

**Doomed to Irony, Condemned to Laughter:**  
The Structure and Function of Irony in the Prose Fiction of Nikolai Gogol

Steven Brett Shaklan

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## ABSTRACT

### **Doomed to Irony, Condemned to Laughter:** The Structure and Function of Irony in the Prose Fiction of Nikolai Gogol

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This dissertation characterizes the particular brands of irony at work in Gogol's fiction over the course of his career and analyzes how they are generated, how they act upon readers, and how they relate to the broader aesthetic and ideological project to which Gogol ultimately dedicated himself – namely, his attempt to rid Russian literary efforts of their dependence upon narrative as their organizing principle. This dissertation also argues that Gogol's use of irony is so extreme in form that it provides an excellent case study for an evaluation of the nature of irony itself. Thus, Gogol's fiction is analyzed with an eye toward how the concept of irony illuminates the structure and function of his prose, and conversely, how the operations of that prose challenge received notions of how irony functions in a literary work.

Taking as a starting point Wayne Booth's notion that the perception of irony is dependent upon the image of the narrator, the first part of this dissertation traces the development of the Gogolian narrator in chronological fashion, tracing a distinct evolutionary pattern. Through close readings of the short stories contained in Volume I (1831) and Volume II (1832) of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* -- "The Fair at Sorochintsy," "St. John's Eve," "A May Night, or the Drowned Maiden," "The Lost Letter," "Christmas Eve," "A Terrible Vengeance," "Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Auntie," and "A Bewitched Place" – the first stage of that evolution is mapped out. Here

Gogol's initial narrators challenge our innate tendency to assume that one integrated speaker is responsible for a given tale, but ultimately, they accommodate that tendency by revealing themselves as convincing character-narrators with unorthodox, but perceptible, profiles. As a result, these works constitute a series of "ironic portraits."

By the time Gogol has reached the apex of his creative powers in the latter half of the 1830s he learns to manipulate the various discourses he includes in his tales such that we sense the lurking presence of Gogol himself (as implied author). Once we recognize this we interpret the massive abrogations of narrative sense he weaves through his tales as being intended by the "speaker." The result is the emergence of "ironic discourse." This transition is illustrated through close readings of the "Petersburg Stories" -- "Nevsky Prospect" (1835), "The Nose" (1836), and "The Overcoat" (1842). The place of *Mirgorod* (1835) as an anomalous experiment in "sincere" prose forms is also addressed.

By the time of the publication of the first volume of *Dead Souls* (1842), ironic discourse allowed Gogol to both mock the expectations his readers brought (and continue to bring) to the experience of reading a "story" and provide a structure that would let them in on the joke. According to Michael Kaufer, solidarity is built by the very process through which the reader recognizes that the author is "being ironic." In recognizing that there is irony at work, the reader feels himself part of a select few, at one with the author, and essentially "in the know," even if the butt of the literary joke is the reader himself.

The final part of this dissertation considers the implications of a brand of irony that seems resistant to received notions of irony that posit it as a means of generating some form of resultant meaning. Gogol's use of irony is significant not in terms of what it *means*, but in terms of what it *does* to the reader. Donald Davidson's formulation of the

concept of metaphor is invoked as a useful means of re-characterizing irony. According to Davidson, a metaphor enjoins the reader to view seemingly disparate things comparatively, to hold the disparate elements in his or her field of vision. As Gogol demonstrates, an ironic utterance enjoins the reader to view the textual and extra-textual incongruities the utterance presents. The qualitative nature of metaphoric vision and of ironic vision are different, but both depend on the “use” of language, and not upon the development of resultant meaning. Irony, like metaphor, is not concerned with what an author eventually means beyond what is literally said, but *how* he or she means what is literally said and what this *does* to the reader in terms of his or her relationship to the text.

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## A Guide to Notation and Translation

I have used the modified Library of Congress system of transliteration to render Russian words and names, substituting commonly used anglicized forms where they are more familiar (Gogol, Tolstoy, Bely). I have retained the transliterated forms in Russian-language citations.

