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Some Notes on the Significance of Gerbert Aurillac in Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita

When the two Soviet literati Berlioz and Ivan Bezdomnyi meet the devil at the Patriarchs Ponds, they are greatly puzzled by the identity of the “mysterious visitor.” Their questions, “But who is he?” (or in a more ironic form, “But who the hell is he?”) interrupt the text at regular intervals, and after they guess (wrong of course, ten times!) as to the nationality and profession of the stranger, the stranger “solves” the mystery by introducing himself thus: “Forgive me, but in the heat of our argument I forgot to introduce myself. Here is my card, my passport, and a letter inviting me to come to Moscow for consultations.” Later on, the stranger, who turned out to be a professor, and somebody whose name began with a W, reconfirms twice more that he had been invited as a “consultant,” and that he was a “specialist in black magic.” He sums up the information again: “Yes . . . apparently your National Library has unearthed some original manuscripts of the tenth-century necromancer Herbert Aurillac. I have been asked to decipher them. I am the only specialist

1. Number symbolism, or mysticism is an important feature of the novel. The number 10 indicates perfection, completion of an idea, as the end and beginning of the decimal system. See my paper on Number Symbolism delivered at the annual AATSEEL convention, New York, 1978; also Heinz Meyer, Die Zahlennalogere im Mittelalter (München: Fink Verlag, 1975).


3. It is not quite clear why this initial, i.e., the W instead of the V that is used by Goethe in his Faust is used by Bulgakov. But following this one and only reference in the Bulgakov text it became customary in English language publications dealing with Bulgakov’s novel to spell the name of Voland as Woland. I have no clue for this peculiarity of Bulgakov’s usage, unless his memory deceived him; or, if he wanted to indicate the Woland was really not Woland, but his alter ego and famulus Wagner, who masqueraded only as Woland. But this seems to be rather farfetched, and does not really stand any close scrutiny.

4. “Consultant” is rather curious title, and it probably has something to do with the fact that Bulgakov himself had been given such a “title” after he had landed a job in the theater, upon Stalin’s intervention with the theater authorities. See Bulgakov’s letter to Stalin, Grani, No. 66 (1967). The title “consultant” reinforces also the idea that Woland, if he is not Stalin himself, he is at least, his “consultant.” The Consultant with a Hoof was one of the many original titles which Bulgakov tried before arriving at the present title. See M. Chudakova, “The Master and Margarita: The Development of a Novel,” Russian Literature Triquarterly, No. 15 (1978), pp. 177-209.
in the world.’’ To Berlioz’ question whether he was a historian, the professor
rather nonchalantly agreed, saying that “Oh, yes, I am a historian.”

Critical literature on Bulgakov has focused on many other issues, but ap-
parently has not considered these details important enough for a comment.
On the other hand, it seems that these details have some interesting infor-
mativ value both as to Bulgakov’s mind and as to the general philosophy of the
novel.

Gerbert Aurillac is mentioned by Woland as a chernoknizhnik, or necro-
mancer. Both the Russian and the English words have a connotation of black
magic, with three different sets of “occupational” specialization: 1) foretelling
the future; 2) being in communication with the dead; and 3) creating evil.
Woland, as a black magician, fulfills all these “requirements.” He certainly
foretells the future when he predicts to Berlioz his death, and a visit to the

5. ibid., p. 14. In the Glenny translation that I used here the name is given Herbert
Aurilachs, and he is referred to as a ninth-century (sic) necromancer. Obviously the spell-
ing of the name is wrong on three accounts: it is Gerbert and not Herbert (i.e., Glenny
probably assumed that the Russian spelling Gerbert indicated a non-Russian Herbert,
which is not the case) Aurillacs is the second part of the name, with two l’s and no s at
the end. The Ginsburg translation (Grove Press) is closer to the correct information and
spelling, when it is given as the “tenth century necromancer, Herbert d’Aurillac,” (p. 16)
but still the Herbert prevails.

6. See Bruce A. Beatie and Phyllis W. Powell. “Story and Symbol: Notes Toward a
Structural Analysis of Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, ibid., p. 235. They accept
the spelling of the name as Aurilacs, and follow this up with different factual data, ob-
viously adopted from some other sources. Since Gerbert Aurillac’s name is connected
with so many legends, it is really amusing to quote this one, as another addition: “Ger-
bert Aurillas (sic) was accused in the year 911 A.D. (sic) of being a Manichean Dualist
because of statements made in his Epistolae.” He was able to quell the rumors and be-
come Bishop of Rheims and finally Pope Sylvester II. His name connected with the devil,
introduces the references to heresy (sic) which . . . is another motif-complex in the no-
vel.” (p. 235) Of course, Gerbert could not have been accused of anything in 911, since
he was not born before 945, and he definitely did not have to “quell any rumors” to
become a bishop; and his name had nothing to do with “heresy”—at least not according
to historical facts. Another reference I found is in E. Proffer’s article, “Bulgakov’s Mas-
ter and Margarita: Genre and Motif,” Canadian Slavic Studies, 3, No. 4 (1969), 544,
where again the name is spelled as Herbert Aurilachs.

7. See Will-Erich Peuckert, Pansophie: ein Versuch zur Geschichte der weissen und
Cavendish, The Black Arts (New York: Capricorn Books, 1968), pp. 1-47. (There is
also an interesting chapter here on the use of number symbolism in black magic.) Kurt
Seligmann, The Mirror of Magic (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948); and Jacques Albin
Simon Collin de Plancy, Dictionnaire infernal: un grand chef-d’oeuvre de l’occultisme

8. The magic formula is interesting: “One, two . . . Mercury in the second house . . .
the moon waning . . . six-accident . . . evening-seven” (p. 12, Glenny translation). Woland
is not doing some nonsensical muttering, as it appeared to his interlocutors, but he was
using a black magic computation which was based upon number symbolism and astro-
logy, and as a result of it he self-assuredly announced: “Your head will be cut off.” And
when Berlioz wanted to know some more details, he gave him the correct information
about the person of the death-bringing accident, as “a Russian woman, a member of the