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## The Uses of Witches in Fedin and Bulgakov

Modernist prose forms often present the reader with the paradox of cerebral, structurally complex works which express an irrational or antirational content. These works seek an almost geometric perfection of form while simultaneously rejecting intellect as a totally inadequate means of conceiving contemporary experience. Strikingly often it is a witch of a rather special breed who provides the essential thematic and narrative elements without which the intellectual pattern of the novel could not crystallize out. That voyantes and sorceresses should people the prose of Western surrealists such as André Breton is not too surprising, but it is surely a nice problem that two of the most self-consciously modernist Soviet novels,<sup>1</sup> Fedin's *Cities and Years* and Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, should depend for both their compositional and moral energies on witches.

No one would dispute, I think, the structural "modernism" of these novels. Both bridge enormous distances of time and space (both could equally well be entitled *Cities and Years*). They create a new order through the juxtaposition of elements of a disparate nature, whether these be newspaper clippings and other realia, or different levels of discourse, or apparently incommensurable genres and levels of narrative and episodic reality.<sup>2</sup> Both novels use the *visible* disparity of these elements as their essential constructional principle, emphasizing this incongruity and thereby making the ultimate resolution of the oppositions all the more striking. Last, and not of least importance, the resolutions of both novels involve the geometrical figure of the closed circle

1. Although *The Master and Margarita* was published long after Bulgakov's death, he had worked on it more or less intensively for the last twelve years of his life. He began the story which ultimately developed into the novel ("The Consultant with the Hoof") in 1928. Thus, in a sense, both novels are in conception novels of the "twenties."

2. It matters little for the purposes of our analysis whether the fragment of printed matter stuck into the collage, and creating a new order there, is from a newspaper or part of a page of *Faust*. What René Micha notes about Bulgakov is equally applicable to Fedin: "Pour l'école formaliste, ce n'est pas la substance d'un élément qui importe, mais sa fonction. Chez Boulgakov, cette fonction est toujours ironique." See "Mikhaël Boulgakov ou la Russie éternelle," *Critique*, 25, no. 260 (January 1969): 16.

Both *Cities and Years* and *The Master and Margarita* display many characteristics of what M. M. Bakhtin has called the Menippean strain in literature. See my article "Some Problems of Construction in Fedin's *Cities and Years*," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 16, no. 1 (Spring 1972): 1-18, and Ellendea Proffer, "Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*: Genre and Motif," *Canadian Slavic Studies*, 3, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 615-28.

and are precipitated by a female character who is a witch. Before we can deal with the witches themselves, we must pause to consider their patron. For behind these witches stands the Devil, with whom they are necessarily in league. The presence of the Devil is compositionally and thematically appropriate, not to say inevitable, in such novels. The montage structure itself calls up the Devil because of its deliberate disruption of sequence, a violation of the Chain of Being which allows chaos to show through the gaps. Furthermore, in novels constructed by the juxtaposition of unlike elements, thesis calls for antithesis, negation, and our eternal friend the Devil. Any ultimate harmony depends on his preparatory participation (*pace* Ivan Karamazov). Life itself depends on him, as Woland impatiently explains to Matthew.<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore not surprising to find the Devil or his surrogate as an actor in such novels. But the curious thing about the Devil's role in them is that he does not appear merely as a metaphor for disruption; he is not just the principle of negation which despite itself furthers the dialectical triad. Quite the contrary. The Devil is the source of the active, positive, moral, and compositional energies of these novels.

Let us not forget that although our bad opinion of the Devil has been inculcated in us by authority, he has often appeared in Western culture as the image of a paradoxical source of life energy. It is by now a cliché of cultural history that in periods when the dominant culture, self-defined as the good, the positive, the legitimate, has become so narrow-minded, so repressive as to be inadequate to the real needs of life, the signs may change.<sup>4</sup> A reversal of roles and values may occur in popular culture, and the Devil appears both as lord of the underworld and the prince of *this* world, the active principle of life itself.