For the quotations from Gogol's fictional works, I have given citation information from the *Sobranie sochinenii v 7 tomakh* (abbreviated SS in the parenthetical citations). As Gogol's prose is notoriously difficult to translate, although the analysis was conducted on the original Russian, I have provided established translations of each quotation cited. Robert Maguire's translation of *Dead Souls* does a marvelous job of replicating the syntactic contortions and idiosyncratic diction of Gogol's prose. For Gogol's short fiction, I have used Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky's translations, where available. For the remaining short stories, I provided revised versions of the translation found in Leonard Kent's *The Complete Tales of Nikolai Gogol: Vols. I and II*. The translations of all remaining Russian-language works are my own, unless otherwise noted.

**Introduction:  
Doomed to Irony, Condemned to Laughter**

Of Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, the prominent American scholar Robert Maguire writes: “He has been proclaimed a realist and a fantast; a subtle student of the human heart and a creator of cardboard characters; a revolutionary and a reactionary; a monger of the lewd and a hierophant of the sublime; a pathological liar and an honest anatomist of the soul; a self-promoter and a self-immolator; a typical Russian and a typical Ukrainian; a narrow nationalist and a universal genius; a jejune jokester and a tragic poet” (*Exploring* 1).

William Woodin Rowe echoes this sense of Gogol’s resistance to categorization: “Labels comfort us—seductively. Great writers (a label already) tend to resist them. And if this resistance were the sole criterion of greatness, Nikolai Gogol could almost be said to have no peers” (1). Rowe then goes on to provide a laundry list of literary categories under which Gogol has been filed since the since he burst onto the Russian cultural scene with the publication of the first volume of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* in 1831; Rowe notes that Gogol has been called, at various times, a “romantic,” an “ideological romanticist,” a “romantic realist,” an “anti-romantic,” an “expanding Romantic,” a “fantastic realist” a “critical realist,” and the man who “founded the Natural School ‘without really intending to’.”

And even in Gogol’s “homeland” (if, for a native born Ukrainian, Russia can be considered a native culture – another point of contention in Gogol scholarship), we find a persistent awareness of a general inability to neatly circumscribe or characterize Gogol’s



work. In 1909, Andrei Bely notes, “. . . we read Gogol and we do not see, we still do not see, that there is not a word in our dictionary to name him. We have not the means of measuring all the possibilities he has exhausted . . . We still do not understand what Gogol is, and although we cannot genuinely see him, Gogol’s creative works – narrowed by our wretched perceptual faculties—are closer to us than all the Russian writers of the nineteenth century” (quoted in Rowe, 2).

However, those who enjoy Gogol – and there are certainly those who find his perambulating prose more trouble than it’s worth -- do so with smiles and stifled laughter. If there is one thing Gogol fans can agree on, it is that Gogol is just plain funny.<sup>1</sup>

This was Gogol’s intention. His letters and critical writings reveal a conscious and sustained effort to define the optimal kind of laughter, and refine the tools with which he hoped to evoke that laughter in his readers.<sup>2</sup>

But comedy is a broad and varied category whose borders, much like those of Gogol’s literary contribution, remain largely undefined. The means with which authors make us laugh are innumerable; the manipulations of language and subject matter, style

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<sup>1</sup> Setting aside the general popular appraisal of Gogol as one of if not the “greatest comic writers” in the Russian tradition (Fanger v), rare is the piece of scholarship, no matter its focus or theoretical orientation, that does not make at least an oblique reference to Gogol as a master of the comic. See for example, Petr Bitsillii’s “Gogol i Chekhov: Problema klassicheskovo isskustvo” (Gogol and Chekhov: The Problem of Classical Art), in which he notes that “there is literally not one word that could be exchanged for another, not one stroke that does not promote by its creation a completely new, unique and, however many times we read it, unexpected comic effect” (30); see also, Inna Vishnevskaiia’s commentary on Gogol’s theatrical works, of which, she writes, “For Gogol, laughter is a literal idea, inseparable from his individual signature, from his distinctive humor. Gogol is a merry writer.” (253).

<sup>2</sup> Specific examples from Gogol’s letters and critical works that reflect this intention are provided in Chapter 5.

and structure that pique our sense of humor are subject to countless combinations and permutations. Plus, it seems that when it comes to comedy, there are factors in play that are simply intangible. Thus, it is unlikely -- and not even necessarily desirable -- that any investigation could adequately describe just what is “funny,” nor even account for all of the elements in a given work that act upon us to make us laugh.

