THE ROLE OF NIKOLAI GOGOL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY REALISM

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PREFACE

My first serious attempt to understand the term realism, as applied to literature, came during a study of the Continental novel in the summer of 1956. In the fall of that year, while studying the English novel, I read D. S. Mirsky's comment that, "Gogol and George Sand were the father and mother of Russian realism and its accepted masters during the initial stages." The writings of these two seemed to me to be so dissimilar that I began studying both. This study led to a term paper, and for a time I was satisfied with my examination of realism.

In the fall of 1957, however, while examining some American "realists," I again turned to Gogol's work for comparison. Certain elements in Gogol's writing seemed highly romantic beside the American realists, and yet, Gogol was supposed to be the father of realism in the Russian novel. Natural interest and curiosity forced me to ask these questions: (1) can realism be defined? (2) can a writer given to highly romantic flights—as all critics insist Gogol was—be classed as a realist? and (3) is there an essence of realism in Gogol's writing which, though different from English and American realism, is just as surely realistic? This thesis is an attempt to answer these questions.

It occurred to me, as the study progressed, that affirmative answers to all three of these questions would establish at least partially a more satisfactory basis for the judgment of many works now not clearly classifiable. If this proves to be the outcome, then this study will be the first step in a reexamination of all the Russian novelists of the nineteenth

century with the end in mind that the term realism may be taken out of the rather cloudy atmosphere in which it now is, and placed in the light so that definitive and accurate classification of writing can be made more universal. This study is, however, limited to an analysis of Nikolai Gogol's short stories, dramas, and novels.

I am indebted to Dr. Agnes M. Berrigan for permitting me to use her personal library to collect much of the material in this thesis; to Dr. Cecil B. Williams for many conferences and criticisms which made "whole cloth" of my scraps of information; to Mrs. John C. Monk and Mr. Alton P. Juhlin of the Oklahoma State University library staff for their generous and interested assistance in obtaining books without which this study would have been impossible; and to Dr. Hans H. Andersen for permitting me, in spite of some misgivings, to begin this particular research.

Yet one more word must be added. Those who have the gift of inspiring others are rare indeed. It is with sincerity that I express my gratitude to two such people—my wife, Laura, and Dr. Agnes M. Berrigan.

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND FOR REALISM

Attempts at defining what is "real" are at least as old as Plato, whose theory that reality exists only in the mind and that all external materials are only imitations of it is the basis of all Platonic art. But Plato knew nothing of novels and short stories, and applying such a theory to these forms, though an interesting novel by Charles Williams does this very thing,[1] would leave us short of setting the boundaries of realism.

Coming up to the sixteenth century, we see another type of realism in which the real and the romantic are mixed by Cervantes. Indeed, his realism is quite similar to Gogol's in certain of its aspects. But we shall note this as well as other comparisons in succeeding chapters.

The hardening of the forms of drama in the time of Vida, Castelvetro, Scaliger, and Dryden, especially as regards the unities of time, place and action, shows yet another type of reality—another attempt to approach it. And one cannot forget the French realists Zola, Flaubert, Balzac. Here are Zola's slice of life, Flaubert's intensity of portrayal of the common, and Balzac's detail. All of these sought reality as they saw the reality of life—the reality which could become literature.

These are instances of different attempts to reach something which

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[1]Charles Williams, The Place of the Lion (New York, 1943).

can never be more than approached. For realism is not a being--static, attainable through the exclusion of other forms. Rather it is an amalgam of all approaches to literature as life, for Gogol, was an amalgam of all approaches to death.

To appreciate Gogol's realism, one must first understand Gogol. If we know the man, his writing becomes more easily understood and one is less likely to mistakenly apply the label of romanticism to what is actually realism. With this understanding of the man, we can examine Gogol's writing and see how it differs from other realistic work. Thus we will have a sound basis for saying that Gogol extended realism or produced a new element of it.

Nikolai Vasilyevich Gogol-Yanovsky (he later dropped the Yanovsky) was born March 31, 1809 into an impoverished Ukrainian gentry family of Cossack stock. He was a frail, sickly child idolized by his rather child-like and intensely religious mother. From her he learned of hell-fire and the workings of the devil, ideas which were to appear again and again in his stories. Sin was a lifelong preoccupation of his mind, certainly in part because of his mother's vivid stories told to him as a child. In one of his letters, Gogol says quite plainly to his mother when recollecting his childhood:

> I remember: I never felt anything strongly, I looked upon all as if it were created for the purpose of gratifying me. I loved no one in particular except you, and I loved you only because nature herself had inspired me with this feeling. I looked upon everything with dispassionate eyes: I went to the church either because I was ordered to go, or because I was carried there; but the only thing of which I used to be aware in it were the garments of the priest and the odious howling of the sacristans. I crossed myself only because I saw others doing the same. But once - I remember this as vividly as if it had happened just now - I asked you to tell me something about the Last Judgment, and you told me so nicely, so clearly and touchingly of those blessings of which virtuous people partake; you described so strikingly, in such a horrifying way, the eternal torments of the sinners that all my sentiments became

awakened and almost shattered, a fact which instilled and stirred up in me, later on, the loftiest thoughts.[2]

From this one can see that his early training was somewhat unreasonable. He developed an egocentric tendency, and this led to his giving an exaggerated character to all the ideas of his own imagination. From the countryside around Sorochintsy in the province of Poltava where he was born, he was sent to Nyeshin to the college, and his letters home are filled with forced emotion--an attempt to conceal the real lack of personal emotion within himself--and rhetorical and melodramatic pretenses about his personal needs and achievements.

He was a bad pupil and acquired no serious knowledge whatsoever.[3] The one thing at which he excelled was impersonations, and his fellow scholars soon learned to dread his caustic portrayals of their own weaknesses. It was here that he received his first uncomplimentary nickname, "the mysterious dwarf," because of his diminutive size and because of the impossibility of guessing whom he would attack.

The early years at home are certainly formative, but often the first years away from home are even more influential. At Nyeshin, Gogol found he had "few features that would entitle him to feel perfectly at home either with people or with life in general."[4]

Small and not very prepossessing in appearance, Gogol was rather nervous by disposition. As though under the weight of a social and moral "inferiority complex," he became morbidly touchy and was always ready to attack in others the defects from which he himself suffered or thought he suffered. This festered not only his gift of observation (confined to

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[2]Janko Lavrin, Gogol (New York, 1925), pp. 24-25.

[3]Ibid., p. 26.

[4]Ibid.

negative features only), but also that intensely satirical and ridiculing vein which became so conspicuous in his writings. At the same time he was anxious to counter, even as a schoolboy, the feeling of his inferiority by compensatory daydreams of future greatness. While still at Nyeshin, he indulged in visions of a brilliant career waiting for him....[5]

As an instance of further confirmation of his lack of personal appeal, we find D. S. Mirsky writing:

He was not very popular among his school fellows.... Very early he developed a dark and secretive disposition, mingled of painful self-consciousness and boundless ambition. Equally early he developed an extraordinary mimic talent which later on made him a matchless reader of his own works.[6]

Yet one must not assume that these years were "all to the bad." Because of this very turning in on himself, Gogol developed a sense of self-defense which later became productive beyond mimicry. He began to ridicule in order to keep from being ridiculed and in this type of writing he became the greatest artist in Russian literature. Also he developed his unsurpassed powers of observation. These were all negative observations of others, and as such they enabled him to assert his own superiority to those he satirized. The more he concentrated on the "low" side of others, the more ambitious he became to rise above them. This ambition became an obsession which was always intensified by his keen awareness of his own weaknesses. Unfortunately, this awareness actually crippled his later writing, which was nothing more than the preaching of lofty virtues.

As his circle of acquaintances grew, his observations of their faults grew and these led to fewer and fewer personal, human, relationships

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[5]Janko Lavrin, Russian Writers Their Lives and Literature (New York, 1954), p. 57.

[6]D. S. Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature (New York, 1949), p. 143.

until he was literally "without friends." The older he grew the more withdrawn he became until he retired into his own ego, into a subjective fancy from which the only compensation to be drawn was the compensation of painting caricatures of people. In this way he hoped that people would believe that the writer (Gogol) who was able to see these things would be above them himself. It was a strange way--a twisted way--of self-satisfaction, but it produced intense images probably impossible to produce in a saner manner. This attitude towards externals was bound to affect his imagination by developing it out of all proportion to other qualities. "So much so," as Lavrin says, "that eventually he exaggerates everything he sees, thinks, feels; everything that he expects or wishes to happen."[7]

This is an interesting quotation, because it contains one of the keys to Gogol's greatness. Far from being an agency of frustration, this developed imagination was his greatest asset. For Gogol was never creative. All of his plots, themes, locales, even most of his characters, were given to him. Pushkin gave him the story from which he created Dead Souls, and also the story from which he created the greatest comedy the Russian theatre ever produced, The Inspector General. Taras Bulba, often called the Russian Iliad, was a Ukrainian folk tale. The idea for his most famous short story, "The Overcoat,"[8] was suggested to him by an anecdote related by a guest at a tea party in 1834. According to Lavrin this is how it happened:

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[7]Lavrin, Gogol, p. 29.

[8]Variously translated "The Cloak," "The Greatcoat," etc.

One of the guests related how a certain minor official, being passionately fond of sport, cut all his expenses in such a way as to save enough money to buy a fine sporting rifle. He bought the rifle, but on the very first day of his sport he dropped it quite by chance into a river. The poor man fell ill and would probably have lost his reason had not his comrades made a collection and presented him with another rifle.

This anecdote about the sporting official and his responsive comrades is in itself rather touching and delightful. Yet, as V. Ronanov has already pointed out, Gogol transformed even this subject into a gloomy story permeated both with pity and scorn. While the original anecdote shows nothing but pleasant features--a passionate love of sport, the kindness of colleagues, Gogol at once conceived the whole matter in such a way as to proclaim the official a "good-natured animal" (in the first draft) and emphasize the "senseless brutality" of the chaffing young clerks, the snobbery of the higher officials, and the hardness of human beings in general. Once more, Gogol picked up as many negative data of real life as he possibly could, condensed them, and grouped them together in such a way as to make the pitiable scribe, Akaky, not only a haunting parody of man, but also a symbol and an accusation of life as a whole.[9]

His first successful collection of short stories, Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka, contains one original story, "Ivan Shponka and his Aunt," and it is significant that it remained unfinished even in the published version. Thus he actually invented nothing but the settings, but he intensified with his imagination any tale which came his way. Throughout his literary career he collected tales and put his imagination to work on them, often distorting them so grotesquely that more of Gogol is seen than of the character. The danger was that this intensifying might turn every commonplace of life into a spook preying on the mind of the author, and in fact this is what happened. At the age of forty Gogol wrote:

Everything is disorganized within me. I see, for example, that somebody has stumbled; my imagination immediately gets hold of it, begins to develop it into the shape of most horrid apparitions which torture me so much that I cannot sleep and am losing all my strength.[10]

However much this danger persisted, it was not an evil until he could

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[9]Ibid., pp. 124-26.

[10]Ibid., pp. 40-41.

no longer sublimate it to his art. When that happened, of course, all that was left (art being gone) was morbidity. Until that happened he produced—because of this very intensification through imagination—some of the greatest pieces of realism in all literature. Beilinsky, the most influential critic of the period, summed up the praises of Evenings with these words:

> All that is beautiful in nature, all that fascinates us in the rural life of the simple folk, all that is typical and original in it, glitters like a rainbow in these first poetic fancies of Gogol. This was a youthful poesy, fresh, fragrant, gorgeous and intoxicating like the kiss of love. Read his "May Night," read it on a winter evening by the blazing hearth, and you will forget all about the winter with its frosts and storms. You will see in your mind the brilliant clear night of the blissful south; you will see the pale young heroine—the victim of an evil stepmother's fury, the lonely dwelling with one window open, the deserted lake and its still waters on which the moonbeams are playing; while on its green banks whirl hosts of aerial beauties . . . This impression is similar to that which Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream leaves in one's imagination."... Each period of human life is beautiful and must have its songs and singers. The Evenings on a Farm is one of such eternal songs of youth—a song which brings back for a moment, even to our old age, all the enchantment of those young years that are irrevocably gone.[11]

So that the chronology will not be entirely lost, one should know that the time between his leaving school in 1828, and the publication of Evenings in 1831, was the most unproductive and one of the most dismal periods of Gogol's life. In 1828, he went to St. Petersburg, the capital and cultural center of Russia, with some vague ideas of becoming a lawyer. There he published, at his own expense, a "weak and puerile" poem, of German idyllic life, Hans Küchelgarten. It received the deserved reviews—all bad—and Gogol was so discouraged he bought up all the copies and burned them.[12] Typically, faced with discouragement, he sought refuge,

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[11] Ibid., pp. 40-41.

[12] Ibid., p. 30.

but this time not in satire; he decided to leave Russia with the rather unformed notion of emigrating to America. He got only as far as Lübeck. Impoverished and confused, he returned to St. Petersburg. There he wrote exaggerated accounts of his actions to his mother, explaining that he had had a violent love affair, here showing again his attitude toward escaping reality.

Fortunately for literature, he obtained a post in a minor government office. Though he stayed there only a few months, he got the "feel" of being a frustrated clerk of the lowest government caste, and this feeling was intensified in "The Overcoat" and that other story of a poor, browbeaten clerk, "The Diary of a Madman." It is doubtful if these two universally recognized masterpieces of righteous indigation would ever have been written had not Gogol been employed in this minor capacity. Unless someone had told him of similar happenings, it is unlikely that such ideas would ever have occurred to him, for, as we have seen, he was not inventive. But having himself been humiliated by stupid superiors, starved by the low wages, and stultified by the unimaginative task of copying government papers, it was entirely within his powers to epitomize the clerks of the world in story form. Poprishchin of "The Diary" and Akaky of "The Overcoat" will be remembered as long as Uriah Heep and for more sympathetic reasons.

Shortly before the first volume of Evenings was published Gogol met Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet and greatest classical realist. Although they were never friends--Pushkin referred to Gogol as "that sly Ukrainian"--the association was a rich one for Gogol. He met the critics and they were warm to his gifts of mimicry and conversation. When Evenings appeared they were enthusiastic. The first volume (1831) containing "Sorochintsy

Fair," "St. John's Eve," "The May Night," and "The Lost Letter," was followed by a second in 1832, in which appeared "Christmas Eve," "The Cruel Vengeance," "Ivan Shponka and his Aunt," and "The Bewitched Spot." In 1835 appeared two volumes of stories entitled Mirgorod and two volumes of miscellaneous prose entitled Arabesques, containing various essays, "The Nevsky Prospect," "The Diary of a Madman," and the first version of "The Portrait." Mirgorod contained "Viy," "Taras Bulba," "Old World Landowners," and "How the Two Ivans Quarreled."[13]

Meanwhile, in 1834, Gogol was made professor of history at the University of St. Petersburg, although, in Prince Mirsky's words, "...except [for] an unlimited self-confidence, he had absolutely no qualifications."[14] He had had no scientific training whatsoever, and this defect coupled with a total disregard for mental discipline led him to cling to a wholly romantic concept of history. Lavrin says he combined this romantic concept of history with:

> ...a comfortable belief in Providence, with a kind of hero-worship, and with a boundless admiration for the feudal Middle Ages. He ignored all epochs of human history except the Middle Ages on the one hand, and the picturesque Cossack-period of his native Ukraine on the other. The Greeks and the Romans simply did not exist for him.[15]

It is obvious that this attitude could not lead to success. His first two lectures were brilliant mainly because of his enthusiasm and his flair for the dramatic, but these were followed by unprepared, almost ignorant, mumbled sessions which soon gave the students the idea that the

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[13]This last story was originally entitled "Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich," and is still so designated by D. S. Mirsky, Constance Garnett, David Magarshack, and others.

