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## *The Faces of Woland. A Literary Character Study*

There is a saying that the devil's most perfect ruse is persuading most people that he does not exist.<sup>1</sup> Yet in the opening scene of *Master and Margarita*, set at the Patriarch's Ponds in Moscow, we see the exact opposite. The uncannily peculiar foreign visitor tries to convince the pair of atheists he un-coincidentally met at the Moscow pond – Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz and Ivan Homeless – that the devil, as well as the Jesus from the Gospel (who Bulgakov calls Yeshua Ha-Nozri) do in fact exist. Just a few moments before, the learned Berlioz vehemently argued to Homeless, who had just written for him an anti-religious poem portraying the hero of the Gospel in a negative light<sup>2</sup>, that Jesus had, in fact, never existed:

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- 1 "My dear Brothers, never forget when you hear people boast of our progress in enlightenment, that one of the devil's best ruses is to persuade you that he doesn't exist!" See Ch. Baudelaire, *Generous Gambler*, in: Idem, *Paris Spleen*, 1869. Trans. by L. Varèse, New York: New Directions, 1970, p. 61. It should be noted that this quote, originally included in the 1868 edition of Baudelaire's work tends to be incorrectly attributed nowadays to the famous Twentieth Century writer, C.S. Lewis.
  - 2 It should be noted that Bulgakov himself was very critical towards such a worldview, as exemplified in the following diary entry from 5th January, 1935: "When I skimmed through the copies of the Atheist this evening at home I was shocked. The salt was not in the blasphemy, although that was huge, of course, if you're looking at it just from the outside. The salt was in the idea, an idea that

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It is hard to say what precisely had let Ivan Nikolaevich down – the descriptive powers of his talent or a total unfamiliarity with the question he was writing about – but his Jesus came out, well, completely alive, the once-existing Jesus, though, true, a Jesus furnished with all negative features.<sup>3</sup>

In his conversation with the un-read poet, Berlioz used arguments taken directly from the works of ancient historians who never mentioned Jesus (Philo of Alexandria, Flavius Josephus, Tacitus<sup>4</sup>). Relying too implicitly on the works of 19th century German materialists (such as Arthur Drews or Ludwig Feuerbach), the learned editor argued that Christianity is just one of many religions, while Jesus is as much a creation of his worshipers as were the Egyptian Osiris, the Babylonian Tammuz and Marduk, Adonis, the Aztec Huitzilopochtli, the Phrygian Attis or Persian Mitra (Bulgakov 1997, 9–10). At first, the mysterious – and as yet unnamed – foreigner, who closely listens to this dispute which is of great interest to him, makes sure that the two indeed do not believe that Jesus existed. Then, he expresses his amazement at the fact that they also deny the existence of God himself:

‘In our country atheism does not surprise anyone,’ Berlioz said with diplomatic politeness. ‘The majority of our population consciously and long ago ceased believing in the fairy tales about God’ (Bulgakov 1997, 12).

From there on, the topic of the discussion reaches a higher register – it will pertain to Aquinas’ five proofs regarding the existence of God, along with the sixth one added

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can be historically proved. Even Jesus Christ was being depicted as a crook and a scoundrel. It’s not difficult to understand who’s responsible for this. The offence is immeasurable.” See: M. Bulgakov, *Diaries and Selected Letters*. Trans. by R. Cockrell, Richmond: Alma Classics, 2016, p. 58.

3 M. Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*. Trans. by R. Pevear, L. Volokhonsky, London: Penguin Classics 1997, p. 9. From now on, when quoting from this source we will refer to the author’s last name, date of publication, and page number in the main text.

4 The part of Tacitus’ *Annals* which mentions the execution of Jesus is deemed by Berlioz a later addition intended to falsify reality (Bulgakov 1997, 9).

5 The distinction between Yeshua Ha-Nozri and God is already clear in the second chapter, in the scene of the Roman Pontius Pilatus’ interrogation of Yeshua Ha-Nozri: “ ‘Yeshua Ha-Nozri, do you believe in any gods?’ ‘God is one,’ replied Yeshua, ‘I believe in him’ ” (Bulgakov 1997, 31). In the sixteenth chapter entitled *The Execution*, Matthew Levi, Yeshua’s only disciple, seeing the unimaginable suffering of his Teacher, speaks to the far-away and merciless God in the following manner: “ ‘God! Why are you angry with him? Send him death.’ ” (Bulgakov 1997, 175). “Then Levi shouted: ‘I curse you. God!’ In a rasping voice he shouted that he was convinced of God’s injustice and did not intend to believe in him any longer. ‘You are deaf!’ growled Levi. ‘If you were not deaf, you would have heard me and killed him straight away!’ [...] He shouted about his total disappointment, about the existence of other gods and religions. Yes, another god would not have allowed it, he would never have allowed a man like Yeshua to be burnt by the sun on a post. ‘I was mistaken!’ Levi cried in a completely hoarse voice. ‘You are a god of evil!’” (Bulgakov 1997, 178).

by Immanuel Kant<sup>6</sup>. The newcomer brings forth all of those points, while Berlioz systematically refutes them all, referring the opinions of Friedrich Schiller and David Strauss. The consequence of such extreme atheism is that Berlioz and Homeless firmly believe that only man is able to control his own fate, as well as the fate of the entire earthly history. Their interlocutor strongly disagrees:

‘Pardon me,’ the stranger responded gently, ‘but in order to govern, one needs, after all, to have a precise plan for certain, at least somewhat decent, length of time. Allow me to ask you, then, how can man govern, if he is not only deprived of the opportunity of making a plan for at least some ridiculously short period – well, say, a thousand years – but cannot even vouch for his own tomorrow?’ (Bulgakov 1997, 13).

