

The Passions of Chichikov: Gogol's Soteriological Scheme

Less than a year before his death, Gogol spent part of the summer of 1851 at the Smirnov's country estate near Moscow. At one point during his stay there, his confidante and spiritual ward, Aleksandra Smirnova, complained of a nervous disorder. Eager to cheer up one of his most ardent admirers, Gogol proposed reading to her from his manuscript of the second volume of *Dead Souls*. However, as related in Shenrok's biographical compilation, a state of ill-health prevented her from being enthused even by this reading. She felt bored and confessed this to the author of *Dead Souls*. "You're right", [Gogol] said. "It's all rubbish, anyway, and it's not what your soul needs". But he seemed very sad after that[1].

Unlike Dostoevsky or Tolstoy, Gogol, for all his Christian spiritual zeal, does not explicitly treat questions of religion in his fictional art. At the same time, however, he makes an implicit claim for them in describing the effect he intended to have upon his readership. Iurii Mann singles out Gogol's hurt reaction in the episode at the Smirnovs as revealing his belief in the "curative power of his writing... that it was a matter of the soul and necessary for the soul"[2]. The author's own view of *Dead Souls* was unambiguous: "My work is great, my deed salvational"[3]. Resolving the "mystery" of existence, the finished work was to bring about nothing less than the reader's and, by extension, Russia's complete spiritual regeneration. Gogol's final literary enterprise had, in short, a quasi-religious redemptive purpose.

How this purpose reflects itself in Gogol's art, framed by the publication of *Dead Souls* and the final burning of its second part shortly before the author's death, is a question which has invited varying responses. Recent criticism tends to regard Gogol's latter-day preoccupations with religion as a symptom rather than a cause of his essentially artistic crisis. His exhortational and confessional non-fiction, notably *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, has been interpreted as a self-referential literary exercise striving for closer interaction with the reading public[4]. For their part, religiously-minded commentators have argued that literature inexorably transforms itself into religion in Gogol's works, with *Selected Passages* featuring as an ideological outline for the didactic ends of the burnt and uncompleted parts of *Dead Souls*[5]. Admitting the extraliterary but protesting it from a metacritical standpoint, a recent argument has convincingly advanced Bakhtinian categories in proposing that the polyphony characteristic of Gogol's earlier works is extinguished by the authoritarian monotone of *Selected Passages*[6].

An alternative way of regarding the interpolation of religion in Gogol's art is to focus on the different modes of religious *writing* that inform the soteriological enterprise of *Dead Souls*. The New Testament gospels, Pauline epistles and patristic literature, as we shall presently see, are no less literary an antecedent to *Dead Souls* than is Dante's *Divine Comedy*, with which Gogol's work seems to share little more than superficial situational parallels. Moreover, the discursive difference between gospel, epistle and patristic text better accounts for the partial genre leap from the

comic to the lyrical-realistic between parts one and two of *Dead Souls*, mediated by the epistolary-didactic *Selected Passages*. Insofar as it incorporates multiple viewpoints of the unfolding drama of God's incarnation, gospel narrative, to reinvoke Bakhtinian terms, is polyphonic. Functioning as sanctioned commentaries on the gospels, the epistles and writings of the Church Fathers, on the other hand, are monologic. In a more general sense, therefore, "literariness" (through myth-creating) informs the religious enterprise in the former case, while the opposite process occurs in the latter, where gospels are canonised through the imposition of an authoritative theological interpretation.

Chichikov's situation in *Dead Souls* Part I bears several parallels with that of the main character of the New Testament gospels. Like Jesus, Chichikov maintains an itinerant lifestyle, effortlessly gains a loyal discipleship, feasts with sinners and seeks to explain a poorly understood message through parables of relative value. His origins and real identity are shrouded in mystery and are the subject of fantastic speculation. He is also eventually tried by the collective. Unlike the picaresque hero, for which the false Messiah is an early prototype, Chichikov is motivated by a higher universal purpose, namely, "acquisition" (*priobretenie*). The ambiguous moral value of this purpose, however, subverts Christian gospel ethics which regard wealth as an impediment, albeit not an outright barrier, to redemption. By seeking to try his hand at passing through the eye of a needle, the petty sinner Chichikov is therefore no Anti-Christ. Instead, through a lightly travestied Christology, he is a more average son of man who prefers to travel the more difficult rich man's path to salvation. Even his most flamboyant miracle-working – "resurrecting" the dead souls he acquires - is undertaken to create material rather spiritual profit.

