Not only do some manuscripts not burn, they generate fires of their own, consuming like dry tinder each new master interpretive code in the mesmerizing dance of their flames. Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* is just such a work. It has been subject to countless interpretations and critical “decodings” since its initial appearance on the pages of the journal *Moskva* in 1966-67. By now it is no exaggeration to say that this novel may be the greatest work of Russian fiction of this century and that, with the amount of secondary literature lavished on it already massive and still growing, its potential for generating new readings is endless. George Krugovoy’s new study of *The Master and Margarita*, entitled *The Gnostic Novel of Mikhail Bulgakov: Sources and Exegesis*, will, I predict, come to occupy a prominent position in the front ranks of this secondary literature. Professor Krugovoy has been working on his project for many years; he has thought through virtually every detail of the novel; he has lived with the book in his courses and in his research; and he has arrived at answers for nearly all the vexed questions and indeterminacies confronting Bulgakov scholars. In short, this is an important book, a clear labor of love, by a very dedicated and erudite scholar.

Krugovoy’s study is divided into seven chapters, each focusing on a central problem or aspect of the novel. Chapter One makes the case for Bulgakov’s debt to symbolist aesthetics and to various Silver Age philosophers and religious thinkers, chief among them being, for Krugovoy’s purposes, Pavel Florensky; in this chapter Krugovoy also argues for the novelist’s coherent and elaborate application of numerological symbolism. Chapter Two provides an in-depth analysis, following the seminal work of the Soviet Bulgakov specialist Marietta Chudakova, of the major historical and apocryphal sources influencing the writer, including the Brockhaus-Efron encyclopedia, Florensky’s *Mnimosti v geometrii* (Imaginaries in Geometry), the various “lifes” of Christ by Renan, Strauss, and Farrar, Nikolai Makkaveisky’s little-known monograph *Arkheologiia istorii Gospoda Iisusa Khrista*, the Gospel of Nicodemus, the “Song of the Pearl” in the Acts of Thomas, and others. These are some of the most useful pages in Krugovoy’s book, for they show, with considerable subtlety and impressive erudition, not only which sources Bulgakov may have used for his descriptions of Yershalaim, but why specifically they were used in the way they were.

In Chapter Three Krugovoy scrutinizes the essentially apocalyptic character of the ultimate confrontation between metaphysical good and evil in the Moscow “outer text.” Here the author’s understanding of the enigmatic epigraph from Goethe’s *Faust* — “I am part of that power that eternally desires evil and eternally does good” — is brought to the fore: no matter what Woland says or does, it is Bulgakov’s intention to have this Satan *will evil*. Nowhere is Woland to be trusted, nowhere are his words or deeds to be taken at face value. This interpretation differs in significant ways from the readings of a number of Western scholars, who are apt to see Woland as a not unsympathetic judge figure, one who, given the fallen status of this atheistic world, both punishes those who deserve punishing and rewards those, the Master and Margarita in particular, who deserve rewarding.

Chapters Four and Five are presumably meant to be read in tandem: they present,
respectively, the existential and metaphysical quests of the hero and heroine. In the former Krugovoy is resourceful in his use of Hoffmannesque subtexts ("The Singers' Contest," "Ritter Glück," the chapel master Kreisler) to explicate the dilemma ("existential egotism") of the "thrice romantic" Master, whose art has become stranded somewhere between the categories of the "aesthetic" (i.e., German Romanticism) and the "theurgic" (i.e., Russian Symbolism). In this reading, it is the Master's calling as genuine artist to learn to experience Christian compassion for the pain of others and, in the process, to imbue his words with theurgic power. Margarita's dilemma, on the other hand, appears to be the exact opposite: endowed with an excess of compassion and courage, she seems too willing to sell her soul to the devil in order to win back the Master and his novel. To paraphrase Krugovoy, how can a genuine witch, a soul who has lost her way and joined forces with the powers of evil, be granted Christian salvation, or even repose (pokoi), for that matter.