The final part of the quote above is the prelude to the approaching tragic death of Berlioz, soon to be uttered by the stranger with the mysterious words about the sunflower oil spilled by Annushka and the head severed by the Komsomol-girl (Bulgakov 1997, 15–16).

As mentioned, the mysterious newcomer who initiated the fundamental worldview discussions with the Moscow atheists, remains as yet unintroduced in the novel by name. The atheistic duo learned only the first letter of his last name – “W” – as seen on his visiting card (Bulgakov 1997, 17). Yet the multitude of narrative terms used to describe the character is noticeable at first glance. It is not a coincidence that the first term used to describe him is “the first man:” “And just at the moment when Mikhail Alexandrovich was telling the poet how the Aztecs used to fashion figurines of Vitzli-putzli out of dough – the first man appeared in the walk.” (Bulgakov 1997, 10). A description such as this – “the first man” – gives the situation a feature of an initiative act of a biblical provenance, which directly corresponds with the particularly evangelical message of the second chapter (*Pontius Pilate*).

Further on in the first chapter, the following descriptions are used: “stranger,” “uninvited interlocutor,” “astonishing foreigner,” “approaching man,” “foreign tourist,” “visitor,” “outlander,” “outlandish fellow,” “traveller,” “unknown man,” “strange specimen,” “mysterious,” “suspicious,” and “hateful.” The entire list of descriptions, referring unchangeably to the sphere of cultural otherness and – what is paramount – of political otherness, builds the foundation for the first incarnation of “the man” who came to the Patriarch’s Ponds. This initial embodiment of the character provokes in Berlioz and Homeless – who both live in Stalinist Moscow – curiosity at first, and later also a growing unrest, which finally becomes fear. After all, the peculiar traveller from an unknown country, yet undoubtedly a hostile one towards the soviet government, country (Is he a Pole? Is he German? French? Maybe an Englishman?), may at any moment be revealed as a hidden spy or even a white-émigré, which would by

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6 It is known that Kant perversely refutes Aquinas’ five ways only to add the sixth – his own (Bulgakov 1997, 12–13).

the way explain his fluency in the Russian language – which in turn would put his interlocutors in extremely dire straits.<sup>7</sup>

Yet by the end of the first chapter we can observe a clear change in the dynamic embodiment of the mysterious character. At the culmination point of the duo's fears he briefly becomes tamed, suddenly introducing himself as a "historian" who had been invited to Moscow in order to study medieval manuscripts of Gerbert of Aurillac in the National Library. At that moment, the text of the novel starts using neutral terms to describe the newcomer, such as: "professor," "scholar," "specialist." All of them correspond to the stranger's vast knowledge of theology, philosophy, and languages, as well as to his fluency in many languages, which results in great respect from the scholarly Mikhail Berlioz and in awe from Ivan Homeless, disoriented by the meandering academic branches. This breaks up the effect of "otherness" and "foreignness" and both men of letters are able to briefly feel secure: "Aha! You're a historian? Berlioz asked with great relief and respect" (Bulgakov 1997, 18).

And yet, the narrator's game with the reader – one played from the very start of the novel – leaves no time for respite. Moreover, the many breaches in normalcy featured in the initial chapter are merely a prelude to what is about to happen in Moscow: a total capsizing of the order by the devil and his entourage. These rifts appear in chapters One (*Never Talk with Strangers*) and Three (*The Seventh Proof*), which is a narrative complementation of the scene set in Patriarch's Ponds, as particular motifs and images: the strangely empty avenue on "this dreadful May evening," the "blunt needle" of unrest in Berlioz's heart and his hallucinations, the ridiculous mentioning of breakfasting with Kant by the stranger, the prophecy of the editor's tragic death. A careful reader will also notice the mysterious wordplays of the newcomer, the subsiding and reappearing foreign accent and changes of linguistic register<sup>8</sup> which create a stylistic dissymmetry for the reader, and extreme confusion for Berlioz and Homeless.

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7 In Soviet Russia any contact with foreigners was, for political reasons, extremely risky, not only for the suspect, but also for their family; Margarita was fully aware of this fact: "I have no prejudices, I assure you," Margarita smiled joylessly, 'but I never see any foreigners, I have no wish to associate with them... and, besides, my husband...'" (Bulgakov 1997, 227).

8 In most cases, the newcomer is a completely serious character, but there are brief moments when the other characters (and the reader) may perceive him as a jester or even a madman: "And there's no devil either?" the sick man suddenly inquired merrily of Ivan Nikolaevich. 'No devil...' 'Don't contradict him,' Berlioz whispered with his lips only, dropping behind the professor's back and making faces. 'There isn't any devil!' Ivan Nikolaevich, at a loss from all this balderdash, cried out not what he ought. 'What a punishment! Stop playing the psycho!' Here the insane man burst into such laughter that a sparrow flew out of the linden over the seated men's heads" (Bulgakov 1997, 44). It is also worth noting that, within the pages of the novel, Woland's linguistic registers span between a commanding and uncompromising tone (as is most often the case) and one that is ironic and carnivalesque (manifesting, for example, in his dialogues with the jester-sage Behemoth), as well as one that is high and spiritual (his final conversation with the Master as an example of rhetorical persuasion).