Parody of the gospels' salvational message is further mediated by a sustained inversion of the parable of the talents[7]. Serving as an allegory of proper spiritual stewardship, the gospel parable outlines the expectations of a man who, in his absence, entrusts three servants with various sums of money. The two servants who make a profit are promoted upon the man's return, while the one who fails to do so is dispossessed of the sum initially granted him. By presenting Chichikov's newly acquired noumenal charges as material commodities, *Dead Souls* effectively switches the allegorical and literal elements of the Bible story. The purchased dead serfs, whose only literal reality is purely spiritual, feature as allegorical wealth until such time as they are mortgaged. The monetary value they represent is purposefully hidden by Chichikov from his landowner suppliers, rather as Jesus conceals spiritual meaning in his parables from those that "look without seeing and listen without hearing"[8].

Confusion arising in negotiations with Korobochka and Sobakevich over a fair price for deceased serfs reflects an underlying non-comprehension of the allegory attending Chichikov's redemptive swindle. Only the boundless Nozdrev inadvertently approximates the hidden worth of the ethereal merchandise, while the most unproductive, thus faithless, stewards, Manilov and Pliushkin, entirely miss the point by handing over their stock gratis. The author-narrator sustains this concealment before the parable's other audience, the reader, by revealing the "real" value of Chichikov's purchases only in the second half of the work. Thereafter, the reader, like

the chosen twelve in the gospels, is permitted to come to an appreciation of the parable's meaning, that is, the ends of Chichikov's strange trade, from a position of irony.

Commentators have sought, since Gogol's day, to read an argument from opposites into *Dead Souls* by interpreting the work's unattractive character types as negative ideals. Extending this line of criticism, Fanger has suggested that positive presences are often signified by absences and negation in Gogol's work[9]. It is in this sense, methodologically reminiscent of negative theology, that the first volume of *Dead Souls* can be read as complete unto itself, its curious open-endedness, like that of the mute scene in *The Inspector General*, pointedly gesturing at ontological paradox. From the point of view of the salvation plot Gogol envisaged for his projected multi-volume work, the most notable absence is, of course, Chichikov's being called to account for the way he has conducted the stewardship of his own soul as well as of those figuratively in his care. As evidenced by contemporaries' accounts of Gogol's readings from the manuscript of the second part of *Dead Souls* and the author's own meagre allusions to his intentions for the work's continuation, it is clear, however, that this absence is merely a deferred presence: Chichikov's second coming was to be as the prodigal son rather than as a parodied Christ.

In engendering expectations of a salvational denouement submitting to Christian convention, *Dead Souls* and its author faced a task of transposing at least partially the comism of the first volume into a key more befitting the expressive ends of a moral-religious worldview. The surviving chapters of the second volume afford a picture of uneven success in this enterprise, while burnings of successive drafts over the last decade of the author's life speak for themselves with regard to Gogol's satisfaction with the work's progress. The appearance of ethically elevated types in the figures of Ulinka, Kostanzhoglo and the ideal Christian steward, Murazov, creates a dualism patently absent in the first volume. In the company of these, caricatured figures, such as Petukh and Koshkarev, immediately retreat to a second plane as faint echoes of their predecessors in Part I. Commensurately, the moral figure cut by the hero of *Dead Souls* becomes less equivocal. While Chichikov's earlier misdemeanours are relatively slight, taking, as he does, from Caesar what does not belong to Caesar in the form of head tax on non-existent serfs, the crimes he commits, and considers committing, in the second volume are acts of outright turpitude. Admitting little ambiguity, the increasingly lyrical-realistic, at times elegiac, tone of the work sustains this dualism. Although any discussion of *Dead Souls* Part II must, like the text itself, remain incomplete, the introduction of salvation history sets the scene for a dramatic road-to-Damascus conversion.