However, there are certain comic features of texts that are palpable and widely acknowledged; investigating the structure and function of those features, as this inquiry will attempt to do, can enhance the experience of readers who have felt their impact but may not be able to articulate what they have experienced. Such an analysis may even focus the attention of readers who “just don’t get it,” allowing them to return to these works with fresh vision and open minds. Of course, the works of Nikolai Gogol need very little PR. Gogol is already part of the established canon, and that very fact tends to induce new readers to “get it” (whether they actually do or not).<sup>3</sup> But there is a feature of Gogol’s prose that is often remarked upon and, at the same time, little studied, even among the ranks of Gogol scholars. That feature is the sly, playful, tongue-in-cheek tone of his mature narrative voice, often referred to as “ironic.” As Donald Fanger notes, “It is ironic that this element [irony] in Gogol should still be awaiting its investigator, for it pervades his writing from first to last and marks it on so many levels that one might see him, in Ortega’s phrase, as ‘doomed to irony’” (232).

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<sup>3</sup> Cathy Popkin remarks upon the effect that presumptions of Gogol’s “funniness” condition our reading from the get go: “Now, in our apparent unanimity on the joys of reading Gogol, we may have become one of [Stanley] Fish’s ‘interpretive communities’ with shared explanations, institutionalized procedures, several ‘usual and customary’ ways of characterizing Gogol’s excesses that render them tolerable and even self-evident” (132).

So pervasive is this feature that it is difficult to read any assertion on the part of Gogol's later narrators as being rendered "straight." When the narrator assures us that a character is "rather respectable," we come to expect that he or she is anything but. When information is characterized as "unnecessary," we can be certain that we will be treated to an exhaustive amount of it. When other details are asserted to be indispensable, we can be sure that their relationship to the story is doubtful. And when we approach the apex of narrative tension and are promised a swift and sure resolution to the central mystery of a given story, we find ourselves repeatedly left in the lurch.

Again, while this feature of Gogol's prose has certainly been noted in the past, there has been a marked absence of systematic study. Stanley Rabinowitz and Frederick Griffiths' characterization of Gogol as an "unsurpassed ironist" (166) is, while accurate, representative of an approach to Gogol that takes the ironic component of his work as a kind of threshold assumption. Many scholars make isolated references to irony in Gogol's prose, taking the genesis and function of these instances as a given or as an aside to the greater aims of Gogol's work.<sup>4</sup> Others note the presence of irony and link it to

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<sup>4</sup> See for example *Masterstvo Gogolia* (Gogol's Mastery) in which Andrei Bely notes that in "Nevsky Prospekt" "folksy parallelism is used for ironic effect" (238), but that effect is glossed as an aside to greater depths of meaning to be found in complex webs of symbolism, sound and color play; in "Iazyk Gogolia" (Gogol's Language) Viktor Vinogradov notes the ironic characteristics of Gogol's prose as they relate to Gogol's manipulation of the literary norms of the 1830s and 1840s. However, Vinogradov ultimately views Gogol's irony as an element to be looked past in the name of some sort of deeper aesthetic system: "The investigator of Gogol's language must first extract the ironic invocations of the forms and styles of literary discourse of the 30s and 40s that were rejected by Gogol, and by contrast, restore the affirmative principles of Gogol's stylistics, and only then realize and set forth the fundamental forms, categories, and elements of Gogol's language" (286).

certain thematic prerogatives they attribute to Gogol.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars treat Gogol's prose with terms that are certainly related to irony – laughter, mockery, play, satire, travesty, parody – without naming the presence of irony as such or the relationship of ironic machinations to the establishment of those features.<sup>6</sup> And there are still others who insist upon the presence of irony, only to deprive it of any tangible purpose, considering it pure play, directionless, or acting in service of some kind of personal artistic prerogative separate and apart from the broader course of Russian cultural development.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example Sergei Bocharov's "The Petersburg Stories," in which he notes the pervasive presence of irony, but views it as an instrument to a distinctly thematic end: "In the disparity between intonation and meaning, we perceive the disparity between the outer and inner worlds, which is the main theme of the whole tale of 'Nevsky Prospekt'" (157).