It should be noted that some of these rifts are connected to the self-disclosure of the narrator as a person, who out of the blue reveals the future and elements of omniscience<sup>9</sup>, and also subtly plays with opposing conventions – the objective (“auctorial”) point of view and the conscious misleading of the reader (the interpretation of miniscule behaviours and elements of the stranger’s psychological traits, offered to the reader and later revealed as a red herring).<sup>10</sup>

So far, we have focused on how Berlioz and Ivan Homeless perceive the newcomer. Yet the objective point of view – which, what is worth mentioning, remains in opposition to the additional outside perspective provided in the form of militia-made reports shown to the reader in a flashforward – we are given the following, detailed description of what the character looks like:

Afterwards, when, frankly speaking, it was already too late, various institutions presented reports describing this man. A comparison of them cannot but cause amazement. Thus, the first of them said that the man was short, had gold teeth, and limped on his right leg. The second, that the man was enormously tall, had platinum crowns, and limped on his left leg. The third laconically averred that the man had no distinguishing marks. It must be acknowledged that none of these reports is of any value. First of all, the man described did not limp on any leg, and was neither short nor enormous, but simply tall.<sup>11</sup> As for his teeth, he had platinum crowns on the left side and gold on the right. He was wearing an expensive grey suit and imported shoes of a matching colour. His grey beret was cocked rakishly over one ear; under his arm he carried a stick with a black knob shaped like a poodle’s head. He looked to be a little over forty. Mouth somehow twisted. Clean-shaven.

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9 Such is the case with the narrator’s veiled prophecy of Berlioz’s death, given before it is uttered by the stranger. What is interesting, is that this moment is rarely noticed in interpretations: “He rested his glance on the upper floors, where the glass dazzlingly reflected the broken-up sun which was for ever departing from Mikhail Alexandrovich” (Bulgakov 1997, 10).

10 “‘Amazing!’ exclaimed the uninvited interlocutor and, casting a thievish glance around and muffling his low voice for some reason, he said: ‘Forgive my importunity, but, as I understand, along with everything else, you also do not believe in God?’ his eyes started showing fright and he added: ‘I swear I won’t tell anyone!’” (Bulgakov 1997, 11–12). “The important information apparently had indeed produced a strong impression on the traveller, because he passed his frightened glance over the buildings, as if afraid of seeing an atheist in every window” (Bulgakov 1997, 12).

11 This description of the stranger’s looks is a blatant allusion to the description of Pavel Ivanovich Chichicov, the protagonist of Nikolai Gogol’s *Dead Souls* (1842): “The gentleman in the barouche was no Apollo, neither was he ugly. He was neither fat nor thin. He couldn’t be called old, yet he wasn’t young, either,” see: N. Gogol, *Dead Souls*. Trans. by D. Rayfield, New York: NYRB Classics, 2012, p. 5. Bulgakov would use allusions to Gogol’s themes and characters already in his earliest works, such as in his short stories *The Adventures of Chichikov* (1922) or *Dyavoliada* (1924). In 1932 he adapted the aforementioned novel *Dead Souls* for the theatre – it premiered in the Moscow MHAAT theatre in November of that year, and a year later, in 1933, he created a screenplay for the never-made film *The Adventures of Chichikov*, based on Gogol’s novel. In mid-1930s he wrote the screenplay for the film *The Government Inspector*, based on the celebrated 1836 comedy by Gogol. This too, unfortunately, has remained unfiled.

Dark-haired. Right eye black, left – for some reason – green. Dark eyebrows, but one higher than the other. In short, a foreigner. (Bulgakov 1997, 10).

What is clear in this description is the multitude of elements of diabolical iconography: the cane with the head of a black poodle, taken from Goethe's *Faust* (Bulgakov 1997, 10),<sup>12</sup> the different colours of his eyes which represent the dualism of the devil's nature, as well as the oscillating between curiosity and boredom – tropes which an observant reader might notice from the very beginning. While the plot thickens, such tropes start to appear more often, also in the form of further – as well as the aforementioned works by Goethe and Gogol – intertextual allusions to other classical works of literature and music.<sup>13</sup>

If the philosophical debate on the existence of Jesus constitutes the foundation of the novel's initial chapter, then Chapter Two (*Pontius Pilate*) constitutes the proof of that existence. In consequence, Berlioz's death under the wheels of the tram-car in Chapter Three is the irrefutable proof of the existence of the devil – to this we shall return later in this article.

In the already mentioned second chapter – which opens the four-part biblical theme (which, in the novel *Master and Margarita* functions as an ideological parallel for the main Moscow theme<sup>14</sup>) – the newcomer appears in yet another of his parts, taking the role of the auctorial narrator in the first part of the story of Pontius Pilate and Yeshua Ha-Nozri. What is more, he becomes at the same time a participant and an observer of the true story of the Gospel. He is a participant of a particular kind – omniscient and yet, as he remarks, at the same time remaining incognito (Bulgakov 1997, 43). In the text of the “novel within the novel” there is no direct proof of his presence in that historical space, yet it can be noticed between the lines during close reading.<sup>15</sup>

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12 See also [Translator's note] in: M. Bułhakow, *Mistrz i Małgorzata*. Trans. by L.A. Przebinda, G. Przebinda, I. Przebinda, Kraków: Znak, 2016, p. 454.

13 Later in the novel one can also notice allusions to the opera *Faust* by Charles Gonoud, which the writer has seen multiple times in both Kiev and Moscow (Bulgakov 1997, 136). See also [Translator's note] in: M. Bułhakow, *Mistrz i Małgorzata*. Trans. by L.A. Przebinda, G. Przebinda, I. Przebinda, Znak, Kraków 2016, p. 482. Another allusion is that to the short story *Never Bet the Devil Your Head* by Edgar Allan Poe, see [Translator's note] *Ibid.*, p. 491.

