

Excess and Absence: An Apophatic Approach to Nikolai Gogol's Fiction

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Colorful, vibrant, and absurd, Nikolai Gogol's fiction continues to entertain, confuse, and disturb common readers and scholars alike one hundred and sixty years after his death. Perhaps even more mysterious than his fiction is the persona of the author himself. A known hypochondriac and megalomaniac (Zholkovsky), Gogol loved to dress in flamboyant clothing, cook decadent Italian dinners, and converse with his characters out loud while writing his fiction. Richard Peace accurately sums up the life, mind, and legacy of Gogol when he describes this strange little man as "an enigma" (1).

Part of what makes Gogol's literature so fascinating is his artful use of words. Simon Karlinsky once cleverly called Gogol a "word glutton" who loved "inventing words and devising macaronic verbal coinages involving several languages" ("Portrait of Gogol as a Word Glutton" 170). Interestingly, Gogol often coupled this "word gluttony" with images of literal gluttony that appear in just about every work of fiction, from the pagan-like feasts described in *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* to the simple supper of the "fair-to-middlin'" gentleman Chichikov in *Dead Souls* (56). Gogol's word gluttony reached a height in *Dead Souls*, which was published in 1842, two years after he recovered from a mysterious illness and embraced Eastern Orthodox Christianity with a newfound enthusiasm that eventually evolved into his final spiritual crisis. Since his years as a student at Nezhin, Gogol believed that a higher power had entrusted him to rejuvenate the moral health of the Russian people. With fiction as his divine vessel, Gogol hoped to inspire his readers to thoroughly investigate their own souls. From his earliest Ukrainian tales to his final work of fiction, *Dead Souls*, Gogol reveals the spiritual degeneracy of his characters through their specific acts of gluttony. The ironic twist is that throughout his literary career, Gogol was engaging in his own form of gluttony in his attempt to spiritually nourish Russia. This essay investigates Gogol's fiction through the lens of apophaticism, a

theology embraced by the hesychasts of the Eastern Orthodox Church that utilized the negation of language in order to come into divine unity with God. An apophatic approach not only gives Gogol's readers a new perspective from which to analyze his fiction, but also explains the tragicomedy of Nikolai Gogol's life as a whole.

### I. Его Жизнь и Смерть

Николай Васильевич Гоголь родился 20 марта в 1809 году в селе Сорочинцы в Украине. Его ранняя жизнь была не очень интересной. В 1821 году Николай поступил в школу в Нежине. Василий, отец Николая, был землевладелец и украинский драматург. Он умер в 1825 году, когда Гоголю был шестнадцать лет. Учёные думают, что Мария, мать Гоголя, которая была религиозным фанатиком, повлияла на психологическое состояние Гоголя. Саймон Карлинский утверждает, что Гоголь “унаследовал... его безграничную фантазию” и “его умение для смазывать реальные и мнимые” от Марии (*The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol* 8). Её религиозный фанатизм повлияла на Гоголя, но не вызвала духовный кризис Гоголя, который начался в последние десять лет его жизни. До его болезни, которая была почти смертельная, в 1840 году, Гоголь был “номинальный христианин в лучшем случае” (Maguire 82) и “был скептический” и даже был “враждебный” к организованной религии (84). Эта позиция очевидная в письме, которое Гоголь написал матерям в октябре в 1833 году:

Не учите её какому-нибудь катехизису, который тарабарская грамота для дитяти. И это немного тоже делает добра, если она будет беспрестанно ходить в церковь. Там для дитяти тоже всё непонятно: ни язык, ни обряды. Она привыкнет на это глядеть, как на комедию... На всё я глядел

бесстрастными глазами; я ходил в церковь потому, что мне приказывали или носили меня; но стоя в ней, я ничего не видел, кроме риз, попа и противного ревеня дьячков. Я крестился потому что видел, что все крестятся.

(Мещеряков 281, книга 10)

Однако в письме Гоголь также говорит о том, как Мария “так хорошо, так понятно, так трогательно рассказали” ему, “о тех благах, которые ожидают людей за добродетельную жизнь” тем не менее “так разительно, так страшно описали вечные муки грешных, что это потрясло и разбудило во [нём] всю чувствительность” (Мещеряков 281, книга 10).

По окончании гимназии в Нежине в 1828 года, Гоголь переехал в Санкт-Петербург. Он пытался написать стихотворение под заглавием *Ganz Küchelgarten*. Стихотворение было смешным ужасным и получило плохие отзывы. После этого инцидента, Гоголь уехал из России в Германию в августе 1829 года. Он вернулся в Россию в сентябре, чтобы работать на государственной службе. Но, Гоголь осознал, что гражданская служба была скучной и не приносила удовольствие. Поэтому, он решил добиваться другой карьеры. Он продолжал писать, но он также начал преподавать в Институте Отечественной Истории. В 1831 году, Гоголь издал первую часть книги о Украинских рассказах под заглавием *Вечера на хуторе близ диканьк*. Книга была очень популярна и, следовательно, литературная карьера Гоголя началась. В 1835 году, когда он профессором всеобщей истории в Санкт-Петербургском университете, Гоголь издал два произведения литературы: *Арабески*(в январе) и *Миргород* (в марте).

Гоголь получил широкое признание после стал популярным после премьеры его пьесы *Ревизор* 19 апреля 1836. Однако его зрители неправильно поняли смысл пьесы. Они думали, что была только комедия, которая высмеивала государственную систему. Гоголь

был расстроен, потому что пьеса не начала духовное преображение русского народа (Maguire 92). Во второй раз уехал из России в Западную Европу. Он вернулся в Россию несколько раз в период с 1836 по 1848.

Сначала, Гоголь писал очень много. Он закончил его единственный роман, *Мёртвые души* и надеялся написать вторую и третью часть трилогии. Но, публикация *Мертвых душах* означала конец литературной карьеры Гоголя. С 1842 до конца жизни, Гоголь старался закончить книгу. Он издавал только документальную прозу, например, *Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями*. Книга была коллекция писем и эссе, в котором Гоголь играл роль моралиста и оратора. Гоголь начал думать о публикации книги в 1846 году потому что ему нужны были деньги, чтобы поехать в Иерусалим (Karlinsky 247). Как оказалось, Гоголь начал верить, что *Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями* была его самая большая работа. Однако, его читателей думали по-другому. Люди, которые обычно хвалили работы Гоголя, были сердиты и оскорблены. Виссарион Григорьевич Белинский, литературный критик, который ранее похвалил его как писателя-реалиста, напал на Гоголя потому что он считал, что Гоголь предал его ценности. Белинский всегда думал, что Гоголь хотел изменить общественный строй в России. На самом деле, Гоголь был консерватором, когда это касалось политических и социальных вопросов. Обескураженный из-за негативной критики, Гоголь послал экземпляр книги к Отцу Константиновскому, в надежде что Константиновский бы понять его моральные сообщение.

Отец Матвей Александрович Константиновский был харизматический священник, который играл важную роль в последние годы Гоголя жизни. Он начал свою карьеру в провинциальной России и был известен своей страстной проповедью и жестокой

личностью. Граф Александр Толстой познакомился с ним, когда он был губернатором Тверской губернии. Граф изумился религиозному образу жизни Матвея Александровича и пригласил священника переехать из провинции в Преображенскую церковь в Ржеве. Граф Александр Толстой хотел, чтобы Отец Константиновский обратился к старообрядцам и убедил их вернуться к истинному Православию (Karlinsky 271). У Матвея Александровича был успех и он часто посещал дом Графа, где он встретился с Гоголем.

В письме, которое он написал из Неаполя в январе или в феврале 1847, Гоголь просит Матвея Александровича чтобы он прочитал *Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями* и дать обратную связь:

Я прошу вас убедительно прочесть мою книгу и сказать мне хотя два словечка о ней, первые, какие придутся вам, какие скажет вам душа ваша. Не скройте от меня ничего и не думайте, чтобы ваше замечание или упрек был для меня огорителен. Упреки мне сладки, а от вас ещё будет слаще. Не затрудняйтесь тем что меня не знаете; говорите мне так, как бы меня век знали. (Мещеряков 231, книга 13)

К сожалению, Отец Константиновский ответил отрицательно. Он критиковал "Письмо XIV," которое Гоголь написал Графу Толстому. В письме Гоголь пытался убедить Графа Толстого в наличии моральных качеств театра (Karlinsky 271). Константиновский запретил деятельность, которая не была религиозной, например: танцы и пение. Он не мог с этим смириться. Критик Карлинский утверждает, что идеи Гоголя могут повлиять на духовность Графа Толстого (272). Гоголь послал немедленный ответ, в котором он объяснил свою позицию, а также поблагодарил Матвея Александровича за советы

(Мещеряков 300, книга 13). Это первая дискуссия положила начало переписки, которая будет продолжаться до смерти Гоголя в 1852 году. 1847 года по 1852 были самые "религиозные" годы жизни Гоголя и Отец Константиновский несомненно был частично ответственен за окончательный духовный кризис Гоголя. Но, Гоголь доверился ему потому что Отец Константиновский дал Гоголю духовный совет и духовную дисциплину, которые Гоголь думал, чтобы помочь ему искоренить всё врожденные страсти” (273). Перед встречей Отца Константиновского, Гоголь посетил Макарий, отшельник в Оптину Пустынь, знаменитый монастырь, где оба Достоевского и Толстого укрылся во время их духовных кризисов. Но, Гоголю не нравились советы Макария, он находил облегчение в проповедях священника (Karlinsky 273).

В январе 1848 года, Гоголь поехал в Иерусалим. Во время поездки, он отплыл в Сицилию и Мальту, где в то время происходила историческая революция. Гоголь был обеспокоен событиями в Европе и его беспокойство можно услышать в его письмах. В конце концов, Гоголь прибыл в Иерусалим. Карлинский утверждает, что Гоголь “был как в тумане” как он бродил по Иерусалиму (261). В письме от 16-28 февраля 1848 года, Гоголь написал Константиновскому и выразил разочарование в связи с состоянием его души:

У гроба господня я помянул ваше имя; молился как мог моим сердцем не умеющим молиться. Молитва моя состояла только в одном слабом изъяснении благодарности богу за то что послал мне вас. (Мещеряков 53, книга 14).

Смутные заявления, такие как “молился как мог моим сердцем не умеющим молиться,” были свойственно ему, особенно в его переписке с Константиновским. Кажется, он

никогда не говорил о своих внутренних мыслях. Он только знал, что он “не виделась” ему своя “бесчувственность, черствость и деревянность” пока он пытался молиться “у самого святого гроба” (Мещеряков 59, книга 14).

Гоголь вернулся из Иерусалима в апреле 1848 года и жил в Одессе с младшим братом Пушкина Лев до октября 1848 года когда он переехал в Москву. В Москве, Гоголь жил с другом и коллегой, М.Р. Погодиным. Но Погодин не мог терпеть религиозный фанатизм Гоголя. Поэтому Гоголь переехал в дом Графа Толстого, где он будет жить до его смерти.

После поездки в Иерусалим Гоголь изменился. Раньше в письмах Гоголя упоминались разочарование и печаль, но как только он вернулся в Европу, он говорит больше о страхе и о сатане. В письме из Одессы, Гоголь упоминает его “положеньё действительно всех опаснее” (62). Он ещё думал, что его выделили на “высшие силы,” но эта высшая сила была зловещая. Ещё раз, язык смутный и повторяющийся. Гоголь объясняет священнику что ему “много бы хотелось сказать” Константиновскому, но “это заняло бы страницы и весьма легко перешло бы в многословие может быть даже в ложь” (62). Гоголь продолжает и говорит что, может быть, “дух-обольститель” обманывает его (62). Несмотря на надежду на спасение, он не был в силах игнорировать чувство присутствия зла.

В ноябре 1848 года, Гоголь поселился в Москве и попытался продолжить свою работу над своей книгой *Мёртвые души*. Но писатель был отвлекаться на свой страх и потому что он “был недоволен состоянием души своей” (96). Поэтому, он неспособный работать. В письме к Константиновскому на 9 ноября 1848, Гоголь говорит:



В ней бывает так черство! То, о чем бы следовало мне думать всякий час и всякую минуту, так редко бывает у меня в мыслях, и это самое редкое помышление о нем так бывает холодно, так без любви и одушевления, что в иное время становится даже страшно (96).