Seen in such a context the role of the Devil is not only or even primarily evil. It only seems so to narrow-minded representatives of the dominant culture, like Bulgakov's Matthew the Levite. There is even a solid, if underground, tradition that links Jesus and the Devil. Both are interpreted as contrary to the principle of rigidity and restraint of life. One well-known incarnation of the Devil recognizes a brother in Jesus: "Jesus was all virtue and acted from impulse not rules, thus constantly breaking the ten command-

3. Mikhail Bulgakov, *Master i Margarita* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1967), p. 202. All references, unless otherwise identified, are to this edition of *The Master and Margarita*.

4. One can find thorough discussions of this phenomenon in Bakhtin's *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekoviia i Renessansa* (Moscow, 1965), which is most easily accessible in the English translation by Helene Iswolsky, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), and in Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière* (1862), published in English as *Satanism and Witchcraft*, trans. A. R. Allenson (New York, 1939; reprint, Secaucus, N.J., 1973), and Julio Caro Baroja, *The World of the Witches*, trans. O. N. V. Glendinning (Chicago, 1965).

ments.”<sup>5</sup> We are indeed in the realm of the Argument of “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell”: “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence. From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the Active springing from Energy.”<sup>6</sup>

As the Devil incarnates the virtue of life energy in Blake, so does he in *The Master and Margarita* and in *Cities and Years*. The identification of the Devil and life with all the chthonian elements inevitably entails a close partnership between the Devil and Woman. But this relationship, too, must be seen in the light of the Change of Signs. We must go behind the libelous image of the wicked, snaggletoothed witch to find the Sorceress, who, although she may have first sought the Devil through despair and a desire for vengeance, becomes in his hands, almost in spite of herself, a comforter and healer, a source of mercy. As Michelet and others have noted, the much maligned Sorceress was, in fact, originally a dominantly positive figure, primarily beneficent, and the spirit from below who animated her was blessed for her activity.<sup>7</sup>

The point of this long preamble is that the witches who people modernist prose are usually descendants of this beneficent sorceress. They are essentially positive—bearers of a necessarily ambiguous restraint-breaking energy. Both Fedin’s Marie Urbach and Bulgakov’s Margarita are such sorceresses. They share the broad-mindedness of the principle of energy which they serve, for in these two novels men are divided not into the good and the bad but into the broad- and narrow-minded.<sup>8</sup> That Margarita is a witch requires, I think, no

5. William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,” in *The Portable Blake* (New York, 1967), p. 264.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 250.

7. Robert Mandrón observes: “La sorcière médiévale n’est pas encore la femme pourchassée de l’époque moderne. Pour le village, pour cette vie paysanne toujours sombre, toujours menacée, elle est une consolatrice, une aide quotidienne . . . c’est le premier âge de la sorcellerie, nourri de vieilles traditions païennes et des leçons chrétiennes pris à contre-pied, nourri également de l’inquiétude et de l’impuissance des hommes. . . . Maudite comme impure selon la tradition plurisécular de l’Église (et Michelet souligne bien l’ambiguïté du culte Marial, qui a exalté la Vierge et abaissé la femme réelle), la sorcière trouve sa revanche dans les pouvoirs magiques qu’elle acquiert: guérisseuse grâce aux plantes et aux philtres, protectrice des faibles elle devient la ‘bienfaitante sorcière.’ Et ‘l’esprit d’en bas’ qui la protège et l’anime, est béni.” Introduction to Jules Michelet, *La Sorcière* (Paris, 1964), pp. 11–13. Or hear Michelet himself: “Jamais, dans ces temps, la femme n’eût admis un médecin mâle, ne se fût confiée à lui, ne lui eût dit des secrets. Les sorcières observaient seules, et furent, pour la femme surtout, le seul et unique médecin” (p. 110). See also the admittedly polemical “Witches, Midwives and Nurses: A History of Women Healers” (Oyster Bay, N.Y.: Glass Mountain Pamphlets, 1973), which contains a short bibliography on the question.

8. It is a curious fact that although this broad-mindedness and openness to the unexpected allows Marie and Margarita rapid, decisive, liberating action and provides

proof. But Marie Urbach's links to the Devil are less immediately visible, although no less significant. For that reason, as well as for the sake of contrariness, I should like to deal with her first.

