complementing but not altering the major action, in which, in defense of Goodness, justice and vengeance strike at Evil and destroy its power.

Bulgakov's attitude toward this principle is still ambivalent. On one hand, it is clear that, without it, Goodness suffers from weakness and inanition against absolute power, and is fated to fail. It is obvious as well that Woland's judgements are in harmony with the ethical norms expounded by Saint Thomas Aquinas or by Dante in Divine Comedy. There is, however an enigma in the novel, which reflects this ambivalence. Many readers and scholars have found it difficult to explain why Yeshua considers the Master unworthy of being raised to heaven. Instead, he offers the Master eternal tranquility and rest, while calling Pilate – who sent him to the cross – to himself instead. This can be explained when we see that the two title-characters cannot choose between the two Saviours offered them, between indulgence and vengeance. Both love, both forgive; but they hate and long for revenge as well. Margarita, becoming a witch, takes revenge on Latunsky, the critic who destroyed the Master; as a wildcat, she leaps on Aloysius Mogarich, who informed

against him. The Master speaks with hatred of the host of pseudo-writers and poets who work in the livery of power. He hears of Berlioz's death with nothing but pleasure. Margarita, at the same time, intervenes on behalf of the child-killing Frida because she feels the woman was purged and paid for her sin, and now deserves redemption. The Master absolves Pilate after two thousand years of punishment, releasing him to ride on the moonbeam leading toward Jeshua..."You are free!" he shouts, "Free! He is waiting for you" (Bulgakov *op. cit.* p. 401). Both the Master and Margarita serve two Saviours throughout the novel. They cannot follow Woland to the Empire of darkness, because they still believe in mercy. On the other hand, they cannot ascend to the realm of light, because they believe in vengeance as well. Therefore, they are given eternal rest in the earthly Paradise. For, in the 'cosmology' of Dante and Bulgakov, Paradise belongs to the Empires of neither darkness nor light; it stands on the border of these, on the top of the mount of Purgatory. Therefore, sustaining and reinforcing the fate of the world, Bulgakov raised mercy and creativity to the apex of his scale of values. He does not for a moment imply, however, that either he or his alterego the Master could forgive – or could even desire to forgive – the Berliozes of the world, or Baron Meigels, or Latunskys.

### 3. (Conclusion)

Starting from the hermeneutical problems addressed by the work, we have been able to reconstruct Bulgakov's concept of God, of the Saviour, of the Evil, and of Man. It was mentioned in the title that this could be achieved through examining a single character: for the key to the interpretation of these concepts is clear Woland, even if we have only been able to arrive at the elucidation of his character in an inductive fashion, and even if his role has only been clarified at the end of this paper. It is his character which makes clear an essential fact: that in Bulgakov's 'theology' the Devil has nothing to do with Evil, that Evil is earthly power and that its ultimate form is the totalitarian state.

It becomes clear as well, while examining Woland's character, that there are two Saviours in Bulgakov's thinking. One of them is the reconstructed Jesus, whose figure follows the outlines drawn in the philosophy of Berdyaev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky. He is nothing but the bearer of goodness and the dispenser of mercy, and he is alien from the principle of judgement. He is Bulgakov's Yeshua, who unites in himself the Berdyaevian ethics of redemption and creativity. The other is Woland. He is needed because the meek Saviour and the benevolent God the Creator, two intellectuals, are not able to free man from the captivity of power. In the character of Woland, Bulgakov rehabilitates the ethic of Berdyaevian law – that is, Jehovah, Moses, Kant, the ethics of punishment and revenge. These principles of vengeance and of divine jurisdiction and interdiction were previously detached from Jesus character. The essence of the dilemma described, and of the paradox inscribed, in the novel lies here. On the one hand Bulgakov believes – on his own behalf, and on that of his two title characters and the majority of his contemporaries – in the desire for a redemption through vengeance, a desire born in a permanent frustration and despair. On the other hand, he still raises the principles of forgiveness and creativity to a valorized status over those of vengeance and punishment: a stance he asserts without ever professing that he himself is able to forgive.

After having subjected the chief concepts of the Bulgakovian 'theology', and of his depiction of the world to a thorough analysis, we can come to one overriding conclusion. We can declare that these concepts can be understood, first of all, as a response to the intellectual challenge of totalitarianism. Bulgakov found himself in an 'inverted' hermeneutical situation while composing his novel. He was himself the tradition which was addressed and deformed by a present alien from him. This stimulated him in a provocative way to interpret it. Responding to this influence, the writer outlines the phenomenology of the present – that is, of totalitarianism. That is the burden of the Moscow chapters. At the same time, he considers and reinterprets tradition in the Jerusalem chapters, searching for its persistent or renewed validity in both the present and future. While the insight into totalitarianism led George Orwell to create a negative utopia, dystopic vision of the day-after-tomorrow's hell, Bulgakov strives to salvage values from beneath the ruins of today, and to find in them a purpose and hope for tomorrow as well.

### References

- Bakhtin, M. (1975)** *Iz predistorii romanogo slova*. In: *Vosprosi literaturi i estetiki*. Issledovania ranih let. Khudozhestvenn aia literatura, Moskva.
- Berdyayev, N. (1959)** *The Destiny of Man*. Geoffrey Bles. Russian edition: O naznachanii cheloveka. Opit opravdaniia et'iki. 1931. Berlin.
- (1916) *Smisl tvorchestva*. Opit opravdaniia cheloveka. YMCA-Press, Paris 1985.
- Böhme, J.** Saemtliche Schriften. Will-Erich Peuckert, 1955-61. In Hungarian: Földi és égi misztériumról. Helikon Kiadó, 1990.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail (1969)** *The Master and Margarita*. Fontana Modern Books. Collins and Havrill Press. First published in 1967. translated by Michael Glenny.
- Burckhardt, J. (1924)** *Die Zeit Konstantins des Grossen*. Alfred Körner, Leipzig.
- Dostoevsky, F. M.** *Brat'a Karamazovi*. First edition 1880.
- Eco, U. (1962)** *Opera aperta*. Bompiani, Milano.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1973)** *Warheit und Methode*. First ed.: Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr 1960. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1973. In English: *Truth and Method*. trans. Ed. Garrett Barden and John Cumming. New York, Seabury Press 1975.
- Gasparov, B. M. (1978)** *Iz nabludenij nad motivnoi strukturoi romana M.A. Bulgakova 'Master i Margarita'*. In: *Slavica Hierosolymitana*, pp. 198-251.
- Renan, E. (1963)** *Vie de Jésus*. Nelson, Calmann-Lévy, Paris (without date). First ad. 1863.
- Spira, V. (1989)** *Bulgakov A Mester és Margarita című regényének multidiszciplináris értelmezése*. Kandidátusi disszertáció. Budapest. (Ph.D. thesis)
- (1990) Hermeneutikai elemzés. Bulgakov: A Mester és Margarita. In: *Műelemzés, műértés*. Szerk.: Sipos Lajos. Medicina Kiadó, Budapest.