14 It was not an accident that the censor's interference in the first edition of *Master and Margarita* in the journal “Moskva” (1966-1967) were made primarily to the biblical parts of the novel, as it reminded the censors of the political situation of the modern regime of the Stalinist era. See: G. Przebinda, *Mogarycz i inni. Dramatyczne losy kanonu tekstowego Mistrza i Małgorzaty*, “Przegląd Rusycystyczny” 2019, 3(167), p. 57.

15 “‘What do I hear, Procurator?’ Kaifa replied proudly and calmly. ‘You threaten me after you yourself have confirmed the sentence passed? Can that be? We are accustomed to the Roman procurator choosing his words before he says something. What if we should be overheard, Hegemon?’ Pilate looked at the high priest with dead eyes and, barring his teeth, produced a smile. ‘What's your trouble, High Priest? Who can hear us where we are now? Do you think I'm like that young vagrant holy fool who is to be executed today? Am I a boy, Kaifa? I know what I say and where

The newcomers story of the city of Yershalaim in the times of Pontius Pilate correlates with the novel written by Master<sup>16</sup>. It is also an opportunity for Berlioz and Ivan Homeless to directly witness the historical truth – which, during the creative process, the inspired author is able to “truly guess” (Bulgakov 1997, 135) – as silent witnesses of the objective narration of the stranger. An alternative method of reaching the same truth is Ivan Homeless’ dream, shown in Chapter Sixteen (*The Execution*), featuring the description of Yeshua’s torment on the pale. The final way of reaching the truth is the process of reading Master’s novel, as conducted by Margarita, who reads the two final biblical chapters – Chapter Twenty Five (*How the Procurator Tried to Save Judas of Kiriath*) and Twenty Six (*The Burial*). In the key moment, both Yeshua and the devil play the role of readers curious of Master’s novel, which seems to be the proof that this peculiar artefact – which at the same time was the manifestation of the rule of freedom so dear to Bulgakov himself<sup>17</sup> – manages to slip out of the omniscience of the devil and deity alike.

But let us return to the Patriarch’s Ponds. It is worth repeating that just as the first two chapters in the novel prove the existence of a deity, a higher power, the third chapter becomes consequent proof of the existence of the devil. The seemingly absurd prophecies uttered by the stranger, who just a while back is called by the multitude of such terms as: “madman,” “sick man,” “insane man,” “mentally ill,” “half-witted” are proven to be cruelly true. Berlioz – who dies just like the prophecy claimed, under the wheels of a fast-approaching tram-car – is punished for his confidence in the empirical ways of learning about the world and his blind faith in the power of man.

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I say it. There is a cordon around the garden, a cordon around the palace, so that a mouse couldn’t get through any crack!” (Bulgakov 1997, 36). “Had it not been for the roaring of the water, had it not been for the thunderclaps that seemed to threaten to lay flat the roof of the palace, had it not been for the rattle of hail hammering on the steps of the balcony, one might have heard that the procurator was muttering something, talking to himself. And if the unsteady glimmering of the heavenly fire had turned into a constant light, an observer would have been able to see that the procurator’s face, with eyes inflamed by recent insomnia and wine, showed impatience” (Bulgakov 1997, 300). Emphasis added by the author of this article (I.P).

16 There are claims that Woland’s story (the so called “Satanic Gospel”) is in fact a falsification of New Testament reality, yet such interpretations are blatantly contradicted by Bulgakov’s own vision.

17 The distinguished Polish Bulgakov scholar, Andrzej Drawicz, writes: “In his work, the writer decides the fate of the world, yet does not manage to grasp his own. In spite of that, his freedom is relatively the fullest, since the work he is creating starts to live on its own, slipping away from constraints. What is truly free is not the tyrant, not the devil, not even the writer himself, but his work.” See: A. Drawicz, *Wszystko będzie jak należy...*, “Literatura na Świecie” 1974, 11(43), p. 237. To quote another contemporary Polish scholar: “Therefore the most general rule of thinking about the world within this novel is ... freedom. Freedom FROM the compulsory politicizing, prevalent in the period the work was written as the main obligation of any writer – “an engineer of the soul” – and freedom TO choose an ethos of humanity in general, to think in the name of all individuals” see: P. Fast, *Mistrz i Małgorzata Bulhakowa. Pisarz, epoka, powieść*, Katowice: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1991, p. 20.



Therefore, if in the scene of Berlioz's death the mysterious newcomer does not yet feature as a punishing hand, but only as one who foresees the tragic course of events<sup>18</sup>, then in the following chapters of the novel – by the use of his faithful entourage (Koroviev, Azazello, Behemoth, and Hella) – he presents himself as exactly such devilish force, punishing human sins and weaknesses. Woland, by that time already known to the reader by name<sup>19</sup>, plays at the same time the role of one that is knowledgeable as to the nature of humankind. What follows on the subsequent pages of the novel is the series of punishing of the vast array of secondary and tertiary characters – those who meet their punishment are people of weak morals (like Styopa Likhodeev), the greedy (Bosoy), the jealous (Rimsky), the liars (Varenuvka), the unbelievers (Sempleyarov), and the sanctimonious (Sokov). Naturally, the scale of trespasses and the severity of the penitence varies, yet – which is crucial – most of those who were punished experience mercy at some point. Trespasses are indeed forgotten and the devil's punishment becomes an opportunity to start a new, somewhat better, life.

‘Well, now,’ the latter replied pensively, ‘they’re people like any other people... They love money, but that has always been so... Mankind loves money, whatever it’s made of – leather, paper, bronze, gold. Well, they’re light-minded... well, what of it... mercy sometimes knocks at their hearts... ordinary people... (Bulgakov 1997, 126).