Although no one would claim that Michelet's *La Sorcière* is in any way normative, his description of the second generation of witches, the daughters of Satan, fits Marie perfectly.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Marie's witchery is obvious if one reads the fourth chapter of *Cities and Years* with a minimum of care. The very first thing that is said about Marie Urbach is that gossip holds her to be a witch.<sup>10</sup> As the sad history of witch trials has proven, she whom public opinion declares to be a witch *is* a witch in the same way that, Sartre has argued, he is a Jew whom others so define. But Marie is diabolical in activity as well as reputation. The pranks of her childhood, her goatlike, solitary romps on the mountains, her visit to the Devil in his reputed hangout on the mountain nicely known as the Three Nuns,<sup>11</sup> her spooking of passing peasants, her

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them with a sensitivity to pain beyond their own, the same broad-mindedness produces passivity rather than activity in the men they love. The reasons for this are conventional and compositional as well as psychological. Neither Marie nor Margarita is an intellectual. The whole tradition of Russian literature reserves that role to men. (Can one conceive of a book entitled *The Underground Woman in Russian Literature*? Fallen, yes, infernal, yes, even intelligent—but intellectual?) It is always the male hero who is too liberal or too sensitive or too aware of ambiguities to act. This in itself provides the compositional reason for the depiction of the complementary woman as *energetic*. Conversely, it would seem that the refusal of the Sonia complex (the woman as victim and sufferer) is a compositional possibility only in a structure where there is a male figure substituted as sacrificial victim: on the one hand Yeshua, Berlioz, Baron Maigel, the Master; on the other, Karl Ebersocks, the mutilated war victims, and the spiritually dismembered Andrei.

9. For example, the following passage about the daughters of Satan applies quite well to Marie: "Celle-ci est tout au plus la fille du Diable. Elle a de lui deux choses, elle est impure, et elle aime à manipuler la vie. . . . Celle qui naît avec ce secret dans le sang, cette science instinctive du mal, qui a vu si loin et si bas, elle ne respectera rien, ni chose ni personne en ce monde, n'aura guère de religion. Guère pour Satan lui-même, car il est encore un esprit, et celle-ci a un goût unique pour toute chose de matière. . . . De bonne heure elle manipule surtout les choses répugnantes. . . . Elle sera fine entremetteuse, habile, audacieuse, empirique. . . . Sans bonté, elle aime la vie, à guérir, prolonger la vie" (Michelet, pp. 149–50).

10. "Ask any peasant—she was known throughout the entire district. She turned up everywhere, and always unexpectedly, like a ghost. It was truly a bad sign if Marie ever ran into someone else's yard. After her appearance some kind of trouble was sure to happen on that farm: a horse would fall sick, or a reaper would break, or—at the very least—the milk would go sour." Konstantin Fedin, *Goroda i gody in Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Moscow, 1969–73), 1:59 (all page references are to this edition). Translations are substantially those of Michael Scammell: see *Cities and Years* (New York: Dell, 1962).

11. On one occasion, Marie does not return, and a search party is sent out. It meets a young peasant who has been spooked by the terrible noise which had enveloped him as he passed the Mountain of the Three Nuns: "It had seemed to the youth that the mountains had moved out of place and an evil spirit had been laughing and howling after him. . . . And behind him there had been a whistling and grinding and laughter and howling. Apparently Beelzebub himself was celebrating his birthday" (p. 162). As

descent into the tomb of the "Stone Margravine," all have the same character of blasphemous disrespect for an ancient, hidebound order. The peasants have in fact every right to consider that "it was as though nothing less than a demon had settled in the wench, and she was born in an evil hour" (p. 159).

