REREADING GOGOL'S MISWRITTEN BOOK

(Notes on Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends)

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As my Bloomian title implies territoriality, it must be acknowledged from the start that a number of maps have been charted for Gogol's "artistic space", in general and for the Selected Passages in particular. "Forgotten" as these passages may be, they turn out sufficiently crowded for Doppelgaenger to find themselves elbowing each other in the maze. What makes Selected Passages (hereafter cited as SP) so rereadable now is, I think, the current post-modern climate, fostering the different but cognate critical strategies that focus on anti-utopian discourse, writing (ecriture), polyphony, psychoanalysis, reader-response, intertextuality, and literature as institution. Such a perspective encourages projecting SP onto a variety of cultural texts, making it a test-case for some major theoretical issues, of which I will begin with skaz.

1. Skaz, Gogol, and his characters.

The definition of skaz hinges on the distinction between the intellectually and stylistically unreliable narrator and the implied author, who towers above him simply because we the readers cannot imagine an author so stupid and inept. But what about SP, where just that is known to be the case? And how do we then deny Gogol the benefit of stupidity in his best - skaz - writing, whose striking similarity to SP has been noted by Gogol's contemporaries and later critics. Some crucial boundaries were blurred already in such texts as "The Overcoat," where the absence of a consistent narrative perspective foregrounds the act of writing itself, rather than an identifiable, if flawed, narrator. SP constitutes a further confirmation of author and character-narrator, and, in fact, Gogol himself admitted that in writing SP he had behaved like a Khlestakov.

The affinity between Gogol and his characters is well known. Gogol, who was famous for impersonating the comic characters of his texts and improvised scenes, has, in fact, described his creative process as a satirical excorcism of the worst aspects of himself and specified the corresponding literary technique as "demotion from the rank of general to that of enlisted man." Identifying secretly with his lowly alter egos, Gogol often endorsed them with "authorial" status (e. g. Khlestakov, Chichikov, Nozdrev, Poprishchin, Akakii, Postmaster, etc.) and ended up as a literary character himself. This began with anecdotes and continued with biographies - genres that treat the writer as character. Gogol's case, as a comic mask. A high point in fictionalizing Gogol qua Gogolian Character was reached in Bunin's short story "Zhilet Pana Mikhol'skogo" ("Mr. Mikhol'skii's Vest"; 1934), which depicts Gogol as envious of the article of clothing belonging to the narrator.

Gogol qua Grotesque Author appeared even earlier - in Dostoevsky's The Village of Stepanchikovo. Perhaps, there was poetic justice in this. After all, it was Gogol who started the game by placing Khlestakov on a friendly footing with Pushkin. And in demoting the author from his privileged position above the characters (in the Bakhtinian sense), Dostoevsky was only following in Gogol's narrative footsteps. Therefore, who else should inaugurate the carnival of professional and would-be writers in Dostoevsky's novels but Gogol, indeed, the Gogol of SP, in the guise of Foma Opiskin, the self-appointed "writer" of books and of the destinies of his entourage?!

Foma's very name offers a vignette emblematic of the author/character oscillation. Dostoevsky probably had in mind the two great Catholic Thomases (discovered by Gogol in the 40s, Aquinas and a Kempis, especially the latter, whose De Imitatione Christi Gogol emulated in SP), as well as Foma Grigor'evich, one of the "authors" of Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka. In a Gogolian manner (cf. Akakii Akakievich), Foma became Foma Fomich, with a pejorative-diminutive family name, structurally reminiscent of Bashmachkin. Also semantically, opiska, "misspelling," evokes Akakii's profession (and the oshibka, "mistake," he almost made in copying when he became excited over his new overcoat) and, more generally, his status as a 'mis-person.' To complete the picture, among the numerous "poor clerks" in the pre-"Overcoat" literature there was one Foma Fomich Opek'shin, a creation of Bulgarin, - the same Bulgarin, who, after the failure of "Hanz Kuechelgarten," obtained for him the position of collegiate registrar (the title that Gogol, in the spirit of "Nevskii Avenue"'s Kolev, would sometimes pass off for that of collegiate assessor). Thus, Gogol started out both as an exalted, but failed, Romantic poet and a "poor clerk" akin to the precursors of his characters. He successfully promoted himself to the rank of author and in the process ambivalently elevated/degraded himself and his characters to the status of Akakii and Khlestakov. By authoring SP from the position of such a character-writer, he effectively set himself up for the grotesque objectification in Stepanchikovo.