Yet in the novel there are also certain wrongdoers who are not to be forgiven: the traitor Judas of Kiriath, the baron-spy Meigel<sup>20</sup>, as well as the frequently mentioned Berlioz. The first of these trespassers is punished for betraying Yeshua twice – he is sentenced independently by both Pontius Pilate and Matthew Levi – and his execution is conducted by the hands of Aphranus, the veiled metaphor for an NKVD agent.<sup>21</sup> The final duo of trespassers meet their severe punishment in Chapter Twenty Three

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18 A similar case is the prophecy of the death of the barman Sokov made by Koroviev, member of the devilish entourage: “‘Well, of course, that’s not a great sum,’ Woland said condescendingly to his visitor, ‘though, as a matter of fact, you have no need of it anyway. When are you going to die?’ Here the barman became indignant. ‘Nobody knows that and it’s nobody’s concern,’ he replied. ‘Sure nobody knows,’ the same trashy voice came from the study. ‘The binomial theorem, you might think! He’s going to die in nine months, next February, of liver cancer, in the clinic of the First Moscow State University, in ward number four’ ” (Bulgakov 1997, 208).

19 The first time the name Woland is mentioned is in Chapter Seven (*A Naughty Apartment*): “ ‘Professor of black magic Woland,’ the visitor said weightily, seeing Styopa’s difficulty” (Bulgakov 1997, 80).

20 The death of the Baron – serving as an analogy to the death of Berlioz – is not directly caused by any diabolical intervention, Woland only speeds up Meigel’s tragic demise: “ ‘And, what’s still more, it is hinted that this will bring you to a sorry end in no more than a month. And so, in order to deliver you from this painful anticipation, we have decided to come to your aid, taking advantage of the fact that you invited yourself here precisely with the purpose of eavesdropping and spying out whatever you can’ ” (Bulgakov 1997, 274).

21 Here it should be noted that although Judas of Kiriath did not live to be fully forgiven, within him – as a tragic character, boyishly enamoured by Niza, the evil femme fatale – Bulgakov sees an element of the Good, which manifests itself in the murder scene: “The third squatted down by



(*The Great Ball at Satan's*). This is one of the infrequent times when the devil effectively manifests the cruelty of his nature. This scene also witnesses another transformation of Woland, this time a fundamental one. In one of the climactic moments of the Ball of the Spring Full Moon (in the chapter entitled *The Great Ball at Satan's*) he performs a cruel monolog towards the still living and suffering head of Berlioz, explaining the complexities of the relationship between existence and non-existence, only to drink a toast with the blood of the shot Baron Meigel from the skull-goblet.<sup>22</sup>:

You have always been an ardent preacher of the theory that, on the cutting off of his head, life ceases in a man, he turns to ashes and goes into non-being. I have the pleasure of informing you, in the presence of my guests, though they serve as proof of quite a different theory, that your theory is both solid and clever. However, one theory is as good as another. There is also one which holds that it will be given to each according to his faith. Let it come true! You go into non-being, and from the cup into which you are to be transformed, I will joyfully drink to being!' (Bulgakov 1997, 273).

During the bloody toast, Woland – who up to that moment is dressed sloppily<sup>23</sup> – appears in one of his primal forms: as a figure clad in a black chlamys, with a steel sword by his hip.<sup>24</sup> By the way, this is exactly the same person who appeared by moonlight at Patriarch's Ponds to Ivan Homeless as early as Chapter Four (*The Chase*), right after Berlioz's death: "in the ever-deceptive light of the moon it seemed to Ivan Nikolaevich that he stood holding a sword, not a walking stick, under his arm" (Bulgakov 1997, 48). This change is a kind of prelude to Woland's final transformation in the novel – which takes place in the final chapter, *Forgiveness and Eternal Refuge* – to which we will return in the final part of this article.

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the murdered man and looked at his face. In the darkness it appeared white as chalk to the gazing man and somehow spiritually beautiful" (Bulgakov 1997, 317).

- 22 Although the imagery in this scene is one of the most crucial parts within the process of the evolution of Woland, it can be noted that Bulgakov himself here directly alludes to the legend referred to in the 11th century chronicle of the Kievan Rus *The Tale of the Bygone Years*, which he must have studied as early as during his studies at the First (Alexandrian) School in Kiev. The following fragment relays the tragic death of Sviatoslav Olegovich, the prince of Kiev, who was murdered by the rock walls near the lower Dnieper by Pecheneg tribe in 972: "When spring came, ... Svyatoslav approached the cataracts, where Kurya, Prince of the Pechenegs, attacked him; and Svyatoslav was killed. The nomads took his head, and made a cup out of his skull, overlaying it with gold, and they drank from it." See: *The Russian Primary Chronicle*. Trans. by S. Hazzard Cross and O. P. Sherbowitz-Wetzor, Cambridge, Mass.: MAoA, 1953, p. 90.
- 23 "What struck Margarita was that Woland came out for this last great appearance at the ball looking just the same as he had looked in the bedroom. The same dirty, patched shirt hung on his shoulders, his feet were in worn out bedroom slippers" (Bulgakov 1997, 272).
- 24 "The patched shirt and worn slippers disappeared. Woland was in some sort of black chlamys with a steel sword on his hip" (Bulgakov 1997, 274).