Finally, the last two chapters of Krugovoy's book look at the fascinating and much discussed conclusion to Bulgakov's novel. What precisely is it the Master and Margarita have earned with the gift of their little house, replete with Venetian window and the "vine climbing to the very roof"? How are we to interpret Levy Matvey's famous dictum that the Master "has not earned light. He has earned rest"? And what is the "disciple" Ivan Bezdomny's function in this plot-cum-Christian-theodicy? Why does Bulgakov conclude not with the deaths and afterlives of his novel's eponymous heroes, but precisely with the ongoing fate of the one left behind? These are the ultimate structural and epistemological issues to which Krugovoy, whose interest is not only in the novel's aesthetic charm but in its spiritual beauty, builds on the basis of each succeeding chapter. And, as I commented at the outset, The Gnostic Novel of Mikhail Bulgakov strikes this reader as a trud in the best sense of the word: a labor both of intellect and learning and of love and devotion.

There are numerous delightful discoveries in Krugovoy's book, particularly at the level of the microscopically close reading or, as the title suggests, "exegesis." In the interests of space I will mention only a few. For example, the name of the valuable pearl that, according to the apocryphal Acts of Thomas, the Son of the Divine King of Kings is sent from the East down to the land of Egypt to deliver from the power of the evil Dragon, is margarita (40). Or Azazello's true nature in the novel as executioner and "crack shot" can be accounted for by searching in the apocryphal First Book of Enoch (the Jewish apocalyptic tradition), where Azazel is described as the adversarial angel who first taught humans how to manufacture weapons (47). Also astute, in my judgment, is Krugovoy's assertion that the eternal resting place of the Master and Margarita is actually closer to a Dantesque Purgatory, the site of expiation and preparation for passage to Paradise, than to Limbo, which according to tradition borders Hell and is reserved for the great pagan ancients (238). This would make sense if we keep in mind that the seven terraces of Mount Purgatory lead, in Dante, to the Earthly Paradise, the final stop before a purged soul proceeds on to the heavenly spheres and the Empyrean. Given Bulgakov's keen awareness of his own "weakness" — especially the neurasthenia, paranoia, and shattered nerves of his later years — and of his fervent desire for peace and quiet, it seems completely logical that the Master's proper reward would be envisioned as something approaching the ideal "betwixt-and-between" of the Earthly Paradise rather than, as some commentators have suggested, the still vaguely hellish Limbo.
Having praised Krugovoy for his learned and rigorous argument, I do have one fundamental objection to *The Gnostic Novel of Mikhail Bulgakov*. I would express this objection as the following: a too literal or “over-determined” reading that seems to squeeze some of the life — including the humor and play — out of Bulgakov’s marvelous text. Krugovoy has an answer for virtually everything: every number, every color, every seemingly errant phrase in a dialogue leads relentlessly to the figurative — “gnostic” — level that is the critic’s primary quarry. If it is true, for example, that each mention of the number 5, or its various permutations (23, 32, 50, 302), is a gnostic cipher for “the realm of human existence” (the masculine principle of 3 plus the Mother Earth principle of 2) (17-18), or that each instance of 2 or 6 is associated with, respectively, hell or the Antichrist (15-16), or that “the realm of the sacred manifests itself in the novel mainly through two numbers: ‘three,’ as an emblem of the divine Trinity, and ‘nine,’ which itself is the treble triad, a symbol of truth” (17), then the decoding and generation of meaning in Bulgakov’s novel become, sadly, mechanical and prescriptive. Do we really get closer to Bulgakov’s truth when we claim, as Krugovoy does, that “The magical addition of ‘eight’ and ‘three’ equals ‘eleven’ [i.e., apartment #83 in the House of Dramlit]. This is the number of sin, transgression, and intemperance” (151), or that “the sum total of the digits composing the year’s number [i.e., 1571, the year when Woland was supposed to have met a ‘charming witch’ at a witches’ sabbath in Germany] is ‘fourteen,’ which signifies ‘justice’ ” (164)?