Он считает, что там было что-то важное, что он должен быть обдумывать. Но пока Гоголь не может понять эту важную мысль. Вместо этого он дает полное объяснение своему странному мыслительному процессу. Очевидно, он чувствовал себя виновным, но из-за своей вины и страха, не может принять меры. Интересно, что Гоголь закончил письмо на "Отче Наш." Эта молитва существовала в Церкви в течение сотен лет и каждый добрый христианин знакомый с этой молитвой. Когда Гоголь чувствовал себя виноватым потому что он не был может "правильно молиться" "своими молитвами, он может полагаться на приемлемую и традиционную молитву. Только повторение одной фразы успокаивала его: "Господи, не введи меня во искушение и избави от лукавого."

Гоголь написал следующее письмо к священнику в конце декабря 1848. В этом коротком письме, Гоголь просит Отца Константиновского чтобы он посетил дом Графа Толстого во время Рождества. Это письмо дает читателю представление о личности Графа Толстого. Гоголь говорит, что граф "живет так уединенно и таким монастырем" (101). Граф Александр Толстой и его жена принцесса Анна Грузинская были очень религиозные и были очень строги в своих христианских поведении: они только слушали духовную музыку и читать религиозные книги (Karlinsky 262). Граф Толстой был еще одним важным духовным наставником Гоголя.

После этого письма Гоголь и Константиновский не общались около года. По словам Сергея Аксакова, зимой 1848-1849 годов, Гоголь восстановил физическую силу,

работал над вторым томом *Мертвых душ*, и был в хорошем настроении (Proffer 16). Но весной 1849 года он был болен и не мог писать. В письме, которое он написал в конце мая, к С.М. Соллогуб, Описание Гоголя его поведения страшна:

Я действовал таким образом, как может только действовать в состоянии безумия человек, и воображая в то же время, что действую умно. Но Бог милосерд. Он меня наказал нервическим сильным расстройством, начавшимся с приходом весны болезнью, которая для меня страшнее всех болезней... Внезапно растопившаяся моя душа заныла от страшной жестокости моего сердца. С ужасом вижу я что нем лежит один эгоизм, что несмотря на умение ценить высокие чувства я их не вмещаю в себе вовсе... (Мещеряков 126, книга 14)

Пока он писал это письмо, он чувствовал безнадежность и страх и в следующие три года эти чувства усилятся.

Связь между Гоголем и Константиновским началась снова в феврале 1850 года. В письме, Гоголь выражает озабоченность, потому что он не слышал от священника в течение очень долгого времени. Предметом его письма, которые он писал в марте, были некоторые книги, которые Гоголь хотел послать к священнику. В этих двух письмах Гоголь не много говорит о его состоянии. Но в следующем письме, которое он написал на Пасху, он много говорит о состоянии его здоровья и другой борьбе. В первый раз с прошлого года, Гоголь выражает, как он “бы хотелось сердцу поведать славу Божию” (178), но когда он пытается писать, он не может. По его мнению, Гоголь считал себя спасителем России:

Хотелось бы живо в живых примерах показать темной моей братии  
живущей в мире играющей жизнью как игрушкой что жизнь—не игрушка.

(179)

Он считал, что его книги могут изменить Россию, но к сожалению, к этому времени, Гоголю было ясно, что он не сможет закончить свою работу. В последнем письме Гоголь выражает желание поехать на Восток, чтобы восстановить своё здоровье и просит молитв священника.

Через несколько недель, Гоголь послал письмо, в котором сообщил Отцу Константиновскому о смерти Надежды Николаевны Шереметевой. Как Отец Константиновский Надежда Николаевна была важным духовным наставником Гоголя. Шереметьева и Николай Гоголь переписывались много лет. Гоголь ценил её мнение относительно богословских вопросов.

В следующем письме, которое Мещеряков опубликовал, Гоголь упоминает, что он живет в Одессе. Он говорит, что он счастливый в Одессе из-за мягкого климата. Что касается его психического здоровья, Гоголь просто говорит: "Но что тут говорить?" (219) и что, "может быть," священнику "душа [Гоголя] известна больше чем [Гоголю] самому" (219). Ещё раз, мы видим, что Гоголь либо не может найти слов, чтобы описать его психического состояния или намеренно выбирает исключить информацию. Карлинский утверждал, что Гоголь пытался скрыть свои гомосексуальные чувства и мысли, но депрессию писателя можно объяснить тем, что Гоголь медленно понимая, что его творческий гений терял силу и что и его письменная работа никогда не будет влиять на Россию. Гоголь не был готов признать эту мысль. Вместо этого он решил просить священника помолиться за него, чтобы он может раскаиваться в своих грехах, выполнять

свою миссию. Несмотря на оптимизм, с которым Гоголь начинает письмо, его последнее предложение показывает его отчаяние: “Молюсь, молюсь, и видя бессилие своих молитв, вопию о помощи: молитесь, добрая душа!” (219).

После этого письма переписка Гоголя с Константиновским останавливается почти на год. Согласно Проффёру и Гиппиусу, Гоголь был очень продуктивным в 1851 году и он, казалось, набирал силу в теле и в духе. В ноябре 1851, он написал священнику о своей надежде работать во имя Бога. Он благодарит Константиновского для своих письмах, потому что они показывают что-то важное о его душе. Когда он читает письма в тишине, он здесь утешается.

К сожалению, в течение следующих нескольких недель, трагические события привели к его окончательному падению. Первым трагическим событием была смерть смерти сестры Николая Языкова, которая была близким другом Гоголя. Смерть Екатерины в январе 1852 года подействовала на него сокрушающе (Proffer 18). В дополнение к этому событию, у Гоголя были несогласия с Константиновским в конце января. Это было сильным потрясением, которое очень огорчило Гоголя. Отец Образцов, коллега Отца Константиновского, сказал в своей автобиографии, что Отец Константиновский заставил Гоголя отказаться от Пушкина потому что он был “грешник и язычник” (Karlinsky 274). Отец Образцов также утверждал, что Константиновский смутно сказал, что Гоголь был заражен “внутренней нечистотой,” которую ни один врач не может вылечить (274). Видимо, Константиновский думал, что он сможет вылечить Гоголя, но ему это не удалось.

Несмотря на это неприятный последний визит, Гоголь пишет сердечное письмо 6 февраля, на следующий день Константиновский уехал в Ржев. В письме, Гоголь благодарит Константиновского за молитвы и просит прощения потому что он оскорбил

его. Последние строки напоминают читателю о знаменитом рассказе Гоголя, *Шинель*, который несчастный Акакий Акакиевич Башмачкин становится рабом своего пальто:

“Мне стало только жаль, что я не поменялся с вами шубой. Ваша лучше бы меня грела”

(Мещеряков 271, книга 14). Гоголь был в эмоциональном и отчаянном состоянии и священник, казалось, был единственным человеком, который может помочь ему.

Заключительная фраза показывает, что Гоголь думал о смерти: “Обязанный вам вечною благодарностью и здесь и за гробом” (271). Последнее письмо Гоголя Константиновскому было Гоголя принятие его судьба.

После отъезда Константиновского, Гоголь решил очистить себя от всех грехов. Он сел на строгую диету и молился непрерывно. Но, его духовный пост быстро превратился в опасный голод. Он ел только водянистую овсяную крупу и пил только воду с небольшим количеством вина. Гоголь, чей организм был уже и так истощен и изношен, усугублял свое здоровье голодом. В ночь на 11 февраля, Гоголь, слабый и исхудалый, бросил рукопись второй части *Мертвых душах* в камин. По словам Гиппиуса, можно заключить что действия Гоголя была ошибкой потому что на следующий день, Гоголь сказал А.П. Толстому что “он хотел сжечь некоторые бумаги” (Gippius 178) что он “намеревался сжечь давно” но он “сжег главы *Мертвых душах*” (178). Гоголь хотел дать эти главы его друзьям после его смерти. Учёные не выдвинули убедительных доводов, объясняющих причину, по которой почему Гоголь решил сжечь его рукописи. Это правда, что первые четыре главы не сгорели ночью 11 февраля. В течение следующих недель, Гоголь продолжал морить себя голодом, отказался спать, и молился перед иконами. Его испуганные друзья просили его, чтобы он ел и пошёл к врачу, но Гоголь сказал, “Оставьте меня в покое. Я чувствую себя хорошо” (Karlinsky 277). Граф Толстой попросил

помощи священников православной церкви. Он выразил надежду, что они могут убедить Гоголя есть и отдохнуть. Когда Гоголь отказался слушать священников, Граф Толстой призвал Врача Алексея Тарасенкова и других врачей, которые пытали Гоголя средневековыми методами лечения (277). После трёх дней мучений Гоголь умер 21 февраля 1852.

[The above section provides a brief biography of Nikolai Gogol and specifically discusses his relationship with Father Matvei Konstantinovsky, an Orthodox priest who became one of Gogol's most powerful spiritual mentors. Gogol began his correspondence with Father Konstantinovsky in 1847 after he sent the priest a copy of *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, a nonfiction work that consisted of letters and essays that focused on Gogol's religious and aesthetic beliefs. Gogol, who never published another work of fiction after *Dead Souls*, wrote *Selected Passages* with the hope that the Russian people would respond to his nonfiction work more satisfactorily than they did to his fiction. Unfortunately, the vast majority of his readers were offended by the book. Disheartened by such reception, Gogol gave Father Konstantinovsky a copy of *Selected Passages* thinking that an Orthodox priest would at least understand the religious implications of the work. Father Konstantinovsky, however, was not impressed and found specific fault with "Letter XIV," an essay explaining the importance of the theatre (Karlinsky 272). After this first interaction, Gogol began to seek the spiritual advice of Father Konstantinovsky, whose "hell-fire-and-brimstone Christianity" (273) influenced Gogol up until the writer's death in 1852.

The circumstances of Gogol's death and the role that Father Konstantinovsky played in the writer's demise remain ambiguous. During their last meeting, Father Konstantinovsky instructed the distressed Gogol to internally cleanse himself through fasting and constant prayer.

This spiritual fast quickly turned into a starvation diet with deadly consequences. Consuming only diluted oatmeal and solutions of wine and water, Gogol's already slight body wasted away. During the night of February 11 through 12, a weak and gaunt Gogol threw the manuscript to Part II of *Dead Souls* into the fireplace. As Gippius notes in his final chapter in *Gogol*, it is very possible that the burning of *Dead Souls* was a mistake, seeing as Gogol admitted to A.P. Tolstoy the next day that he "wanted to burn some papers" that he "intended to burn long ago, but instead...burned the chapters of *Dead Souls*," which he desired to give to his friends after his death (178). The mystery behind the famous incineration of Part II of *Dead Souls* has not, and may never be solved. What is certain is that the first four chapters and one of the final chapters survived the night of February 11. After that night, Gogol's condition declined exponentially. On the morning of February 21, 1852, after enduring days of horrific treatments prescribed by incompetent doctors, Nikolai Gogol died.]

## II. The Divine Calling

As mentioned above, throughout his life, Gogol felt that a "higher power" had chosen him for "some great mission" (Maguire 82). He eventually came to view himself as an instigator of moral change and the savior of the Russian people. This divine calling motivated Gogol even before he considered a career as a writer. On March 24, 1827, while still in school in Nezhin, Gogol wrote to his mother, Maria:

I am testing my strength for beginning an important, noble task: for the good of the fatherland, for the happiness of its citizens, for the good of the life of my fellow men; and, until now indecisive, not confident of myself (and rightly so), I am flaring up in a fire of proud awareness of myself and it is as my soul sees this

divine angel firmly, adamantly, continually pointing to the goal which is zealously being sought. (*Letters of Nikolai Gogol* 25)

During the time in which he wrote this letter, Gogol planned to move to St. Petersburg to join the civil service. However, he soon realized that his vision of St. Petersburg was naïve and preconceived. The civil service itself also proved a disappointment, causing the disillusioned Gogol to seek his purpose elsewhere, which he found in writing.

Gogol's unique use of language established his legacy among Russian literary giants. His constant wordplay, loquacious metaphors, and linguistic twists and turns give his fiction a vibrancy that stays with the reader long after finishing the book. Believing that "there was no area of experience that could not be translated into words" (Maguire 340), Gogol felt that he could "represent the unrepresentable" (Fusso 6) and use this verbal abundance in his fiction to capture a divine truth that would benefit Russia spiritually and morally. Unfortunately, this endeavor proved to be much more difficult than the writer first assumed. Thus, he abandoned his topsy-turvy world of fiction for theological writings. When this project failed as well, Gogol spent his final years desperately trying to justify himself both to Russia and to God.