2. Gogol's identity, writing, and reception.

The oscillations of Gogol's (self-)image stemmed from his problematic sense of identity and its boundaries (as abundantly shown by Fanger). Gogol himself insisted that he was a riddle. He identified completely with his various roles, could wear several facial expressions in one day (and thus elude painterly portrayal) and change toward a friend overnight. He was pathologically unsure of his performance (e. g. as lecturer) and slavishly adapted himself to the tastes of his "superiors" (e. g. Pushkin). He partly invented his name, appropriating the semi-fictitious Gogol' and dropping Janovskii, and, when traveling, signed it variously as Gonol', Gogel', etc.
Psychologically, this has been related to Gogol's identification with his mother and desire to elude her control and his repressed homosexuality; some memoirs show him knitting (cf. the embroidery governor in Dead Souls), and wearing woman's clothes (cf. Plushkin).

Gogol's fragile identity was most likely at the root of his stylistic contrasts, his doubles, impostors, characters lacking selfhood etc., and of his two master themes: 'metamorphosis,' which determined his evolution, and 'mystified identity,' which permitted such different readings of his life and works. In particular, Gogol's dual orientation towards the literary aristocrats and the lower-brow public, mostly successful, was always fraught with the potential for rift.

A major tension inside Gogol's personality was that between 'nonentity' and 'grandeur'. Megalomaniaical in matters great and small, he prided himself on his cultural mission and his knack for buying cheap. He tyrannized his friends, who were supposed to relieve him from menial trifles and expenses and otherwise "cherish" (ileiat') him, imposed penances, and died asking for a ladder to heaven.

He also claimed for himself all possible roles. One contemporary saw him as a typical Ukrainian, khokhol, who wants to be everything - musician, painter, actor, and, indeed, he tried his hand at every literary genre (poetry, short story, novel/epic, drama, criticism, journalism, history, testimonial). He admired Senkovskii for being a one-man journal and lovingly ridiculed such a personality in the image of Khlestakov. Gogol's writing has been described as an "orchestra of voices" and a ventriloquist's act. A curious case of ventriloquism is provided by "After the Play," where the fictional author eavesdrops and comments on the opinions of viewers, which, of course, have been pre-prompted by the real author, intent on prescribing his interpretation of The Inspector General.

This double authorial overkill is a telling manifestation of yet another facet of Gogol's megalomania: desire for total control. Gogol could ill stand the presence of unfamiliar people, wrote out his lectures (or else feigned sickness), and tried to monitor from Europe all the movements and exchanges of information related to him, for instance, the itineraries of acquaintances who could bring him messages or money, as well as the circulation of his letters and the exchange of opinions about him, instructing his friends how to refute misrepresentations. He was notoriously secretive, traveling under altered names and avoiding contacts with fellow-travellers (he would go to such lengths as feigning sleep or not recognizing them), and (like Petrushka) often slept fully dressed - armed, as it were. In correspondence, he "falsified" his motives and personality. He concealed his addresses, changed printers, misleading his associates (e.g. Chevyrev), and consorted with Belinsky's group clandestinely from the Slavophiles. He also had a penchant for destroying his writings: he burned a juvenile novel/a, a romantic poem, a historical drama (after it put Zhukovsky to sleep), and twice the second part of his "epic." Sure enough, after the failure of SP Gogol regretted not having burned it. Gogol's annihilatory pyrotechnics can be viewed as a will to monopolize his literary rights, and his near-suicidal death, as a desperate gesture of control over his very life.

Indeed, most of Gogol's bids for power were always on the brink of collapsing. They achieved control either by destroying their object or by the less dramatic strategy of withdrawal (evidenced by his celibacy, aloofness from mundane matters, avoidance of contacts, and self-imposed exile). In an ambivalent reversal of his manipulativeness - but not of his blissful unconcern for the boundaries of his self, Gogol deliberately surrendered many functions to others. Thus, he instructed his friends to pool their efforts, each in his own way, for his sake and, in particular, for taking care of his mother. Gogol delegated to Shevyrev all matters of money-management, publication, and even the editing of his faulty style and grammar; to his correspondents, the drafting of his future texts; and to censorship, the enforcement of artistic discipline. Before burning Dead Souls, Gogol tried to leave the manuscript with A. P. Tolstoy and the decision what to do with it, to the discretion of Filaret and others. Delegation of power naturally led to situations where others failed Gogol (as, for instance, when A. P. Tolstoi refused to keep the manuscript, effectively enabling Gogol to burn it, or when Aksakov decided not to pass on to Pogodin Gogol's offensive remarks about him). Gogol blamed his friends for the advice to publish SP, Aksakov and Annenkov, for the faults of the entire public and the "evil one" for the burning of Dead Souls. Thus, the circumstances of this fatal burning are emblematic of both 'total control' and 'relinquished responsibility.'