[14]Mirsky, p. 144.

[15]Lavrin, p. 55.

professor did not know his subject. This was indeed the case. His enthusiasm gone, he characteristically lost all interest in lecturing. Ivan Turgenev, the great novelist, left this account of the "professorship":

> I was one of his students in 1833, when he was lecturing on history at the University of Petersburg. To tell the truth, this lecturing of his was rather queer. First of all, out of three lectures Gogol invariably missed two; and secondly, even when he appeared in the hall, he did not talk: he only whispered incoherently about something or other, showing us little steel engravings with views of Palestine and other eastern countries. He was continuously in terrible confusion. We all were convinced (and we were hardly wrong) that he did not know anything about history, and that our professor, Gogol-Yanovsky, had nothing in common with the writer Gogol who was then already famous by his Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka. At the final examination on his subject he sat, with a handkerchief wrapped round his head, simulating toothache. There was an expression of extreme pain on his face, and he never opened his mouth. Professor T. P. Shulgin examined the students for him. I see, as if it were now, Gogol's lean figure, with a long nose and the two ends of his black handkerchief surging above his head like two ears. There is no doubt that he himself understood all the comic awkwardness of his position, for he retired in the same year. And yet this did not prevent him from exclaiming: "Unrecognised I took the chair, and unrecognised I leave it."[16]

Thus we see Gogol hiding from the unpleasant; this time by the ruse of a feigned toothache. Fortunately for all concerned he gave up his chair in 1835 and returned to literature. Henceforth, this was to be his only vocation.

He was now in the middle of his most productive period. Evenings had come out in 1831 and 1832 followed by Mirgorod and Arabesques. He seemed to be consumed by a passion to write before his inspiration left him and his stories reveal this passion. "The Old World Landowners" and "Taras Bulba," both of which appeared in the first volume of Mirgorod, are universally accepted as literary masterpieces. Gogol himself, on the

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[16]Ibid., pp. 56-57.

title page of this volume, says that these stories are a continuation of Evenings, but even a cursory inspection of them will reveal the change in intensity, in power, from those earlier stories. Lavrin comments concerning the changes in style in the stories in Mirgorod:

> These stories, which at first look like a continuation of Evenings, mark the dividing line between the romantic and the realistic manner in Gogol's art. Two of them, "Taras Bulba" and "Viy," are romantic in the extreme, while the other two, "The Old World Landowners" and "How the Two Ivans Quarrelled," are--technically at least--as realistic as can be.[17]

With the statement that "Taras Bulba" is extremely romantic, I do not entirely agree, but this matter will be dealt with in a subsequent chapter.

Gogol's good relations with the "literary aristocracy" continued after he left the university, and Pushkin and Zhukovsky particularly encouraged him. Notice that I say "encouraged" rather than "befriended." He was not a man to befriend. As Mirsky says, "...there was never any intimacy between either Pushkin or Zhukovsky and Gogol. They liked him and appreciated his talent, and refused to idolize him."[18] If, however, the "literary aristocracy" in St. Petersburg gave him only qualified admiration, in Moscow he received the adulation even he could want.

> The young idealists, with Belinsky at their head carried him to the skies, but it was not with them that he made friends. The set that became his principal sanctuary were the Slavophiles, especially the Aksakov family, in which he could taste of absolute and unconditioned admiration.[19]

Even though 1832-35 were rewarding, productive years sparked by his association with Pushkin, it was not until April 19, 1836 that Gogol decided that all his ambitions could be fulfilled through literature. On

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[17]Lavrin, Russian Writers, p. 60.

[18]Mirsky, p. 144.

[19]Ibid.

this date The Revisor[20] was produced for the first time. The censors were unanimous in their condemnation of it, and would have refused to let it be produced except for one of those strange quirks of fate. Czar Nicholas I himself had read it and been highly amused. "Everyone has received his due," he said, "and I most of all." This was not literally true, as even a quick reading will reveal, and one must assume that the Czar duly noted that the most satiric passages were directed at minor officials--the type which plagued him as much as they annoyed everyone else. Still, even the Czar's endorsement was not enough for all of the petty bureaucrats to stomach the biting wit of The Revisor. "A hue and cry was raised against Gogol and before long...he preferred to leave Russia altogether. He settled down in Rome, where he remained with various interruptions, until 1848."[21] The Revisor was not Gogol's only play; he also wrote Marriage and Gamblers. The first is a farce and the second a clever piece on the theme of cheating the cheat. Both were, however, so overshadowed by The Revisor, that they are seldom mentioned, and it is true that the situations in these lesser works are far less universal in appeal, so less likely to have survived. In spite of this, both were extremely successful at the times of their productions.

It was during his self-imposed exile in Rome that Gogol wrote Marriage and Gamblers. It was while he was there that Pushkin died in 1837. This event made a profound impression on Gogol, though not one of overwhelming grief. As one might expect of this egocentric personality, he

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[20]Variously translated The Government Inspector, The Inspector General, etc.

[21]Lavrin, p. 68.

saw in Pushkin's death not the loss of a strong supporter nor the loss to Russia of a great literary figure, but rather the falling of the mantle of Russia's greatest prose writer on his own shoulders. This was the beginning of the feeling that he had been "selected" to cure Russia of all her ills. The idea had not yet become an obsession with him, and he produced in Rome his greatest work, Dead Souls.[22] Even in this masterpiece of satire can be seen the burgeoning of his notion that he must save Russia. Even in The Revizor the idea is present. As Lavrin reports, Gogol wrote later in An Author's Confession concerning the latter:

> I saw that in my former works I laughed in vain, uselessly, without knowing why. But if I must laugh, why not laugh at what really deserves to be laughed at by us all. In my Government Inspector [Revizor] I decided to bring together and to deride all that is bad in Russia, all the evils which are being perpetrated in those places where utmost rectitude is required from man.[23]

In The Revizor he is still laughing, but the key words "all that is bad in Russia" seem to indicate a mind which already feels capable of such judgment. In Dead Souls this idea is carried farther, though it is still held back from escaping the bounds of art. Only after Dead Souls is art lost and preaching begun.

After the publication of Dead Souls in 1842, for which event Gogol returned to Moscow, he projected the idea of a trilogy on the order of Dante's Divine Comedy. Dead Souls was to have been the Inferno wherein caricatures only appeared. In the Purgatorio, the hero Chichikov was to undergo purification through contacts with virtuous governors and the

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[22]Originally called Dead Souls, the censors imposed the title The Adventures of Chichikov, or Dead Souls and it has more recently been entitled Chichikov's Journeys and sub-titled Home Life in Old Russia by Constance Garnett and Rosa Portnova.

[23]Lavrin, p. 66.

Paradisio would be the new Russia. He could not do it. It was put aside and he began a book of direct moral preaching without anything to preach.

> The "message" that was to be embodied in the new book was nothing but a hotchpotch of provincial, very earthly and uninspired, religious flatness, sprinkled by a little aesthetic romanticism and served up to justify the existing order of things (including serfdom, corporal punishment, and so on) and to impress on every man the duty of conforming conscientiously and to the best of his might with the present God-ordained order of things.[24]

Though this work was called Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends, it contained practically no passages from actual letters.[25] He was deeply hurt when it was not received "as a message from Sinai" as he had expected. Several rebukes from former supporters deepened his dismay, and one such has become a classic in Russian letters. This is Belinsky's reply in which he outspokenly declares Gogol to be a falsifier of Christianity for the profit of those in power. This was an untrue but not unfair criticism of the book.

Such reaction threw Gogol into a sea of self-disgust which, coupled with his always strong self-consciousness, caused him to drown himself in religion. He was not made for religion, as he should have known, and he could not force religion upon himself. His earliest associations with religion had been those of seeing Christianity in a simple form: as the fear of death and hell. "He had no impulse toward Christ."[26] He tried a pilgrimage to Palestine in 1848, where he walked in Christ's footsteps (in the literal sense only), but he received no spiritual uplifting. When this had failed, he returned to Russia where he spent his last years. A

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[24]Mirsky, p. 146.

[25]Ibid., 147.

[26]Ibid.

particularly evil influence in the form of a "fierce and narrow ascetic," Father Mathew Konstantinovsky, became his advisor and companion. Though he arrived on the scene too late to affect any of Gogol's great writing, he may have prevented him from completing the second part of Dead Souls by his insistence that all imaginative work was sinful. At least we know that Gogol burned the completed second draft of this second part--the first draft he had destroyed in 1845. Only by chance were the first five chapters saved.[27] With this second draft were burned no one knows how many other fragments and whole stories.[28] The clue to the notion that Father Konstantinovsky was influential is in the fact that Gogol explained his action as a joke "played on him by the Devil."[29] Shortly after this deplorable incident, he fell into a state of profound melancholy, and died on February 21, 1852.

Though some little space has been given by biographers of Gogol to the regrettable influence of this priest, for the purposes of this study his influence may be considered negligible. He possibly caused the destruction of some work, but it is doubtful whether it was of a quality to compare with earlier pieces. It is rather with his "saner" writing that we are concerned.

Thus was the twisted course of Gogol's life. From memories of the wild beauty of the Ukraine came the subject matter for his most beautiful passages. From the cold streets of St. Petersburg he drew his pictures

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[27]Janko Lavrin, introduction to Tales from Gogol, tr. Rosa Portnova (London, 1945), p. 10.

[28]Mirsky, p. 147.

[29]Ibid., p. 148.

of the utmost in depression. From his own introverted nature came the shaping. Everything in his life turned him in upon himself, and his escape was always through writing, through exaggerating the low, the base, the false, the dull, the stupid, the petty, even the tragic in others in order to see himself above them. In this way, he seemed admirable—personally admirable. Because of this feeling of rejection, of personal inferiority, because of an ego which he could bolster in no other way, all of his writing is intensely subjective in motivation. This need forced the exaggeration which became what I call "imaginative realism," and which, through an examination of his writing, I will show to be not fantastic nor romantic, but realistic—an intensified and unique realism.

CHAPTER II

SHORT STORIES

Examining all the works of Nikolai Gogol would be a prodigious task; one suited to a far larger study than projected for this thesis. He published no fewer than seventeen successful short stories, three plays, one long novel and one short one. Fortunately, we can understand his unique realism by looking into one short story from each collection published. In the following chapter an appraisal of one play and the long novel should suffice.

His first successful collection of stories, Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka, opened with "Sorochintsy Fair." This is a delightful and clever comedy of the trickery a shrewd gypsy lad used to win the hand of his beloved from her reluctant stepmother.

Even in this first story see with what enthusiasm Gogol begins:

> How intoxicating, how wonderful is a summer's day in Little Russia! How languishingly hot are the hours, when at noon the day sparkles in silence and sultriness, and the blue and infinite ocean of sky, bent over the earth like a voluptuous dome, seems to have fallen asleep steeped in tenderness, clasping lightly the beautiful earth in an airy embrace! No cloud in the sky, no voices in the field. Everything seems to have died, only above, deep in the sky, the lark trembles and silvery songs float down to the enamoured earth and from time to time the sea-gull's cry or the resounding voice of the quail echoes in the steppe. Lazy and oblivious, idle and aimless, the oak-trees stand under the clouds and the dazzling blows of the sun enflame picturesque masses of leaves, casting on others a shadow as dark as night, which gusts of wind sprinkle with gold. Clouds of ethereal insects, like emeralds, topazes, sapphires, pour over multi-coloured kitchen gardens, shadowed by stateful sun-flowers. A camp of grey hay-ricks and golden sheaves of corn is scattered in the field and wanders its infiniteness. Wide boughs of the wild cherry, the plum tree, the apple and the pear--bent under the weight of the fruit; the sky and its clear mirror, the river in its green, proudly raised frame...

of life was enough, that realism consisted in the accumulation of an infinite number of details. [he] felt ... that the novelist's art must be a revelation of life as it really is ... But [he] wants no commonplace photographs of life. What [he] desires is a presentment of life that is more real than actuality itself.[4]

Perhaps Gogol's reality is "more real than actuality itself." Perhaps it is not. At any rate, the idée fixe in the French school was that life might be photographed from any angle and at any time, except from above; i.e., from a position affording the author an opportunity of superimposing his own emotions on the characters. Gogol felt that life was affected by the superimposing of any emotion from any direction, so much so that the author's duty was to emphasize anything which so affected characters and action. Herein he differed from the French, and hereby he gave to realism a new force, a force expanded by Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoi. Isabel Hapgood, the distinguished translator and critic, says:

Naturally, in the new quest that followed the decline of pseudo-classicism, romanticism and realism were at first mingled. This was the case with Gogol.... But he soon struck out in the right path.[5]

At first glance this seems to mean that Gogol abandoned the romantic. This is not so, nor was it meant. Miss Hapgood had been discussing Gogol's schoolboy effort, the poem Hans Küchelgarten. With the above statement she began her discussion of his short stories, the first of which was "Sorochintsy Fair."

But before we examine this story hear what comfortable words William Lyon Phelps has to say:

Gogol's realism differs in two important aspects from the realism of the French school, whether represented by Balzac, Flaubert, Guy de Maupassant,

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[4]Mirsky, p. 148.

[5]Isabel F. Hapgood, chapter on Gogol in The Columbia University Course in Literature (New York, 1928), p. 351.

or Zola. He had all the French love of veracity, and could have honestly said with the author of Une Vie that he painted l'humble verite. But there are two ground qualities in his realistic method absent in the four Frenchmen: humor and moral force.[6]

The humor is apparent, whether exuberant or bitter, but the moral force which is present certainly in Balzac for one, is with Gogol imposed from without by Gogol himself. With it he enlarges realism.

Mirsky makes an interesting comment, too:

> Until after the publication of the first part of Dead Souls, Gogol took scant interest in reality as such but relied for the creation of his characters entirely on his unaided imagination. But he was a realist in the sense that he introduced (as details and as material) innumerable elements and aspects of reality that had hitherto not possessed the freedom of literature.... He made vulgarity reign where only the sublime and the beautiful had reigned....the caricatures he drew were, weirdly and terribly, like the reality about him; and the sheer vividness and convincingness of his paintings simply eclipsed the paler truth and irrevocably held the fascinated eye of the reader.[7]

Let us now see some of this reality from "Sorochintsy Fair."