Gogol's lifelong struggle to adequately define and describe this divine truth parallels the teachings of Eastern Orthodox theology. In his analysis of Gogol, Robert Maguire discusses the work of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, a theologian famous for his writings on apophaticism, a form of Eastern Orthodox Christian theology that "approaches" God by describing Him through negation. Maguire acknowledges that an apophatic approach to Gogol's works is "a powerful idea" and that negation "is so common a trait of Gogol's style that it may be called characteristic" (88). However, the discussion ends there as Maguire dismisses apophaticism as a subject that "really should be reserved for theological discourse" (88) and returns his focus to



Dionysius' *The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. While Maguire's analysis of Dionysius' theory of the divine hierarchy and how it relates to "right place" and "displacement" in Gogol's works is thought-provoking, his abrupt abandonment of apophaticism in Gogolian fiction leaves much room for discussion. In fact, apophaticism applies not only to Gogol's literature, but also to his rise and fall as a writer.

Although scholars are yet to agree on the exact identity of Pseudo Dionysius (many believe that he was a disciple of St. Paul (Lossky 23)) or when he produced his works, his writings are an invaluable component of theological study. Scholars use "Pseudo" in order to distinguish the mystery author's writings from those of the Dionysius from the Bible's Acts 17:34 (Versluis). Pseudo Dionysius explains the concept of apophaticism at length in his work, *Mystical Theology*. He describes how the faculties of the human intellect are unable to grasp the concept of God in its entirety and that in order to come into union with the Divine, one must transcend these imperfect faculties. Humans attempt to "define" God through metaphors, similes, analogies, etc., but one cannot explain God through rational thinking because God is beyond the rational, beyond language, and beyond this world. Thus, as humans, we can only use language to draw closer towards (or further away from) God.

According to Pseudo Dionysius, cataphatic theology, which "proceeds by affirmations" will lead one to "some knowledge of God," but in an "imperfect way" (Lossky 25). Cataphatic theology is necessary because when a human embarks on a spiritual journey, he or she needs some conception from which to branch off. However, Pseudo Dionysius believed that one comes closest to God through apophatic theology. This "perfect way" eventually leads the faithful into an abyss, into "the darkness of absolute ignorance" (25). He asserts that theology "prefers the

negative because Almighty God is more appropriately presented by distinction than by comparison” (Preface to *Mystical Theology* 129).

Although known as “negative theology,” apophaticism does not confine itself specifically to negative statements about God. What is important is the process of negation of the cataphatic statements in order to stress the barriers of language even further to draw closer to the Divine. For instance, one may say, “God is good.” This positive (cataphatic) statement confines God to a specifically human idea. If the believer limits God, he or she creates a false god, an idol that is built upon flawed conceptions (Lossky 33). So, one must negate the statement (“God is good”) and reach into the realm of language and create a “higher” concept of God and then negate that concept as well. This process continues until one hits the full capacity of language. A void of silence and stillness enshrouds the believer and it is here that one realizes the incomprehensibility of God and experiences a mystical union with the Divine.

Pseudo Dionysius compares this journey to Moses’ climb up Mount Sinai as told in the Book of Exodus. Purifying and “separating himself from all that is unclean,” Moses ascends the mountain to meet God (27). Once he “passes into the truly mystical darkness of ignorance,” Moses “is united to the best of his powers with the unknowing quiescence of all knowledge” (28). This “union” by no means indicates that the believer visualizes a concrete image of God, but rather confirms that as humans, we can never comprehend God, but must search deeper into the darkness. Upon such realization, the soul will be “filled with an ever-increasing desire” to continue to grow (35). Thus, the attempt to reach God remains a life-long journey, where one persistently works to purify the soul and to transform the self (38).

At the height of his literary career, Gogol relished in the endless concoctions of verbal abundance, which functioned in the same way that cataphaticism functions in theology. He felt

that he could build a conception of divine truth, or Logos, through his absurd humor and descriptive language. However, the writer's faith in his creativity wavered as time after time he watched his readers misinterpret his messages. Eventually, he came to the conclusion that he had wasted his life approaching God in the wrong way and had consequently perverted his divine mission, gravely displeasing his God above. Of all his sins, Gogol sought to eliminate that of gluttony, in both the literal sense and the literary sense. He traded his former cataphatic approach to God for apophaticism, abandoning his love for loquacity for the formal Slavonic text and nourished himself with watery gruel instead of indulging in the exotic dishes inspired by his years abroad. Even with such changes, Gogol never ascended into the "mystical darkness of ignorance," but slid into physical and psychological exhaustion, dying a terrified and tormented man.

### III. Sin and the Supernatural in Little Russia

To understand the tragedy of Nikolai Gogol, one must examine the beginning of his literary career. Gogol's spiritual journey can be divided into three periods of literary productivity: the period of folklore-inspired Ukrainian tales (1830-1835) during which religion played a lesser role, the period of moralist fiction (1836-1842), when Gogol attempted to use his literary talent to spiritually transform Russia, and the period of nonfiction (1842-1852), a decade filled with religious writings that infuriated critics and friends alike. Gogol's spiritual progression manifests itself in his use of verbal abundance and absence in accordance with food imagery. The extravagant food imagery accompanied by rambling conversations or unsettling silence serve to unveil the absurdity of corrupt human nature.

In the past, scholars unfairly dichotomized Gogol's literary genius into two camps: that of the "mature" Gogol, the writer of *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls* and that of the naïve storyteller of the Ukrainian tales, which lack the moral and religious sophistication of his later works. Vladimir Nabokov expresses great relief that Gogol, "in his riper years," chose "to ignore or reject those artificial works of his youth" (31). "When I want a good nightmare," Nabokov continues, "I imagine Gogol penning in Little Russian dialect volume after volume of *Dikanka* and *Mirgorod* stuff about ghosts haunting the banks of the Dniepr, burlesque Jews and dashing Cossacks" (31-32). Nabokov admits "that here and there," within *Evenings* and *Mirgorod*, "something foretelling the real Gogol... may be dimly but unmistakably foreseen" (32). No doubt, Gogol's style and diction matured as his literary career progressed, but the same demons that lurked within "A Terrible Vengeance" and "The Night Before Christmas" also manifest themselves in *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*. The devil who convinces Petro to slaughter six-year-old Ivas in "St. John's Eve" sits next to Chichikov in his carriage as he travels from one landowner to the next, collecting the names of the dead. The supernatural force that bestowed on Gogol a divine mission did not always come in the form of a Christian God. The early tales that Nabokov reduces to "colorful romances" emerge from a "pagan foundation" (Mochulsky *Духовный путь Гоголя* 21 qtd. in Maguire 84) and lack the religiously driven morality that permeates *Dead Souls*. The Christian references that do appear in *Evenings* are much of the time treated lightheartedly and with sarcasm. However, both the Ukrainian tales and "more mature" works focus on "a religion of sin and retribution" and "the experience of cosmic horror and an elemental fear of death" (Mochulsky qtd. in Maguire 84). This fear of the vengeful, punishing higher power became a lifelong obsession for Gogol and would eventually

manifest itself in the Christian God in accordance with the strictest dogmas of the Eastern Orthodox Church.

“The Night Before Christmas” (“Ночь перед рождеством”), a tale featured in the first volume of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, tells the story of a village blacksmith named Vakula and his attempts to win over the beautiful, but egotistical Oksana. Whenever a scene involving excess consumption of food occurs in this story, it indicates the presence of supernatural mischief or other sinful events that take place in Dikanka. This theme of sin and the supernatural represented through food is most apparent in Vakula’s encounter with the wizard Paunchy Patsiuk.

Vakula visits Patsiuk as a last resort strategy in obtaining Oksana. Patsiuk, a former Zaporozhets, “didn’t work, slept three-quarters of the day, ate like six mowers, and drank nearly a whole bucket at one gulp” (41). Despite his obvious inclination towards gluttony and sloth, the villagers called upon this wizard whenever someone fell ill or found oneself in a disagreeable situation. The narrator notes that due to “laziness...or else the fact that it was becoming more difficult each year for him to get through the door,” the villagers now had to pay their visits in Patsiuk’s house. As he enters the wizard’s home, Vakula finds Patsiuk seated on the floor in “Turkish fashion” in front of wooden bowl of noodles (41). Paying no attention to his visitor, Patsiuk slurps up the noodles “without lifting a finger” (41). Vakula states his case and asks the wizard, who “knows the way” to the devil, to help him capture Oksana’s heart. Patsiuk says, “If it’s the devil you need, then go to the devil!” and then returns to slurping up his noodles. When Vakula presses further with his request, bribing the wizard with all sorts of edible goodies, Patsiuk apathetically responds, “He needn’t go far who has the devil on his back” (42). Of course, Vakula has no idea that the entire time he’s lugged a sack in which he thought contained

his tools really held the devil himself. Anxiously waiting for an explanation, Vakula stands with his mouth half-open, “ready to swallow the first word like a noodle” (42). When he receives nothing but silence, Vakula’s mind wanders from his present issue and focuses in on Patsiuk and his food. Now two bowls, one filled with dumplings, known as *vareniki* (вареники), and the other of sour cream, replace the noodles. The blacksmith is taken aback by what happens next:

Patsiuk opened his mouth wide, looked at the dumplings, and opened his mouth still wider. Just then a dumpling flipped out of the bowl, plopped into the sour cream, turned over on the other side, jumped up, and went straight into Patsiuk’s mouth. Patsiuk ate it and again opened his mouth, and in went another dumpling in the same way. He was left only with the work of chewing and swallowing. (43)

Patsiuk’s process of consumption is both comical and disgusting. One can only imagine the wizard’s heavy jaws unhinging so that the fatty comestibles of traditional Little Russia can swarm into his gullet, preventing him from communicating with his visitor. In addition to limiting his own speech, Patsiuk seeks to stuff the face of his visitor as well and Vakula makes it too easy. A dumpling dunked in sour cream flies through the air, invading the stupefied Vakula’s agape mouth, “smear[ing] his lips with sour cream” (43). The blacksmith at first remains motionless, marveling at Patsiuk’s powers, but he soon comes to his senses. “What the devil!” Vakula cries, “Today is a *hungry* kutya, and he eats dumplings, non-lenten dumplings! What a fool I am, really, standing here and heaping up sins!” (43). Patsiuk not only sins in that he engages in one of the passions of the flesh, gluttony, but he also breaks a number of fasting rules with one bite.

During the Nativity Fast, observers abstain from meat, dairy, fish, wine, and oil. The fast begins on November 15 (Julian Calendar)/ November 28 (Gregorian Calendar) and ends on

December 24 (Julian Calendar)/ January 7 (Gregorian Calendar). According to the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church, fasting allows believers to come closer to Christ, “suppressing” one’s “feelings and physical passions,” such as “gluttony, pride, self love, envy, and idle talk” (Tyneh 136). Thus, Patsiuk, gorging on *vareniki*, which are made with oil and butter, dipped in sour cream, a form of dairy, shows absolutely no regard for the Christian holiday. In one sense, Patsiuk represents a perverted caricature of Christ, performing similar miracles, but using the unclean powers of the demonic. Instead of denying himself of food and water, as Christ did in the desert for forty days, Patsiuk engages in a passion-driven bingeing marathon. Finally, Patsiuk is severely limited in the realm of language. Rusty Panko, the garrulous narrator of *Evenings*, mentions that the wizard “had only to whisper a few words” (43) in order to heal a sick villager. In his attempt to avoid “heaping up sins,” Vakula runs from Patsiuk’s cottage and straight into the path of the devil himself. Despite the demon’s attempts to take vengeance on the blacksmith, Vakula almost effortlessly captures the devil, forcing the dark spirit to serve Vakula’s own passions. One can see how early on in his career, Gogol coupled the themes of gluttony and the sacred, whether it be mystical paganism or Christianity, indicating that from the beginning, Gogol recognized a significant link between food, the written word, and sin.

Gogol’s play with words and food continues in his description of Christmas Eve traditions in the village. Villagers walk around the neighborhood, caroling under the windows of houses and, in exchange for the musical entertainment, the owner of the house drops “some sausage, or bread, or a copper coin” into the sacks of the carolers (19). In his footnote, Panko explains that the word for the specific types of carols that the villagers sang, the *koliadki* (колядки) originated from the idol Koliada, “who was thought to be a god” (19). Panko links a Christian holiday and its traditions with its pagan past, explaining that the year before, “Father

Osip forbade caroling around the farmstead, saying folk were pleasing Satan by it” (19).