The same interplay of grandeur, nonentity, and withdrawal determined Gogol's exclusive concentration on writing. He admitted that he did not know Russia or, for that matter, the Ukraine and created out of nothing by sheer linguistic prowess - words (e.g. Gleaned from the dictionary) being all he required for his work. Gogol's worldly needs were minimal and his existence purely textual, so that there was nothing he could hide (!) from the public. An apotheosis of this rhetorical prowess - words (e.g. Gleaned from the dictionary) being all he required for his work. Gogol's worldly needs were minimal and his existence purely textual, so that there was nothing he could hide (!) from the public. An apotheosis of this rhetorical prowess - words (e.g. Gleaned from the dictionary) being all he required for his work. Indeed, most of Gogol's bids for power were always on the brink of collapsing. They achieved control either by destroying their object or by the less dramatic strategy of withdrawal (evidenced by his celibacy, aloofness from mundane matters, avoidance of contacts, and self-imposed exile). In an ambivalent reversal of his manipulativeness - but not of his blissful unconcern for the boundaries of his self, Gogol deliberately surrendered many functions to others. Thus, he instructed his friends to pool their efforts, each in his own way, for his sake and, in particular, for taking care of his mother. Gogol delegated to Shevyrev all matters of money-management, publication, and even the editing of his faulty style and grammar; to his correspondents, the drafting of his future texts; and to censorship, the enforcement of artistic discipline. Before burning Dead Souls, Gogol tried to leave the manuscript with A. P. Tolstoy and the decision what to do with it, to the discretion of Filaret and others. Delegation of power naturally led to situations where others failed Gogol (as, for instance, when A. P. Tolstoi refused to keep the manuscript, effectively enabling Gogol to burn it, or when Aksakov decided not to pass on to Pogodin Gogol's offensive remarks about him). Gogol blamed his friends for the advice to publish SP, Aksakov and Annenkov, for the faults of the entire public and the "evil one" for the burning of Dead Souls. Thus, the circumstances of this fatal burning are emblematic of both 'total control' and 'relinquished responsibility.'

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Failure of control and delegation of authority also marked Gogol's relationship with critics. In addition to reviews, he sought private information about responses to his work, especially negative ones, at first squirmed and rebutted, but then adapted his self-image accordingly, letting his literary identity be redefined for him by others. For instance, in SP he did become an ideologist, as Belinsky wanted him to, but, ironically, one of a persuasion prompted by another camp.

Gogol's contradictory person, style, and reception cast a long historical shadow in the form of successive rereadings. Russian literature has since been busy working out Gogol's prophetic slips, with SP the grossest and the latest to be vindicated. The peripeties of Gogol's "tragedy of misdirection" by critics and of its posthumous consequences for SP have been traced by Debreczeny in his Gogol and Contemporary Critics. In particular, Debreczeny notes how.

"Dostoevsky [first] suffered for Belinsky's opinion on [SP]... was conditioned by Siberian brain-washing to love what he had hated, and..."
Yet, it was the same Dostoevsky who made a double-edged fun of Gogol in *The Village of Stepanchikovo*.

The "rehabilitation" of Gogol's oeuvre has proceeded along two main lines, those of form and content, and *SP* lies at the intersection of both.

### 3. Selected Passages and the importance of writing badly.

In *SP* Gogol pushed his grandiloquent sermonizing to an extreme. Branded as reactionary by liberal critics and downright silly by most everyone, his message did find a supporter (in Grigor'ev) and was later endorsed and developed by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Rozanov, and others.49 Gogol's conversion prefigured those of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, in an early attempt at legitimizing that very Russian blending of fictional and ideological discourse which informed - deformed, in the views of some, - the narrative mode of such texts as, say, *War and Peace*, Rozanov's writings, and *Doctor Zhivago*. The effect was not purely ideological but stylistic as well, liberating the direct, esthetically imperfect voice of the author.50 Thus, Gogol's notoriously miswritten book was his final and ironic defeat.51 but, in a sense, its "bad" writing was the best thing about it.

From the start Gogol produced "bad" texts, which he had to renounce and destroy52 Even in his best prose critics were quick to point out provincialisms, dubious taste, and ungrammaticalities. His worst mistakes would be edited out, but most of his "irregular" writing remained intact to be soon recognized as innovative and eventually canonized, when Gogol was proclaimed a modernist *avant la lettre*. His stylistic "failures" were appropriated by the comprehensive cultural revolution of the past hundred years.