Up to this point in the novel, Woland appears as a strange newcomer, a philosopher, historian, the narrator of a biblical tale, an alleged madman, a punishing hand of justice, a magician performing in a theatre<sup>25</sup>, while the fundamental role of this character is directly connected to the pair whose names appear in the title and their two most important acts of mercy on the pages of *Master and Margarita*. Firstly, Woland allows Margarita – who, as the queen of the ball, is entitled to one wish – to grant forgiveness to Frieda, the child-killer, thus freeing the woman from her own personal inferno, which for her was extremely cruel in comparison with other participants of this Ball of the Spring Full Moon. The devil’s ball itself can also be seen as Woland’s act of mercy towards the parade of condemned wrongdoers and wretches, who are allowed a one-night reprise from Hell. Here, Frieda’s case is a particularly tragic one, as she is the only one who is not granted a rest in the carnival. Therefore, the queen of the ball liberates her from her eternal suffering – it is important to note that here, the causative power seems to belong entirely to Margarita.<sup>26</sup> Woland’s role is only as a supporting power, which could mean that – in spite of what Margarita says when euphorically thanking him for saving Master’s manuscripts from the flames (Bulgakov 1997, 287) – he is not, in fact, omnipotent.<sup>27</sup> It is also worth noticing that when a moment later he decides to grant Margarita another wish and give her Master back, he betrays his kindness, as she had decided to forgive the child-killer instead of choosing her own happiness. Woland’s kindness and forbearance that we witness in his relationship with Margarita (who is fascinated by him) manifests itself also through the set of particularly human features and vices that have been given to this anthropomorphised devil during the preparation for the Ball. In Chapter Twenty Two (*By Candlelight*) he turns out to be a chess-playing great-grandson of a herbalist, who suffers from rheumatic pain in his knee, or, as he calls it – a souvenir from a certain sixteenth century witch.

The second – symmetrical – act of mercy takes place in Chapter Thirty Two when Master frees Pontius Pilate, who had been making penance in his personal purgatory for two thousand years for the sin of cowardice which – according to Pilate himself – is the greatest weakness a man might commit (Bulgakov 1997, 319). The Roman

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25 This is why some scholars see him as a “trickster” (cf. M. Lipovetsky, *Charms of the cynical reason: the trickster’s transformation in Soviet and Post-Soviet culture*, Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019, pp. 34, 54), while in fact the role of the tricksters in the novel is played by the members of his court: Koroviev, Behemoth, Azazello, and Hella.

26 It is the feminine voice that is most often the voice of forgiveness in *Master and Margarita*. During the dark magic séance, the voices that argue for the revocation of the cruel punishment of the master of ceremonies, Georges Bangalsky, are feminine (see: Bulgakov, 1997, 126). It is worth mentioning that in one of the most recent theatrical adaptations of Bulgakov’s novel, directed in October 2019 by Janusz Opryński in the Jan Kochanowski Theatre in Opole, the female voices onstage were transposed into the voice of Margarita.

27 What is more, he is also not omniscient, which can be noticed for example in the context of his reading Master’s novel – one might say that the anthropomorphised devil does not possess the gift of knowing everything at one moment.

procurator of Judea receives forgiveness due to the intercession and forgiveness of Yeshua, whose life he was too cowardly to save. In Woland's own words, Master's novel can finally be finished by himself by one single sentence, which Master does without a doubt: "You're free! You're free! He is waiting for you!" (Bulgakov 1997, 382). The freed Pilatus finally goes to the sphere of the Light – along with his companion, Yeshua, and Banga, his loyal dog, who also in this context should not be forgotten. What is paramount is that the sphere of Light is the only part of the afterlife which is not ruled by Woland, we even do not know who actually rules there, whether it could be Yeshua himself or the "One God" that Yeshua mentions during the interrogation by Pilate. It should be mentioned that Chapters Twenty Nine through Thirty Two constitute a vital, eschatological part of the novel, usually unappreciated by readers, although crucial for the understanding of the overall message of *Master and Margarita*. It is here, and not in the Epilogue – which focuses primarily on background characters and basically lessens the apocalyptic dimension of Woland's three-day stay in Moscow – that closes and determines the fate of the main characters of the novel, including the oh-so-humane devil, Woland.

Let us ponder for a while with the characters upon the aforementioned afterlife: the devil of the novel is the master of two spheres (different from the Light): Refuge and Darkness. It is in the oasis of Refuge, also owing to the interference of Yeshua, and it is where the eternal fates of the Master and his companion Margarita come to an end:

'He has read the master's work,' said Matthew Levi, 'and asks you to take the master with you and reward him with peace. Is that hard for you to do, spirit of evil?' 'Nothing is hard for me to do,' answered Woland, 'you know that very well.' He paused and added: 'But why don't you take him with you into the light?' 'He does not deserve the light, he deserves peace,' Levi said in a sorrowful voice. 'Tell him it will be done,' Woland replied and added, his eye flashing: 'And leave me immediately.' 'He asks that she who loved him and suffered because of him also be taken with him,' Levi addressed Woland pleadingly for the first time. 'We would never have thought of it without you. Go' (Bulgakov 1997, 360–361).

The sphere of Refuge appears to be a space full of quiet. There is no place there for any earthly fear and unrest, and culture, art, and nature remain in mutual harmony. It is even suggested that we might presume that the Master's biblical tale – in spite of the writer's declaration to Woland (Bulgakov 1997, 298–293) – might not be his final work:

The master and Margarita saw the promised dawn. It began straight away, immediately after the midnight moon. The master walked with his friend in the brilliance of the first rays of morning over a mossy little stone bridge. They crossed it. The faithful lovers left the stream behind and walked down the sandy path. 'Listen to

the stillness,' Margarita said to the master, and the sand rustled under her bare feet, 'listen and enjoy what you were not given in life – peace. Look, there ahead is your eternal home, which you have been given as a reward. I can already see the Venetian window and the twisting vine, it climbs right up to the roof. Here is your home, your eternal home. I know that in the evenings you will be visited by those you love, those who interest you and who will never trouble you. They will play for you, they will sing for you, you will see what light is in the room when the candles are burning. You will fall asleep, having put on your greasy and eternal nightcap, you will fall asleep with a smile on your lips. Sleep will strengthen you, you will reason wisely. And you will no longer be able to drive me away. I will watch over your sleep' (Bulgakov 1997, 383–384).