We cannot go into the early career of this devil's daughter in any detail, but three brief points must be made: (1) Her natural father, Urbach, a man whose origins and life-style are incomprehensible to the local citizenry, turns out to have been a secret socialist, who financially contributed to the disruption of the status quo, and therefore in the eyes of the peasantry, and of his own wife, is a true disciple of the Master of Deceit. (2) Puberty only increases Marie's evident links to the Devil: "From that time, the rumor spread that from her it was but a short distance to the Devil himself, and that it was better not to cross her path" (pp. 168–69). (3) The lengthy chapter dealing with Marie's childhood and adolescence constitutes approximately one-ninth of the novel. It is placed just before the novel's halfway point, immediately before the episodes concerning Marie's meetings with Andrei. Her witchery is therefore both thematically and *compositionally* central. It explains her energy, an energy so uncharacteristic of her milieu and of the town called Bischofsburg whose thoroughfare, Bismarck Avenue, is divided into three branches, one for horsemen, one for bicycles, and one for pedestrians, and is studded with signs containing reminders such as "Dropping papers or fruit peel forbidden!" "Do not break branches or knock off leaves," and "Do not dig up paths with sticks or umbrellas" (p. 249).

In such a world, energy, which desires to break out of deadening restraints, must have the character of disorder and destructiveness and bear the mark of the Devil. This explains why Marie is drawn to a pariah, who at first seems strong and independent.<sup>12</sup> Andrei turns out, however, to be utterly dependent on her for the energy to maintain his belief in himself and to fulfill his mission and duty. Like Margarita, Marie must be the sole moral support of her man, must attempt to nurse him back to moral health and vigor.<sup>13</sup> It is she who must oblige him to return to Russia, where she will join

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soon as Urbach hears this, he leaves the search party and heads for the Three Nuns. "He knew his daughter well indeed," as the narrator observes, "if he decided immediately that she would be nowhere else than visiting the Devil" (p. 163). The terrifying spirit was in fact Marie, banging on a sheet of tin. "It is so terrible there you can't resist it," she says, as she comes obediently down at her father's call.

12. The initial illusion of the beloved's strength is characteristic of both Marie and Margarita.

13. Her role of energizer and nurse begins the very first time that she comes to his room. Her first words are, "What is the matter with you? Are you ill? Then why are you holding your head?" (p. 220). A minor but interesting point is that both Marie and Margarita come to their man's room rather than meeting at their own homes or in some neutral spot. This is possible only because of the extreme social isolation of both men.

him as soon as possible. Meanwhile, she bends her energy to overthrowing the old in Germany: fraternizing with the enemy; joining in the storming of the prison castle, which is the very stone image of Urizen; inspiring the soldiers to form a city soviet, setting up an office for them, even providing the soviet with its essential symbol of authority—a rubber stamp, reading “ex libris Marie Urbach.”

It ought to be noted here that Marie is not the only daughter of the Devil active in Bischofsburg. The war has turned many women into witches. As they walk circumspectly several paces ahead of their burgher husbands and fathers, the wives, mothers, and fiancées of Bischofsburg have, in fact, secretly gone over to the Devil. They rejoice in the blooming of the prophetic linden tree which last flowered in 1871. This tree had been planted unnaturally upside down. Its rooting and flourishing were taken by the man who planted it as testimony to the power of God. But we and the women know whose power it really reveals. The women believe that the war will stop when every last woman in Germany has joined in a spell and wears her hair as they and their friends do: quite flat, with a part in the middle. It is the women who insist on freeing the men and the truth hidden in the citadel. And it is a worthy sister of Marie who leads other women to reveal Bischofsburg’s greatest obscenity masked as a charitable institution: the storehouse of mutilated soldiers which hides behind the tidy façade of the house at the head of Bismarck Avenue.

Remembering the legless, armless, sightless, hearingless lump of suffering to which she could not even communicate her presence and which had formerly been her husband, Martha Berman leads a group of black-clad women in mourning to the hospital to “resurrect” these living dead.<sup>14</sup> The women are described descending on the hospital like a coven of witches: “The wind jerked and caught up the wailing and groaning, jerked the long crepe veils, and the women in mourning broke into a run. Behind the group in mourning, whirled into a funnel by the wind, swept other women, alone and in groups,

14. Can it be an accident that these women who raise the dead bear the names of Mary and Martha, Lazarus’s sisters? Many of the names are significant in *Cities and Years*. We have already mentioned Urbach and Bischofsburg, but let us also note in passing the names Kurt *Wahn* and Andrei *Startsov*, as well as the archetypically German town of Erlangen.