"Miscontrolled" writing signaled the liberation of a previously repressed and disciplined "lower" voice, which was analogous to such manifestations of literary decontrol as the "works" of Koz'ma Prutkov, Leskov's skaz, Dostoevsky's "hurriedly unpolished" manner, the late Leo Tolstoy's deliberately primitive "truth-searching" discourse,53 Rozanov's homely homilies, Khlebnikov's quasi-graphomaniac poetics, Zoshchenko's coy primitivism, down to Limonov's stark uncouthness, which prompted a traditionalist contemporary's apt formulation: "personazhi pishut, "(now) the characters are doing the writing".54 In a broader, philosophical sense, this is akin to such modern cultural phenomena as Nietzschean relativization of values, Freudian triple-voicedness of the psyche, and Dostoevskyan-Bakhtinian dialogism.

Are then *SP* polyphonic? Certainly not in intent, although Gogol did try to pass off his own (real, edited, and fictional) letters for a "correspondence," i. e. an exchange of opinions. To be sure, according to Bakhtin, dialogism does not equal dramatic (resp. epistolary) mode: the "other" voice is to be heard even in the discourse of a single speaker. This does happen in *SP*, but the authorial voice dominates all others. Or does it? Thanks to bombast and inconsistencies, its persuasiveness unravels. The decontrol is, of course, involuntary - Gogol is not a Prutkov, but he comes so close to him that some contemporaries believed *SP* to be "a deliberate Ukrainian prank by which Gogol intended to attract public attention."55 In other words, the book is "camp," and guilelessly "pure" one at that, calling for a "campy," post-modernist, rereading.56

A further twist to this virtual dialogism is given by the nature of the monologic voice. The authorial stance is Domostroi-like, autocratic, pervasively megolomaniacal. Pretending to the role of Russia's official savior,57 Gogol resembles Prutkov also in the latter's role of senior official and author of "A Project for Introducing Uniformity of Thought in Russia." The relationship between the Czar/State and the Poet is a master myth of Russian culture. Gogol's variant of this myth58 envisions a union instead of rebellious opposition, foreshadowing Khlebnikov's (and other Avantgardists') Poetic World Chairmanship.

Indeed, the oxymoronic combination, in *SP*, of a liberatingly bad writing with grandiose political pretensions can be compared to the alliance between the avant-garde and totalitarianism. Lest these dystopian overtones sound hollow, we might recall that, not unlike Stalin, the author of *SP* insists on knowing every woman's "konek," "hobby," - in order to better manipulate her, and the names and patronymics of all the important personages in town, so that he could "be their friend... to all, without exception..." (125/311)59. This prophetic anticipation of Big-Brotherly love for every subject has, in fact, materialized in direct literary lineage: it was on the author of *SP* that Dostoevsky modeled his Foma Fomich, who, in turn, was an early version of the Grand Inquisitor, a precursor of dystopian rulers.60

Furthermore, since according to a recent view61, Stalin and Stalinist culture were a runaway version of the Russian avant-garde, such post-modernist refractions as *Palisandriia* are only natural.62 The myth of Palisandr Dal'berg - the great graphomaniac, savior of Russia, Kremlin ruler, and repository of all possible roles and attributes - is all the more relevant to the problem since Palisandr on several occasions mentions Gogol, while his "romantically officialese" writing bears distinct traces of Gogolian influence and overtly plays with specific Gogol intertexts, e. g. The dead souls scam.63 Here finally Gogol's camp is recycled into its highest possible counterpart. *Palisandriia* too, is shockingly "reactionary" in its affectionate portrayal of the powers that be (Uncle Joseph, for one).64 held together by its lofty rhetoric alone, and obsessively metali-terary.

As for *SP*, the prominence of metali-terary themes in it is well-known and has been solidly covered by Sobel (op. cit.). I will concentrate on Letter XXI "Chto takoe gubernatorsha," ("What the Wife of a Provincial Governor Is," 122-36/308-21), whose preoccupation with writing has escaped critical notice because it ostensibly constitutes advice to the gubernatorsha on how to serve the public good. Incidentally, this discrepancy between the writer's intended message and the reader's ability to see through it constitutes yet another situation of decontrol, virtual skaz, and polyphony.

### 4. Grandeur, information, and media manipulation.
Letter XXI is a typical Gogol text. The speaker's persona comes across as both self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating. On one hand, he boasts of his predictions which have come true, his near-omniscience and close ties to God; poses as the ultimate arbiter who can put everything in order; and demands unconditional obedience. On the other, he admits that he is completely uninformed about the town and Russia in general; that he is not a "vseznalka", "know-it-all," but just "a fool" ("glup, reshitel'no glup;" 134/319-20).