Whether or not such a progressive deprogramming of laughter as reader response was prompted by motives of orthodox piety, almost everything written by Gogol after the publication of *Dead Souls* acts as a defence against misreading. A diary note by Aleksandra Smirnova is suggestive from the point of view of the particular type of misreading of interest to our investigation:

A lofty Christian at heart, [Gogol] knew that our model, Christ the Saviour, never laughed. So it is easy to understand what he felt when he saw that Chichikov, Sobakevich, and Nozdryov produced only laughter...[10].

A threat to salvation from the comic is perceived in strikingly similar terms by Jorge in his condemnation of the second book of Aristotle's *Poetics* in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*: For centuries the doctors and the fathers have secreted perfumed essences of holy learning to redeem, through the thought of that which is lofty, the wretchedness and temptation of that which is base. And this book – considering comedy a wondrous medicine, with its satire and mime, which would produce the purification of the passions through the enactment of defect, fault, weakness – would induce false scholars to try to redeem the lofty with a diabolical reversal: through the acceptance of the base[11].

It is precisely to correct misreadings of the expressive ends of the comic in the first volume that the opening lines of the second volume endeavour to do. Any ambiguity that might even partially redeem the general state of moral and existential impoverishment is removed by a repetitive making-plain of the base, here marked as *bednost'*, elsewhere as the more prominently Gogolian *poshlost'*:

Why describe wretchedness (*bednost'*) and wretchedness and the imperfections of our life, digging up people from the wilds of our country? What can be done about it, if that is the characteristic trait of the author and, falling ill with his own imperfections of our life, he cannot describe anything but wretchedness and wretchedness and the imperfections of our life, digging up people from the wilds and the remote comers of our country. So here we are once more in the wilds and once more we've come upon an out-of-the-way corner[12].

In publishing *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* before completing and releasing the second volume of *Dead Souls*, Gogol deferred the literary transformations required for resolving his redemption plot. In their place, he offers an elaborate preventative measure against misreading of *Dead Souls*, both past and future parts, in presenting as *a fait accompli* the salvation of his own authorial self – a prelude to Chichikov's deliverance. As the foreword informs us, having providentially overcome serious illness and feeling sufficiently worthy to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the implied author of *Selected Passages* is a spiritually transfigured one, just as the work itself is a generically novel one in Gogol's writings up until that time. Its epistolary mode and high oratorical, at times biblicist, style. I have substituted "poverty" in Magarshack's translation with "wretchedness" in rendering *bednost'*.

foreground a claim of the implied author's authority, wisdom and sincerity rather than the particular subjects actually raised. Mimicking the structure and motivation of Saint Paul's letters, *Selected Passages* offer *ad hoc* instruction to diverse recipients who are challenged by moral and religious alternatives. The work is also infused with a sense of apostolic calling, its self-professed "necessity" recalling Paul's own motivation for preaching the gospel as stemming from "compulsion"[13]. Like the Pauline and other early Christian pastoral epistles, *Selected Passages* endeavours to draw author, reader and text together into a tight exegetical community. In this community residing in literary-eschatological expectation, it is the author alone who, from a position of salvific insight, exercises the prerogative to set and reset the receptional coordinates of the reading public.

The fact that it was the author personally who came in for harsh criticism **in**

the resounding failure that attended *Selected Passages* suggests that the point of the work had not been lost on his readership. In extending his spiritual directorship of a few close friends to the more universal realm of his literary activity, Gogol had clearly over-created his authorial self. The autocanonisation attempted in *Selected Passages* was regarded by most contemporary readers as a presumptuous transgression of the literary through the introduction of extraliterary realia, many of which, even in their day, demonstrated a dubious morality. In short, *Selected Passages* endeavoured to fill absences, such as Chichikov's retribution and salvation, with an ideological presence.