If one reads this first story and pronounces it a farce, he will have a strong position from which to argue. The situations involve comedy of the burlesque mood, and the characters are those of the Russian "vertep" or Punch and Judy puppet type. Without knowing the motivating forces behind Gogol, the above judgment is proper and defensible. However, when one has a regular mass of evidence that he imposed himself from above on his characters, scenes, etc. then one must re-evaluate it. S. T. Aksakov, the well-known critic and author of the Family Chronicle, said as much several times, and he quotes his son (Konstantine Aksakov) concerning the impression produced on all by the young Gogol who "behaved rudely,

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[6]William Lyon Phelps, Essays on Russian Novelists (New York, 1926), p. 60.

[7]Mirsky, p. 151-52.

negligently, and looked upon people from above, as it were."[8] This habit he imposed upon his characters as he did upon his acquaintances. In general this imposition took the form of exaggeration of their defects, superstitions, and comic aspects; the last two we find mainly in "Sorochintsy Fair."

It is a slender tale of a young, handsome gypsy boy, named Grisko Golopupenkov, who falls in love with a pretty girl, Paraska, whom he meets at the district fair. Her father turns out to be an old friend of his father, and soon the two men have slapped hands and concluded the marriage bargain, much to the delight of the simple Paraska, who is joyously in love with the handsome youth. It is the stepmother of Paraska, however, who objects. She loathes Grisko because he shouted an insulting comparison between herself and her stepdaughter as they rode into the town. Nothing will reconcile her to this boisterous lad. She forces her husband to break his bargain with Grisko, who in despair turns to his gypsy friends. They promise to get his Paraska for him in return for his selling them his cattle at a lower-than-market price.

Paraska's father, Cherevik, is loaded with drink and taken to the house of his kinsman, where his wife has been entertaining a new "admirer" paid by the gypsies. She quickly hides him in a loft as the revelling crew come in. Knowing Cherevik to be superstitious, the gypsies tell him a wild tale of the devil in the form of a pig looking for the sleeve of a red jacket which a money lender at this very fair had years before cheated him out of. As the story progresses, the assembly becomes more and more fearful—it is such a dreadful tale—and at the climax a pig's

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[8]Lavrin, Gogol, p. 55.

snout is shoved through the window, the wife's lover crashes from his perch into the middle of the whole crowd, and everyone rushes madly into the street. Cherevik and his kinsman are caught, accused of running because they have stolen a horse, and bound together to await the accessor and a trial. At this point, Grizko is allowed by the gypsies to obtain Cherevik's release, and the old man, in return, rushes his daughter and Grizko through a marriage ceremony before his wife puts in her appearance.

The story itself is a combination of folk superstition and folk-ways known intimately by Gogol, who was reared where both abounded. These become realistic in his treatment because they are real in the lives of the people at the "Sorochintsy Fair." The devil never appears; he does not physically affect the action; he does not make the story a fantasy. His effect is through the minds of the characters who believe in him. The gypsies know that the small farmer, Cherevik, will believe such a tale, and they count on this to get him into a predicament from which Grizko can extricate him and win his reward, Paraska. This is as real as life.

The characters are exaggerated, but not contrived. The exaggeration is Gogol's method of feeling superior; besides it lends a certain speed to the action if the characters react violently. In the storytelling scene we have violent reaction:

> And Cherevik, as if scalded with boiling water, grabbed a pot, put it on his head instead of his cap, dashed to the door and ran through the streets like a madman, not seeing the ground under him. Only exhaustion forced him to reduce the speed of his flight. His heart was pounding like a mill wheel, and perspiration streamed from him in torrents. He was already prepared to drop to the ground in exhaustion when he seemed to hear somebody racing after him. He held his breath ...
>
> "The Devil! The Devil!" he shouted almost senseless and, losing strength, fell to the ground in a faint.
>
> "The Devil! The Devil!" something shouted behind him and then he heard that something threw itself on him with a roar. Here his senses

left him entirely and like a terrible occupant of a narrow coffin, he remained numb and motionless in the middle of the road.[9]

Certainly one must admit this is burlesque; but one cannot deny that it is only exaggeration of the real, not a distortion of the factual. Characteristically, Gogol ends this story on a softer note as the gaiety of the wedding part wanes:

> The thunder, laughter, songs, grew quieter and quieter. The fiddler's bow was dying, getting weaker and loosing indistinct sounds in the emptiness of the air. Some stamping was still heard in the distance, somehow reminiscent of the murmur of the distant sea and soon all was empty and silent.[10]

There is more fantasy in "Christmas Eve" from the collection in Volume Two of Evenings; yet even in this, the use of the devil only speeds the action—it does not alter the realism of the story. Again the setting is Sorochintsy town, and again we have a young man, a blacksmith named Vakula, and a beautiful and willful young girl, Oksana. Superstition is a part of the makeup of the elders of the town, and a devil in the form of a pig is actually and visibly present. This devil despises Vakula because the blacksmith's painting of hell is uncomplimentary to all its occupants and especially to this demon. Oksana finally agrees to marry Vakula if he will get her the slippers the Empress of Russia wears. He manages to get them by tricking the devil, getting the upper hand over him, and forcing the devil to carry him to St. Petersburg, where the Empress grants his simple request.

To be sure the use of a flying devil, the compression of the time element due to the flying speed, and the nick-of-time return with the

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[9]tr. Rosa Portnova, p. 28.

[10]Ibid., p. 35.

slippers are unrealistic by our standards. They were unrealistic by Gogol's standards, too. Yet, I believe that even in this story—along with "Viy," his most fantastic—he uses the fantastic only to show a realistic possibility, the overcoming of great odds by overcoming the devil. If we admit that Gogol believed in the intervention of the devil in personal lives, we can better understand his preoccupation with overcoming him. If we remember that he was personally acquainted with the lives and beliefs of the peasants around Sorochintsy, we can understand his use of elements which would not seem fantastic in that setting. If we suppose that he wished to recall details of his home province while he was in the far north, is it not reasonable that he would recall all of the details that made up that life—the "real" as well as the "fantastic"? In fact, are they not one and the same? Would it not, in other words, have been far less real—more idealized—had he left out an interfering devil?

Though I can find no critical comment on the following, it seems to me indicative of a further intensification of realism. In this story he uses not only the same setting, but some of the same names as he uses in other stories. For instance, Deacon Nikiforovich is Ivan Nikiforovich of "How the Two Ivans Quarrelled"; this story is one of his so-called "most realistic." This is a slender thread with realism and it may not bear the weight of argument, but the use of names in a realistic story and their use in what might have been called a purely fantastic one seems more than coincidental.

The weight of the argument must, however, rest on the inclusion of fantastic elements (beliefs) in a story about people who believed in such fantasies. The intensification of details and the compression of time

only make more real—more complete—our understanding of Sorochintsy's inhabitants. But did these inhabitants believe in witches and devils? Look at the opening and closing paragraphs of "Christmas Eve":

> The last day before Christmas had passed. Wintry lucid night had arrived. The stars looked out. The stately moon rose in the sky to shine for good people and the whole world, so that everyone might be gay and sing carols praising Christ. The frost was sharper than in the morning, but everything was so quiet that its crunching under the boot could be heard half a verst away. No gathering of young men yet appeared beneath the windows of the houses. Only the moon peeped into them stealthily, as if tempting the girls to hurry with their dressing up and run out on to the creaking snow.
>
> From the chimney of one house a column of smoke arose and spread in a cloud over the sky and with the smoke rose a witch riding on a broomstick. If the assessor from Sorochinsky had been passing at the time, driven by all his three horses, wearing his Lancer-like cap with a sheepskin band, and his blue coat lined with sheepskin, with his whip devised by the devil which he uses to urge on his drive, then he would surely have noticed her. For there is not a witch in the whole world that can escape from the Sorochinsky assessor. He can remember the number of piglets the peasant woman's pig delivered, how much linen lies in her trunk and exactly what piece of his clothing or of his household goods a citizen will pawn in the tavern on Sunday. But the Sorochinsky assessor was not travelling by and, after all, what business of his are strangers—he has his own district.[11]

And see how the youngest in the district were introduced to the devil:

> Still, that is not all. On the side of the wall, as you enter the church, Vakula painted a picture of the Devil in Hell, so repulsive that no one could pass it without spitting and the women, when the child in their arms would begin to cry, would hold it up to the painting and would say, "Look at the nasty picture," and the child, holding back its little tears, would gape at the picture and press closer to its mother's breast.[12]

Though it is probable that Gogol was not confronted with the devil, we know that his mother's descriptions were vivid and impressive. And we can be sure that he was well acquainted with the habits of the lower classes as well as with those of the gentry, as evidenced by his detailed accounts

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[11] Ibid., p. 36.

[12] Ibid., p. 78.

of conversations, clothes, customs, etc.

It would be interesting to detail each story in Evenings, but space does not permit nor does necessity demand it. If realism, even realism of a unique essence, can be comprehended in these two semi-fantasies, it is reasonable to admit that realism is present where fantasy is not so prominent. With the ideas so far set down in mind, any reader should, I think, be able to follow the course of the realistic intent in the other six tales in these two volumes. Thus in the interest of brevity and the coverage of what are considered more universal works, attention should be concentrated on three others: "The Overcoat";[13] "Nevsky Prospect," from Arabesques; and "Taras Bulba," from Mirgorod.

Before beginning the account of "The Overcoat," mention should be made of the reason for the omission of a great story from the Arabesques collection, "The Diary of a Madman," of which Mirsky has said, "The work must forever rank as a Russian classic; it ought to rank as a universal classic."[14] and of which Isabel Hapgood said, "...and 'The Diary of a Madman' is unexcelled as an amusing but touching study of a diseased mind in the ranks of petty officialdom."[15] It is truly a finely drawn characterization, but we will see the small official in our examination of the universally acclaimed The Inspector General and in the form of Chichikov in Dead Souls, so it is felt that the character of Poprishchin in "The Diary" might be passed over with only the above comments to commend it to the more ambitious reader.

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[13]Variously translated "The Cloak," "The Greatcoat," etc.

[14]The Columbia University Course in Literature, p. 354.

[15]Ibid., p. 353.

Akaky, the government clerk-hero of "The Overcoat," is another Poprishchin, but aged and beaten down enough to accept his humble place in life without grumbling.

> When and at what precise date Akaky had entered the department, and who had appointed him to it, is something that no one can remember. During all the years he had served in that department many directors and other higher officials had come and gone, but he still remained in exactly the same place, in exactly the same position, in exactly the same job, doing exactly the same kind of work, to wit, copying official documents. ...No particular respect was shown him in the department. ...Some assistant head clerk would just shove a paper under his nose without even saying, "Please copy it," or "Here's an interesting, amusing little case!" or something in a similarly pleasant vein as is the custom in all well-regulated official establishments. And he would accept it without raising his eyes from the paper, without looking up to see who had put it on his desk, or whether indeed he had any right to put it there. He just took it and immediately settled down to copy it. The young clerks laughed and cracked jokes about him, the sort of jokes young clerks could be expected to crack. They told stories about him in his presence, stories that were specially invented about him. They joked about his landlady, an old woman of seventy, who they claimed beat him, or they asked him when he was going to marry her. They also showered bits of torn paper on his head and called them snow. But never a word did Akaky say to it all, as though unaware of the presence of his tormentors in the office. It did not even interfere with his work; for while these rather annoying practical jokes were played on him he never made a single mistake in the document he was copying. It was only when the joke got too unbearable, when somebody jogged his arm and so interfered with his work, that he would say, "Leave me alone, gentlemen. Why do you pester me?"[16]

The height of ambition of which he is still capable is to scrape together enough money to buy a new overcoat to replace the only one he owns—a coat so patched and threadbare that even the tailor, Petrovich, says of it, "No, sir, impossible to mend it....The whole coat's rotten. Touch it with a needle and it will fall to pieces."[17] With great difficulty—skipping meals, saving candles—he makes this little dream come true: a new coat, imitation marten collar and all. He is a somebody. The office

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[16]Nikolai V. Gogol, "The Overcoat," Tales of Good and Evil, tr. David Magarshack (London, 1949), pp. 273-74.

[17]Ibid., p. 281.

recognizes him. The height of recognition is reached when he is even invited to a party at the home of his superior that very night. He drinks too much, and starts for his lodgings late at night. While crossing one of the vast and lonely squares of St. Petersburg, he is knocked down by two ruffians and, when he comes to himself, there is no trace of either the thieves or of his new coat.

> Akaky Akakyevich came running home in a state of utter confusion. His hair, which still grew, though sparsely, over his temples and at the back of his head, was terribly tousled; his chest, arms, and trousers were covered with snow. His old landlady, awakened by the loud knocking at the door, jumped hurriedly out of bed and with only one slipper on ran to open the door, modestly clasping her chemise to her bosom with one hand. When she opened the door and saw the terrible state Akaky was in, she fell back with a gasp. He told her what had happened to him, and she threw up her arms in dismay and said that he ought to go straight to the district police commissioner, for the police inspector was quite sure to swindle him, promise him all sorts of things and then leave him in the lurch; it would be much better if he went to the district police commissioner who, it seemed, was known to her, for Anna, the Finnish girl who was once her cook, was now employed by the district commissioner of police as a nurse, and, besides, she had seen him often as he drove past the house, and he even went to church every Sunday and always, while saying his prayers, looked round at everybody very cheerfully, so that, judging from all appearances, he must be a kind-hearted man.[18]

He is shuttled from one police official to another without getting any help, until finally, full of despair, he takes to his bed and dies of grief. Such is the gist of the story.

There is added to the story, however, several pages which seem to be almost an afterthought on the part of Gogol. Akaky's ghost returns to the city and snatches coats from the shoulders of officials all over town. This apparation is reported several times by high government workers and lastly by the "Very Important Person" who was the final one to intimidate him and refuse him help when he was alive.

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[18]Ibid., pp. 292-93.

All of a sudden the Very Important Person felt that somebody had seized him very firmly by the collar. Turning round, he saw a small-sized man in an old, threadbare Civil Service uniform, and it was not without horror that he recognised Akaky Akakyevich. The Civil Servant's face was white as snow and looked like that of a dead man. But the horror of the Very Important Person increased considerably when he saw that the mouth of the dead man became twisted and, exhaling the terrible breath of the grave, Akaky's ghost uttered the following words, "Aha! So here you are! I've - er - collared you at last! . . . It's your overcoat I want, sir! You didn't care a rap for mine, did you? Did nothing to get it back for me, and abused me into the bargain! All right, then, give me yours now!"[19]

To quote Magarshack:

As regards what Gogol himself called "the fantastic ending" of the story, another Russian critic justly observes that "it has not been dictated by any desire to fire the imagination of the reader, but solely by the desire not to miss a single feature that might fully delineate the character of Akaky." The fantastic element in the story,...does not in fact enforce a "suspension of disbelief" on the reader. Indeed, Gogol's contemporaries seemed to have interpreted the robbing of the overcoat from the Very Important Person by Akaky's ghost as the fate awaiting the Russian ruling class if it did not repent of its ways, an interpretation that most certainly did not occur to Gogol but that seems to have been justified by the events of less than a hundred years later.[20]

Thus we see Gogol again using the fantastic with the real to produce an "intensification of reality," which was unique in his time. William Lyon Phelps says:

I do not share the general enthusiasm for the narrative of the comically grotesque quarrel between the two Ivans: but the three stories "Old-fashioned Farmers," "The Portrait," and "The Cloak," show to a high degree that mingling of Fantasy with Reality that is so characteristic of this author.[21]

In fairness to Phelps, I must also quote his concluding words, with which I do not agree:

Its [The Cloak] realism is so obviously and emphatically realistic that it becomes exaggeration, but this does not lessen its tremendous power: then suddenly at the very end, it leaves the ground, even the air,

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[19]Ibid., pp. 302-03.