The theme of grandeur is also projected onto the bureaucratic hierarchy (Gogol mentions the infinite ladder of bribery), reflecting Gogol's love-hate of rank and the addressee's "number one" position in town. At the top, second only to God, Gogol places himself, an ideal order-enforcing official, ("chinoivnik, 125/311); then comes the gubernatorsha, whose good example will trickle down through the ranks, or else she can threaten the unhelpful priests with the names of the bishop, the "supreme government," and the Emperor himself. Even spiritual reeducation is metaphorized as law enforcement: the stupid sheep must be driven with the whip of shame and conscience.

Bureaucratic coercion is combined with the techniques of public relations. Gogol plans the manipulative use of balls, dinner invitations, fashions, legalistic procedures, public ostracism, rumours, sermons, and society women's influence on their husbands. These strategies are to target all social groups, (bureaucracy, gentry, women, clergy, merchants, and lower middle class ["meschchanstvo"], with their respective systems of subordination.

All of this hinges on communication. Like an American campaign manager, Gogol charts the flow of data, analyzes ratings, prepares media events, relies on image manipulation. In fact, the entire fourteen-page long letter deals with nothing other than various forms of information processing.

First, information has to be gathered. Gogol delegates the task to his correspondent, who must personally interview every important official (Gogol has a questionnaire of three standard questions ready), supplementing the dossier with information gathered from others; talk with and learn "through and through" ("naskvoz") about "the entire female half of the town" (126/312); meet with every priest, polling them (as well as the chief of police, with whom a hearty talk is recommended) about every citizen of the middle and lower middle class (some of whom should be interviewed personally). The search for information ends with the scrutiny of all possible "merzosti," "abominations, disgusting things" (135/320-1).

Information must then be carefully filed, and Gogol repeatedly instructs his correspondent on the art of note-taking. (All the while, Gogol's own text is so repetitive and chaotic [!], that towards the end he has to admit it, but, of course, blames it on the addressee: "everything in [my letter] is haphazard, not in strict logical order, which, however, is your fault; 136/321). Like a "diligent schoolgirl" (134/319) and "sensible official" and unlike a "passionately chaotic woman" (125/311), she must start a special notebook and record in it all conversations as accurately as possible, using the margin or separate pieces of paper for additional notes. This activity must be allotted regular hours, yet somehow every conversation must also be taken down right away ("Having found out, go [otpravil'iates'] to your room and immediately put it all down on paper for me;" 125/312), - one more inconsistency typical of the flawed authorial voice of SP. Of course, once reinterpreted as a stylistic pattern, that voice exhibits a subtle use of skaz for maximum effect: the unreliable speaker gets away with making two opposite points.

To return to information processing, gossip is to be recorded too, either "beskhitrostno," "guilelessly, the way it was," or exactly "the way it was reported to you by trustworthy people" (126/313). All these data must be shared with other "media" personalities, e. g. the bishop, but above all with Gogol, who will help put the chaotic information in good order. (Referring to the correspondent's previous letters, he keeps criticizing her for not supplying enough well-processed information, - in a familiar gesture of delegated guilt.)

But mere streamlining of the information flow is not all. To influence events, information must be manipulated by a panoply of techniques: - by raising one's own consciousness ("convince yourself that... [all your subjects] are your kinsmen and people close to your heart, and then everything will change before you;" 123-4/310); - by prayers (advised of the problems, Gogol will use his personal access to God, who will enlighten him: ...[He] might send to my mind the gift of understanding [vrazumlenie], and my mind, made understanding by God, might be able to do something better than a mind which has not been made understanding by Him," i. e. than the less creative mind of the correspondent; 124/310); - by engineering facts and appearances that will be taken as role models and disseminated by fashion and other "aping" mechanisms, "obez'ianstvo" (123/309; Gogol suggests wearing the same simple dress to parties, refusing to visit a bad official, publicly praising good behavior and firing offenders); - by the interviewing strategies (the very course of the conversation will advise the people of their problems and desirable cures); - by influencing the perceptions of key communicators (the bishop; the wives) in order to enhance the persuasiveness of their acts (sermons; brainwashing of husbands); - and, above all, by recourse to Gogol's own creative and prophetic gifts, in particular, his ability to divine the future (for him, "it is sufficient to observe the present more attentively, and the future will suddenly appear ["vystupit"] all by itself;" 134/320).