<sup>6</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin devotes a great deal of attention to Gogol's "pure carnival laughter" (485) in "Rable i Gogol': Isskustvo slova i narodnaia smekhovaia kul'tura" (Rablé and Gogol: The Art of the Word and the Culture of Folk Humor), but never uses the term "irony" despite attempting to distinguish this type of laughter from pure satire; in "Epic and Novel," Bakhtin defines the use and appropriation of discourse by a narrator for ironic effect, but never ostensibly links this tactic to Gogol's ultimate artistic goals. Alexander Slonimsky concentrates on Gogol's use of alogism as a means of raising his material to the highest form of the comic – humor "which is present when the person who is manipulating comic concepts at will (i.e. the subject) adopts a contemplative attitude toward the world and attains to a higher cognition of life" (325). Interestingly, this parallels the attempts of scholars of irony to move between irony as a textual feature and irony as worldview (discussed later in this chapter), though Slonimsky never mentions irony in relation to either the textual feature (alogism) or the worldview (humor). Vinogradov discusses Gogol's style as it relates to the establishment of what he calls the "Naturalistic Grotesque" citing Gogol's "parodic" manipulation of pre-existing genres, such as the adventure novel without finding an explicit place for irony in that dynamic (26). Donald Fanger repeatedly notes the "shifting mix of mockery and pity" found in "The Nose" without clearly identifying the ironic use of language that constitutes that mockery, or the putative source (author or narrator?) of that mockery (21).

<sup>7</sup> Bely considers Gogol's playfulness as "irony without a clearly defined goal" (16), while Fanger notes that Gogol's cheeky play with fragmentation and disruptive maneuvers is a demonstration of the "pure pleasure of narration" and of a desire to be freed from the "poetry of clear statement" (92).

The broader claim of this study is that in the prose fiction of Nikolai Gogol, irony is not only present, but pervasive and purposeful as well. My intention is to characterize the particular brands of irony at work in Gogol's fiction over the course of his career, how they are generated, how they act upon us as readers, and how this relates to the broader aesthetic and ideological project to which Gogol ultimately dedicated himself. That project can be characterized as an *assault on story* as the organizing principle for imaginative literature. Whether this attempt was "successful" will also be addressed.

What's more, I would contend that by the time he reaches the apex of his creative powers in the latter half of the 1830s, his use of irony is so radical, so massively directed at the very fabric of norms that traditionally structure imaginative literature, that an investigation of it not only adds to our appreciation of Gogol's work, but also suggests a new theoretical direction regarding the function of irony in a literary text. Thus, we will look at Gogol's fiction with the concept of irony in view, and conversely, how Gogol's fiction challenges and refines the very notion of how irony functions in literary work.

### *What We Talk About When We Talk About Irony*

The central problem of writing on irony is similar to the central problem of writing on Gogol: a resistance to categorization. As Paul de Man notes in his ironically titled lecture "The Concept of Irony":

It seems impossible to get hold of a definition, and this is itself inscribed to some extent into the tradition of the writing on the texts . . . The German aesthete Friederich Solger, who writes perceptively about irony, complains at length that August Wilhelm Schlegel . . . although he had written on irony, really cannot define it, cannot say what it is. A little later, when Hegel, who has a lot to say about irony, talks about irony, he

complains about Solger, who writes about irony, he says, but who doesn't seem to know what he is writing about. And then a little later, when Kierkegaard writes on irony, he refers to Hegel, whose influence he is at that moment trying to get out of, and he more ironically complains about the fact that Hegel doesn't really seem to know what irony is. He says what and where Hegel talks about it, but then he complains and says he really doesn't have much to say about it, and what he says about it whenever he talks about it is just about always the same, and it isn't very much. (164)

One of the features shared by nearly all contemporary attempts to define "irony" is the near impossibility of defining "irony." Writes Robert Enright in *The Alluring Problem*, "We know an irony when we see one; only he who begins to write about the subject risks sinking into uncertainty and discomfort" (32). Then there's Douglas Muecke, who claims, "Getting to grips with irony seems to have something in common with gathering the mist; there's plenty to take hold of if only one could" (3). And finally there is Wayne Booth -- whose *Rhetoric of Irony*, along with Muecke's *Compass of Irony*, have proven touchstones for virtually every investigation of irony to follow -- who notes, "There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold to the romantic claim . . . that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it" (ix).