[20]Ibid., p. xiii.

[21]Phelps, p. 49.

and soars away into the ether of Romance.[22]

With due respect for Phelp's critical ability, I feel that he has contrived the misunderstanding which several earlier critics fostered: the belief that romanticism is unreconcilable with realism. To have left out the ghost of Akaky would have destroyed the basic purpose--the realistic purpose--Gogol had in writing "The Overcoat," just as surely as leaving belief in the devil out of "Sorochintsy Fair" would have reduced it to a personal reminiscence.

"The Overcoat" exerted a strong influence on Russian writers; Chapter IV of this thesis details the influence of this and other stories by Gogol.

Although "The Overcoat" is listed in almost every collection of Russian stories, another tale deserves, and is often given, equal attention; this is "Nevsky Prospect."[23] It has been said that "Nevsky Prospect" expresses "Gogol's wounded idealism perhaps more directly than any other narrative of his."[24] The very antithesis between the two main characters, one of them vulgar and the other a romantic dreamer, serves to point up the incompatibility of life as it is and beauty as Gogol sees it.

"A gloomy place - this world, gentlemen," became from now on Gogol's motto as well as his basic disposition. But he masked it by his laughter in which he found first an escape from life and then a means for revenge upon life. Unable to escape from reality, he tried to fight it by laughing at its ugliness and drabness, which he did with all the vindictiveness at his disposal. It was here that Gogol's romantic temperament often took on a highly realistic garb, notably from his Petersburg stories onwards.[25]

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[22]Ibid., p. 50.

[23]Sometimes translated "Nevsky Avenue."

[24]Lavrin, Russian Writers: Their Lives and Literature, p. 63.

[25]Ibid., pp. 62-63.

"Notably from his Petersburg stories onward," but not exclusively. Certainly "Nevsky Prospect" is more realistic in the sense that it emphasizes a more bitter view of life against "reality" than do "Sorochintsy Fair" or "Christmas Eve," but this does not mean that bitterness is the only criterion of reality, as has already been pointed out.

Nevertheless, all in all, "Nevsky Prospect" represents a break from the tales of the Ukraine to the "Petersburg Stories." The opening lines of "Nevsky" remind one of the enthusiasm of the stories in Evenings, but the rest is different:

> There is nothing finer than Nevsky Avenue, not in St. Petersburg at any rate; for in St. Petersburg it is everything. And, indeed, is there anything more gay, more brilliant, more resplendent than this beautiful street of our capital? I am sure that not one of her anaemic inhabitants, not one of her innumerable Civil Servants, would exchange Nevsky Avenue for all the treasures in the world. Not only the young man of twenty-five, the young gallant with the beautiful moustache and the immaculate morning coat, but the man with white hair sprouting on his chin and a head as smooth as a billiard ball, yes, even he is enthralled with Nevsky Avenue. And the ladies . . . Oh, for the ladies Nevsky Avenue is a thing of even greater delight! But is there anyone who does not feel thrilled and delighted with it? The gay carriages, the handsome men, the beautiful women--all lend it a carnival air, an air that you can almost inhale the moment you set foot on Nevsky Avenue! Even if you have some very important business, you are quite certain to forget all about it as soon as you are there.[26]

The eulogy continues for six pages, surpassing even the openings of "May Night" and "Sorochintsy Fair" in length, but an undercurrent of bitterness is in it. Eventually the characters, Lieutenant Pirogov (representing actuality) and the artist, Piskarev, (representing the romantic) are introduced.

They are walking down Nevsky Avenue when they are struck by the beauty of two girls, one coming toward them and one gazing in a shop

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[26]Gogol, Tales of Good and Evil, tr. Magarshack, p. 117.

window. Pirogov is attracted to the blond by the window, and urges Piskarev to follow the pretty brunette going the other way. Their different influences on the lives of the two men form the theme of the story.

Piskarev is the naive one who falls in love and hopes to reform his "lovely dream." He is shocked to find her a common streetwalker in a fourth floor "establishment," for he is an artist and can see only her fresh young beauty; she is only seventeen. "It could be seen that it was not long that abominable vice had had her...."[27] On meeting her "associates," he rushes from the flat and does not stop until he arrives at his own. There he is tormented with visions of her beauty, and thoughts of her degradation. Here Gogol makes one of his frequent author-intrusions, "And, indeed, we are never so moved to pity as at the sight of beauty touched by the corrupting breath of vice."[28] For hours he sits, half awake, thinking of her. He hears a knock at his door, and opens it to find a richly dressed servant, sent by this very girl, who says his mistress has sent him to fetch the artist. Half-dazed, he is taken to a magnificent ball at a huge house where he meets the girl. She tells him she is not what he thinks, but their conversation is interrupted before she can tell him her secret. She goes to dance with a state councilor, and he searches for her through all the rooms of the mansion. Tired and disconsolate, he sits down to rest and finds himself staring at a guttering candle in his own room. It has all been a dream.

He becomes obsessed with the "reality" of the dream and the desire to recapture it.

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[27]Ibid., p. 128.

[28]Ibid.

In the end the dreams became his whole life, and from that time his life underwent a curious change: he, as it were, slept when he was awake and kept awake when he was asleep. Anyone seeing him sitting dumbly before an empty table, or walking along the street, would have taken him for a sleep-walker, a somnambulist, or for a man ruined by drink. He stared vacantly in front of him; his natural absent-mindedness increased, until at last all feeling and emotion were completely banished from his face. He revived only at the approach of night.[29]

Dreams fail him as insomnia comes upon him, and he resorts to opium; now the dreams return. He conceives the idea of reforming her, and rushes to her house. She greets him:

Oh, it's you! Why did you run away from us that evening? ...I've only just got up. They brought me home at seven this morning. I was dead drunk.[30]

Still he tries to persuade her to marry him, but she answers, "How do you mean? I'm not a washerwoman or a dressmaker! You don't expect me to work do you?"[31] This is his dream shattered. He staggers home and cuts his throat.

So perished the victim of a mad passion, poor Piskarev, the gentle, shy, modest, childishly good-natured man, who carried a spark of genius in his breast which might with time have blazed forth into a great bright flame. No one shed any tears over him; there was no one to be seen by his dead body, except the ordinary figure of the district police inspector and the bored face of the police surgeon. Quietly and without any religious service, his body was taken to Okhta, and the only man who followed it was a night watchman, an ex-soldier who did indeed weep, but only because he had had a glass of vodka too many. Even Lieutenant Pirogov did not come to pay his last respects to the poor luckless artist upon whom during his lifetime he had conferred his exalted patronage. However, he had other business to attend to, being involved in rather an extraordinary adventure. But let us turn to him. I do not like corpses and dead men and I always feel rather ill at ease when my path is crossed by a long funeral procession, and an old crippled soldier, dressed like some Capuchin, takes a pinch of snuff with his left hand because he is carrying a torch in his right. The sight of a rich catafalque and a velvet

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[29]Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect," Tales of Good and Evil, tr. David Magarshack, pp. 134-35.

[30]Ibid., p. 138.

[31]Ibid.

pall always depresses me terribly, but my feeling of depression is mingled with grief whenever I see the bare, pine coffin of some poor wretch being taken to the cemetery on a cart and only some old beggar woman, who had met it at the crossroads, following it because she has nothing else to do.[32]

This is half the story of "Nevsky Prospect," the "unreal reality." The girl is never named, probably because Gogol wanted her to be part real and part dream-like in Piskarov's other world. Also, Gogol was not capable of creating women characters. Isabel Hapgood comments:

> The day for minute analysis of feminine character had not arrived, and in all Gogol's works there is, properly speaking, no such thing as the heroine playing a first-class role, whether of the antique or the modern pattern.[33]

The adjective "ethereal" is employed often by Gogol in describing women. Describing the dancers as Piskarov sees them in his first dream, we read:

> The ladies were so ethereal, so utterly and divinely vain, so full of rapture, ...their lovely feet touched the floor without any apparent effort and they could not have looked more ethereal if they had walked on air.[34]

Then of "the girl" he says, "She sat down, ...her hand dropped on her knees, crushing her ethereal dress under it...."[35] Gogol sees women either as "ethereal beings," or as demons, sin incarnate.

The second part of the story is an account of the adventures of the other half of our pair of young men, Lieutenant Pirogov. Gogol introduces him:

> But Lieutenant Pirogov had a large number of talents which were all his own. He could, for instance, recite excellently the verses from Ozerov's Dimitry Donskoy and Griboyedov's The Misfortune of Being Too Clever, and he was an absolute master of the art of blowing smoke from his

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[32] Ibid., pp. 139-40.

[33] Hapgood, p. 354.

[34] Gogol, tr. Magarshack, p. 131.

[35] Ibid., p. 132.

pipe in rings, so that he could string a dozen of them together, one on top of the other. He also could tell the amusing story about a cannon being one thing and a unicorn another in a most inimitable way. It is perhaps a little difficult to enumerate all the talents fate had lavished with so generous a hand upon Pirogov. He liked to talk about an actress or a dancer, but not as crudely as a young second lieutenant usually discourses on the same subject. He was very proud of his rank, to which he had only lately been promoted, and though occasionally as he lay down on the sofa he would murmur, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity! What though I am a lieutenant?" he was, as a matter of fact, very pleased with his new dignity. He often alluded to it in conversation in a roundabout way, and once when he met some Government clerk whom he did not think sufficiently respectful to him, he stopped him at once and pointed out to him in a few trenchant words that he was a lieutenant and not some ordinary officer. He did his best to put it the more eloquently as two very good-looking ladies were passing at the time. In general Pirogov displayed a passion for the fine arts and patronised and in every possible way encouraged the artist Piskarev, which, however, might have been mainly due to his great desire to see his manly countenance portrayed on canvas. But enough of Pirogov's qualities.[36]

This rather self-satisfied young man followed the blonde, who turned out to be Mrs. Schiller, the wife of a German artisan--a metal worker. She is stupid and beautiful, ingenuous and altogether fetching. Pirogov is enchanted and makes all sorts of advances which the woman does not even understand. He learns from her that her husband always leaves home to get drunk with his friends on Sunday, so he calls on Sunday. In order to embrace her, Pirogov suggests a dance, and she agrees. He becomes so delighted that he smothers her with kisses; at this moment, Herr Schiller and his friends walk in. They strip Pirogov to his undergarments and turn him into the street to scurry home. Pirogov rages:

...nothing could compare with Pirogov's anger and indignation. The very thought of so terrible an insult made him furious. Siberia and the lash seemed to him the least punishment Schiller deserved. He rushed back home so that, having dressed, he could go at once to the general and report to him in the most lurid colours the outrage committed on his person by the German artisan. At the same time he meant to send in a written complaint to the General Staff, and if the punishment should still be unsatisfactory, he resolved to take the matter further and, if need

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[36]Ibid., pp. 141-42.

be, further still.[37]

Now we see the difference between Pirogov and Piskarev. The latter became obsessed with his "love," and it destroyed him, though his entire intent and purpose was to do good. Pirogov's intent was anything but good, yet he is unaffected in the end:

> But the whole thing [his resolve to punish Schiller] somehow petered out most strangely; on the way to the general, he went into a pastry-cook's, ate two pastries, read something out of the Northern Bee, and left with his anger somewhat abated. The evening, moreover, happened to be particularly cool and pleasant and he took a few turns on Nevsky Avenue; by nine o'clock he calmed down completely and it occurred to him that it was hardly wise to disturb the general on a Sunday, especially as he was quite likely to be out of town. And so he went instead to a party given by one of the directors of the Auditing Board, where he found a very agreeable company of Civil Servants and army officers. There he spent a very pleasant time and so distinguished himself in the mazurka that not only the ladies but also the gentlemen were in raptures over it.[38]

Gogol intrudes again to give us his intent:

> What a wonderful world we live in! I could not help reflecting as I strolled along Nevsky Avenue the other day and as I recalled these two incidents. How strangely, how mysteriously does fate play with us! Do we ever get what we want? Do we ever attain what all our endeavours seem to be specially directed to? Everything seems to happen contrary to our hopes and expectation. Fate rewards one man with a pair of splendid horses, and you see him driving about in his carriage, looking bored and paying no attention to the beauty of his trotters, while another man whose heart is consumed with a passion for horseflesh has to go on foot and get all the satisfaction he can by clicking his tongue whenever a fine trotter is led past him. One man has an excellent cook, but unhappily nature has endowed him with so small a mouth that he cannot possibly take more than two pecks, while another has a mouth as big as the arch of the General Headquarters, but, alas, he has to be content with a German dinner of potatoes. How strangely does fate play with us all!
>
> But strangest of all are the incidents that take place on Nevsky Avenue. Oh, do not trust that Nevsky Avenue! I always wrap myself up more closely in my cloak when I walk along it and do my best not to look at the things I pass. ...Away, away from the street lamp, for heaven's sake! Pass it quickly, as quickly as you can! You'll be lucky if all you get is a few drops of stinking oil on your new suit. But, even apart from the lamp-post, everything is full of deceit. It lies at all times,

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[37] Ibid., p. 149.

[38] Ibid., pp. 149-50.

does Nevsky Avenue, but most of all when night hovers over it in a thick mass, picking out the white from the dun-coloured houses, and all the town thunders and blazes with lights, and thousands of carriages come driving from the bridges, the outriders shouting and jogging up and down on their horses, and when the devil himself lights all the street-lamps to show everything in anything but its true colours.[39]

Thus ends "Nevsky Prospect." In it we see Gogol's disillusionment with life in St. Petersburg, at its false front, its stratified society into which he never penetrated very far. Piskarov, wishing only good, might be Gogol as he saw himself, defeated by the evil which was the essence of the capital. Only the shallow, the self-interested, the Pirogovs could be unaffected, could survive.

"Nevsky Prospect" is Gogol at one of the high points of his art. Its effect was profound. Recognized by all as a masterpiece of realism, it did not suffer—as some of his stories suffered at the time—from having that mixture of fantasy and reality which was misunderstood as a defect in his realism. Others followed his lead. The theme was used again and again until finally Dostoevski made his superb treatment in Poor Folk. As Phelps says:

...and Dostoevski's first book, Poor Folk, is in many places almost a slavish imitation of The Cloak - and he freely acknowledged the debt in the course of the story.[40]

With this praise we turn from the northern cold of "Nevsky Prospect" to the sun of Gogol's Ukraine again as we take a look at his most poetic work, Taras Bulba.

Though it is a novel—or, more properly, a novelette—I include it with his short stories to separate it from his novel-masterpiece,

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[39]Ibid., pp. 150-51.