5. Writing about writing.

The amount of attention Gogol devotes to writing and creativity and the supreme position he reserves for himself make suspect the declared purpose of this writerly pyramid: the improvement of life in the provincial city.

The symbolic meaning of this city becomes clear in light of Gogol's retrospective comments, in his Denouement of the Inspector General, on the city portrayed in that play as the Inner City of the Soul; cf. St. Augustine's City of G, the Utopian City, the "soulful" double-entendre in the title of Dead Souls, and also the references to the gubernatorsha's soul in the letter under analysis ("you yourself say that I have helped you in the affairs of your soul ["v vashem dushevnom dele"];" 124/310; "it will be impossible not to love you if your soul is known;" 133/319).
On one hand, all this manipulation of files and images sounds like a cross of Stalin's apparatus with Nixon's wiretapping and Reagan's Great Communicatorship, which brings out Gogol's mania grandiosa, his love of rank and control. But even more forcefully he emerges as absorbed with écriture, his main claim to Romantic grandeur. In a curious replay of the "Diary of a Madman," the writer of SP pretends to the crown of the Poet/Czar of the City he has blessed with his attention.

Indeed, all this power play is purely literary and Gogolian. The fixation on the minutiae of text production (orderliness, regular hours, special notebooks and scraps of paper, etc.) is reminiscent of Akakii the writer and Petrushka the reader. The process of writing is likely to evoke strong emotions ("If, in the course of the descriptions you will be making for me..., our [i. e. Russian] regrettable aspects should strike you too hard and outrage your heart ....;" 130/316) and in compensation yield a legitimate plaisir du texte ("pleasure, repose, spiritual relaxation razvlechen'e dukh';") 132/318). Small wonder, since Gogol expects from his correspondent genuine acts of artistic creation. To impress on Gogol (and the bishop) her situation, she must "sketch everything down to the last vivid detail, making it literally appear before [their] eyes, so that your town, as if alive, would constantly abide in [their] thoughts..." (130/316). Like a literary critic, Gogol insists that the images she creates should be graphic and typical, but allows also for caricature:

"I must have someone live [zhiv'emu' - italicized in the text] from among them, so that I may observe him from head to foot in all detail... All this information will serve to paint an exemplary picture [primernyj obraz, italicized in the text] of the middle-class person and merchant as they really should be; in a monster you will recognize the ideal of that which, as a caricature, has become a monster" (131/317).

The literary talents Gogol expects from his correspondent and other women are quite extraordinary:

"If you only know how to speak to them in the language of their souls,... to sketch out for a woman a lofty career that the world expects of her today - her heavenly career to be the source which propels us to everything that is right, noble, and honest, to summon man to noble aspirations - [she] will suddenly blaze up... push her husband to the honest fulfillment of his duty, and, tossing her rags aside, convert everyone to action..." (133/319).

These rhetorical talents are, of course, carbon copies of his own rare gift:

"If you give me a full understanding of their character..., I will tell you in what way... it is possible to instigate them: there are secret strings in the Russian, unknown even to himself, which one needs but pluck for him to throb everywhere..." (132-3/318).

In fact, it is Gogol's own, not the gubernators' activity that is the ultimate goal of all the information processing, and through a thin disguise we recognize Gogol's notorious pleas for material, indeed, for ready-made writer's sketches that would enable him to write about Russia: "For my sake, you must... begin an examination of your... town... I need this..." (125/311). She herself must refrain from any activity other than communicating with Gogol:

"For the time being it is better not to hurry; do nothing, even if it seems to you that you can do something... It is better meanwhile to observe closely... [and] transmit... to me;... without that I do not even understand how it is possible to give counsel..." (126/312).

Only having accumulated complete knowledge, would Gogol be able to articulate the magic word:

"Then will I be able to tell you certain things, and you will see that much of what seemed impossible is possible... Until that time I will say nothing, because I could make a mistake, and I would not want to do that. I would like to speak such words, as would strike the mark precisely..." (127/313).

To this problem of writing block Gogol - in an obvious echo of his failure to finish Dead Souls - returns again and again:

"In the first place..., but... my words may be beside the point, it would be better not to pronounce them at all..." (132/318); "I feel that I am beginning to speak of things which are perhaps not at all fitting to your town,... but the fault is yours, for you have not conveyed detailed information on anyone to me..." (134/319).