However, this suppression of speech cannot be justified in that “there’s not a word in the *koliadki* about Koliada” and that these carols “sing of the nativity of Christ” (19).

Meanwhile, Oksana and her friends discover the sacks containing the headman, Choub, and the deacon, believing that inside the sacks are culinary delights, such as “whole quarters of lamb,” “sausages and loaves of bread probably beyond count” (45). Laughing, the beauty and her friends plan to steal the sacks of sinners, looking forward to the gluttonous feast days ahead. Here, Gogol associates gluttony with verbal abundance in the form of laughter. Oksana and her friends cannot seem to stop chuckling at the thought of stealing Vakula’s goods. The deacon contemplates an escape, but “to get out of the sack in front of everybody, to make himself a laughingstock” (45), causes him remain in the sack, scrunched “under Choub’s uncouth boots” (45). Even the background and peripheral scenes of “The Night Before Christmas” contain this excess of food, noise, and laughter. Outside in the streets, Panko describes how “the crowds of jostling folk were increased by those coming from the neighboring villages” (38), resulting in more laughter and chaos. As the night wears on, the traditional Christian *koliadki* are replaced by nonsensical tunes that would more likely be sung in a tavern. Panko turns his focus to one rambunctious member of the crowd, who felt inclined to “roar a New Year’s song at the top of his lungs” (38):

Humpling, mumpling!

Give me a dumpling!

A big ring of sausage,

A bowl full of porridge! (38)



One cannot help but notice that the song contains both excessive gastronomical language and nonsensical babble. The reference to food in vast quantities (literal gluttony) parallels the loud laughter in response to the song itself (word gluttony). The holiday of Christmas Eve begins to take on that vain disposition that Rusty Panko so laments in his introduction.

While Oksana and her clan run to get a sled to transport their treasures home, the chum of Choub comes across the sacks. He too imagines that “they’re stuffed with buckwheat loaves and lard biscuits” (46) and, without bothering to look inside sets out with the weaver to heave the sacks home. Unfortunately for the chum and the weaver, the chum’s wife, an old woman who “praised and ate with great appetite” (47), greets them at the door, demanding that they show her the contents of the sacks. Due to her old eyes, the wife mistook Choub for a boar. Choub, determined not to be the subject of ridicule, insists that he pulled the trick on purpose. A similar event takes place back at Choub’s house when Oksana opens her sack only to find the headman step out of it in great confusion, babbling irrelevant questions to the surprised Choub, who responds with an equally asinine question. Enraged that Solokha took advantage of his affections, Choub curses the witch exclaiming, “And to look at her—just like a saint, as if she never put anything non-lenten near her lips” (51). It is ironic that Choub, previously mistaken for a slab of meat, uses food to describe Solokha’s sinfulness, when he too is guilty of lust.

Finally, the confusion concerning Vakula’s supposed suicide manifests itself in terms of food and feasting. The village’s response to Vakula’s “death” begins with the weaver’s wife babbling frantically “in the middle of the street amidst a crowd of Dikanka women” (58). The lamentations quickly escalate into a full-on verbal battle filled with curses, profanity, and the occasional spitting in the enemy’s face. Within the next paragraph, the tone of the tale shifts to melancholy. Oksana, now hopelessly in love with the blacksmith, languishes over the thought

that he would “dare” to “destroy his soul” (59). In church on Christmas morning, Oksana both “prayed, and did not pray” (60) and “the parishioners all noticed that it was as if the feast was not a feast” (60). When the deacon attempts to speak the Holy Word of God, he merely “croaked in a barely audible voice” (60). Christmas, a feast day and the breaking of the Nativity Fast is marked by absence and broken logos. It is only when Vakula returns to take Oksana as his bride, that the festivities can commence and the Nativity Fast is broken.

#### IV. Pulkheria Ivanovna and Afanasy Ivanovich in the Land of Cockaigne

The apophatic nature of logos alluded to in “The Night Before Christmas” develops further in Gogol’s idyll, “Old World Landowners” (“Старосветские помещики”). The entirety of this story is built upon affirmation and then negation, excess and absence, the comic and the demonic. Pushkin described “Old World Landowners” as a “comic touching idyll” that “forces” one “to laugh through tears of sadness and tenderness” (qtd. in Peace 32). Gogol defined the idyll as “not a fairy story (*skazka*) and not a tale (*povest*)” but rather “a vivid representation of a quiet, peaceful way of life, a scene having no dramatic movement” (qtd. in Peace 32). Interestingly, Gogol compares the idyll to “a picture of the Flemish School” (32) in the sense that both genres choose “simple objects” as subjects.

The Flemish School of painting reached its height during the Northern European Renaissance of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. While painters of the Flemish School chose seemingly straightforward subjects for their paintings, i.e. portraits, scenes from the Bible, and still life, they also incorporated into their art moralizing themes, such as *vanitas*, which refers to the insignificance of everyday life, and *memento mori*, the reminder of the inevitable death that awaits us all. One such example of this can be seen in Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s 1567 painting,

*The Land of Cockaigne.* The myth of Cockaigne dates back to before the Middle Ages, when it became most popular in Europe. Drawn from both pagan and Christian themes, the myth served as a powerful counterbalance to the dismal quality of life that most Europeans endured during this time in history. While the surviving texts describing Cockaigne vary, they all depict Cockaigne as a land where occupants never worked, indulged in unlimited quantities of food and drink, and enjoyed “free sex with ever-willing partners” (Pleij 3). By the Renaissance of the sixteenth century, the myth of Cockaigne no longer served as a fantastical “earthly idyll” (6) to distract medieval laymen from the drudgery of daily life, but became an enticing subject for European artists. In Bruegel’s visual rendition of Cockaigne, three bloated figures, a clerk, a peasant, and a soldier, lounge on the grass underneath a tree with a table stacked with various dishes attached to its trunk. The clerk’s pen and ink, the peasant’s farm tools, and the soldier’s weapons all lay uselessly on the ground. A pig runs by in the background with a knife already stuck into its side and a roasted bird sits in its dish, waiting to be consumed. The painting illustrates the “proverbial motifs of idleness and gluttony” (406), revealing the paradox of Cockaigne, a land “as frivolous as it is lavish” (5). Bruegel warns his viewers that leading a life according to the passions of the flesh, man will fall off the righteous path and turn towards sin. Gogol presents his readers with a similar lesson in his “painting” of Afanasy Ivanovich Tovstogub, and his wife, Pulkheria Ivanovna, both of whom occupy their own Land of Cockaigne in Little Russia.

In “Old World Landowners,” Gogol shifts from the overt fantastical world that characterized “The Night Before Christmas” to a realm more subtle in its supernatural elements. The devil is no longer represented as a comic caricature fond of mischief and easily defeated by a simple rebuke. Now, Gogol depicts an invisible devil, recognized only in the thoughts, words,

and actions of Afanasy Ivanovich and Pulkheria Ivanovna. The elderly husband and wife live in a land of grotesque excess, especially when it comes to food and drink. Pulkheria, the manager of the estate, spends her days constantly “locking and unlocking” the doors to the storehouse, “pickling, drying, and stewing a numberless multitude of fruits and plants,” and preparing “preserves, jellies, fruit pastes made with honey, sugar,” and the narrator cannot seem to remember what else (137). A coachman “was forever distilling vodka in a copper still, with peace leaves, bird-cherry flowers, centaury,” and “cherry pits” (137-138). Pulkheria prepares so much food and drink that she “would have finally drowned the yard in it” if the serf girls did not break into the storehouse “and gorge themselves so terribly that they would spend whole days afterwards groaning and complaining about their stomachs” (138). At the dinner table of the old couple, food has a habit of “suddenly appear[ing]” and “immediately disappear[ing]” (140), as if by its own will. Everything on the estate revolves around the preparation and consumption of food. Food even serves as medicine against ailments caused by overindulgence. When Afanasy wakes in the middle of the night due to a stomachache, Pulkheria insists that he “better eat something.” As if by magic, once Afanasy eats “a little plateful” (141), the pain subsides and he falls back asleep.

However, a devilish presence lurks in the background of this peaceful portrait of the old world landowners. Black flies stain the painting of the Duchess of La Vallière (135), speckle “a mirror in a narrow gilt frame with carved leaves,” and, accompany the “heavy basso of a bumblebee” and the “piercing shrieks of wasps,” which “cover the ceiling like a black cloud” (137). Just as flies swarm around rotten food or a decomposing corpse, these flies indicate the presence of moral decay and the discordance within the Tovstogub household and the management of the estate. The workers constantly plunder the storehouse, stuffing their faces,

and “even stealing old linen and yarn” (139). The serf girls who “mostly slept and raided the kitchen” (137) mysteriously turn up pregnant. The narrator observes that the only bachelor at the estate is the lazy houseboy, hinting that Afanasy Ivanovich might be the father of these illegitimate children. Pulkheria, distracted in her role as estate manager, either remains completely oblivious to Afanasy’s infidelity or simply chooses not to acknowledge it.

The Tovstogub marriage is held together by the sticky sweets that Pulkheria Ivanovna constantly feeds her husband. Both their casual conversations and most heated arguments revolve around food in some way. Afanasy expresses any displeasure with Pulkheria by projecting his complaints onto the food she prepares for him. By insisting that his *kasha* (каша) is burnt or that the watermelon has gone bad, Afanasy can release his childish frustration onto his wife (Peace 38). In other instances, Afanasy enjoys poking fun at Pulkheria. One night at diner, the old couple and their guest discuss the inevitability of war with Napoleon. Afanasy, ever eager to press Pulkheria Ivanovna’s buttons, announces that he too is thinking about going to war. The exasperated Pulkheria knows “he’s joking,” but acknowledges that such talk is “unpleasant” to listen to and scares her (Gogol 143). Afanasy Ivanovich is “pleased to have given Pulkheria Ivanovna a little fright” and laughs as he sits “hunched on his chair” (144). As in “The Night Before Christmas,” laughter indicates much more than good-natured fun and there exists something more sinister in Afanasy’s laugh. Despite his childlike innocence, Afanasy is a prisoner of the passions of excess: gluttony, lust, and idleness and it will take the loss of Pulkheria for him to realize that he lived an empty life according to the flesh.

The narrator transitions from describing the vibrant lives of the landowners to their demise by recounting his own gluttonous experience at their estate:

I loved visiting them, and though I overate terribly, as all their visitors did, and though it was very bad for me, nevertheless I was always glad to go there.

However, I think that the very air of Little Russia may possess some special quality that aids digestion, because if anyone here tried to eat like that, he would undoubtedly wind up lying not in his bed but on the table. (145)

Here, the narrator explicitly links food with death. According to Russian custom, the deceased is laid out on a table until a coffin can be furnished. This image reoccurs a few pages later when Pulkheria, who ironically dies not from overindulgence in food, but rather self-starvation, is “laid on the table, dressed in the dress she herself had appointed, with her hands crossed and a candle placed in them” (149).

Pulkheria succumbs to death after an incident during which mischievous wild cats lure her little gray cat into the surrounding forest. A few days later, the kitty returns, “thin” and “scrawny” for “she had had nothing in her mouth for several days” (14). Feeding the starveling meat and milk, Pulkheria watches as “the gray fugitive got fat before her eyes” (146). As Pulkheria reaches out to give her kitty a little pet, the fugitive runs away before anyone can catch her. The cat abandons Pulkheria Ivanovna’s “cosseted, passionless” world for a life of amorous exploits with the wild forest cats (Peace 41), thus a life according to the passions of the flesh. Disturbed by the incident, Pulkheria Ivanovna interprets it as a harbinger of her death and immediately begins to deny herself the one thing that she dedicated her life to: food. In addition to refusing food, Pulkheria also loses her ability to speak. When Afanasy Ivanovich cracks a joke in order to “find out why she was suddenly so sorrowful,” his wife “either would not reply or her replies failed totally to satisfy” her husband (Gogol 147). Distraught, Afanasy Ivanovich makes one last attempt to keep Pulkheria from slipping into death, using his only weapon of defense:

food. A reversal of roles occurs (Maguire 31) and now Afanasy Ivanovich must play the role of caretaker, treating Pulkheria Ivanovna's sickness with food and drink. But it is too late for the saving power of a plate of stewed dried pears or a glass of buttermilk. One day, "after a long silence," Pulkheria "made as if to say something, moved her lips," but "her breath flew away" before she spoke her last words to her husband.