[40]Phelps, p. 61.

Dead Souls. Above all, it is romance of the Cossack past. Lavrin says that it was inspired by the Waverly Novels, and is "spun out in Gogol's ornate and agitated manner at its best."[41] It is not realistic as the others are realistic—i.e., it does not employ the elements of fantasy mixed with the realistic as in "Sorochintsy Fair," nor does it present a completely realistic treatment as in "Nevsky Prospect." Its claim to realism seems to lie in the fact that it does not seem to be all fantasy as it might very well have seemed treated by an artist of inferior skill. The descriptive passages, though extravagant, are never other-worldly. The characters are somewhat on the order of the puppet characters mentioned earlier in this chapter, but they represent at most intensified realism.

Old Taras is the epitome of the Cossack warrior, loving a fight more than anything else. In the opening scene he welcomes his sons home from school with a massive brawl in the front yard to satisfy himself that they are developing. He cares little for their schooling, and Gogol comments:

> The style of education in that age was widely at variance with the manner of life: these scholastic, grammatical and theological subtleties never were used and never were met with in real life. Those who studied them—even the most scholastic of the lot—could never put their knowledge to any practical use whatsoever. The most learned men of those days were even more ignorant than the rest, because they were entirely removed from all experience.[42]

Incidentally, commenting on this quotation Phelps says:

> I think it probable that Gogol's hatred for the school curriculum inspired a passage in Taras Bulba, though here he ostensibly described

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[41]Lavrin, p. 60.

[42]Gogol, Taras Bulba, tr. Isabel Hapgood (New York and London, 1915), pp. 58-59.

the pedagogy of the fifteenth century.[43]

Only after the fight do they all kiss, and the boys, Ostap and Andrii, greet the mother. She has not seen them for a year and is shocked when Taras announces during a massive feast that they will all leave at dawn for the wars.

> The poor old woman, well used to such behaviour on the part of her husband, looked sadly on from her seat on the wall-bench. She did not dare to say anything; but when she heard the decision which was so terrible for her, she could not refrain from tears. She looked at her children, from whom so speedy a separation was threatened, and it is impossible to describe the full force of the speechless grief that seemed to quiver in her eyes and on her lips, which were convulsively pressed together.[44]

One of the most poignant scenes in all of Gogol's writings is that of this withered and devoted mother crouching all night on the ground beside the boys as they sleep, her heart overflowing with love, admiration, tenderness, pride, and fear. As Gogol pictures it:

> Night had only just clasped the heavens in her embrace, but Taras always went to bed early. He threw himself down on a rug, and covered himself with a sheepskin coat; for the night air was quite sharp, and Bulba liked to be warmly covered when he was at home. He was soon snoring and the whole household speedily followed his example. All snored and grunted as they lay in different corners. The watchman went to sleep the first of all, because he had drunk more than any one else, in honour of his young masters' homecoming.
>
> The poor mother alone slept not. She bent over the pillow of her darling boys as they lay side by side; with a comb she smoothed their carelessly tangled young curls, and moistened them with her tears. She gazed at them with her whole being, with her every sense; she merged herself wholly in that gaze, and still she could not gaze enough. She had nourished them at her own breast, she had reared them and petted them; and now to see them only for an instant! "My sons! my darling sons, what will become of you? what awaits you?" she said, and tears stood in the furrows which disfigured her once beautiful face. In truth, she was to be pitied, as was every woman in that valorous epoch. She had lived only for a moment in love, only during the first fever of passion, only during the first flush of youth; and then her grim betrayer had deserted her for the sword, for his comrades and his carouses. She had seen her husband for two or three days in the course of a year, and then for a period of several

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[43]Phelps, p. 36.

[44]Hapgood tr., pp. 41-42.

days in the course of a year, and then for a period of several years there had been no news of him. And when she had seen him, when they had lived together, what sort of a life had been here? She has endured insults, even beatings; she had seen caresses bestowed merely out of pity; she had been a strange object amid that mob of heartless cavaliers, upon which the dissolute life of the Zaporozhe had cast a grim colouring of its own. Her pleasureless youth had flitted swiftly by; and her beautiful rosy cheeks and her bosom had withered away unkissed, and become covered with premature wrinkles. All her love, all her feeling, everything that is tender and passionate in a woman had, in her case, been converted into the one sentiment of maternal love. With ardour, with passion, with tears, she hovered over her boys, like a gull of the steppe. Her sons, her darling sons, were being taken from her,--taken from her in such a way that she might never see them again! Who knows? Perchance a Tatár would cut off their heads in the very first skirmish, and she would never know where their deserted bodies lay, torn by the beasts of prey; and yet for each drop of their blood she would gladly give her whole self. Sobbing, she gazed into their eyes, even when all-powerful sleep began to close them, and said to herself: "Perhaps when Bulba wakes he will put off their departure for a brief day or two; perhaps he took it into his head to go so soon because he had been drinking hard."

The moon, from the height of heaven, had long since illuminated the whole courtyard filled with sleepers, the dense clump of willows and the tall steppe grass which hid the wattled hedge. She still sat by the heads of her beloved sons, never removing her eyes from them for a moment, or even thinking of sleep. Already the horses, divining the approach of dawn, had ceased eating, and laid down upon the grass; the topmost leaves of the willows began to rustle softly, and little by little the rippling rustle descended to their very bases. She sat there, unwearied, until daylight, and wished in her heart that the night might last as long as possible.[45]

In the morning they ride away, all for the last time, across the steppe.

All that was dim and sleepy in the minds of the kazáks fled away in a twinkling; their hearts fluttered like birds. The further they penetrated into the steppe, the more beautiful did it become. At that time all the South, all that region which now constitutes New Russia, even to the Black Sea, was a green, virgin wilderness. No plough had ever passed over the immeasurable waves of wild growth; horses alone, hiding themselves in it as in a forest, trod it down. Nothing in Nature could be finer. The whole surface of the earth looked like a green-gold ocean, upon which were sprinkled millions of different flowers. Through the tall, slender stems of the grass peeped light-blue, dark-blue and lilac corn-flowers; the yellow broom thrust up its pyramidal head; the parasol-shaped white flowers of the yarrow dotted its surface. A wheat-ear,

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[45]Ibid., pp. 47-50

brought God knows whence, was filling out to ripening. About their slender roots ran partridges, with necks outstretched. The air was filled with the notes of a thousand different birds. In the sky, motionless, hung the hawks, with wings outspread, and eyes rivetted intently on the grass. The cries of a vast flock of wild ducks moving up on one side, were echoed from God knows what distant lake. From the grass a gull arose with measured sweep and bathed luxuriously in the blue waves of air; and now she has vanished on high, and appears only as a black dot! Now she has turned her wings, and shimmers in the sunlight. Devil take you, Steppe, how beautiful you are!...[46]

They arrive at the great meeting place of the kazáks (Cossacks), the Syech. Here were gathered all the bands who would make war on the Polish invaders.

And there it was, the Syech! There was the nest from which all those men, strong and proud as lions, had issued forth! There was the place whence poured forth liberty and kazáks, all over the Ukraina.[47]

Andrii kept thinking of a Polish beauty he had met in the city of Kiev where he and Ostop had attended school; soon he would see her again. She is in her fortress of Dubno where her father is Vevoda (nobleman in charge). He sees her when her old servant steals to him as he sleeps in the camp among the kazáks besieging Dubno. She tells him her mistress has had nothing to eat for two days, and he returns with her carrying food. His love overwhelms him on seeing her pitiable condition, and he turns traitor to his own father and brother and to all the kazáks to lead the city forces in trying to break the siege.

And the kazák was lost! He was lost to Kazák chivalry. Never again will he behold Zaporozhe, nor his father's house, nor the church of God. The Ukraina will never more behold the bravest of her sons, who have undertaken to defend her. Old Taras will tear a grey tuft from his scalp-lock, and curse the day and the hour in which such a son was born to dishonour him.[48]

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[46]Ibid., pp. 66-67.

[47]Ibid., p. 73.

[48]Ibid., p. 158.

Reinforcements arrive for the city and a great battle is fought outside the gates. A Jew, Yankel, whom old Taras has saved from hanging, brings him the news of his son's defection.

> Bulba pondered deeply. He remembered that the power of weak woman is great - that she had ruined many a strong man, that this was the weak point in Andrii's nature - and he stood long in one place, as though rooted to the spot.[49]

Andrii does not appear in this battle, but he leads the Polish forces in the next and is killed by his own father in a little grove, cut off from his own forces by his headlong charge. This is the scene:

> ...a powerful hand gripped his horse's bridle. Andrii looked: before him stood Taras! ...In such wise, in one instant, Andrii's wrath was as though it had never existed. And he beheld nothing save only his terrible father, standing before him. ...
>
> "You'll be such a traitor, will you? You'll betray your Faith in this fashion? Betray your comrades? Hold on, there, dismount from your horse!"
>
> Obedient as a child, he dismounted, and stood before Taras more dead than alive. "Stand still, don't move! I gave you life, I will also kill you!" said Taras, and, retreating a pace, he brought his gun up to his shoulder. Andrii was white as linen: his lips could be seen to move softly, and he uttered a name; but it was not the name of his native land, or of his mother, or of his brethren; it was the name of the beautiful Pole. Taras fired.
>
> Like an ear of corn cut down by the reaping-hook, like a young limb when it feels the deadly steel in its heart, he hung his head and rolled upon the grass without uttering a word.[50]

Half the kazák forces had been sent to aid a beleaguered town of their own before this last battle. Taras had been left in charge. The Polish forces finally drive them away, and in so doing Ostap is captured and Taras is knocked senseless.

Taras recovers weeks later only to learn that Ostap is to be executed in Warsaw. He gives Yankel everything he possesses to disguise him

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[49]Ibid., p. 167.

[50]Ibid., pp. 227-28.

and get him into the city that he may rescue Ostap. Yankel performs well, and Taras almost succeeds in seeing Ostap, only to be stopped at the last minute by a guard who has not been bribed. Taras is forced to withdraw, but resolves to see Ostap die.

> What were old Taras's feelings when he beheld Ostap? What was in his heart then? He gazed at him from among the crowd, and lost not a single one of his movements. The men had already approached the place of execution. Ostap halted. He was to be the first to quaff the bitter cup. He glanced at his comrades, raised his hand, and said in a loud voice: "God grant that none of the heretics who stand here may hear, impious wretches, how Christians suffer! Let none of us utter a single word!" Then he walked up to the scaffold.
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> "Well done, son! well done!" said Bulba softly, and bowed his grey head.[51]

With the death of his last son, Taras goes home. There he raises another army of kazáks, and the land is terrorized as never before in history. A thousand fold are the Poles, the hated Lyakhas, repaid.

> "This is in commemoration of Ostap, you devilish Lyakhs!" was all that Taras said. And such commemorations for Ostap he arranged in every village, until the Polish Government perceived that Taras's raids were more than ordinary expeditions for plunder; and that same Pototsky was given five regiments, and ordered to capture Taras, without fail.[52]

But the Lyakhas catch the kazáks, and as the latter try to break through an encirclement, old Taras is captured. He is chained to a tree, but before being burned alive he has the satisfaction of seeing most of his comrades escape.

> ...But can any fire, flames or power be found on earth capable of overpowering Russian strength? ...The kazáks floated swiftly on in the narrow, double-ruddered boats, - rowed stoutly, carefully shunning the reefs, cleaving the ranks of the birds, which rose on the wing - and talked of their Ataman.[53]

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[51] Ibid., pp. 266-67.

[52] Ibid., pp. 279-80.

[53] Ibid., p. 284.

So ends the "romance" Taras Bulba. Phelps says:

> Jukovski had translated the Iliad and the Odyssey; his enthusiasm for Hellenic poetry was contagious; and under this inspiration Gogol proceeded to write the most Homeric romance in Russian literature, Taras Bulba.[54]

Admittedly, it is a sweeping tale of "long ago and far away," but it is not romantic in all its details. Gogol used it to show what men should be like, what men were not like in his day, what ideals can mean--ideals he felt were being lost in his generation. If the entire case for classifying Gogol as a realist were to rest on Taras Bulba, I will admit that the proof would be more difficult. Fortunately, such is not the case. Yet enough of reality is present to include it in this study without apology for the romantic side of it.

It is unique in Russian literature; "it has had no imitators or followers (except, perhaps, Babel in his stories of the Red Army)."[55] Mirsky continues, "It is heroic, frankly and openly heroic, but it is also broadly humorous and realistic. It is perhaps the only Russian imaginative work that has that many sided exuberance which might claim the epithet Shakespearian."[56] High praise, indeed. Yet if we look at Taras we see much of the tragic that is Lear's. The breadth, the scope transcend the bounds of photographic realism, leaving us with a far more powerful work of art, of more reality than life itself.

After finishing the first reading, one is amazed that the scope has been compressed into so little space. The feeling is that of having

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[54]Phelps, p. 38.

[55]Mirsky, p. 151.

[56]Ibid.

read a much larger book. Phelps comments, "The book is so short that it can be read through in less than two hours; but it gives the same impression of vastness and immensity as the huge volumes of Sienkiewicz."[57]

From "Sorochintsy Fair" to Taras Bulba is a long road. It leads through the disillusionments of Gogol's Petersburg years. All that he loves of the simplicity of his Ukraine is found strangely intensified and exaggerated for his own self-satisfaction, and the world of ideals that are no more is passed through, too. With the publication of Taras Bulba, his undisputable genius was acknowledged; but with the next period of his life are associated his greatest achievements—the production of The Inspector General and the publication of the first part of Dead Souls.

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[57]Phelps, p. 38.

CHAPTER III

THE INSPECTOR GENERAL AND DEAD SOULS

Toward the end of his life Gogol wrote:

> In Revisor I tried to gather in one heap all that was bad in Russia, as I then understood it; I wished to turn it all into ridicule. The real impression produced was that of fear. Through the laughter that I have never laughed more loudly, the Spectator feels my bitterness and sorrow.[1]

The point has been made that Gogol was at his best when he was ridiculing something. When he decided to turn "all that was bad in Russia" into ridicule, he had material enough for a major work. The Inspector General was certainly that.

He began writing The Inspector General in 1834. The play first appeared in print in 1836, and the final version was published in 1842.[2] Janko Lavrin suggests that Gogol's variation of what is actually a very old theme was "partly suggested to him by Pushkin and partly by other works of a similar kind, Russian and foreign."[3] A rather clumsy play by Kvitka, Newcomer from the Capital, had been produced in 1827. Also some of the situations are similar to scenes by Moliere. However, the resemblances are casual. What is important is what an author does with his material, not where he gets that material. It is true that Pushkin was once mistaken for a high official from St. Petersburg when he stopped in

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[1] Phelps, p. 40.

[2] Lavrin, Gogol, p. 137.

[3] Ibid., p. 138.

Nishny Novgorod. The official was traveling incognito, in order to inspect the governmental order of the city. Pushkin told Gogol of this, and we can almost trace the workings of Gogol's mind as he turned the situation over and over. First of all, it is humorous; next, it is a chance to portray many types; and finally, it is a chance to ridicule corruption by exaggerating each type.