This nebulosity, this awareness of irony as a felt commodity, has given rise to a proliferation of types of irony, many of which overlap, others of which admit seemingly no common ground. Notes Muecke:

One has only to reflect for a moment upon the various names that have been given to 'kinds' of irony -- tragic irony, comic irony, irony of manner, irony of situation, philosophical irony, practical irony, dramatic irony, verbal irony, ingénue irony, double irony, rhetorical irony, self-irony, Socratic irony, Romantic irony, cosmic irony, sentimental irony, irony of Fate, irony of chance, irony of

character, etc. – to see that some have been named for effect, others from the medium, others again from the technique, or the function, or the object, or the practitioner, or the tone, or the attitude. (4)

“Ironology” has also suffered a historical cataclysm from which it has never really recovered. Through much of modern history, “irony” was considered a purely rhetorical phenomenon, a view repeated with little variation by everyone from Quintilian to Samuel Johnson. As Johnson put it, irony is “. . . a mode of speech in which the meaning is contrary to the words” (406). This implies that irony involves the negation of the overt meaning of an utterance and the suggestion of an implied meaning that contradicts the overt utterance.

The Russian scholarly tradition has known its own proponents of rhetorical irony, going back to the days of Mikhail Lomonosov.<sup>8</sup> Flatly declaring irony a trope, Lomonosov then went on to discern three categories of irony as trope – sarcasm, civil mockery, and what he refers to as “khariantism,” or light mockery – all subspecies of the rhetorical model. And much like in the Western tradition, the rhetorical vision of irony still holds sway in the East. As A.F. Losev put it, “Irony emerges when, wishing to say ‘no,’ I say yes,’ and at the same time this ‘yes’ I say exclusively for the expression and emphasis of my sincere ‘no’ . . . The essence of irony consists of the fact that I say ‘yes,’ not hiding my ‘no,’ but on the contrary, expressing and emphasizing it” (quoted in Shcherbina 40).

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<sup>8</sup> Lomonosov was one of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Russia’s intellectual leaders; as a distinguished academic and poet, he made major theoretical and creative contributions to Russia’s Classical period.

Interestingly, while the starting point for Russian investigations of the concept of irony tends to start with the rhetorical, there is a concerted emphasis on the emotional tenor of irony, namely the centrality of laughter to the expression and experience of irony, both in its rhetorical and more abstract variants. In many contemporary Russian investigations, there is an initial appeal to the dictionary, but what the Russian dictionary includes suggests an almost immediate difference in focus in terms of fixing the fundamental constructs and qualities of irony. In his *Ironiia kak fenomen kul'tury* (Irony as a Phenomenon of Culture), Pivoev cites the following dictionary definition:

1) repudiation or mockery, masquerading as agreement or approval; 2) a rhetorical figure – the expression of ridicule by means of insinuation, when a word in context suggests an opposing meaning; 3) a form of the comic, laughter under the guise of seriousness revealing a sense of superiority or skepticism. (30)

While irony and some sort of contradictory resultant meaning are certainly related here, in every definition, priority is given to variations of a comic attitude toward the subject. In the first variant, irony is a form of *osmeianiye* (“mockery”) in the second it is an expression of *nasmeshka* (“ridicule”) and in the third, it is *vid komicheskovo* (“a form of the comic”) or simply *smekh* (“laughter”).

In her “Zametki o prirode i tekhnike ironii” (Notes on the Nature and Technique of Irony), A.A. Shcherbina cites the following dictionary definition:

“Contemporary dictionaries usually emphasize two meanings of the word irony: 1) subtle, hidden ridicule and 2) a stylistic figure, phrase, or word that asserts the opposite of that which is actually thought of the subject of the expression.” (40)

Here, even more strikingly, the rhetorical conception of irony – represented by the second variant, takes a backseat to the notion of irony as, first and foremost *tonkaia, skrytaia nasmeshka* (“subtle, hidden ridicule”).



However, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of irony had burst its bounds as a feature of rhetoric and began to be used to identify a far more abstract worldview in the form of Romantic irony, a worldview in which irony began to assume the features of a term commonly used as its antonym -- sincerity. As a result, both east and west of the Neva, the concept of irony has never been the same.