To overcome the block, towards the end of the letter he tries to work himself out of it by invoking his ability to prophesy the future through a scrutiny of the present. Then follows a sweeping dip into all the merzosti of the present. Or, rather, the direction is both downward and upward, for the passage is a characteristically Gogolian exercise in masochistic, yet lofty rhetoric, with the root merz- repeated thirteen times, five of them in the recurrent phrase 'vsem atrival'ia po bad'iu vo vsiakie merzosti,' "to scrutinize as much as possible all kinds of abominations" (134/320), - an incantatory monotony worthy of Stalin. Cleansed from and by the "disgusting" depths, Gogol rises to spiritual clarity and concludes on a hopeful note.

The ending is emblematic of the whole enterprise of SP. Gogol still refrains from pronouncing the Last Judgement - in the same way as with Dead Souls, where he, in fact, ended up offering nothing other than SP as a sort of interim report instead. Pending his attainment of omniscience and the magic Word, he commands his correspondent to

"reread the [present] letter five, six times... The substance of my letter must remain totally within you; let my questions be your questions and my desire your desire, so that each word and letter may haunt you and torment you, so long as you have not fulfilled my petition exactly as I wish" (136/321).

The letter comes to verbalize explicitly its meta-verbal, metaliterary theme of writing writ large, foregrounding écriture, set towards expression, message for message's self-referential sake.

* * *

Today many of the Selected Passages, including Letter XXI, read as hilariously funny. As in most of Gogol's texts, this results from the way the speaking voice subverts itself, allowing the reader to see around the speaker. That in SP the character/narrator who is preoccupied with writing but fails to control it is the author himself, does not seem to spoil the
reader's fun. To account for this response, only a subtle shift in the critical viewpoint is necessary - the one prompted by the figures of Koz'ma Prutkov and Palisandr Dal'berg. All the miswritten book asks for is to be misread into place, and, I believe, the post-modern sensibility, as well as Gogol's insistent pleas for help from readers, suggest just that. Through the "visible to the world," tearfully programmatic message of SP we will then be able to perceive and appreciate its "invisible laughter."

NOTES


4. See Professor Rabinowitz's paper in the present volume.


6. In Fanger's apt formulation, the narration there comes from all four directions at once - like the Petersburg wind (Creation..., p. 154).

7. Terts sees the author of SP also as similar to Akaki, Chichikov, and other Gogolian "objects of slaps and mockery" (V teni..., pp. 12, 61).

8. See SP, Letter XVIII (3), pp. 104-5/294-5. All references to SP list the page numbers of the English edition (Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends by Nikolai Gogol. Transl. by Jesse Zeldin. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969 [where necessary, the translation is emended]) and, after the slash, the pages in vol. VIII of the complete Russian edition (Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, Moscow: AN SSSR, 1952). The principle of "demotion" is noted by Fanger (Creation..., p. 236); cf. also Terts on Gogol as a caricature of the figure of Writer (V teni..., pp. 277, 281).


10. Among such genres are also literary epigrams (sometimes collected into texts of epic proportions, like A. F. Voeikov's "The Madhouse"); literary epitaphs; Lermontov's "Death of a Poet" and its progeny; and others.

11. Even discounting its skaz-like ambiguity, the story is suggestive of the comic figure Gogol cuts in Russian literary mythology. Cf. L. I. Arnolf's memoirs comparing Gogol with his stock of unworn boots to the anonymous episodic character in the last paragraph of Ch. 7 of Dead Souls who enjoyed trying on boots in the solitude of his room (see Gogol' v vospominaniakh sovremennikov, ed. by S. Mashinski, Moscow: Goszidat, 1952 [hereafter abbreviated as GVS], p. 482); cf. also Gogol's thrifty ways of boot repair see his letter to S. T. Aksakov, July 7 1840, GVS pp. 126-7) with those of the Bashmachkins.

12. As shown in Tynianov's now classic article "Dostoevskii i Gogoł'...".


15. Gippius, Gogol, p. 129.

16. This colorful detail from P. V. Annenkov's memoirs (GVS, p. 263) does not seem, however, to be borne out by the records of travelers, published in the Moskovskie vedomosti (see Mann's commentaries in P. V. Annenkov, Literaturnye vospominaniia, ed. by Iu. V. Mann, Moscow: Khudozhestvennaya literatura, 1983, p. 560).

17. For an analysis of an intermediate stage in this process of the characters' mancipation from Gogol's grip and their arrogation of equal authorial rights (making possible his eventual objectification in Stepanchikovo), see S. G. Bocharov ("Perekhod ot Gogolia k Dostoevskomu," in his O khudozhestvennykh mirakh, Moscow: Sovetskaiia Rossiia, 1985, pp. 161-200), who focuses on Makar Devushkin's settling scores with the author of Akakii Akakievich.