The action takes place in a provincial town whose gorodnichy, or mayor, Anton Antonovich Dinookhanovsky, is informed by a friend that the revizor, or Inspector General, from St. Petersburg will visit his town incognito. Anton summons all the town officials to his house to take precautions.

After each hazards a guess as to the purpose of the inspector's visit, the mayor turns to the postmaster:

> MAYOR: Where do I stand, now? It isn't that I'm afraid, exactly, but still, to a very slight extent...I'm uneasy about the businessmen and the gentry. They're saying that they're fed up with me; but, by God, even if I did accept a little something from this one or that one, it really was without any prejudice. I'm even wondering (taking the POSTMASTER by the arm and leading him off to one side)—I'm even wondering if there weren't some complaints against me. For really, now, why should an Inspector General be heading this way? I say, couldn't you—for all our sakes—take every letter that goes through the Post Office—both the incoming and the outgoing, and sort of...unseal each one a little, don't you know, and kind of glance it through, to see if it doesn't contain some complaint or other, or simply an exchange of information? If it doesn't, it can be sealed up again—or it may be delivered just as it is, "opened by mistake," don't you know—
>
> POSTMASTER: Oh, I know, I know. You don't have to teach me. I do it not so much out of precaution but more out of curiosity; I'm no end fond of finding out if there's anything new going on in the world. And it's mighty interesting reading, let me tell you. Now and then there's a letter that's simply delightful to read—what vivid descriptions, what tender passages! And what lofty morality—better than in any metropolitan daily![4]

Others are making suggestions, more or less to the point, when two worthies,

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[4]Nicholai Gogol, The Inspector General, tr. B. G. Guerney (New York, 1943), p. 169.

Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky, rush in with the news that they have actually seen the man in the local hotel. Both are ready to swear it must be the inspector for he is casting very curious looks at everything.

The mayor's panic increases. However, on hearing that the man is young he decides to bribe him and to cautiously invite him to be his guest. He sets off for the hotel after giving the following revealing instructions:

MAYOR: Tell you what you do: Pugovitsin, now, is a pretty tall fellow, even for a copy; so, for the looks of things, you station him at the bridge. And then break up the old fence around where the shoemaker lives, as fast as you can, and make it look as if we were planning to build something there. The more demolition there's going on, the greater the inference that the head of the town is active. Oh, my God—why, I forgot that there are about forty cartloads of all sorts of garbage dumped behind that fence. What an atrocious town this is! No sooner is a monument put up on any spot—or even a fence, for that matter—than they'll pile up all sorts of rubbish there! The devil alone knows where it all comes from! (Sighs.) And another thing: should this newly arrived official get to asking anybody working for the city if they're satisfied, let 'em say: "Yes, Your Honor"—but if any one of 'em should turn out to be dissatisfied—well, I'll really give him something to be dissatisfied about later on. Ah, me, but I have sinned; I have sinned much! (Picks up cardboard hatbox instead of his hat.) May God grant that all this blow over as soon as possible, and after that I'll put up such a candle as no one has ever yet put up. I'll make each shopkeeper in this town come across with a pud of wax for that candle. (Puts on hatbox instead of hat.)
... Yes, and if he should ask why the chapel for the hospital hasn't been built yet—for which a certain sum was appropriated five years ago—don't forget to say that construction was begun on it but that it burned down. I even submitted a report to that effect. Otherwise, like as not, somebody may get absent-minded and blab his fool head off and say that it was never as much as started. And you might tell Derzhimorda not to be so free with his fists; that fellow gives shiners to everybody, just on general principles—both to the just and the unjust. Let's go, let's go, Dobchinski![5]

While all this is going on the supposed inspector general, Khlestacov, is in terrible straits. He is really only a petty official of the lowest order who has lost all his money while on his way to his father's estate. Things have actually become so bad for him that the hotel has refused him any more credit, and jail is threatened. He is trembling at every sound

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[5]Ibid., pp. 175-76.

when the mayor enters his room. They stare at each other in equal trepidation. The mayor begins by saying that as the town's highest official it is his duty to see that persons of rank do not suffer any inconvenience. Hlestacov's guilty conscience interprets this as a polite prelude to incarceration, and begins denouncing the food, the service, and everything about the hotel and town. The mayor thinks this is the beginning of all the denunciations he knows the town deserves:

MAYOR: Have pity on me! Don't ruin me! I have a wife and small children! Don't make me a miserable man! ... It was only inexperience, I swear, only my inexperience! And insufficient means! Judge for yourself—the salary I get is not enough for tea and sugar. And if I <u>have</u> taken any bribes, they were very little ones—something for the table or a coat or two.... As for the sergeant's widow, who took to shopkeeping—whom they say I had flogged—it's slander, I swear it's slander. My enemies invented it—they're the kind of people who are ready to murder me in cold blood.[6]

In the end, however, things turn our favorable for the mayor, and even better for Hlestacov, who is offered "loans" by all the officials, and is lodged in the mayor's house, where he is feasted and idolised. At his new home, Hlestacov is again visited, one by one, by the town officials who stumblingly, and in a state of fear approaching collapse, press on him new "loans." At the same time each is offering his bribe, he slanders his colleagues, thus giving the audience another insight into the various characters.

DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES (drawing himself up as he enters and clutching his sword): I have the honor of presenting myself: Court Councilor Zemlyanika, Director of Charities!
HLESTACOV: How d'you do; I beg you to be seated.
DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES: I had the honor of accompanying you on your tour of inspection and of receiving you personally in the eleemosynary institutions entrusted to my care.
HLESTACOV: Ah, yes, I remember. You tendered me a most excellent luncheon.

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[6]Lavrin, p. 144.

DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES: Only too happy to exert myself in the service of our native land!

HLESTACOV: It's a weakness of mine, I confess, but I do love good food. Tell me, please—it seems to me that you were somewhat shorter yesterday—isn't that so?

DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES: That's very possible. (After a brief silence.) I may say that I spare no effort and fulfill my duties zealously. (Inching forward together with his chair and speaking in a low voice.) It's the Postmaster here who does absolutely nothing; all his affairs are much neglected; the outgoing mail is always held up...you can find out the specific details yourself, if you wish. The Judge, too—he's the one who was here a little while before me—all he knows is to go riding after rabbits; he keeps dogs in the courthouse, and his whole conduct—if I may be frank with you—of course it's for the good of the State that I must do this, even though he's related to me and is a friend of mine—his conduct is most prejudicial. There's a certain landowner hereabouts; they call him Dobchinski—you've seen him around, I dare say. Well, no sooner does this Dobchinski step out of his house than the Judge is already there, sitting with Dobchinski's wife. I'm ready to take my oath on that. And make a point of looking the little Dobchinskis over; there isn't a one that looks like Dobchinski, but every one of them, even the little girl, is the spit and image of the Judge—

HLESTACOV: You don't say! Why, I'd never even think that.

DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES: And then there's the Superintendent of the Schools here. I don't know how the Administration could ever entrust him with such a post. He's worse than any Red, and he instills the youth with such pernicious doctrines as it would be difficult even to describe. If you care to give me instructions to that effect, I could report on all this ever so much better in black and white—

HLESTACOV: Very well—let it be done in black and white. It'll please me very much. I'm sort of fond, don't you know, of reading something amusing whenever I'm bored. What's your name? I keep forgetting it.

DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES: Zemlyanika.

...

HLESTACOV: If you'll be so kind, Artemii Philipovich: I'm in an odd fix—I've run all out of funds during my travels. Have you four hundred on you by any chance that you could lend me—

DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES (Proffering bank notes): I have.

HLESTACOV: It comes in quite handy, I must say. Thanks, ever so much. (Exit DIRECTOR OF CHARITIES. Enter BOBCHINSKI and DOBCHINSKI.)[7]

Hlestacov, through all of this, gives not a thought to the real meaning of these events. He enjoys it all, eats, gets drunk, and boasts about the position he holds in the government at St. Petersburg. Yet he does these things with no evil intent. As Lavrin says, "He does so...

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[7] Tr. Guerney, p. 209-11.

in the manner of a Russian Tartarin who lies with temperament, even with inspiration because he is the first to believe all he says."[8] Actually he is no more than an irresponsible braggart with the brains and egotism of a child. He makes love to the mayor's wife and daughter and finally becomes engaged to the girl. At this event, the mayor's fear turns to unbounded optimism. He even is in a mood to forgive the merchants who have complained about him to Hlestacov.

Hlestacov finally is persuaded by his old servant, Ossip, to get away while they have a chance. Pleading the need to tell his parents of the coming wedding, Hlestacov and Ossip depart. All the mayor's friends come to congratulate him, but in the midst of the celebration the postmaster brings in a letter Hlestacov sent before leaving.

I hasten to inform you, my dearest friend Tryapichkin, of what wonders have befallen me. On my travels I was cleaned out—but thoroughly!—by a certain Captain of Infantry, so that mine host of the local hostelry was all set to put me in the cooler, when out of a clear sky, owing to my physiognomy and dress being those of a citizen of the capital, the whole town took me for a governor-general, or something. And now I am living at the home of the Mayor, having the time of my life, and running after the Mayor's wife and daughter for all I am worth. The only thing is, I haven't made up my mind which one to start up with; I think I'll tackle the mother first, because it looks as if she were ready to grant one any favors right off the bat. —Do you remember what tough times you and I used to have, trying to get our meals without paying for them, and how once, in a pastry shop, the proprietor grabbed me by the collar because I had eaten some tarts and wanted to charge them to the account of His Britannic Majesty? Things are altogether different now. They all lend me money, as much as I wish. And they're all frightfully quaint here. You'd die laughing. I know you write short things of all sorts; find a place for them in your work. First of all, there's the Mayor, he's as stupid as a gray gelding....[9]

The mayor is thunderstruck:

MAYOR: There! When he set out to slit my throat he slit it from

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[8]Lavrin, p. 145.

[9]Tr. Guerney, p. 233-34.

ear to ear! I'm killed, killed, killed entirely! I can't see a thing! All I can see before me are some swinish snouts instead of faces, and not another thing! Bring him back--bring him back! (Waves his arm.) ... But what about me? But what about me, now, old fool that I am? I've lost my wits through age, like an old ram! Thirty years of my life have I spent in serving the public; never a businessman, never a contractor could take me in; I hornswoggled swindlers who could show tricks to other swindlers; such cheats and knaves as were wise enough to cheat the whole world did I rope in; three governors have I hoodwinked! But what do governors amount to! (Deprecating gesture.) As if governors were even in the running--

ANNA: But this can't be, Tony darling; he's engaged to our Maria--

MAYOR (really stirred up): "Engaged!" He's engaged in a pig's eye! Don't go shoving that engagement at me! (In a frenzy.) There, look--let all the world, let all of Christianity look--look, all of you, how the Mayor has been made a fool of! Call him a fool, call him a fool, the old, low-down villain! (Shakes his fist in his own face.) Hey, there, you with the thick nose! You took a squirt, a rag like that for a person of importance! There, he's eating up the road now, rolling along to the tinkling of his jingle bells! He'll spread this story through the whole world, nor will it be enough that you'll be a general laughing stock.... Some scribbler, some waster of good white paper will turn up, and he'll plunk you into a comedy--that's what hurts! He won't spare your rank, your title, and all the people will bare their teeth, grinning and clapping their hands. (Turning on the spectators.) What are you laughing at? You're laughing at your own selves! (With a "What's-the-use!" gesture.) Eh, you! ... (Stamps his feet in frenzied malice.) I'd take all these wasters of good white paper and-- (roars) oo-oo-ooooh! You scribblers, you damned liberals! Seed of the devil! I'd tie all of you in a knot, I'd grind you all into powder and shove you in the devil's hip pocket! And in his hat as well! (Shakes his fist and grinds his boot-heel into the floor. After a brief silence.) I can't come to myself to this very minute. There, verily: Him whom God would chastise He first deprives of reason. Well, now, what was there about this snot-nose that looked like an Inspector General? Nary a thing! There, not even that much. (Measures off the very tip of his little finger.) And suddenly they all set up a chorus: "The Inspector General! The Inspector General!" There, now, who was the first to come out with the rumor that he was the Inspector General? Answer me![10]

While the mayor is cursing his own stupidity, the final blow falls. A gendarme enters and announces to him in a stern voice, "The official sent here in the Emperor's name from Petersburg demands your immediate presence. He is stopping at the hotel."[11]

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[10]Ibid., p. 236-37.

[11]Ibid., p. 238.

Such is the outline of The Inspector General. Corruption, snobbery, stupidity, and malice such as were found in a provincial setting were laid bare to merciless laughter. Gogol does not preach in this play; he lets the characters whip themselves. They talk of their own abuses with a stupid, and sometimes childlike, innocence. The irony consists in his pretending not to see any irony at all, although one feels the gap between where he stands and where his characters stand. Each scene leads perfectly to the next. Belinsky comments;

> In The Revisor there are no scenes to which the word "better" can be applied, because none of them is inferior to the rest, they are all excellent; they are the necessary parts forming one artistic whole, which is rounded up not only by its external form, but also by its inner contents; and so it is a self-sufficient world of its own.[12]

The play itself is not photographically real. Rather it is an exaggeration of the vices on which Gogol wanted to vent his indignation. Thus it is like his short stories, a tour de force in intensified realism. Lavrin states it this way:

> It was his conscious craving for a higher form of life that severed him all the more from actual existence. It was his strong but unsatisfied need of reverence coupled with his utter incapacity to revere anything with genuine abandonment and passion that made him all the more aggressive. Hence he indulged at least in his negative passion—the passion of indictment, of anger, of laughter through tears. Having collected the necessary objective facts, he modified them according to his own inner need and constructed out of them a picture which he himself took for a mirror of real life. In fact, Gogol had to do so, because this was the only way in which he could attack and refute the reality he loathed. Once more he asserted himself against it—through his art.[13]

The play was a success, with complex and some rather curious reactions. The audience laughed, but they were angry with the author. This was the first time so-called "accusatory literature" had dared speak from the

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[12]Lavrin, p. 152.

[13]Ibid., pp. 152-53.

Russian stage, and the result, in spite of the emperor's endorsement, was not favorable to Gogol. Almost everyone saw himself personally insulted. The criticism resolved itself into the cry that The Inspector General was slandering Holy Russia. Gogol himself said that regardless of the criticism, there was one honest "character" in his play—his laughter. He also spoke several times of the ethical significance of laughter. Even with such criticism, the performances continued. Those who disliked the "too close to home" characterizations, still enjoyed the play. But the more they laughed, the angrier they became with the man who was the originator of this "double-faced laughter." Gogol became tired of the whole affair and decided to go abroad. He wrote to a friend:

> A contemporary author who writes comedies and describes manners must be as far from his own country as possible. No prophet can earn glory in his own fatherland. I don't mind the fact that all classes of society have risen against me; yet it is somewhat sad and depressing to see my own countrymen, whom I sincerely love, attack me with no justice, to see in what a perverted way they accept and interpret everything.[14]

Comparing The Inspector General with Dead Souls, Mirsky writes:

> Gogol's greatness as a dramatist rests chiefly on the Revizor, doubtless the greatest play in the Russian language. It is not only supreme in character drawing and dialogue—it is one of the few Russian plays that is a play constructed with unerring art from beginning to end. The great originality of its plan consisted in the absence of all love interest and of sympathetic characters. The latter feature was deeply resented by Gogol's enemies, and as a satire the play gained immensely from it. Revizor was intended as a moral satire against bad officials, not a social satire against the system of corruption and irresponsible despotism. But quite apart from the author's intention, it was received as a social satire, and in the great oppositional movement against the despotism of Nicholas I and the system of bureaucratic irresponsibility, its influence was greater than that of any other single literary work. In their great symbolic and comprehensive popularity the characters of Revizor stand by the side of those of Dead Souls. They are less obviously geometrical, and, the characterization depending entirely on the dialogue, more supple and human. They are less markedly "humorous," more ordinary, more average, than Sobakevich and his like. The head of the local administration, the

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[14]Ibid., pp. 154-55.