The funeral feast that ensues Pulkheria Ivanovna's passing counterbalances her starvation. Just as the *kutya* (кутья) pies, and liquors that cover the tables "in heaps," Pulkheria Ivanovna too lays on a table for the viewing pleasures of the guests (149). Abundance is everywhere, surrounding the dead woman and her unfortunate husband. The numerous guests swarm about like the flies on the ceiling. Outside, the beauty of nature and budding new life mockingly thrusts itself at Afanasy Ivanovich: "the sun shone," "nursing infants wept in their mothers' arms," "larks sang," and "children in smocks ran and frolicked on the road" (149). But even in the midst of all this excess, Afanasy Ivanovich remains empty.

Five years after the death of Pulkheria Ivanovna, the narrator returns to the estate to visit Afanasy Ivanovich. Within moments of stepping into the cottage, he remarks that "the absence of the solicitous Pulkheria Ivanovna could be seen in everything" (151). Immediately after this comment, the narrator describes a meal he shares with Afanasy Ivanovich:

I tried to entertain him by telling him various bits of news; he listened with the same smile, but at times his look was completely insensible, and thoughts did not wander but vanished into it. Often he would raise a spoonful of *kasha* and, instead of putting it into his mouth, put it to his nose; instead of stabbing a piece of chicken with his fork, he stabbed the decanter. (151)

Without Pulkheria Ivanovna, the mechanics of the consumption of food haywires as sauce ends up on Afanasy Ivanovich's dressing gown and *kasha* on his nose. Afanasy Ivanovich's failure to feed himself is coupled with his inability to communicate with the narrator. As the serfs serve up a dish of *mnishki* (мнишки) with sour cream, the old man attempts to speak of Pulkheria Ivanovna, but, overcome with emotion, cannot articulate a sentence. With tears streaming down his face, Afanasy Ivanovich stopped stuttering and "his hand fell on the plate, the plate overturned" and "sauce got all over him" (152). Not long after the narrator's visit with Afanasy did the old man reach his end. While walking in the woods one day, he heard Pulkheria Ivanovna calling him home. Like his wife before him, Afanasy Ivanovich "wasted away" and "finally went out the way a candle does when there is nothing left to feed its poor flame" (153).

Gogol shared with this old couple not only a love of food and entertaining, but also the ease and tranquility of the old fashioned landowners' "bucolic life." However, as Gippius notes, Gogol knew that this story was "not simply a reflection of the impressions drawn from real life," but rather an "idealization" that sprung from his own imagination (74). By incorporating passages that discuss the pillaging of the Tovstogub's storehouse, the mysterious pregnancies of the serf girls, and the bespattering of flies on paintings, Gogol reminds his readers of the undercurrents of corruption in the landowners' Cockaigne-like existence.

Gippius identifies two circles of "static banality," the lowest of which is occupied by those "self-satisfied" sloths who "[aspire] to nothing and [do] nothing" (129). Both Pulkheria Ivanovna and Afanasy Ivanovich led lives of static banality, but the narrator focuses specifically on Afanasy's tragic existence:

"God!" I thought, looking at him, "five years of all-destroying time—already an insensible old man, an old man whose life seems never to have been disturbed by



a single strong feeling of the soul, whose whole life seems to have consisted entirely of sitting on a high-backed chair, of eating little dried fish and pears, and of good-natured storytelling...” (152)

The narrator’s sympathetic musings encourage in the reader a feeling of pity for the old world landowners. Despite their charm and occupation as “the most attractive of the characters” in Gippius’s lower circle (129), Pulkheria Ivanovna and Afanasy Ivanovich still occupy this realm of sin and must face the consequences. What better punishment for idleness and excess than an agonizing death from total depravation?

“Old World Landowners” reveals Gogol’s own fears of leading a life of “static banality,” thus failing to fulfill his life’s mission and succumbing to the same passions that plagued his characters. Anyone familiar with Gogol’s works and biography recognizes the similarities between Pulkheria Ivanovna’s death by starvation and Gogol’s own demise in 1852. Of course, one must be careful with this comparison because Gogol published “Old World Landowners” seventeen years before he died. It remains highly unlikely that he was somehow foreshadowing his death in the story of Pulkheria Ivanovna and Afanasy Ivanovich. What can be surmised from the story is that for Gogol, excessive earthly passions, such as lust and gluttony, distract one from his or her true mission and result in complete physical and moral defeat.

After the publication of *Mirgorod* in 1835, Gogol’s narrative space left the Ukrainian countryside for the vast provinces of Russia and the bustling streets of St. Petersburg. The stories in *Mirgorod* bridged the pagan world of witches, devils, and monsters, to the more obscure demons lurking in the souls of men as Gogol became more concerned with the moral impact that his writing had on the people of Russia. Gogol clearly had reservations about his Ukrainian tales and his frustration is apparent in a February 1833 letter to M.P. Pogodin:

You ask about *Dikanka Evenings*. To Hell with them! I won't publish them. And although monetary acquisitions would not be superfluous for me, I cannot write, add tales, for that. I have absolutely no talent for speculations. I had even forgotten that I was the creator of these Evenings, and only you reminded me about it...And let them be doomed to obscurity until something weighty, great, artistic comes out of me. (*Letters* 43)

By the time that *The Inspector General* premiered on stage on April 19, 1836, Gogol's outlook on his life's mission had already shifted significantly since the publication of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* and *Mirgorod*. When Gogol "heard that people were offended" by his works "and that whole levels and classes of society were even angry" at him, he became even more determined to use "the power of laughter" to instigate ethical change (*Letters* 190).

Unfortunately, the play did not spark the revolution that Gogol hoped for and instead he met with accusations of libel. Unable to handle the disappointment, Gogol fled Russia on June 6, 1836 and began an extensive tour of Western Europe.

#### V. Word Weaving in *Dead Souls*

This flight west, punctuated by visits to Russia in order to reconnect with friends, settle family matters, and publish his collected works, lasted twelve years, from June 1836 to April 1848. The time abroad allowed Gogol to separate himself from the disappointment of *The Inspector General* and to rekindle his creative spirit. His most prominent accomplishment of the first six years abroad was the completion and publication of *Dead Souls* in 1842, which he began working on while still living in St. Petersburg. In a letter written to Alexander Pushkin on October 7, 1835, Gogol discusses his plans for his new work:

I have begun to write *Dead Souls*. The plot has stretched out into a very long novel, and it will apparently be extremely funny. But for now I've stopped at the third chapter. I'm looking for a good informer with whom I can get on intimate terms. In this novel I want to show all of Russia from one side.

Please be so kind as to give me a plot, some kind of plot, either funny or not funny, but a purely Russian anecdote. Meanwhile, my hand is trembling to write my comedy. If this doesn't happen, then my time will just be wasted...Both my mind and my stomach are starving... (Appendix C of *Dead Souls* 278)

It is interesting that Gogol compares his “literary starvation” to physical starvation. At this time, Gogol craved both creative and physical sustenance that would provide him with the inspiration and energy to carry out his purpose. Despite a brief delay due to his decision to leave Russia after the ill-fated reception of *The Inspector General*, Gogol enjoyed a brief period of heightened productivity. However, when the cold, wintry months hit Switzerland, he fell into a depression and struggled to make headway on *Dead Souls*. Urged by his doctor to find “a change of scene” (Appendix C of *Dead Souls* 280), Gogol settled in Paris, regaining his emotional and physical strength. On November 12, 1836, Gogol writes an enthusiastic letter to Vasily Zhukovsky, describing the colossal impact that he expected his work to have on all of Russia:

Right now I am entirely absorbed in *Dead Souls*. My work is enormously great, and it will not soon be finished. A whole new set of social classes and many different gentlemen will rise up against me; but what can I do! It is my fate to be at odds with my countrymen. *Patience!* Someone invisible is writing with a powerful staff before me, I know that after my death my name will be more fortunate than I was... (Appendix C of *Dead Souls* 280)

Gogol's prediction that *Dead Souls* would not only take a long time to produce and his anticipation of Russia's reaction to the work were both correct. From the time that Gogol left Russia in 1836 to the publication of Part I of *Dead Souls*, Gogol underwent numerous phases of mental and physical illness, which hindered his production and ate away at his psyche. The worst bout of illness occurred in 1840 during a stay in Vienna. Karlinsky downplays the incident, dismissing the argument that the illness marked any sort of artistic change in Gogol. There is some truth in Karlinsky's assertion (208), but one cannot ignore the shift in Gogol's mindset after this brush with death. Viewing his recovery as a "miraculous" (Gippius 105) intervention by Divine Providence, Gogol felt that his life was "still necessary" (105) and he regained the motivation to continue his work on *Dead Souls* with a new sense of importance.

Inspired by his extraordinary healing and travels in Rome, Gogol produced a novel that overshadowed his former works of literature. *Dead Souls* marks Gogol's pinnacle as a word glutton. Homeric similes, extensive metaphors, and hilarious soliloquies burst uncontrollably from his pen. The ornamental style of writing found in *Dead Souls* can be compared to "word weaving" (плетение словес), a technique that emerged during the Second South Slavic Influence in fifteenth century Russia. This renaissance in Russian orthography began in the late fourteenth century when populations living in the Balkans were forced out of their homes during the Turkish invasion (Terras 319). As these populations migrated from Serbia and Bulgaria to Russia, they brought with them new techniques and trends that would influence Russia's literary world. This migration of church scholars combined with a revival of hesychasm in the Russian Orthodox Church led to the implementation of word weaving in both ecclesiastical and secular writings. Victor Terras defines word weaving as a technique in which the writer combines words "to form synonymic or paronomastic series" that are "marked by a dense network of phonic

correspondences” (319). The technique serves to “*suggest* a given idea by referring to it through the convergence of related terms rather than to *identify* this idea with one term” (319). Just as the hesychasts used prayer “to reach the divine through degrees of spiritual purification,” writers used word weaving “to approximate the perfect correspondence between the signifier and the signified” (319). Word weaving “became a means of expression of the Divine” and served to reveal the “gap between Divine Grace and Evil” (Oklot 384). In this sense, word weaving is an extension of apophatic theology. In the same way that a believer uses prayer to approach the idea of God, the word weaver continually edits the written word in order to more thoroughly represent a particular concept.

Epifanii Premudrii, a well-known scholar of the first period of the Second South Slavic Influence, compares word weaving to “the mystery of the Eucharist” and a work of literature to the “triumph of God’s will, a holiday, or a feast” (Oklot 384). In the Eastern Orthodox Church, the sacrament of the Eucharist is a mystical experience when bread and wine are transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ. The faithful unite as one body of believers to take part in the mystery and to become nourished with the Holy Spirit. If the spiritual importance of word weaving is to be compared with that of the Holy Eucharist, then words have the power to spiritually nourish (or impoverish) an entire population of believers. Gogol wanted *Dead Souls* to be Russia’s Holy Eucharist, which would feed a spiritually starving population.

Through strategic placement of words, phrases, and events, Gogol “weaves” together the various adventures of Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov as he travels across provincial Russia with the goal of increasing his economic and social standing through the purchase of dead serfs. Gogol modeled *Dead Souls* after Dante’s *The Divine Comedy*, an epic poem in which Dante travels through Hell, Purgatory, and then Heaven with a mission to redeem his sinful soul. *Dead Souls*,

like *The Divine Comedy*, was meant to be an allegory for a corrupt man's journey towards salvation. Chichikov, Gogol's Dante, must first descend into Hell and be exposed to the various manifestations of human degradation before he can begin his climb of spiritual purification. In each of the five circles of Hell that he visits, Chichikov meets a landlord (or landlady) who embodies a specific form of gluttony, which Gogol indicates through the character's consumption of food and corresponding manner of speech. Gogol utilizes specific literary devices to further emphasize each landowner's abuse of both physical and spiritual nourishment. Chichikov begins his adventure with the empty-headed and empty-stomached Manilov, whose obsessive pipe smoking and excessive sugary language take the place of physical food. With each new landlord, Chichikov descends deeper and deeper into the inferno until he encounters the most abhorrent of gluttons, Pliushkin.