The final sphere – that of Darkness – seems to be identical to that of the traditional Hell. It is also the homestead of Woland and his entourage, and it is there that they return to in the final moments of the book, after returning to their primal features:

And, finally, Woland also flew<sup>28</sup> in his true image. Margarita could not have said what his horse's bridle was made of, but thought it might be chains of moonlight, and the horse itself was a mass of darkness, and the horse's mane a storm cloud, and the rider's spurs the white flecks of stars (Bulgakov 1997, 380).

Here is the novel's main devil in his final, though not entirely revealed, form. It remains unclear due to the characteristic metonymic shift in his description. What is presented is only a poetic description of his attributes and not of the devil's "true form" promised by the narrator. Contrarily to the case of the devilish entourage of the minor demons, the reader is never given the opportunity to learn what the master of the Kingdom of Shadows and Darkness truly looks like. One can only venture an interpretative assumption that Bulgakov decided that the final, eschatological form of Woland could not be perceived.

The previously quoted conversation between Woland and Matthew Levi, Yeshua's disciple that arrived from the Light, in which the non-earthly fates of the titular pair are decided is also somewhat of a narrative intermission dealing with the necessity of the coexistence of good and evil. Here, Levi is a fervent representative of the cast of dogmatic priests (criticized by Bulgakov himself) who in fact have a destructive influence on human faith and religion. Meanwhile, Woland's words – the "spirit of evil and sovereign of shadows" (Bulgakov 1997, 360) – represent the view that is opposite to the ontological dogmatism, that is a personalistic view, in which a fair existence of any person requires the coexistence of the lightness and the shadow. It should therefore be noted that along with the abject critique of the vulgar Soviet atheism, Bulgakov

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28 Apart from the obvious allusion to *Faust*, the name "Woland" also means "Flying," as duly spotted by the modern Polish researcher of Bulgakov's work, Jerzy Prokopiuk, see: J. Prokopiuk, *Piękno jest tylko gnozy początkiem*, Katowice: KOS, 2007, p. 248.

also critiques all forms of dogmatized institutionalization of the church, which entails a symbiosis of the government and church rule, which is overall pagan in nature.

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The purpose of the essay above, based mostly on many years of close reading of Bulgakov's masterpiece, was to present the multidimensionality of the character of Woland as one of – although decidedly not the sole!<sup>29</sup> – the main characters of *Master and Margarita*.<sup>30</sup> A character that – contrary to the majority of scholarly analyses and the opinions of readers – cannot be limited to one fundamental interpretative scheme. It should be firmly emphasized that the Faustian motto of the novel (“... who are you, then?” “I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good” (Bulgakov 1997, 5) is surely not one of such schemes, especially since it appeared, in its present form, only at a very late stage of creating *Master and Margarita*.<sup>31</sup> Its function is that of an eye-catching stylistic figure or, possibly, an intriguing literary allusion. Bulgakov's devil is not in a Manichean conflict between good and evil, his nature is also devoid of the excruciating compulsion to commit evil (as is the case in the motto), and, finally: he is never presented as a tempter.<sup>32</sup> The first Polish scholar

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29 As might be suggested by the title of the new, valuable, work on the reception of *Master and Margarita* in Poland in the years until 1989 – that would translate to: “*Woland's Shadow over the People's Republic of Poland*” – see: K. Korcz, *Cień Wolanda nad PRL. Mistrz i Małgorzata Michajła Bułhakowa w Polsce w latach 1969–1989. Obecność. Recepcja. Odzew*, Poznań: Bonami, 2019.

30 I would like to point out that the longer Bulgakov wrote and modified *Master and Margarita*, the more the story of the devil (in which the titular pair of characters was still absent) became, in the later versions, a story of mankind – both ideologically and narratively.

31 It should be noted that there was no motto of any kind even in the final manuscript of the novel, which was finished on the 22/23 of May, 1938. The final version of the motto from *Faust* appeared as late as the Fall of 1939, so only a couple of months before the writer's death, see: G. Przebinda, *Mogarycz i inni. Dramatyczne losy kanonu tekstowego Mistrza i Małgorzaty*, “Przegląd Rusycystyczny” 2019, 3(167), p. 43, 48. It should be added that the motto from *Faust* appeared in the original was Bulgakov's own translation from German – in one of the later notebooks containing manuscript materials pertaining to the novel, the motto remained written down in German: “*ein Teil / von jener / Kraft / die stets das Böse will / und stets das Gute schafft*.” The cited source is held in the Manuscript Department of the Russian State Library (Pashkov House) in Moscow, under the signature 562.8.1, where I had the opportunity of studying it closely in early August of 2019, when I was working in the Moscow Mikhail Bulgakov Archive.