Resurrection, or at least the possibility of raising and speaking with the dead, is one of the great boons which the Devil granted through the sorceress in the Middle Ages: “Il est évident que la compassion apparaît désormais du côté de Satan. La Vierge même, idéal de la grâce, ne répond rien à ce besoin du cœur, l’Église rien. L’évocation des morts reste expressément défendue. Pendant que tous les livres continuent à plaisir ou le démon pourceau des premiers temps, ou le démon griffu, bourreau du second âge, Satan a changé de figure pour ceux qui n’écrivent pas. Il tient du vieux Pluton, mais sa majesté pâle, nullement inexorable, accordant aux morts des retours, aux vivants de revoir les morts, de plus en plus revient à son père ou grand-père, Osiris, le pasteur des âmes” (Michelet, p. 97).

who had flown down from no one knew where like leaves at the height of the fall" (p. 316). They carry the broken veterans out from the wards and parade them through the streets. And it is no accident that the woman who leads this parade of life destroyed in the name of order, of dancing demons with metal arms and legs, should be a black-clad widow who hails from a town called *Teufelsmühle* (Devil's Mill). All these women who turn against order and propriety and godliness in the name of life and energy have once more turned to their ultimate source of help. Thematically speaking, *Cities and Years* contains not one witch, but many. Marie is only the most important of them all.

The novel does not tell us what finally happens to Marie. After she has fought her way to Petersburg by the most unscrupulous means, and finds out that Andrei has betrayed her and himself, Marie disappears. The reader knows only that when last seen she was being carried forward by a band of laughing children "tout droit, tout droit" to the unknown.<sup>15</sup> Andrei, on the other hand, moves at the end of the novel to join the circle of his destiny, to the death we have already seen in the first pages. The snapping shut of the trap, the falling into place of the last, already inevitable events leading to Andrei's death, is circular and satisfying. But it is a circle of despair cut through by an axis of energy. Marie's compositional function is to be this axis of energy penetrating the juxtaposed narrative elements of this nonorganic and mechanically constructed novel, giving it what life it does contain. She returns from degradation to break through the closed circle of Andrei's fate. For Marie Urbach is the Devil's daughter, and therefore, ultimately, she is in love with life, not death.

The essential compositional function of the Devil and his Queen in *The Master and Margarita* is so obvious as to require little exposition here. But it should be noted from the outset that the complicity of the Devil and Jesus, which we have seen in Blake, is essential to the resolution of Bulgakov's novel, which might just as well also have been entitled "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell." I shall therefore concentrate on the positive elements of Margarita's witchery, for she functions even more clearly than Marie in *Cities and Years* as the bearer of energy and compassion in the novel and as the compositional element whose activity precipitates the final harmony.

Margarita is immediately identified as a witch by a singular intrusion of the authorial voice: "Gods, Gods, what did she want, this witch with a slight squint in her eye who bedecks herself in mimosa every spring?" (p. 95). The answer, of course, is *life*, not empty but comfortable propriety. Her energy

15. This scene is part of a Pied Piper complex which begins with a story told by Kurt Wahn before the war, and ends, at least for Andrei, with rats that he seems to see swarming in waves over his feet.

needs an object, and it flows into the Master, braces him, enables, even compels him, to complete his book. When, through illness and fearfulness, he destroys the manuscript, Margarita becomes the healing sorceress: she declares that she will cure him, save him, and enable him to write the book again. When the Master disappears, it is almost inevitable that she will call on the Devil. How else is she to find out if the Master is living or dead? Having no other hope, she declares to Azazello that she is “soglasna idti k chërtu na kulichki,” even ready to go to the ends of the earth for more news of the Master (p. 138). The composition of Margarita’s phrase is important here. It is well known that one can conjure up the Devil by merely using a cliché containing his name. That is how Woland appears at Patriarchs’ Ponds and how Azazello has appeared on the bench beside Margarita. But Margarita has done more. The word *kulichki* contains in it the echo of *kulich*, the Easter cake consecrated at the midnight mass. She has called up both the Devil and the Resurrection in one phrase, and she will literally make the paradoxical journey she is prepared to take. Only it is neither as far nor as unlikely as she at first thinks.