Manilov, whose name derives from the verb *манить*, meaning "to lure" or "to beckon" (*Dead Souls*, Guernsey's footnote 10), represents the outdated sentimentalist with a falsely sweet demeanor. The narrator describes Manilov as "a handsome man," whose face was "not devoid of amiability." Yet, "there was apparently far too great an overdose of sugariness about it" and in Manilov's "ways and turns of speech there was something that wheedled for your good graces and friendship" (19). The first mention of food coincides with a description of Manilov's relationship with his wife. The Manilovs are "perfectly content with each other" (20) and "what is called happy" (21). Yet, their marriage is sexless and, like the relationship between Afanasy Ivanovich and Pulkheria Ivanovna, food replaces sex:

Despite the fact that more than eight years had elapsed since their marriage, each one of them still kept bringing to the other either a slice of apple, or a bonbon, or

a nut, and would say in a touchingly tender voice that expressed perfect love:

“Open your little mouth wide, dearest, and let me put this tidbit in.” (20)

Grammatically speaking, these little gifts are in the singular. Neither Manilov nor his wife presents the other with a whole apple, a box of bonbons, or a bag of nuts. Their marriage, like their small confectionary tokens of love, is insubstantial and superficial. This is apparent in the phrase “each one of them still kept bringing to the other either a slice of apple, or a bonbon, or a nut” (их них всё еще каждый приносил другому или кусочек яблочка или конфекту или орешек). The text reveals the repetition and overabundance of the “ill” sound in “или” and the sounds “ch” and “k” in “кусочек яблочка,” “конфекту” and “орешек.” The hard “k” sound occurs again in the expression of “perfect love”: Разинь душенька свой ротик я тебе положу этот кусочек (“Open your little mouth wide, dearest, and let me put this tidbit in”). This repetition will manifest itself in Chichikov and Manilov’s ensuing conversation during which Chichikov “mimics” what Maguire calls Manilov’s “code” (220). Manilov decorates his sentences with tiny embellishments, such as милость (kindness), приятно (pleasant), and добрый (good) (219), in the same way that he pops just a “tidbit” (кусочек) of apple into Mrs. Manilov’s mouth (ротик). This ridiculous decadence will also translate to Manilov’s written word. In Chapter Seven, Manilov and Chichikov reunite in the town of N—, where Chichikov hopes to purchase the title deeds for the dead souls. Manilov hands him a list that had been “tied with a thin little pink ribbon” and, as Chichikov unrolls the list, he marvels at the “neatness and beauty of the handwriting” that is surrounded by Mrs. Manilov’s “artfully” designed border (136). The emphasis is focused entirely on the decoration of the list with absolutely no mention of the names of the serfs.

After a humorous and prolonged exchange of nauseating salutations, the Manilovs and Chichikov sit down for dinner. While food plays a large role in Chichikov's encounters with future landlords, there is little mention of food in the Manilov household. Manilov announces with pride that he does things in the "Russian way" (по русскому обычаю), serving "cabbage soup" with "an open heart" (от чистого сердца) (24). At one point, the children's tutor must wipe the nose of Manilov's son, Themistoclius in order to prevent "a most considerable drop of foreign matter" from dropping into his soup. However, other than these descriptions, sustenance is essentially lacking. More than once, Mrs. Manilov turns to Chichikov with concern, saying "You aren't eating a thing; you have helped yourself to very little—." Chichikov, with an equally sickening politeness, answers that he is full and that "pleasant talk is better than any course" (26). Like the meal, the talk is meaningless and superficial as the guest and the hosts blabber on about the virtues of the officials of the town, the "pleasures of tranquil life," and the "cleverness" of Themistoclius. All of the officials are "good" men, the countryside "has many pleasant points," and the children are "darling" (23-24). No opinion other than an ostentatiously positive one is expressed by either the guest or the hosts.

The men retire to the drawing room following the meal for more "pleasant talk" and a smoke. Instead of food, Manilov has a fondness for "the less substantial oral intake of smoke" (Peace 215). When he is not speaking or eating, his pipe is shoved in his mouth. As Peace notes, Manilov must consciously remove the pipe from his mouth in order to kiss Mrs. Manilov (215). When Chichikov steers the conversation away from all that is agreeable or enjoyable and expresses his desire to purchase dead souls, Manilov is "utterly at a loss" for words and can only stare at Chichikov while intermittently "letting the smoke dribble out of his mouth in a very tenuous stream" (29). As Chichikov continues to explain his intentions, Manilov, "no matter how



he tried,” could not “penetrate the gist of the matter” and, “instead of replying” sucked at his chibouk “as if he were trying to draw out of it an opinion” (30). Unfortunately, the chibouk fails him, “merely gurgle[ing] and emit[ing] its death rattle” (30), and leaving the befuddled Manilov speechless.

It is worth noting that Gogol uses the image of smoke and its association with food to display corruption even before Chichikov meets Manilov. In the first chapter, Chichikov has just arrived in the town of N—and is seeking sustenance at a local tavern. The common room where the tavern owner serves Chichikov’s dinner is decorated with “the same oil-painted walls, darkened at the top from chimney smoke,” “the same sooty ceiling; the same chandelier, dingy from smoke” and “the same pictures, covering an entire wall and done in oils—in a word, everything the same as you would find everywhere” (3). These blackened objects, soiled by the consistent influx of smoke, are indicators of the moral impurities that Chichikov not only possesses, but will also encounter in his travels across the providences. Maguire notes that Gogol used two separate adjectives to describe the sooty ceiling (закопченный потолок) and the chandelier (копченая люстра) (217). Both of these words come from the verb коптить, which means “to cure in smoke,” but копченая is reserved as an adjective to describe meats that have been smoked, such as sausage. Therefore, the context of this adjective is out of place (217). Gogol “weaves” in inappropriate word combinations further emphasizing Chichikov’s own displacement and therefore foreshadowing his later interactions with the landowners, each of whom possesses his or her own vice that blackens the soul.

In true sentimentalist fashion, the two men come to an agreement concerning Chichikov’s purchase of the dead souls. Yet, the narrator leaves the reader with a rather disturbing portrait of Manilov. After Chichikov makes his exit, Manilov, “puffing away at his pipe,” “gave himself up

to meditation” (33), but this meditation is about as substantial as the food served at the Manilov household. This useless daydreaming is interrupted only by Chichikov’s request to purchase dead souls:

The thought of it refused, in some particular way, to be digested in his head; no matter how he turned it over and over in his mind, he could not make it clear to himself, as he sat there all this time and puffed away at his pipe, which occupation lasted until it was high time for supper. (33)

The phrase, *не варилась в его голове*, literally translates to “could not be cooked (digested) in his head,” bringing back the theme of food and its association with *logos*. Although Gogol’s description of Chichikov’s visit to the Manilov’s is humorous and entertaining, Manilov is not a comic figure, but rather a pathetic one. Both his body and his mind are filled with smoke, which does not satisfy him, but only blackens the walls of his lungs and his soul. Meaningful thoughts cannot be “cooked up” in his brain and, as a result, the words that emit from his mouth quickly dissipate into the air along with a steady stream of tobacco smoke.

Chichikov, intending to visit another landowner, Sobakevich, ends up at the estate of Nastasia Petrovna Korobochka by mistake when his drunken coachman steers the carriage in the wrong direction during a storm. This sequence of events was intentional on the part of Gogol in that Korobochka embodies the opposite vice of Manilov. Unlike Manilov, who “is aloof from the everyday matters of his estate,” Korobochka is “completely immersed in them” (Peace 217). The narrator describes her as “one of those motherly creatures...who are forever complaining tearfully about poor crops” and “accumulate bit, by bit, their tidy little hoards of money” (39). Richard Peace compares Korobochka to Pulkheria Ivanovna in that she too is an “old world landowner” (217), but overlooks the similarities that Korobochka and Pulkheria share when it

comes to the preparation and consumption of food. For instance, Pulkheria's insistence that Afanasy must eat something in order to cure his physical ailments mirrors Korobochka's obsession with Chichikov's appetite when he arrives bespattered in mud. Chichikov, unconcerned about his stomach, wants nothing more than a good night's rest. Korobochka says that he "ought to have a bite of something" after traveling, but that she cannot provide him with sustenance at the time because "it's so late at night" (39). Suddenly, her speech is interrupted by the "strange hissing" of the wall clock that "sounded as if the whole room had become filled with serpents" (39). This hissing is "immediately followed by a death rattle" (за шипеньем тотчас же последовало хрипенье) that recalls the same sound that sputtered out of Manilov's chibouk in the previous chapter. In both instances, the failure of the delivery of speech is associated with this death rattle. However, in comparison with the humorous image of Manilov sucking desperately on his beloved pipe, there is something more threatening in this particular death rattle as it is coupled with the Dantesque image of snakes filling Korobochka's living room.

After a heavy sleep in an expertly fluffed feather bed, Chichikov wakes up to find a number of flies perched upon his face. One may remember that flies, the indicators of rotting food, decay, and corruption, also swarmed the home of Pulkheria Ivanovna and Afanasy Ivanovich. Chichikov rises from his bed and gazes out of the window that faces the poultry yard where he witnesses a rather unnatural and disturbing incident:

A sow and her family bobbed up right on the spot, and right on the spot, while rooting through a pile of garbage, she gobbled up a chick in passing and, without perceiving this, went on putting away watermelon rinds in a systematic kind of way. (42)

At first, it seems that the pig is engaging in what all pigs are apt to do: eat garbage. However, Gogol puts a sickening twist on what would be a normal occurrence when the pig eats not only a living creature, but a creature that has just recently entered life. Gogol uses the image of consumption to remind the reader not to be fooled by Korobochka's cozy estate, for this seemingly harmless woman is capable of dangerous manipulation.

Chichikov sits down with a cup of tea that is "laced" with fruit brandy, a sweet yet potent beverage, and begins to assess Korobochka and plan how he can convince her to sell her dead souls. As with Manilov, Chichikov adopts the style and manner of speech of his targeted victim. However, instead of ornamenting his speech with *милость, приятно, or добрый*, Chichikov punctuates his sentences with religious and superstitious remarks, such as *слава бору* (thanks be to God) and *На всё воля божья* (God's will is in all things). He is surprised to find that Korobochka does not give in nearly as easily as Manilov does when Chichikov implements this method of persuasion and Chichikov's "Thanks be to God" is soon replaced with "may the Devil take her!" (*посулил ей чорта!*).

Finally, Korobochka and Chichikov come to an agreement, yet the old proprietress never stops scheming on how to get Chichikov to also purchase some of her other commodities. In order to carry out her plan, Korobochka uses food as bribery. As Chichikov writes the list of the names of the dead serfs, he catches "the enticing aroma of something hot, made with butter" (51):

Chichikov looked around him and beheld, already standing on the table, small mushrooms, patties, hasty pudding, curd tarts, fritters, pancakes, and wafers with all sorts of baked additions—baked chopped onion, baked poppy seed, baked

curds, baked clotted cream—and Heaven alone knows how many other things there were. (52)

Чичиков оглянулся и увидел, что на стояли уже грибки, пирожки, скородумки, шанишки пряглы, блины, лепешки со всякими припёками: припёкой с лучком, припёкой с маком, припёкой с творогом, припёкой со сняточками, и нивесть чего не было.

Unlike the scanty confections that the Manilovs pop into each others' mouths, Korobochka's dishes are both satisfying and abundant. Phonetically, this sequence, when read in Russian, flows with a smoothness that the phrase describing the eating habits of the Manilovs lacks. This smoothness is due primarily to the repetition of the phrase, “припёкой с” followed by a noun with a masculine instrumental ending. The repetition produces a mesmerizing oscillation of the voice, creating a sing-song tone. Like the food that Pulkheria Ivanovna prepares for her guests, there is something unnatural about the quantity and substance of the meal. Gogol refers to Chichikov's binge as a “performance” (52) as he “dispatched” three pancakes “into his mouth” (52) (три блина отправил в рот). The robotic way in which Chichikov consumes these pancakes reminds one of the manner in which the pig gobbles up a chick “in a systematic kind of way” (продолжала уписывать арбузные корки своим порядком). His act is dehumanizing, gluttonous, and, overall, superficial. Just as Korobochka possesses underlying intentions for treating Chichikov to such bountiful fare, Chichikov too views this gesture as nothing more than a presentation, an act, and therefore a strategic method that will lead to Korobochka's submission. Thus, this gesture is just as empty as Manilov's inability to feed Chichikov anything. Satisfied physically and financially, Chichikov leaves Korobochka and her buttery pancakes for the provincial road, continuing his quest for the souls of the dead.