32 A completely different case is that of the early versions of the novel, those that even had the appropriate “devilish” titles, such as: *A Hoofed Consultant*, *The Dark Sorcerer*, *The Grand Chancellor*, and *The Prince of Darkness*. In these earliest versions from 1928–1931, Bulgakov would actually describe the “consulting engineer” (who would later become Woland) as a tempter, and not a subtle one using the following words: “‘And you, most distinguished Ivan Nikolaevich... , please be so kind,’ he said, softly ‘as to step on this portrait here.’ At which he pointed his sharp finger toward the picture of Christ on the sand... ‘I will do no such thing!’ the disoriented Ivanushka looked at his patron and friend. Berlioz supported Ivanushka... ‘If such is the case’ the engineer said crossly, furling his brow. ‘Then you will let me tell you, citizen Homeless, that you are a bloody liar! Yes! Yes! And there is no use glaring at me like that!’” (this fragment translated by KR on the basis of: M. Bułhakow, *Czarny mag. Wielki kanclerz. Książę ciemności. Rękopisy z lat 1937–1938*. Trans. by K. Tur, Białystok: Studio Wydawnicze Unikat, 2003, p. 29.).

to point it out was Andrzej Drawicz, who still had no way of reaching the Moscow Archive, but who possessed an intuition of knowing what the most important thing about the writer is:

While the devil of Goethe could rightly claim that about himself ... Woland et consortes do not bother with any paradoxes, their actions are done according to their firm prerequisites, moreover, there is no way to prove that they, "want evil," therefore they hardly, if at all, fulfil this formula. For Mikhail Aphanasyevich the Faustian motto was rather an allusion, a sign that was used without a deep dive into its meaning.<sup>33</sup>

Also, Woland is not a demon who – as stated in many popular, quasi-theological interpretations of the novel – falsified goodness and ultimately led to Master's and Margarita's demise. I consistently believe that – in spite of such interpretation which reduces literature to ideology – Woland's agency in the novel (not counting perhaps the fantastical and grotesque themes and motifs) bears overall positive outcomes, which is owing to the titular pair of characters, especially in the two acts of mercy. The multidimensionality of Woland functions as an ethical message, oscillating between strict justice and mercy.

Therefore, Woland is not a homogenous character and the multi-aspectual perspective of him is necessary not only when explaining the ideological message of *Master and Margarita* as a literary work, but also – at the very beginning – with each attempt at any particular adaptation of the novel, be it for the theatre, television or the big screen.

Translated by Karolina Rybicka-Tomala

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33 Here: translated by KR, A. Drawicz, *Wszystko będzie jak należy...*, "Literatura na Świecie" 1974, 11(43), p. 226. Gustaw Herling-Grudziński was mistaken when, in 1967, while on air of Radio Free Europe, he presented the following moralistic interpretation of this ideological problem: "To greatly simplify, we can say that in *Master and Margarita* Bulgakov stayed true to the motto from Goethe's *Faust*: 'Who then art thou? Part of that power which still produceth good, whilst ever scheming ill.' Behind the allegorical, multi-dimensional façade of the novel, one can see the constant presence of Russia possessed and stifled by Stalinism, which the more tries to break out into the good, the more it sinks into the deep of evil." See: G. Herling-Grudziński, *Mistrz i Małgorzata*, in: Idem, *Dziela zebrane*, vol. 3: *Recenzje, szkice, rozprawy literackie 1957–1998; Felietony i komentarze z Radia Wolna Europa 1955–1967*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2013, p. 100. A similarly misguided interpretation seems to be that by Janusz Opryński from the aforementioned theatrical adaptation presented in Opole, who in the final scene makes Woland describe his essence by this very *Faust* quote.

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## STRESZCZENIE

### *Oblicza Wolanda. Studium postaci literackiej*

Celem niniejszego artykułu było przedstawienie własnej charakterystyki Wolanda jako jednego z głównych bohaterów powieści Bułhakowa *Mistrz i Małgorzata*, po doświadczeniach związanych z pracą nad nowym tłumaczeniem tego dzieła. Studium zostało przeprowadzone na podstawie wnikliwej analizy tekstu powieści. Wyszczególnione zostały tutaj role, w jakich występuje Woland w relacjach z bohaterami drugiego i trzeciego planu, oraz przemiany mentalne i fizyczne, jakim podlega. Sporo uwag dotyczy towarzyszącym temu wyraźnym zmianom rejestrów stylistycznych w jego wypowiedziach. Analizie językowej poddane zostały także wielorakie miana, jakimi sam narrator określa tę postać. Unaocznione są również analogie do innych autorów (Goethe, Gogol, Poe). Artykuł jest próbą rekonstrukcji światopoglądu reprezentowanego przez Wolanda, z uwzględnieniem wielości elementów nawiązujących do konkretnych doktryn filozoficznych, politycznych i etycznych. Wszystko to prowadzi do konkluzji, że bułhakowski diabeł to postać wielowymiarowa i nieoczywista, wymykająca się wszelkim tradycyjnym, jednoznacznym schematom interpretacyjnym.

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

Woland, *Mistrz i Małgorzata*, *Faust*, Michaił Bułhakow, Edgar Allan Poe, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Mikołaj Gogol, uważne czytanie, diabeł, człowiek, dobro, zło, personalizm

## ABSTRACT

### *The Faces of Woland. A Literary Character Study*

The objective of this article is to present the Author's own interpretation of Woland as one of the main characters of Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, following his experience of creating a new Polish translation of the novel. The study was conducted on the basis of a deep analysis of the text of the novel. The article points out the roles in which Woland appears in relation with secondary and tertiary characters, as well as the mental and physical changes he undergoes. A number of comments relate to the accompanying clear changes in the stylistic registers in his statements. The

article includes a linguistic analysis of the many names that the narrator himself uses to describe the character. It also points out to the analogies to the works by other authors (such as Goethe, Gogol, and Poe). The article attempts to reconstruct the worldview represented by Woland, taking into account the multitude of elements that allude to particular philosophical, political, and ethical doctrines. All this leads to the conclusion that the devil of Bulgakov is a multidimensional and complex character that eludes all traditional, straight-forward interpretative schemes.

**KEY WORDS**

Woland, *The Master and Margarita*, *Faust*, Mikhail Bulgakov, Edgar Allan Poe, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Nikolai Gogol, attentive reading, devil, man, good, evil, personalism