18. See T. G. Pashchenko memoirs in GVS, p. 45.

19. See P. V. Annenkov reporting the words of the painter F. A. Moller and Gogol's own (GVS, p. 290).


21. Reported by S. T. Aksakov (GVS, pp. 137-8, 152). Thus, the Russian joke about distinguishing between Gogol', G ogel' [Hegel], Bebel', Babel', "kabel'" ("cable"), "kobel" ("male dog"), and "suchka" ("female dog, bitch") is not devoid of pertinence.

22. See his letter to S. T. Aksakov, March 18 1843 (GVS, p. 186).


25. He reprimanded them, demanded gratitude for living among them, and expected them to reread, copy, and circulate his letters.


27. Fanger, Creation..., p. 48; Terts compares him to Nozdrev, who claimed as his, moe, even what lay beyond his boundaries (V teni..., p. 238).

28. See, respectively, V. V. Vinogradov, Poetika russkoi literatury. Izbrannyye trudy, Moscow: Nauka, 1976, p. 191, and Donald Fanger, "Gogol and His
discovery of the good taste of bad taste can be liberating... The ultimate Camp statement: it's good because it's awful.

...the glorification of 'character'..., the unity, the force of the person... The peculiar relation between Camp and homosexuality has to be explained...

...the spirit of extravagance..., something

...Camp... emphasizes... style at the expense of content... Camp which knows itself to be Camp... is... less satisfying... Camp... reeks of self-love...,

...that of a fictitious character" (54 Sintaksis..., p. 84), and on the way already

...On "camp" see Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'," in her

...Naum Korzhavin in a personal communication to the present writer. Cf. Fanger's statement that, "giving up the freedom of a creator, Gogol took on

...sometimes Tolstoy's style turns quite Akakii-like, see A. K. Zholkovskii, "Lev Tolstoi i Mikhail Zoshchenko kak zerkalo i zazerkal'e russkoi revoliutsii,"

...This strategy is somewhat reminiscent of Agaf'ia Tikhonovna's wishful combining of her suitors' various features ( Marriage).

...the obverse of this motif is Bobchinskii's desire that his name be known to the Emperor ( The Inspector General).

...On Gogol as the Grand Inquisitor see Terts V teni..., pp. 69-70; cf. Gary Saul Morson, The Boundaries of Genre, Dostoevsky's 'Diary of a Writer' and the Traditions of Literary Utopia, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, pp. 115-141, and Alexander Zholkovsky, "Dreaming Right and Reading Right:

52. See Sasha Sokolov, Palisandria, Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985; about it, see Olga Matich, "Sasha Sokolov's Palisandria: History and Myth," Russian Review 45(3) [1986]: 415-26, and Alexander Zholkovsky, "The Stylistic Roots of Palisandria," Canadian-American Slavic Studies 21 (3-4) [1987; special Sokolov issue, guest-ed. by D. Barton Johnson]: 369-400.

53. In a variation on both Gogol and Fedorov, Palisandr buys the graves of eminent emigres to transport back to Russia its glory (Matich, * Palisandria: History and Myth*...).

54. On the classicistic nature of Socialist Realism see Terts's historic essay "On Socialist Realism," in his The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982 [1959], 127-219; cf. the painters Komar and Melamid's mock neoclassist sots-art (e. g. "Comrade Stalin and the Muses"); cf. also Terts ( V teni..., pp. 244 ff.) on Gogol's links to the XVIII century and on SP as a sort of Taras Bulba (ibid., pp. 93-94).

55. If his opinion is, after all, unique ("and if there is in me whatever small drop of reason, not possessed by all...," a sentence omitted from Zeldin's version - A. Zh.), it is, in a characteristic high/low mediation, thanks to his familiarity with "merzosti," "abominations, disgusting things" (135/321).

56. Cf. SPs much-quoted principle that love should be transmitted "up through the ranks" ("po nachal'stvu," Letter XXVIII, 194/366).

57. Cf. Chernyshevsky's Vera Pavlovna on carrying things over from the future into the present.

58. Typicality, that crucial concept of criticism of the time, is also invoked regarding the choice of representative events and rumors to be recorded by the gubernatorsha.
Reading books is indeed good. But there is one aspect of it that many people tend to forget: the value of rereading books. I believe that not only should you read books you’ve never read, but also you should reread books you’ve already read. In fact, I’d argue that rereading books is just as important as reading new ones. Why You Should Reread Books. Here are some reasons why rereading books is good: 1. It reminds you of the good ideas. Research shows that in just 24 hours people would forget most of what they’ve read. You might get a lot of good ideas from a book, but it’s easy to forget most