As the carriage rumbles toward the tavern, where Chichikov hopes “to have a bite of something and fortify himself,” (56) the narrator digresses into a lengthy analysis of the stomachs and appetites of various Russians. He explains that he cares nothing for the “top-notch people living in St. Petersburg and Moscow,” who “spend their time thoughtfully planning” what and when they are to eat, “gulp down oysters, sea spiders, and other such wondrous viands,” and then “wind up” at “the baths at Karlsbad” or “the medicinal waters in the Caucasus” (56). Rather, it is the “fair-to-middlin’ gentlemen” who are to be envied, those who can consume “a ham at one stagepost, a suckling pig at a second, and at a third for a slice of sturgeon, or some sort of sausage baked with onions” and still “sit down at a full table, at any hour you like” and “tackle” an endless amount of various traditional Russian dishes (56). The narrator then ends this elaborate description with a tongue-in-cheek message on morality:

Now, these gentlemen really are enjoying a gift from Heaven! More than one top-notch gentleman would sacrifice in a moment half the number of serfs he possesses and half of his estates (mortgaged and unmortgaged, with all the improvements both foreign and domestic), just to have such a stomach... But that’s where the trouble lies, that one cannot acquire, either for any sum of money or for any estate (either with improvements or without), such a stomach. (56)

The Russian word for “stomach,” живот, is related to the verb “to live,” жить and it is no coincidence that Gogol associates his characters’ eating habits with the way that they lead their lives. While the narrator praises the stomach of Chichikov, his way of life is not to be emulated or admired yet as his sinfulness is on par with the landowners he encounters. However, by designating Chichikov as one of these enviable “fair-to-middlin’” gentlemen, Gogol reminds the reader that there is hope for his hero’s moral transformation. One must remember that Chichikov

has only just embarked on his spiritual journey. Part I of *Dead Souls* is the Inferno and Chichikov must still climb the mountain of Purgatorio (Part II) and ascend into Paradiso (Part III). The five landowners who occupy the Inferno are the embodiments of gluttony and Chichikov must come to the realization that he cannot continue to squander his life and end up as a Manilov, a Nozdryov, or, worst of all, a Pliushkin.

While Chichikov relishes in his meal of suckling pig (obviously a favorite dish of Chichikov's as he dines on suckling pig a number of times throughout the story), another carriage draws up to the front of the tavern and out pops the third landowner, Nozdryov. A scoundrel, a gambler, and a pathological liar, Nozdryov holds his tongue about as well as he holds his alcohol. He is a man of excess, but, unlike Korobochka or Pliushkin, he does not engage in certain affairs "in order to gain something," but rather because the urge comes "from some sort of turbulently indefatigable impetuosity and liveliness of character" (67) (от какой-то неугомонной юркости и бойкости характера). From the moment he spots Chichikov in the tavern, Nozdryov does not cease talking and the words that spew uncontrollably from his mouth and scatter into the air around him are pure nonsense. Whereas Manilov delicately ornaments his speech with excessive positive adjectives and Korobochka interjects with invocations to Christ, there is no real pattern to Nozdryov's speech and Chichikov struggles to figure out Nozdryov's linguistic "code."

Much to Chichikov's disappointment, Nozdryov is more concerned with showing his guests the entirety of his estate rather than feeding them. Once they do sit down for a meal, it becomes obvious that "the dinner table" "did not constitute for Nozdryov the main thing in life" (70). The chef's creative culinary art is indicative of Nozdryov's character:

It was evident that the chef was guided for the most part by some weird inspiration and would pop into the pot the first things that came to his hand; if the pepper pot happened to be standing nearby, he would sprinkle in the pepper; if cabbage came handy, he would shove in the cabbage; he slopped in milk, ham, peas—in short, slap, dash, as long as it was hot, and as for taste, well, some sort of taste would probably come out in the end. (71)

The verbs used to describe the chef's preparation of dinner consistently become more intense as the passage goes on. Gogol begins with the animate, but relatively harmless verbs “pop” or “put” (клял) and sprinkled (сыпал), but then progresses to the aggressive “shoved” (совал) and “slopped” (пичкал). As the dinner and conversation continues, Nozdryov's language becomes increasingly more hostile and he finally erupts onto the verge of physical violence.

For what is lacking in comestibles, Nozdryov makes up for in spirits. Nozdryov pours glass after glass of port, Madeira that “actually burned one's mouth,” haut sauternes, a bottle, which according to Nozdryov's “unorthodox terminology,” was a mixture of bourguignon and champagne, “a cordial made from rowan berries,” and finally, “some balsam or other, which bore a name that was hard to remember” (71). Maguire notes that this scene reflects Nozdryov's own “arbitrary” and “chaotic” lifestyle in the acquisition of objects and the creation of language (226). Language quickly unravels as Nozdryov continues to slosh alcohol into his guests' glasses. While Nozdryov is “most zealous” in serving his brother-in-law and Chichikov these potent drinks, he does not “add a great deal to his own glass” (71) and his aggressive hospitality eventually results in the complete incapacitation of one of his guests. By the time that the dinner comes to a close, the brother-in-law is so inebriated that he cannot form coherent sentences. While Nozdryov offers sustenance, it is either of poor quality or extremely potent, reflecting his



indifference towards and even disdain for, what Gogol considered a valuable life. His insatiable love for wines and other spirits further emphasizes his tendency to engage in debauchery.

With the brother-in-law out of the picture, Chichikov feels comfortable enough to discuss his real intentions for agreeing to visit Nozdryov. As with Korobochka, it is no easy task to get Nozdryov to sell his dead serfs and, like Korobochka, he at first attempts to sell just about everything but his souls, such as his hurdy-gurdy, his dogs, his horse, and a light carriage. When Chichikov resists, Nozdryov suggests that they play a game of cards to settle the matter, which results in an argument and the resentment on the part of both parties. At dinner that night, Nozdryov offers his guest no fancy liquors and the only form of sustenance mentioned at the dinner is a single bottle of Cyprus wine “sticking up like a sore thumb” (78). The argument continues the next morning and, thanks to Nozdryov’s unrestrained energies, it escalates to the brink of a fist fight. Luckily, “it pleased the Fates” (83) to save Chichikov from a humiliating beating. Just Nozdryov raises his arm to give Chichikov a taste of his chibouk, the Captain of the District Police marches through the door with a warrant to arrest Nozdryov for, unsurprisingly, “a personal assault, with birch rods” while “in a state of intoxication” (83).

This is not the last that Chichikov sees of Nozdryov and it is this landowner’s aggressive and abundant speech that plays a large role in Chichikov’s undoing in Chapters Ten and Eleven. Nozdryov reemerges at the governor’s ball, inevitably drunk, and “lying unmercifully” in “half-inebriate, half sober speech” to all who will listen (168). Once he spots Chichikov from afar, Nozdryov begins an endless stream of nonsensical, boisterous phrases, “emitting peal upon peal of laughter” (168) and revealing Chichikov’s disturbing secret: that his recently accumulated serfs are in fact dead. Nozdryov’s speech takes an absurd turn when he begins to sputter various phrases in French, making extensive use of the word, *baiser* (kiss), and incorporating it into his

drunken Russian. This interweaving of French and Russian speech, which reappears in Chapter Nine during the ridiculous bantering between Anna Grigorievna and Sofia Ivanovna, is a sign of superficiality as nauseating to Gogol as Manilov's sentimentalism. Despite the fact that the guests at the ball eventually stop listening to Nozdryov, Chichikov knows that his secret is out. The narrator confirms this fear when he states that "no matter how vulgar a bit of news may be," every "mortal man" "will inevitably" have his "bellyful of talk" (169). The town indeed will gorge itself on a feast of rumors and lies, which culminate in the Postmaster's *Tale of Kopeikin*. The narrator notes that the dinner following the ball was a very "pleasant" and "gay" one, but poor Chichikov, who normally relishes in such gatherings, "found it hard to relax" (170). The glittery extravagance of the dinner no longer enchants Gogol's hero, but rather horrifies him:

All the faces, glimpsed between triple candelabra, flowers, bottles, and *bonbonmieres*, were glowing with the most unconstrained pleasure. Army officers, ladies, frock-coated gentlemen—all became amiable, even to the point of being cloying...Men who had attained the decorous age, among whom Chichikov was seated, were carrying on loud discussions dealt with the very subjects in which he always took part; but he looked like a man fatigued or broken up by a prolonged trip. (170)

Chichikov becomes aware of his "troubled" and "confused" heart and the "oppressive void" that "persisted therein" (170). This is the first time that Chichikov comes close to truly inspecting his soul. However, as soon as he begins to really take an introspective look, Chichikov instead scapegoats the guests at the party and the vanity of balls. He has not quite hit a low enough point to be forced into making moral improvements.

After the provincial police haul off Nozdryov, Chichikov flees the estate and finally arrives at the home of the bear-like Sobakevich. Gogol introduces Sobakevich and his wife through food imagery in the form of a Homeric simile, one of the many recurring “word-weaving devices” that Gogol uses throughout *Dead Souls*. As the carriage pulls up to the estate, Chichikov’s gaze is met by two faces in a window:

One feminine in a house cap, narrow and elongated like a cucumber, and a masculine one, round, broad, like those Moldavian pumpkins called *gorlinkas*, out of which they make, in Russia, balalaikas, the pride and joy of some frolicsome, twenty-year-old country lad, a fellow who knows how to wink and is a dandy and who not only winks at but whistles after the snowy-breasted and snowy-necked maidens who gather round to listen to his soft-stringed strumming (89).

This absurd simile calls to mind the language of the sentimentalist manifested in Manilov’s mode of speech, which Chichikov adopts in the hopes of winning Sobakevich onto his good side (Maguire 228). Of course, he finds that Sobakevich possesses no patience for sticky-sweet sentimentalist sentences, for his own language is about as thick and heavy as the meat he stuffs down his gullet.

The first moments between the Sobakevich couple and Chichikov are awkward ones. The three sit in uncomfortable silence “for almost a full five minutes” before Chichikov decides to speak, intending to butter up Sobakevich in time to make his business transaction. He begins the conversation much in the same way that the conversation with the Manilovs began back in Chapter Two, by praising the various officials in the town. As he did with Manilov, Chichikov gushes forth words such as прекрасный (splendid) and превосходный (excellent). However, to each of these positive remarks, Sobakevich fires back with a negative statement. Like Nozdryov,

Sobakevich's speech is aggressive, but whereas Nozdryov's speech overflows with superfluous words and exclamations, Sobakevich's is blunt and hostile.

The dinner at Sobakevich's begins "as all spacious Russia does throughout its towns and villages" (93), with a shot of vodka and a snack of "salted delicacies and other such appetite-arousing blessed dainties" (93). But, this Manilovish daintiness only lasts so long. The guest and hosts file into the dining room where they sit down to a traditional Russian dinner of overwhelming proportions. As Sobakevich slurps, gnaws, and sucks his way through cabbage soup, nurse, mutton, tarts with curds, and a turkey "stuffed with all sorts of good things," he does not hesitate to continue to discredit the town officials (93-94). In addition to assigning each government official a personalized insult, Sobakevich also elaborates on their eating habits:

I know what they buy in the market. That rascal of a chef, who learned his trade from a Frenchman, will buy a cat, skin it, and then serve it up to you at a table and say it's rabbit... That's how they do things; I'm not to blame, they all do everything that way. Every sort of refuse, stuff that our wench Akulka throws into the cesspool, if you'll permit me to use the word, they pop into their soup. Into the soup with it! (93)

Here, Sobakevich is in his element and his speech flows more freely. The awkward hostility that existed in the first moments of the meeting dissipates at the dinner table and Sobakevich seems just a bit more human. Once the host and guest step out of the dining room, Sobakevich returns to his clumsy, sullen self. As Chichikov begins his proposition, Sobakevich merely stares at him, "his head cocked to one side," with an empty, expressionless face, "as if there were no soul at all in his body" (96). The brief glimpse of humanity seen at the dinner table disappears, and the reader is reminded of Sobakevich's bestial qualities.