It is important to note that Margarita is also wrong about the price she believes she will have to pay when she visits the “foreign gentleman.” She, too, has been brainwashed by traditional concepts of the Devil. For although sexual intercourse with the Devil is traditionally as much a part of the bargain for the woman who is Queen of the Sabbath as is the flying cream, the bath, and the ride through the air, it turns out that Woland does not “want her for that.”<sup>16</sup> In fact, all the more horrific or degrading aspects of having commerce with the Devil have disappeared from *The Master and Margarita* along with the traditional designation of the Devil as Evil. To take but one example, the guests at the ball kiss Margarita’s knee rather than Satan’s ass in a most untraditional display of propriety.

Neither Woland nor Margarita participates in any undignified orgies during the ball.<sup>17</sup> Woland officiates only at the culminating festivity, the blood

16. Woland is evidently not averse to taking a tumble with a fair witch from time to time. (He suspects that his rheumatic knee is the result of an encounter with one on the Harz mountains in 1571. It is interesting that he prefers to treat the knee with his “Old Grandmother’s” remedies, rather than go to an eternal or mortal doctor.) The Soviet edition, with inexplicable care not to tarnish the Devil’s reputation, has cut the entire passage.

On flying cream see A. J. Clark, “Some Notes on ‘Flying’ Ointments,” appendix in Margaret Alice Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford, 1921; reprint, 1963), pp. 279–80.

17. Even his prankster henchmen participate reluctantly and without real pleasure in the traditional ball, which they regard as an obligation of their jobs but ultimately a nuisance (with the exception, of course, of the cat Behemoth, who cavorts with genuine glee in the champagne fountain). The distance which Margarita’s escorts maintain from the ball prevents one from having to equate them or her with the real sinners present.

sacrifice traditionally central to the black mass.<sup>18</sup> But here Woland is carrying out the work of universal justice by punishing the informer Baron Maigel. This is no longer a mockery of the most sacred moment of the Christian mass. The direct challenge to Jesus implied by the drinking of blood in the traditional black mass has no place in a world where Christ and the Devil head clearly defined departments of the same enterprise and work together so that “everything will be as it should be, for that is the way the world is arranged” (p. 211).

If the Devil will not or cannot grant pardon (why should he do the business of another department?), it is important to note that Margarita has not lost the power to do good simply because she has sold herself to the Devil. Like the life-giving sorceress of the Middle Ages, her power to do good as well as evil is immeasurably increased by her alliance with the prince of this world.

Witch Queen Margarita is in fact a most unorthodox combination of prideful headstrongness, vengefulness, and compassion. Out of pride, she at first refuses to ask Woland for anything. This deadliest sin is of course a diabolical virtue, and Woland therefore freely offers her *one thing*. Although her motives for requesting Freida’s release are far from unambiguous, Margarita’s decision to free Freida with her one wish means sacrificing her own dearest hope, the reunion with the Master for which she has sold herself and the salvation of the Master who is dearer to her than her own soul. This, I am afraid, is charity, and Margarita is in fact the true bearer of Christian charity in the novel. The fact that she is a disciple of Yeshua as well as of the Master<sup>19</sup> becomes even more significant when we consider one of the novel’s compositional peculiarities.

Many critics have noted that almost everything in the Master’s novel is slightly different from the gospel accounts of the life of Jesus. Some of these discrepancies may be attributed to the fact that the gospels with which we are familiar are here presented as the result of Matthew the Levite’s unfortunate inability to get things straight. But certain other facts, which do not pass through the testament of Matthew, are also different. Most interesting for our purpose is the disappearance of all the women who are present in the gospel accounts. Yeshua does not even know who his mother is. So the whole mythic structure of purity and virginity which determines the church’s alienating attitude toward women disappears from the Master’s novel,<sup>20</sup> as

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Woland’s absence for a great part of the ball and his negligent appearance in his torn and dirty nightshirt (a dishabille more characteristic of the intimate Esbat) make it appear that he, too, regards the ball with some scorn.

18. See Murray, *Witch-Cult*, p. 150.

19. It is, of course, no accident that the disciples of Jesus addressed him as Master and that Margarita’s hero goes by the same sobriquet quite without irony.