Gorodnichy, is a satirical figure of immense symbolism and pregnancy. As for the central character, Hlestakov, the supposed inspector general himself, he is as subjective and introspective as Chichikov. If in Chichikov Gogol exteriorized all the vegetable elements of his self, in Hlestakov he symbolized the irresponsibility, the light-mindedness, the absence of measure, that was such a salient trait of his own personality. But, like Chichikov, Hlestakov is entirely "transposed," entirely alive—the most alive of all the characters of Russian fiction—meaningless movement and meaningless fermentation incarnate, on a foundation of placidly ambitious inferiority. As for the dialogue of Revizor, it is above admiration. There is not a wrong word or intonation from beginning to end, and the comic tensity is of a quality that even in Gogol was not always at his beck and call.[15]

It is difficult to find more than this to say in praise of The Inspector General. However, one should recognize that it is more than praise; it lends tremendous weight to the claim that Gogol was an intensifier of realism. The reactions of the audience which laughed and was angry at the same time proves far better than any lengthy analysis that they saw both the intensification of characteristics and the reality of those characteristics.

Beginning the discussion of a novel with a statement of praise is often an unwary step; one is then under an obligation to "make" the novel live up to the introduction of it. However, when one introduces Dead Souls he need have no fears that it will succumb to close examination. This statement by Phelps serves as an introduction:

It was not until the publication of Dead Souls that Russia had a genuine realistic novel. This book is broad enough in scope and content to serve as the foundation of Russian fiction, and to sustain the wonderful work of Turgenev, Tolstoi, and Dostoevski. All the subsequent great novels in Russia point back to Dead Souls.[16]

It is not the purpose of this thesis to corraborate Phelps' opinion

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[15]Mirsky, A History of Russian Literature, pp. 154-55.

[16]Phelps, p. 51.

that all the great Russian novels point back to Dead Souls; here we are concerned with the realism only. In order to understand this realism, however, we should know something of the legal system existing at the time Gogol wrote; without this knowledge, the plot of the story would seem fantastic.

In the days before the serfs were emancipated, a soul meant a male serf. The women were not counted in the periodical revisions, though a working unit, a "tyaglo," consisted of a man, his wife, and his horse—the trinity indispensable to agricultural labor. In the interval between revisions, a landed proprietor continued to pay taxes on all the serfs accredited to him on the official list, the births being reckoned for convenience as an exact offset to the deaths. Another provision of the laws was that no one should purchase serfs without the land to which they belonged, except for the purpose of colonization. An ingenious fraud suggested by the combination of these two laws forms the foundation of Dead Souls. The hero, Chichikov, is an official who has struggled up ambitiously and shrewdly, through numerous vicissitudes of bribe-taking, extortion, and ensuing discomfiture, until he is forced from the service. In this strait he hits upon the idea of purchasing from landed proprietors of dubious probity the souls who are dead, though still nominally alive, and on whom they are forced to pay taxes. Land is being given away gratuitously, in the southern governments of Kherson and Tauris, to anyone who will settle upon it. His plan is to buy one thousand non-existent serfs (dead souls), at a maximum of one hundred rubles apiece, for colonization on an equally non-existent estate in the south, and then, by mortgaging them to the loan bank for the nobility known as the Council of Guardians, obtain a capital of two hundred thousand rubles.

Chichikov is the hero, but, though he dominates the book, he by no means overshadows the characters in different chapters. He is a curious type, one for which the Russians have an untranslatable word, poshlost. As accurately as I have been able to determine, poshlost means "self-satisfied inferiority." On this subject Mirsky has this to say:

> The characters are, together with those of Revizor, the most memorable and permanent of Gogol's legacy to the Russian mind. Chichikov is the greatest of Gogol's subjective caricatures—he is the incarnation of poshlost. His psychological leitmotiv is complacency, and his geometrical expression roundness. He is the golden mean. The other characters—the squires Chichikov visits on his shady business—are typical "humors" (for Gogol's method of comic character drawing, with its exaggerations and geometrical simplification, is strongly reminiscent of Ben Jonson's). Sobakevich, the strong, silent, economical man, square and bearlike; Manilov, the silly sentimentalist with pursed lips; Mme Korobochka, the stupid widow; Nozdrev, the cheat and bully, with the manners of a hearty good fellow—all are types of eternal solidity. Plyushkin, the miser, stands apart, for in him Gogol sounds a note of tragedy—he is the man ruined by his "humor"; he transcends poshlost, for in the depth of his degradation he is not complacent but miserable; he has a tragic greatness.[17]

The characters are the visible members of the body of Dead Souls, but the heart is the heart of Russia.

Most of it was written in Rome, and one can imagine the feeling of pleasure Gogol received as chapter after chapter poured from his pen. He always loved travel—every chapter mentions the movement of the troika[18] which he loved so well.

> How strange, how alluring, stimulating and wonderful is the sound of the words "on the road". And how marvellous the road is! The sunny day, the autumn leaves, the cold air... Wrapped more closely in one's winter coat, cap over ears, one huddles more snugly into the corner. For the last time a faint shiver passes through the limbs and is followed by a pleasant warmth. The horses race along...how seductively drowsiness steals over one and the eyelids close and through sleep one hears, "How white were the snows," and the breathing of the horses and the rumble of the wheels.... My God, how glorious is at times the long, long road! How

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[17] Mirsky, p. 153.

[18] A chaise drawn by three horses.

> often have I, drowning and perishing, clutched at thee, and always thou hast rescued and preserved me![19]

For this voluntary exile, the writing of Dead Souls must have been like a trip through his beloved Ukraine, seeing the countryside again, meeting the infinitely varied types he loved so well to analyze and exaggerate.

He probably began with the idea of writing only a larger humorous and satirical work--larger than his short stories. But after his Inspector General was received as it was, this project seems to have widened. He wrote to Zhukovsky from Paris in 1836:

> I have remade all that was done before, I have reconsidered the whole plan, and now am working it out quietly as if I were writing a chronicle ... If I ever complete this work in the manner I should like to--what a colossal, what an original subject! What a varied crowd! The whole of Russia will appear in it! This is going to be the first production of mine that will preserve my name.[20]

The full plan was never completed, but the first book is greater for being projected on this grand scale.

Gogol calls Dead Souls an epic. One will be reminded of Don Quixote at once--the development of both being based on the travels and encounters made by the heroes. He conceived it as a trilogy on the pattern of Dante's Divine Comedia, but finished only the first part--the part which represents a kind of Inferno of actual Russia. In this first book, Gogol worked as he had with The Inspector General; he collected the bad sides of Russia and condensed them with intensity into a picture composed of realistic single elements, but presenting his own exaggerated, subjective vision of life.

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[19]Lavrin, pp. 158-59.

[20]Ibid. p., 163.

The story itself, as with many Russian masterpieces, is simple. There is no complex plot, no love story. It is a series of genre pictures, a presentation of types and situations, episodic in themselves but integrated by the subjective intention of Gogol.

> A rather handsome, light traveling carriage on springs rolled into the gates of an inn in a certain provincial capital, the kind of carriage that is favored by bachelors: retired lieutenant-colonels, second captains, land-owners possessing a hundred souls or so of serfs--in a word, all those who are called the fair-to-middlin' sort. The gentleman seated in this carriage was no Adonis, but he wasn't bad to look at, either; he was neither too stout nor too thin, you couldn't say he was old, but still he wasn't what you might call any too young, either. His arrival created no stir whatever in the town of N------ and was not coupled with any remarkable event; all the comments it called forth came from two native mushiks standing in the doorway of a pot-house across the way from the inn, comments which, however, had more to do with the carriage itself than with the man sitting in it.
>
> "Look at that, will you?" said one mushik to the other. "What a wheel! What do you think, would that wheel make it to Moscow, if need be, or wouldn't it?"
>
> "It would," answered the other.
>
> "But it wouldn't make it to Kazan, I'm thinking--or would it?"
>
> "Not to Kazan, it wouldn't," the other answered.
>
> And with that the discussion ended.
>
> Also, as the carriage drove up to the inn it encountered a young man in white dimity trousers, quite narrow and short, and a swallow-tail coat that made a brave attempt at being in the mode, revealing a dickey fastened with a brummagem stick-pin of bronze, in the shape of a pistol. The young man turned back, looked the vehicle over while clutching at his cap, which had been almost carried away by the wind, and then went on his way again.[21]

This is how Dead Souls begins, and, unlike his other stories, it develops in a slow, narrative tempo. One follows Pavel Ivanovitch Chichikov into the hotel, through his conversations with the waiter, through his meals, and out for his calls on local landowners. He is charming, mannerly, given to saying little about himself but much about the good qualities of everyone he meets; thus he charms the local population. The reader watches

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[21] Nikolai Gogol, Chichikov's Journeys: or Home Life in Old Russia, tr. Bernard Guilbert Guerney (New York, 1942), p. 1.

his careful preparations for an evening party at the governor's:

> The preparations for this evening-at-home took up two hours and a bit over, and in this matter likewise the new-comer evinced such an attentiveness in grooming as is hardly to be met with in general. After a brief after-dinner snooze he ordered water and a wash-basin to be brought and for an exceedingly long time scrubbed both his cheeks with soap, thrusting them out from within with his tongue; next, after taking a towel from the shoulder of the tavern waiter, he wiped his full face thoroughly, beginning with the back of his ears, but only after first snorting a couple of times in the tavern waiter's very face; next, he put on a dickey in front of the mirror, plucked out with tweezers a hair or two that stuck out of his nose, and immediately thereafter was clad in a frock of a scintillating bilberry-red hue. Having thus clothed himself, he drove off in his own carriage, rolling along through streets infinitely broad yet lit only by the scanty light from windows glimmering here and there.[22]

At the party he makes valuable use of his opportunity of meeting the local landowners, such as the ultra-polished and sugary Manilov and the great bear type Sobakievitch, to all of whom he is the epitome of tact and politeness.

> The new-comer had a never-failing presence of mind, somehow, and showed himself to be an experienced man of the world. No matter what the conversation might be about he always knew how to keep it going; if the talk was about a stud, he would speak of a stud; if they happened to speak of thoroughbred dogs, he would impart very sound observations on that subject; if the conversation had to do with an investigation being carried on by the Treasury Department, he demonstrated that juridical quiddities were not unknown to him either; if the discussion was about the game of billiards, he did not let his auditors down in that game, either; if they happened to speak of virtue, he would discourse about virtue, too, and discourse exceedingly well, so that tears actually welled up in his eyes; if the talk was of the distilling of hard spirits, he knew what was what in hard spirits also; if of customs inspectors and clerks, why, he passed judgment about them likewise, as though he himself had been both a clerk and an inspector. But it was remarkable that he was able to clothe all this with some sort of sedateness, that he was able to conduct himself well. He spoke neither too loudly nor too low but in a manner that was just what it should be.
>
> In a word, no matter which way you looked at him, he was a very decent fellow. All the officials were pleased by the arrival of this new personage. The Governor expressed himself clearly on the subject, that he was a well-intentioned man; the Public Prosecutor said that he was a man of affairs; the Colonel of Gendarmes, that he was a learned man; the

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[22]Ibid., p. 7.

Chairman of the Administrative Offices, that he was an experienced and meritorious man; the Chief of Police, that he was a meritorious and an amiable man; the wife of the Chief of Police, that he was the most amiable and the most courteous of men. Even Sobakevich himself, who rarely spoke well of anybody, after arriving rather late from town and having already completely undressed and got into bed by the side of his gaunt wife, said to her: "I had supper at the Chief of Police's evening-at-home and made the acquaintance of a collegiate councilor by the name of Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov--a most pleasant fellow!" To which his spouse answered "Hmm!" and gave him a kick.[23]

Thus we see the general acceptance of Chichikov which was maintained until the time that he embarked on his strange plan and found some unexpected suspicions on the part of certain landowners.

His plan has been outlined earlier in the chapter. The rest of the novel is concerned with the successes and setbacks in working it out. One error on Gogol's part might be mentioned here. He did not fully understand the legal aspects of the plan he was using as a plot for Dead Souls. S. Aksakov had pointed out to him in a letter dated July 3, 1842, that serfs, for the purpose of being transferred elsewhere, could be sold only together with their families, whereas Chichikov refused to buy women.[24]

It would be tedious for the reader to here list and describe every encounter of Chichikov: the sentimental Manilov; the shrewd animal, Sobakievitch; Korobachka, an almost half-witted old woman who is withal extremely sharp in managing her own affairs; the cheat, scandalmonger, and eventual downfall of Chichikov, Nozdryov; the miser, Plyushkin, whose vice has shrunk him to a shred of humanity. The whole of provincial society with its balls, whist games, intrigues, gossip, all its empty, senseless

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[23]Ibid., p. 11.

[24]Lavrin, p. 169.

existence comes under the magnification of Gogol's microscopic pen. Gogol intensifies each life, both as an individual's and as that of a type; i.e., as a symbolic representative of a whole category of human beings. Chichikov himself is a symbol insofar as he typifies the respectable and grabbing mediocrity--the modern speculator. As Lavrin says:

> Hlestakov looks almost an innocent baby by the side of this weighty and respectable gentleman who collects the "dead souls" all over Russia without suspecting that his own soul is utterly and hopelessly dead. Chichikov's background, too, is equally symbolic. Through all the grotesque trifles and trivialities there looms the great tedium and the drab monotony of life as a whole. Behind Gogol's grinning laughter we feel the great boredom and the vulgarity of an age in which the very soul of mankind seems to be dying a slow and imperceptible death.[25]

According to Lavrin, Gogol once said:

> Those who have dissected my literary abilities, were not able to find out the essential characteristics of my nature. Only Pushkin was able to do it. He always asserted that no author except myself has such a capacity for bringing out all the trivialities of life, of describing so well the vulgarity of the mediocre man, or of opening one's eyes on those small things which generally remain unobserved.[26]

Dead Souls represents Gogol's highest achievement in this art of intensifying the characteristics of his characters. One becomes so interested in each type that the plot is at times forgotten, but he puts them all together so perfectly, that one is always conscious of the bit-by-bit completing of a terrifying picture of human life. One does not tire of these descriptions, possibly because of this feeling of purpose behind them. Take this description of Sobakievitch:

> This time, as Chichikov glanced at Sobakevich out of the corner of his eye, he looked to him like a bear, just a middlin'-sized bear. To complete the resemblance, the frock-coat upon him was absolutely the color of a bear's pelt; the sleeves were long, the trousers were long, he set his feet down lumberingly, this way and that way, and was forever stepping

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[25] Ibid., p. 171.

