CARLO TESTA

BULGAKOV’S MASTER I MARGARITA: 
POST-ROMANTIC DEVIL PACTS

The Evil One is gone, the evil ones remain.
Den Bösen sind sie los, die Bösen sind geblieben.
Goethe, Faust

I. THE DIFFRACTION OF EVIL

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

In spite of its often politically conservative, at times even outright reactionary political implications and interpretations, the philosophical anthropocentrism of the Romantic period in a sense relayed and brought up to date the basic postulate of Renaissance and Enlightenment: namely, the notion of man preceding all things. However variously the Romantic quest for infinity and union with the Cosmos may have been experienced and interpreted, existentially or politically, it represented in all cases a

striking form of solipsism: the subject's partner became no lesser a being than the whole Universe itself. It may be suggested that Flaubert's Saint Antony, with his painstakingly and maniacally narrativized disintegration of the self, rendered virtually to perfection the archetype of what could be called the Romantic self's orgasm with and in the Cosmos;3 and there can hardly be a doubt that Antony's position as the "Self in the Desert" was a metaphorical representation of the subject's founding role in idealistic epistemology. For the Romantic soul, the world may have been as rich and full of signs as a fairytale-like "speaking landscape," or, by contrast, as barren and silent as an existential desert of the Thebaid; but the self always stood firmly in its center—if only to yearn for the fulfilling experience of the moment when the limiting necessity of "saying I" could be deposed. The enthusiasm of the time for the typically Romantic theme of the pact with the devil reflected its intoxication with what can only be termed, in the widest sense of the word, the humanistic world view of an epoch passionately desiring to be "chercheuse d'infini."

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

The second part of the century changed things dramatically. At whatever point in time we wish to place the epistemological shift, and to whatever complex convergence of social and scientific causes we prefer to attribute it, it is a fact that, as time went

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