Although the apostolic implied author of *Selected Passages* retreats in the second volume of *Dead Souls*, the ideology of the former work makes itself strongly felt in the resumption of the salvation plot. In several instances, it removes ambiguities created by parody in the first volume, characterisation of the virtuous landowner being an evident case in point. The way in which Khlobuev, Kostanzhoglo and Murazov manage their estates revisits the parable of the talents and effects its reinversion. The God-fearing but resourceless Khlobuev, for instance, loses his wealth for failing to invest it properly. As in the case of the Pharisees, against whom the New Testament parable is directed, a contained piety is deemed insufficient for the attainment of salvation. Murazov, on the other hand, through his own example of profitable stewardship and in his active exhortation of Chichikov to invest his God-given talents for good, serves as the Christian ideal. The restoration of the original allegorical meaning of the Bible parable thus somewhat shifts the precedence of the literary and the religious. While gospel parody, with its humour and ambiguities, witnesses the literary informing the religious in the first volume, a subtle, partially opposing process – a sort of call to orthodoxy – can be felt in the second. Responding to Chichikov's pleas to be saved and admonishing Khlobuev's poor caretakership, Murazov replaces the travestied Son of Man of the first part as *alter Christus* in the second.

Gogol's purely spiritual writings, largely in the form of letters and booklets of instruction to close friends, offer little of interest for an exploration of the nexus between religion and literature in his corpus. Rigidly orthodox and pharisaically categorical, they subscribe to the stylistic conventions of *Selected Passages*. A notable exception, however, is the posthumously published *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*. Written with a humility rare for Gogol and drawing directly on various patristic sources, the work explicates the interaction between priest, worshipper and liturgy during the recitation of Divine Office. Substitution of these participants with author[14], reader and text effectively renders a literary restatement of the exegetical community which *Selected Passages* endeavours to create. *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*, however, accords a special place to the text - in this case, a special kind of text. The central element of divine worship is the liturgy itself, that is, the unchanging Word which is the source of salvation by being, to quote the author, "an eternal repetition of the great feat of love which was carried out for our benefit"[15]. Mediating with its self-referential nature between Christ's resurrection and the Second Coming, the liturgy affords a sort of eschatological relief by a making-present of the salvific purpose. Whether or not *Dead Souls*, or Gogol's conception

for the work's continuation, ultimately aspire to liturgical status, *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy* indicate the possibility of an essentially literary way to a god who is the Eternal Word.

Gogol's failure to complete *Dead Souls* is, among other things, a concession of the impossibility of closing the soteriological scheme which underpins it. Like salvation history, the work remains stuck between a past inaugurated eschatology, on the one hand, and a future realised one, on the other[16]. Ivan Aksakov's grandiose claim that "the second volume [of *Dead Souls*] should resolve the task which all 1847 years of Christianity have not managed to resolve"[17] is therefore somewhat sacrilegious – from a literary as well as a religious point of view. *Dead Souls'* teleology, like that of religious writings, thrives on the deferment of a final explication of mystery. Suggestive in this respect is Gogol's own predilection in later references to *Dead Souls* for the theologically loaded word "mystery" (*taina*) instead of the more playfully literary "riddle" (*zagadka*).

1. V.I. Shenrok Materialy dlia biografii N. V. Gogolia (St. Petersburg, 1892-1897), vol. IV, 795.

2. Iu. Mann. V poiskakh zhyvoi dushi: Mertvye dushi. Pisatel' – kritika – chitatel' (Moscow: Kniga, 1984), p.307.

3. N.V. Gogol. Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (AN SSSR: Moscow and Leningrad, 1937-52), vol. XI, 332.

4. See, for example, Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 21 Off.

5. A.M. Bukharev, a literary-minded monk (Archimandrite Feodor) who corresponded with Gogol, attempted to demonstrate this continuity in his *Tri pis'ma k N. V. Gogoliu, pisannye v 1848 godu* (St. Petersburg, 1861). See also K. Mochulsky. *Dukhovnyi put' Gogolia* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1934) and V.A. Voropaev. "'Monastyr' vash – Rossiia!," introduction to N.V. Gogol', *Dukhovnaia proza* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1992), pp. 3-34, here p. 24.

6. Frederick T. Griffiths and Stanley J. Rabinowitz. "The Death of Gogolian Polyphony: Selected Comments on "Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends", in *Susanne Fusso and Priscilla Meyer, ed.. Essays on Gogol. Logos and the Russian Word* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992), pp. 158-171.