[26] Ibid.

upon the feet of others. His face was a red-hot, fiery color, the ruddy color you find on a five-kopek copper. As everyone knows, there are many such faces in this world, over the finishing of which Nature did not spend much thought or ingenuity, on which she did not use any small, delicate tools such as fine files, fine gimlets, and so forth, but simply hacked away with a full swing of the arm: one swipe of the ax, and there's the nose for you; another swipe, and there are the lips; with a great auger she gouged out the eyes, and, without wasting any time on trimming and finishing, she let her handiwork out into the world, saying: "It lives!" Just such a sturdy and wondrously rough-hewn countenance did Sobakevich have; he kept it down for the most part, rather than looking up; he hardly turned his neck and, because of this unwieldiness, looked but rarely at whomever he was speaking to, but always either at an angle of the stove or at the door. Chichikov glanced at him once more out of the corner of his eye, as they were passing into the dining room: a bear! A perfect bear! Knowing his way of stepping on the feet of others, Chichikov placed his own very carefully and allowed him to go ahead. The host himself, apparently, felt conscious of this failing and immediately inquired: "I haven't inconvenienced you, have I?" But Chichikov thanked him, saying that no inconvenience had yet occurred.[27]

Some landowners are suspicious, some are not. Only Nozdryov, the cheat, recognizes a fellow scoundrel. Even then, he would have gone along with Chichikov had he not been drunk and precipitated a quarrel over the price for his dead souls. This is a tense point in the story, but Chichikov escapes.

He pursues his plan until he has enough souls and returns to town amid rumors that he is a millionaire. He is sought after more than ever. When it is known that he will be at the governor's great ball, the ladies go into a positive rage trying to outdo each other in dress.

The ball itself is the beginning of the end. Nozdryov appears, half-drunk, and being a bore who lives on gossip and utterly incapable of restraint, he rushes up to Chichikov as the latter is being asked by the governor to arbitrate between him and two ladies as to whether woman's love is constant or not:

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[27] Tr. Guerney, pp. 80-81.

"Ah, the land-owner of Kherson, the land-owner of Kherson!" he kept shouting, walking up to him and emitting peal upon peal of laughter that made his cheeks, as fresh and dewy as a spring rose, quiver. "Well? Have you done a great deal of trading in dead souls? For you don't know, Your Excellency," he bawled right then and there, turning to the Governor, "that he trades in dead souls! By God, he does! I say, Chichikov! Why, you're such a fellow—I tell you this in friendship, for all of us here are your friends—there, His Excellency is here too—why, I would string you up, I would, by God!"

Chichikov was utterly dazed.

"Would you believe it, Your Excellency," Nozdryov went on, "when he said to me: 'Sell me some dead souls,' I simply split my sides laughing. I come here, and they tell me that he has bought three millions' worth of serfs for resettlement. What serfs—what resettlement! Why, he was bargaining for dead souls with me! I say, Chichikov, why, you're a beast, by God, but you are! There, even His Excellency right here...or you, Prosecutor: isn't that the truth?"[28]

Everyone is too stunned to understand. The man is drunk and is hustled out, but the idea is there. Some have sold to Chichikov and begin to worry about their own parts in this rather cloudy picture. It is not yet all over, but the end is determined. The women begin to talk of Chichikov and dead souls, of Chichikov and the governor's daughter, of Nozdryov and Chichikov.

This passage Gogol inserts when he discusses the ethics of writing such a tale:

Yet which one of you, filled with Christian humility, not aloud, but in silence, when you are all alone, during moments of solitary communion with your own self, will let sink deep into the inward recesses of your own soul this onerous question: "Come, now, isn't there a bit of Chichikov in me, too?"[29]

And at the end we see Chichikov escaping in his troika, flying down the road to—where?

And art not thou, my Russia, soaring along even like a spirited, never-to-be-outdistanced troika? The road actually smokes under thee,

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[28]Ibid., p. 152.

[29]Ibid., p. 232.

the bridges thunder, everything falls back and is left behind thee! The witness of thy passing comes to a dead stop, dumfounded by this God's wonder! Is it not a streak of lightning cast down from heaven? What signifies this onrush that inspires terror? And what unknown power is contained in these steeds, whose like is not known in this world? Ah, these steeds, these steeds, what steeds they are! Are there whirlwinds perched upon your manes? Is there a sensitive ear, alert as a flame, in your every fiber? Ye have caught the familiar song coming down to you from above, and all as one, and all at the same instant, ye have strained your brazen chests and, almost without touching earth with your hoofs, ye have become all transformed into straight lines cleaving the air, and the troika tears along, all-inspired by God!...Whither art thou soaring away to, then, Russia? Give me thy answer! But Russia gives none. With a wondrous ring does the jingle-bell trill; the air, rent to shreds, thunders and turns to wind, all things on earth fly past and, eyeing it askance, all the other peoples and nations stand aside and give it the right of way.[30]

The first book of Dead Souls ends. In reflection it is at first impossible to get it in any order. One is reminded of the condensation of scope in Taras Bulba, but this is different. An episode is recalled, then another. A feeling develops that it was all episodic. Then comes the realization that it is this very intensification of episodes, of characters, of exaggerated happenings that make the book a completely realistic picture of all of the things Gogol wished to emphasize: the vulgarity of the greedy, the lack of imagination of the provincial gentry, and the lack of souls in those who trade in souls.

This realism is so accurate as to be indisputable as such. Not one critic has failed to recognize its intensity, its devotion to detail, its exaggeration for the purpose of making reality real. In Chapter IV, the comments of several critics on the realistic qualities of Dead Souls and of the other works selected for analysis in this thesis will be examined. Here it may be said that in Dead Souls nothing is of a quality likely to die.

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[30] Ibid., pp. 233-34.

CHAPTER IV

SIGNIFICANT ASPECTS OF GOGOL'S REALISM

Comparatively little criticism has been devoted to Nikolai Gogol. In his own time his works were reviewed and commented on, but there was not distance enough between him and his reviewers to draw forth critical judgment as to his influence on Russian literature. After the great novelists Turgenev, Dostoevski, and Tolstoi had finished their literary careers, however, critics began to notice parallels between some of their deservedly praised writings and some of Gogol's work. The discovery of these parallels led to the inference that Gogol influenced many writers. Such notice inevitably raises the prestige of a writer, but it does not always lead to complete credit being given to his contributions.

William Lyon Phelps, perhaps, gives more credit to the influential aspect of Gogol's writing than do others:

> Tolstoi could hardly have written The Cossacks without the inspiration of Gogol, Turgenev must have taken the most beautiful chapter in Virgin Soil directly from Old Fashioned Farmers, and Dostoevski's first book, Poor Folk, is in many places an almost slavish imitation of The Cloak—and he freely acknowledged the debt in the course of the story.[1]

And this:

> This latter book [Dead Souls] is the first of the great realistic novels of Russia, of which Fathers and Children, Crime and Punishment, and Anna Karenina are such splendid examples.[2]

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[1] Phelps, p. 61.

[2] Ibid., p. 38.

This is not to say that Hapgood, Mirsky, Lavrin, Magarshack, Garnett, the Alymers, and others did or do not consider Gogol's works germinal; it means only that their concern is more with the unique qualities of his approaches to realism for themselves alone than for the influence he had on others. With this point of view I am in entire accord, for the fact that a work is germinal is no guarantee that it is great literature—the work of an inferior writer has often been copied by hundreds of other inferior writers—but critical acclaim for unique or beautifully-developed forms is true and worthwhile praise. Thus it seems unnecessary to dwell on the influences Gogol had on others. Those who are interested can easily compare the examples cited by Phelps and can, from such a sampling, find other examples for which proof of such influence may be established.

This thesis has attempted to set forth certain of such aspects of his contribution to the development of literary realism: his combination of the fantastic with the real; his use of exaggerated qualities of character and emotion; his combination of the romantic with the real; and his use of intensified realism to create reality "more real than actuality."

Of "Sorochintsy Fair" and "Christmas Eve" the critical acclaim has tended to be concerned with the romantic quality of the setting, the characters, the quaintness of their beliefs, the laughter, and the comedy. What has been overlooked is the use to which these things were put by Gogol. He was not inventive; he did not recall sights in his home province and then build an original story around them. Everything he wrote had happened—the devil had appeared with the snout of a pig; the devil had flown on Christmas eve; the peasants had seen him; his influence had been felt by nearly everyone. Of course these things happened in the <u>minds</u> of these people he knew so well, rather than in the clear light of

day; but is that reason enough to call them unreal? Are we not even more afraid of that which we have not seen with our eyes? And is that fear not real? Gogol wrote the real fear, the mixture of the fantastic with the real in that ignorant fear; so he included the "real" cause of the fear itself. An old Russian proverb goes like this: "If the devil is in your heart, he is on your back." These people had the devil in their hearts, in their minds. Their prayers were as often against the devil as for some gift from God. To have left the devil out of these stories would have been as little realistic as to have left out the drinking of vodka because one does not believe it is good for people.

The realism of "The Overcoat" needs no defense except for the inclusion in it of the "ghostly" ending. Magarshack's remarks on this point, as given in Chapter II of this thesis, seem to be adequate to refute Phelps and others who feel that it "soars away into the ether of romance." That Gogol's contemporaries felt that the stealing of the coat by the ghost of Akaky represented the fate awaiting the Russian ruling class if it did not have more care for the Akakys of all of Russia, seems not only a sound, but a prophetic interpretation, viewing it from our vantage point in history. If Akaky is not real, then can those two clerks, Uriah Heep and Bob Cratchit, be called real? Many times the comment has been made that Dickens' characters live on because they are so universally realistic. Akaky is better. He transcends the Dickens clerks by having not only a universal quality, but a prophetic stature. If it is the abuses of the "clerks" throughout history that have brought on the greatest social changes in the world, then Akaky is literature's greatest clerk.

The exaggeration of the intensity of feeling of Akaky—first his desire for the coat, and next the intensity and persistence of his revenge—

at first seem out of proportion with events in real life. This would be true unless one recognized the totality of the reality of which Gogol was writing. Akaky was not one clerk, but the generic clerk, the clerk unrelieved by any romantic softening of his position. One new coat was the greatest reality in his life; it was the almost superhumanly unattainable symbol of success. Once achieved, it transfigured this near sub-human object of derision into a recognizable entity—into a social unit, distinguishable for the first time from the furniture. Its loss represented the loss of this identification, this individualization, and signaled the return to facelessness. Such a return was unbearable, unthinkable. Even in death such a circumstance was not to be accepted. It was not for the return to being an individual that the coat had to be found—Akaky could not return to life—coat or no coat. It was for the human need of identification itself that the coat had become the symbol and must be returned.

Purely photographic representation of events could not have sustained the magnitude of the message "The Overcoat" bore. Romantic and exaggerated intensification of emotion was needed to carry the theme, and Gogol created this combination so that his realism would have the muscle to bear its burden.

The technique of combining romantic elements with reality to produce heightened reality is best displayed by Gogol in Taras Bulba. So long as the romantic; i.e., the exaggerated, elements are not permitted to control the action or become the instruments by which the plot is resolved, one should not object to them on the grounds of being unreal. Taras towers over everyone else in the book; he is, in many ways, larger than life. But his actions are never superhuman. If this novel were a true romance, Taras would have been able to save his son Ostap—probably through

the introduction of some unrealistic device—but this does not happen. As a matter of fact, Taras himself is captured and put to death. Taras then is real; he is human. His heroic qualities are exaggerated, even romanticized, only to make the contrast between him and his enemies—those whom Gogol saw as the enemies of Russia—more intense. It is one of the marks of Gogol's deftness at characterizations that he never lets this intensification become an end; it is always used only as an element of contrast to heighten the reality.

The Inspector General laid the groundwork for satirical drama directed at all levels of Russian life. Gogol was concerned only with creating a very funny play based on the incident told him by Pushkin, in which he could laugh at the provincials he knew so well. He did this to a remarkably successful degree, but as has been said of others, he "builded better than he knew." He created the arch types who later appeared in his most celebrated work, Dead Souls.

It was in Dead Souls that his laughter reached its most poignant pitch. He showed the world the incredible narrowness, the meanness, the pettiness, the stupidity, and the self-centeredness of which the provincial Russian was capable, and he also created the epitome of "poshlost," that self-satisfied inferiority, in his supreme character, Chichikov. He displayed for the last time his gift of mimetic creativity, and he must have satisfied even himself with this effort. He created a whole province of characters to whom he could feel superior. And yet, was there not a "little of Chichikov" in him, also? Perhaps it was the realisation that all he had been doing in Dead Souls was really on a level a little lower than the godlike that caused him to be bitter. He was feeling superior to that to which feeling superior was not so much a moment of triumph as

a moment for pity. Is this why he projected a second and a third book? In them was to be shown the gradual change in Chichikov, through his meeting with better and better characters, from the semi-charlatan to the reformed man of high principles. In the final book, Chichikov was to be the instrument of reformation for all Russia.

Gogol could not do it. His talent was imbedded in his own needs, and when he was no longer attempting to satisfy those needs, he became commonplace. He could not preach, for he had no message. He could discern the disease, but he could not propose the cure. At direct moralizing, he was an utter failure. Even he realized this, for he burnt his own efforts. His greatest art was concentrated in his laughter. But this laughter was not the happy laughter in which the author has a part. Gogol's creation of characters produced such an effect quite often for his readers, but never for himself. His creations were purposely exaggerated—often caricatures—of types of people with which he was familiar. The purpose of their creation then became a two-fold one: to create laughter for the reader and—more importantly to Gogol—to give himself a feeling of superiority. Perhaps this is one reason that indignation at the author of The Inspector General was so intense. First of all, many were indignant because they saw themselves caricatured so outrageously, and this indignation was intensified by the fact that they felt the author believed himself superior to the types he held up to ridicule. If one feels such an emotion, one is more likely to despise the author; not many people are content with a feeling of "poshlost." Most members of the audience resent it if they feel the author thinks himself superior to those characters with which they have identified themselves. Yet it was through this need in himself that he was able to add to the development of literary realism.

At the end of his life he spoke of it. His last words—they were placed on his tomb[3]—reemphasize this peculiarly directed approach to realism: "And I shall laugh with a bitter laugh."

It was the bitter laugh, then, that Gogol was striving for. His success at achieving reality in this way may be judged not only by the popular acclaim for some of his works, but also by the intense indignation aroused by others. In each case, it was his use of reality which occasioned audience identification—identification in the first instance with people they knew and to which they, like Gogol, felt superior. In the second case the identification was with themselves, and the result was indignation. In both cases it was Gogol's use of this technique of intensification of reality which made greater his contribution to the development of literary realism.

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[3]Hapgood, p. 39.

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