20. Freud comments on this attitude toward women, particularly in *Totem and Taboo*

does the relevance of the argument used by the intellectual bureaucrat Berlioz to disprove the existence of Jesus.

The feminine element thus removed from the life of Yeshua and his entourage re-emerges in full force through Margarita's role in the novel.<sup>21</sup> She is not only the source of the Master's creative energy, the mediatrix between him and life (for which he is otherwise quite evidently inapt); she also becomes the only feminine figure in the final configuration of timeless characters.<sup>22</sup> The change of the physical characteristics which reveals the eternal essence of the Devil and his three male demons is seen through the eyes of Margarita. She therefore cannot see herself as they ride. But her essence is revealed too, slightly later. When she sees Pilate in his purgatory and demands his release, the text states: "Her completely calm face was veiled by compassion." The traits of the Virgin here show through the witch. Or rather, not the traits of the Virgin but those of Mary Mother of God, who in a widely known Slavic apocryphal account descends to Hell, is harsh in her judgment of those who betrayed her son, yet nevertheless intercedes with him and obtains a yearly period of release from torment for the damned.<sup>23</sup>

Although the word which releases Pilate must come from the Master, the world-ordering conclusion has been made possible only by the active energy of Margarita. In both moral and compositional terms, she provides the energy which brings this precariously balanced and complex structure into its final position of harmonious resolution.

The endings of *Cities and Years* and *The Master and Margarita* take the preceding narrative sequences out of suspension and resolve them into final crystallizations. In *Cities and Years* this effect is produced by the obligatory return to the first chapters. In *The Master and Margarita* the two initial blocks, Moscow and Jerusalem, fuse in the timeless ending of the chapter "Absolution and Eternal Refuge" and in the last words of the epilogue.<sup>24</sup> Thus

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(New York, 1950): "Applied to the treatment of privileged persons the theory of ambivalent feeling would reveal that their veneration, their very deification, is opposed in the unconscious by an intense hostile tendency" (p. 66). Michelet has of course commented on this aspect of the cult of Mary, too. A curious, modern-day parallel is the language of the surrealist idealization of women, which was in its own way quite as alienating as Mariolatry—and used many of the same clichés of imagery! See Xavière Gauthier, *Surréalisme et sexualité* (Paris, 1971), pp. 98–114.

21. One woman does appear in the Master's novel who is absent from the gospels. In the novel, Judas does not hang himself from remorse (a fine, Matthewesque conceit, that!) but is lured to his death by a woman, who serves as the instrument of Pilate's vengeance.

22. The witch, Hella, seems to have dropped by the wayside somewhere.

23. See "The Virgin's Visit to Hell," whose oldest Russian copy dates back to the twelfth century. N. K. Gudzy provides a detailed summary of its contents in his *History of Early Russian Literature* (New York, 1949), pp. 46–50.

24. The Soviet edition cuts the following crucial passage off the end of the chapter:

Fedin and Bulgakov resolve their complex surface patterns in an intellectually satisfying way. But the essential element with which these constructions are built and which they serve is not itself intellectual. It is energy. In both cases the bearer of this energy is an incarnation of the necessarily ambiguous life-bringing sorceress, without whose action the entire construction would have remained an arbitrary juxtaposition of disparate elements without aesthetic life.

To some extent the use of witches by Fedin and Bulgakov and the formal pattern of the closed circle are a direct result of Soviet conditions. In both cases we have praise of rebellion balanced by the need to reassert the value of the individual, idiosyncratic artist as orderer of experience in a context where both *sense* and a recognition of the value of individual creative activity seemed to have disappeared. But these two novels do not represent a parochial or isolated phenomenon. Witches, or a thematic element comparable to them which serves a similar formal function, can be found in many male-authored modernist novels, Western as well as Soviet. To take but one example, a most instructive parallel with Fedin and Bulgakov might be seen in some of the works of André Breton, leader of the French Surrealist movement. Although his early *Nadja* (1928) bears a superficial resemblance to the techniques and message of *Cities and Years*, the most interesting book for our purpose is *Arcane 17*.<sup>25</sup>

*Arcane 17* was written during the Second World War when Breton was in exile on the Gaspé Peninsula, isolated, watching the European world which he had challenged in his own way destroyed in another way, experiencing deep personal grief, trying to conjure this destruction, to assert through a complex, cross-layered metaphoric text that light and dark are inextricably combined, indeed that light comes only through the experience of the dark.