7. Recounted in the Gospels of Matthew 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-27.

8. Matthew 13:13. Elsewhere, Mark 4:11 -12 and Luke 8:10.

9. The Creation of Nikolai Gogol, p. 50. Iurii Mann argues a similar case in his discussion of the mute scene in *The Inspector General* ("Gogol's Poetics of Petrification" in *Fusso and Meyer*, pp. 75-88, here p.84).

10. A.O. Smirnova. *Zapiski i dnevniki, vospominaniia, pis'ma*, ed. M.A. Cjavlovskij (Moscow, 1929), p.316, cited in Fanger, p. 202.

11. Umberto Eco. *The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (London: Picador in association with Seeker and Warburg, 1984), p. 475.

12. *Gogol. Dead Souls*, trans. David Magarshack (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1984), p. 261. . I have substituted "poverty" in Magarshack's translation with "wretchedness" in rendering *bednost'*.

13. 1 Corinthians 9:16-17.

14. Robert A. Maguire draws attention to the implicit equation between priest and artist in *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy* in his *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), p.308.

15. N.V. Gogol'. *Razmyshlenia o Bozhestvennoi Liturgii*, in *Dukhovnaia proza*, pp.323-389, here p.324.

16. I have borrowed these terms from an article on Pauline theology by Joseph A. Fitzmayer,

S.J. in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968), vol. II, 800-827, here 810 (79:50).

17. Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov v ego pis'makh (Moscow, 1888), part I, vol. I, 413, cited in Mann, p. 256.

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Исторические воззрения Гоголя и замысел поэмы "Мертвые души"

Одной из важных задач науки о Гоголе является изучение исторических взглядов писателя. Все художественные произведения Гоголя, начиная от самых ранних, написаны не только верным наблюдателем быта, тонким знатоком человеческой души, но и оригинальным, глубоким историком. О серьезности занятий Гоголя историей свидетельствует хотя бы тот факт, что на протяжении целого ряда лет он преподавал историю в двух учебных заведениях Петербурга – в Патриотическом институте и в Императорском университете. Однако в многочисленных исследованиях уходящей эпохи напрасно было бы искать ответа на вопрос, чем объясняется это «загадочное» увлечение Гоголя.

Интересом к прошлому Гоголь был во многом обязан основательной постановке дела преподавания истории в Нежинской гимназии высших наук (здесь Гоголь обучался с 1821 по 1828 год). По свидетельству его соучеников, в 1824 году в гимназии даже «составилось историческое общество под председательством старших воспитанников <...> Редкина и Любича-Романовича. Со всею смелостию детского возраста принялись пять или шесть воспитанников составлять полную всемирную историю в огромном размере. На долю Базили достались египтяне, ассирияне, персы и греки – и он года в полтора написал тысячу или 1500 страниц сверх уроков по классам...» [1, 329]; «В свободное от классных занятий время <...> <П. Г. Редкин> вместе с другими тремя товарищами – Базили, Кукольником и Тарновским – предпринял огромный труд: возможно полное сокращение всеобщей истории, изданной обществом английских ученых и состоящей из нескольких десятков кварталов. Труд этот, хотя и не был окончен, много способствовал не только основательному изучению русского и французского языков, но и развитию исторического смысла...» [2, 443]. Судя по первым литературным опытам Гоголя, а также по материалам, собранным им в нежинский период, занятия товарищей всеобщей историей не прошли мимо него. В то время в круг чтения Гоголя появляется и «История государства Российского» Н. М. Карамзина.

Изучение истории в Нежинской гимназии было тесно связано с теми задачами, которые ставились перед воспитателями юношества тогдашним правительством. «В народном воспитании преподавание Истории есть дело Государственное», – писал, в частности, по этому поводу будущий министр народного просвещения С. С. Уваров в 1813 году (в то время попечитель Санкт-Петербургского учебного округа) [3, 2]. В. А. Жуковский, назначенный в 1826 году воспитателем Наследника Александра Николаевича, в свою очередь