I don’t think so. Mystery, psychological tension and “reality” are drained out of the plot when this or any other master code is applied to every nuance of the novel’s texture. There is no longer the question of which details simply belong to the messy, unreconstructed level of *byt* (surely there are some?) and which details are actually “signs” from beyond. Perhaps what this reviewer objects to most in Krugovoy’s insistent approach, which places the perspicacious exegete in the position of a modern John of Patmos, is that the existential drama facing the actual Bulgakov and his third wife Yelena Sergeyevna and the literary Master and Margarita is flattened out and made right-angled, “apocalyptic” *avant la lettre*. Choices are viewed “from the end,” as though the critic were holding God’s script(ure). If only the Master and Margarita could see what the numbers mean, the logic goes, then their choices would be clear and simple. But the deadly serious play between humanity and divine higher (or lower) forces is thereby trivialized as each act is keyed to a Kabbalistic of Johannine code. We do not read *The Master and Margarita* for its drama (the exquisite cat-and-mouse dialogue between Pilate and Yeshua), its humor (Ivan Bezdomny’s futile attempts to follow Woland’s retinue), its irony (the Aesopian shadow-play between Pilate and Aphranius), its love (the “miraculous” chance meeting of the hero and heroine), its poignancy (the Master’s burning of his novel and Margarita’s saving of its charred remains), etc. Indeed, we no longer seem to *read* any of this at all, since these potentially secular elements fall away as merely “preparatory” to the gnostic unveiling. I for one do not believe that Bulgakov, who could be, as occasion demanded, as much mystifier as mystic and who, moreover, had implicit faith in the sublime “guesswork” of the creative act (i.e., the truth is to be slowly and tormentingly groped toward, not “plugged in”), would “uncover” (the root meaning of *apocalypsis*) God’s plan in this two-dimensional way.
One final cavil about this very interesting and provocative study: in Krugovoy's valiant attempts to show that every action and reaction on the part of Woland is inherently deceitful and that, correspondingly, Margarita's Faustian gamble to sell her soul to the devil in order to get the Master and his novel back is steeped in sin, something very basic to Bulgakov's design may be overlooked. Krugovoy remarks about the conclusion, for example, that Margarita's "sin is that, having preserved her personal integrity and goodness, she has lost her faith in the power of good. Having applied the divine attribute of omnipotence to Woland, she places herself under his control. Margarita's transgression is greater than that of the Master, and she certainly does not earn 'light,' as is sometimes believed. . . . Doing what Levy Matvey refuses to do, she raises a glass of wine and exclaims, 'to Woland's health.' Her record is too poor to be worthy of light" (229). Surely Bulgakov placed Margarita's courage and active love above the Master's fear and weakness? We can say this because presumably Bulgakov himself was equally inspired by his own wife Yelena Sergeyevna's example of faith in him and courage to persevere at all costs, qualities without which the novel simply would not have been finished. Does the spirit of \textit{The Master and Margarita} really support Krugovoy's literalism? Considering her love for the Master and their "child" (the Pilate story), what other options did Margarita have in the novel other than to "sell her soul to the devil"? It is precisely her willingness to become a witch in order to save the "truth" of the master and his gift that makes her such an inspiring example. Thus it is hard to believe, given the prominent autobiographical element in the relationship between hero and heroine, that Bulgakov would deem Margarita's transgressions greater than the Master's. Perhaps the reason Margarita does not enter the light (other than the fact that she is, to be sure, still a sinner) is that this is a love story and that she, like her prototype, would choose to remain with her beloved Master?

\textit{The Master and Margarita} is many things and encompasses aspects of various genres. Still, it is first and foremost a modern novel and not scripture or a sacred text. Secular, profane, "carnival" time is as crucial to it as the temporal beyond of the Empyrean. Despite allusions and illusions, the Master is not Dante the pilgrim, Margarita is not Beatrice, the novel is not a gigantic religious epic in terza rima, and every instance of a 3 or a 9 need not be transposed to the "anagogic" level of divine allegory. What is topical (the satire of corrupt Moscow life) and what is for the ages (the splendid dovetailing of religious myth and romantic love story) coexist in permanent, as it were "homeostatic" tension. Professor Krugovoy has given us a sometimes brilliant, sometimes strained, yet always informed "gnostic" reading of the novel. The merits of his work are considerable; happily, however, they do not add up to a reading-to-end-all-readings.

David M. Bethea
University of Wisconsin, Madison