While Sobakevich is first and foremost an animalistic glutton and consumer of flesh, he is also a creator of flesh. Peace notes that Sobakevich is the only landowner who “gives flesh and solidity” to his dead souls (228). He knows each soul by name and what skills he (or she) possessed. As he discusses the qualities of these serfs, Sobakevich lights up for a second time, words “pour[ing ] forth in such torrents that all one could do was listen” (Gogol 98). Mikheev the coach maker, Stepan the Cork, the carpenter, Milushkin the bricklayer and others suddenly come alive before his greedy eyes. Like the fleshy meals Sobakevich gorges on, these serfs served only to satisfy his stomach. He views the deaths of these men and women not as the loss of human souls, but as a hindrance to his gluttonous routine. Sobakevich ironically sees his former serfs as animals with human faculties, yet does not recognize his own bestial character.

Pliushkin’s estate is the final stop, and deepest circle of Hell, that Chichikov visits. He is also the sole landowner that the protagonist encounters only once in the story (Peace 230). By making Pliushkin’s estate Chichikov’s last station, Gogol emphasizes that this landlord is the most despicable and morally corrupt of all. He wants Pliushkin’s wrinkled face to haunt both Chichikov and the reader long after the story is finished. Pliushkin occupies the lowest realm of the lowest circle of “Gogol’s world of banality” (Gippius 128). While Afanasy Ivanovich and Pulkheria Ivanovna waste away their days lost in the world of Cockaigne, aloof and complacent, Pliushkin has passed beyond such complacency and his gluttonous way of life has “become a desirable end in itself” (129). Before Chichikov sets off for the village of Pliushkin, he learns from Sobakevich of this landowner’s stingy ways:

“I don’t run things the way some Pliushkin does; he owns eight hundred souls, yet he lives and dines worse than my shepherd does.”

“Who is this Pliushkin?” Chichikov inquired.

“A swindler,” Sobakevich answered. “Such a miser as it would be hard to imagine. The convicts in stocks at the prison live better than he does; he’s starved all his people to death.” (Gogol 94)

Sobakevich explains that Pliushkin’s peasants are “dying off like flies” (94) (умирают как мухи мрут). The alliteration of мухи мрут, the repetition of the “y” sound, and Chichikov’s own reiteration of the phrase places special emphasis on this fact that Sobakevich shares with Chichikov. Also, the reoccurrence of the image of the fly indicates that Pliushkin’s estate is a cesspool of rotting food, physical death, and moral degradation. This image of flies continues once Chichikov enters the house of Pliushkin, where upon a desk that is cluttered with various decaying trinkets, “three dead flies, covered over with a letter” add a sinister touch to the home décor (110). When Pliushkin offers Chichikov a glass of cordial made by his late wife, “little bugs” (козявки) are floating around inside the bottle along with other pieces of garbage. As Pliushkin presents Chichikov with a list of his dead serfs, the narrator observes that the peasants’ names on the paper “were as closely clustered on it as midges” (Крестьянские имена усыпали её тесно как мошки) (120). Gogol uses a different word for “fly” in each setting to highlight the omnipresence of moral decay and that this moldering is not only present in Pliushkin’s home, food, and drink, but in the man himself, as he secretes decay through his own written word.

When he sees Pliushkin for the first time, Chichikov mistakes the shriveled old man for the female housekeeper who moments before greeted him at the door. Despite the fact that this man is dressed as a “beggar,” Pliushkin is indeed a proprietor:

No other landlord had so much wheat, in grain, flour, or simply in stacks, or one whose storerooms, warehouses, and drying sheds were cluttered with such a

world of linens...dried fish of all sorts, and all kinds of vegetables and berries, everything the lips will accept. (111).

Unlike Sobakevich, who constantly consumes his goods, Korobochka, who sells them in order to acquire compensation, Nozdryov, who idiotically gambles away his excess, or Manilov, who owns nothing and cares for nothing, Pliushkin deliberately gains and hoards, neither consuming, nor selling, nor losing. He deliberately sits obstinately atop of his rotting stockpile, refusing to move.

The reader learns that Pliushkin did not always lead such a disgraceful life, but had once been a “wise” miser, with a family and a purpose. Back in those days, “his speech” was “imbued” “with experience and a knowledge of the world” and “it was a pleasure for his guests to listen to him” (112). He had not been extremely wealthy, but his wife “was famed for her hospitality” and the master himself worked hard to maintain a well-run estate (113). But after the death of his wife and youngest daughter, and his living children’s decisions to abandon the estate, Pliushkin succumbs to obsessive miserliness, which functions like a disease, infecting the unfortunate from the inside out. With “a wolfish appetite,” the disease cannot be subdued, and “the more it devours, the more insatiated it becomes” (114). When it has eaten away every last bit of moral flesh within Pliushkin’s soul, the disease spreads to the physical body, graying his hair and stooping his shoulders. Pliushkin even has a nervous habit of chewing his lip, “as if he were munching something” (стал опять кушать губами) (118). The disease results in an epidemic among Pliushkin’s peasants as they die off one by one of starvation.

As with Sobakevich, the meeting between Gogol’s hero and the landowner begins with an unsettling silence. Chichikov inhales, preparing to adorn this crinkled old man with “some high flown vein” of sentimentalist sap, but pauses, realizing that such a manner of speaking “was

a bit much” (116). Even after Chichikov “rework[s] his speech accordingly,” Pliushkin merely grumbles almost incoherently through a toothless mouth that he has already eaten and that the “abominable” state of his kitchen rendered insufficient for the preparation of food. It is only after Chichikov presents his offer, promising that Pliushkin will save money on taxes through the selling of his dead souls, that Pliushkin offers even the slightest gesture of hospitality, summoning a young servant to ready a samovar and fetch a moldy Easter cake.

Once he realizes that Chichikov’s offer will benefit his hoarding lifestyle, he addresses God and the Heavens with zeal comparable to Korobochka’s religious outbursts: “Ah, my Lord! Ah, all ye saints!”(118). Of course, such praise is displaced and perverted in that Pliushkin is thanking God for allowing him to remain stagnant in sin. In fact, a few pages later, Pliushkin continues to speak with this religious theme when he accuses his servant Mavra of stealing a sheet of paper:

You just wait; on the dread Day of Judgment the devils will make it hot for you with their iron pitchforks. You’ll see how hot they’ll make it for you!... “There,” they’ll be saying, “take that you conniver, for the way you fooled your master!” and they’ll make it hot for you with their red-hot pitchforks, they will! (122)

This statement is ironic for it is Pliushkin who will most likely be greeted by these devils after death. He, not Mavra, is trying to “fool” his Master by justifying his hoarding and abuse as protecting himself against his thieving servants. It is only “under pretext” that he sees “whether his people were getting good fare” while “fill[ing] himself with plenty of cabbage soup and buckwheat groats” (125).

Pliushkin’s gluttony is the most terrifying of all because, unlike the other four landowners, he is keenly aware of his sin. It is with Pliushkin that we see the upmost corruption



of nourishment both in the form of the written and verbal word and, in the physical sense, food and drink. Pliushkin represents the horrific combination of the other four landowners. When he speaks, he combines Sobakevich's hostility and Nozdryov's lies with a blatant perversion of Korobochka's religious outbursts and Manilov's soft spoken demeanor. He possesses an abundance of food, but most of this food is rotting in the sheds, never to be consumed or sold. The food that is still edible, he consumes himself, while simultaneously complaining of not having enough to eat, yet starving his serfs to death. Chichikov leaves Pliushkin's crumbling estate in a state of elation, whistling, singing, and congratulating himself on such a successful transaction. The irony is that this is the turning point for Chichikov. After his meeting with Pliushkin, Chichikov's fortunes take an unfortunate turn and Gogol dedicates the remainder of Part I to Chichikov's fall from grace.

While Chichikov fails to undergo any moral transformation in Part I of *Dead Souls*, the negative characters introduced set the stage for his development. As Chapter Eleven indicates, Chichikov's journey is far from over after he flees the town of N—. The reader should not judge too harshly, for, as the narrator indicates, there is “a bit of Chichikov” in all humans (246). The characters depicted in Part I of *Dead Souls* attempted to replace their spiritual emptiness with earthly materials, such as food, alcohol, and tobacco. But Gogol wanted his readers to understand that Chichikov, Manilov, and the other landowners could heal only when they realized that these substances were insubstantial and that only God could fill the gaping hole in his or her soul. Up until his death, Gogol remained excited for the spiritual resurrection of Chichikov because he hoped that Parts II and III could reflect his own salvation as well. But, as we know, Gogol celebrated neither Chichikov's transformation nor the healing of his own soul.

## VI. Conclusion

It is no coincidence that Gogol's style of writing reflects the hesychasts' apophatic approach to union with God. Gogol truly believed that he could weave together stories that would profoundly impact his readers through his fiction. Before he consciously embraced Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Gogol began his climb towards unity with the Divine with the creation of the Ukrainian Tales. Even in these seemingly simple pagan-themed stories, Gogol conflates the sin of gluttony with the sacred, a literary strategy that comes into full fruition with *Dead Souls*.

In "The Night Before Christmas," it is the fantastic nighttime feast of Paunchy Patsiuk, the village wizard, which indicates the presence of sin. The comical scene in which Patsiuk teleports *vareniki* from bowl to mouth is easy to dismiss as what Nabokov so emphatically condemned as immature writing. But Gogol's fiction, like the man himself, is composed of many layers, each of which must be carefully peeled back and examined. When we do so, the tale's events are not quite so simple. Gogol utilizes food imagery and language to show how Patsiuk's voracious appetite becomes monstrous, Oksana's girlish giggles suddenly turn malicious, and Vakula's assumed suicide briefly turns into a reality for the villagers.

Gogol further explored the themes of gluttony and sin in "Old World Landowners." The overt pagan themes of "The Night Before Christmas" are replaced with less ostentatious representations of the supernatural. Like the paintings of the Flemish School, "Old World Landowners" is aesthetically pleasing portrait upon a first glance. However, this Cockaigne-like existence will eventually destroy the management of the estate and the marriage of Afanasy Ivanovich and Pulkheria Ivanovna.

The Ukrainian Tales represent the preliminary works of fiction that lead up to the publication of *Dead Souls*. They are important components of Gogol's career because they

document the progress of both his literary and spiritual progression. However, Gogol's apophatic approach is most clearly developed in *Dead Souls*. The way in which he utilizes плетение словес, weaving words in and out of each other, producing syntactically complex phrases and sentences is a characteristic unique to Gogol and one that no other writer in Russian literature has successfully emulated.

During the writing of *Dead Souls*, Gogol's spiritual climb steepened significantly. Physical illness, the public's reception of his works, and his own self-criticism became permanent and debilitating burdens. Upon reaching the top of the mountain and ascending into "the darkness of absolute ignorance" (Lossky 25), Gogol did not experience mystical union with the Divine, but rather a sense of paralyzing fear. One can only imagine the despair that he felt when he decided that his love for language and his lifelong mission to use verbal abundance to nourish others had in fact been his most dreadful sin. How was he any different from the Patsiuks of the world, who gorged on *vareniki*, or the stingy Pliushkins, or the empty-headed Manilovs? Who was he to teach, to inspire, to revive the Russian people, when he could not purge himself of his own passions that kept him prisoner to the devil? Gogol could never silence the taunting voices of his demons and he died believing that he failed as a writer, a teacher, and a Christian.

Despite the tragic end of Gogol's life and career, his fiction lives on as his writings continue to be read, taught, and studied both in Russia and around the world. Gogol inspired some of the most well-known twentieth century Russian writers such as Andrei Bely, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Isaac Babel. Karlinsky's 1976 statement that "Gogol is somehow more alive today than almost any other nineteenth century writer" (293) still holds true in our present day as it is hard to forget such an eccentric personality and such vibrant stories. We must remember that the same Gogol who died in a state of psychological and physical torment was the same Gogol

who prepared enormous dishes of Italian-style macaroni and cheese, who weaseled his way out of giving lectures at St. Petersburg University by feigning a toothache, and the Gogol who as a boy was all too willing to jump onto the stage and play the most ridiculously comical character imaginable.

While western scholarship on Gogol has progressed phenomenally in the last four decades, there is still much room for investigation into the life and art of Nikolai Gogol. Only a handful of the volumes of letters that Gogol wrote throughout his life have been translated into English. Similarly, most of Gogol's religious writings remain published only in the original Russian along with a number of unpublished or unfinished books and essays. These works have been largely neglected because there is a lack of interest in Gogol's nonfiction. However, the translation and analysis of these writings is necessary task, as these works may provide invaluable insight into the mystery of the man who was Gogol.

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