The poet is separate, lost, and obtuse. From the first sentence of the text, everything is mediated through a woman, Elisa. She is his link to the ambiguity of life: she has undergone suffering so great and senseless in the loss of her child that she has experienced the *change of signs*: and the light in her eyes comes from the dark fire of transmuted rebellion. In *Arcane 17*, this woman is *sorcière, fée, voyante*. She is *Mélusine*, bringer of dynastic energy who must not be seen as she undergoes her mythic transformation. She is the *verseuse*

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"and the Master's memory, his accursed, needling memory, began to fade. He had been freed, just as he had set free the character he had created. His hero had now vanished irretrievably into the abyss; on the night of Sunday, the day of the Resurrection, pardon had been granted to the astrologer's son, fifth Procurator of Judea, the cruel Pontius Pilate." In the book's final sentence, "the *cruel* Pontius Pilate" becomes, as the Master had intended, "the *knight* Pontius Pilate." *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Michael Glenny (New York: Signet, 1967), pp. 372 and 384.

25. André Breton, *Arcane 17* (New York, 1945).

depicted on the seventeenth arcane of the Tarot pack, pouring forth two streams beneath the star of Hope. She is the goddess of that morning star, Isis herself.

As Isis, the woman leads us to the fundamental affirmation of Arcane 17: “Osiris est un dieu noir” (p. 154). But even Osiris—cousin of Christ as dying god, cousin of the Devil as shepherd of souls—cannot reassemble his dismembered self. Isis must do it, gather the fragments to bring the black god of initiations back to the light. Separation and anguish can be transmuted into harmony only through the feminine force which has comprehended the revelation that night is the source of life. Only through her are the antinomies resolved.

The image of the reassembled Osiris, the desire to overcome fragmentation through the organization of fragments in such a way that their new order becomes necessary and life-bearing, is the basic mythical and compositional idea of many modern novels. Breton has recourse to myth for the same reasons Bulgakov did—in an effort to *increase* ambiguity and therefore dissipate the *opacity* which obstinately holds to conventional opinions and suspect defenses. Breton postulates that the man of desire expresses himself through shreds of myth, and that he is always searching for the richest, most complex myth in whose network his own myths can insert themselves and find their place. All three authors turn to myth as the source of this life-giving ambiguity and find in the myths of darkness and night not the demon of negation but the only accessible source of life.

*Arcane 17* illuminates the successes and failures of the two Soviet novels in one final way. All three use the figure of the circle as a structuring principle, but with varying artistic success. The secret seems to be that Breton and Bulgakov have allowed their male protagonists to follow their female guides into a mythical complexity which alone validates the geometrical figure. Fedin and his characters refuse to take the leap into mythic opacity. The circle of Andrei's fate closes in such a way as to exclude Marie and her message, creating a life closed on itself in isolation rather than wholeness. It therefore depresses and trivializes the structure of the novel, which remains a fascinating failure. In Bulgakov's novel, on the other hand, the circle is to be found on both the strictly constructional plane and on the richest, most ambiguous levels of the mythic network of the novel. It is *only* on this mythic level that *Arcane 17*, with its interlocking myths, its vertiginous passage through analogies, forms a circle where separation is transmuted into harmony. Its mythic circularity constitutes an act of confidence in life, love, and the poetic word.

Fedin uses the figure of the circle to trap a character in isolation; Bulgakov's and Breton's circles are magic circles, charms woven with the aid of a sorceress. And Breton seems to have spoken truly not only about himself but also about Bulgakov and other major writers of the modernist tradition when he observed in *Arcane 17*: "Consciously or not, the process of artistic discovery, even though it remains a stranger to the full scope of its metaphysical ambitions, is nonetheless subject to the form and to the very means of proceeding of High Magic. Everything else is destitution, unbearable platitude, billboards and rhyming games" (pp. 153–54).