This artistic-philosophical approach, as defined largely by Friedrich Schlegel, seemed to incorporate a complex mixture of affirmation and negation. Commenting on Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Schlegel notes, "The author himself seems to take the characters and incidents so lightly and whimsically, scarcely ever mentioning his hero without irony and smiling down upon his masterpiece itself from the height of his spirit. But one should not let oneself be deceived by this into supposing that he is not religiously in earnest . . ." (quoted in Gurewitch 63). The Romantic ironist responds to the fundamentally irreconcilable paradoxes of the world (the real and the ideal, the value of artistic genius and the limitations of the artistic work, etc.) with, as Ann Mellor puts it, both "enthusiastic commitment and sophisticated skepticism" (quoted in Enright 13). In other words, Romantic irony seemed to be both ironic and sincere.

In the wake of Schlegel's declarations, the contours of the concept of irony became so malleable as to encompass anything and everything in art and in life itself. New Critics such as I.A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks picked up on the notion that irony, as a textual phenomenon and a type of vision, involved the perception of irreconcilable contradictions, a phenomenon that ". . . pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow" (Brooks 210).

Postmodernity has followed suit, raising irony to the status of liberator and hero, an optimal characteristic of modern vision that upends the old, the tired, the essentialized, only to become an end in and of itself.<sup>9</sup> In the literary sphere, irony as a vaguely perceived mode has become the norm. As Muecke puts it, “For most serious writers, whether poets, novelists, or dramatists, irony is now much less often a rhetorical or a dramatic strategy which they may or may not decide to employ, and much more often a mode of thought silently imposed upon them by the general tendency of the times” (10).

Despite this proliferation of literary/rhetorical designations – not to mention the incredible expansion of the term “irony” in common usage – there have been relatively few attempts to synthesize some sort of general understanding of the concept of irony. This is not to say that the phenomenon of irony has not attracted any attention. There are countless critical works that wrestle with irony, but most do so in the form of tracing its relation to the work of a particular author or period, or by treating it in relation to genre (such as satire, parody, or the grotesque) or aesthetic category (such as comedy). These works concentrate on teasing out the emotional, functional, and thematic particularities of a discrete body of ironic phenomenon, instead of seeking to define the structural and functional essence of irony itself.<sup>10</sup> As Kaufer writes, “The study of irony has more or less remained localized to the study of specific ironic contents. When literary scholars

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, although rarely naming irony explicitly, talks about it as a kind of “negativity without reserve” (259), which is closely tied to the notion of “free play” or “the play outside meaning” (274).

<sup>10</sup> This is true of both the Western and Russian critical traditions. For a more thorough survey of tangentially related scholarship on both fronts, see Muecke’s *The Compass of Irony* (pp. 3-13), V.M. Pivoev’s *Ironiia kak fenomen kul'tury* (Irony as a Phenomenon of Culture; pp. 3-6), and S.I. Pokhodnia’s *Iazykovye vidy i sredstva realizatsii ironii* (Linguistic Aspects and the Means of Realizing Irony; pp. 3-10).

probe the ironies of a particular author, when general audiences analyze the ironies of a particular speaker, or general observers the ironies of particular situations, they are primarily interested in marshalling ironic phenomena to analyze a specific content rather than to generalize about ironic form” (455-456). Beyond these studies of “ironic contents” we find a collection of monographs and articles the volume of which is amazingly small relative to the amount of work that has been done on related phenomena, such as metaphor. Indeed, so limited is the availability of conceptual work on irony on the Russian front that V.S. Pivoev claims in his slim volume *Ironiia kak fenomen kul'tury* (2000), “. . . to this point in our national critical literature there is not one monograph on irony, although the need for such work has long since been observed” (3). This is a largely false claim – there are other monographs in the Russian tradition -- but the mere fact that a scholar operating today would dare to make such a claim speaks to the relative paucity of definitional work on a term so heavily in use in broader literary criticism.

Those who have hazarded an attempt to consolidate a critical history of the concept of irony tend to view irony as a dual phenomenon, categorizing it (and the various attempts to define it) into two major categories: irony as textual phenomenon and irony as worldview.<sup>11</sup> The nomenclature differs from scholar to scholar, but the basic conceptual buckets into which historical definitions are dropped remain rather consistent.

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<sup>11</sup> Booth distinguishes between “stable irony” and “infinite unstable irony” (3). Muecke writes of “being ironic” versus “ironic vision” (43); as Pokhodnia puts it, irony has been considered either *stilisticheskii priem* (“a stylistic device”) or a conceptual *rezultat* (“result”; 5); B. Alleman considers it as either a *facteur structurant* (“structural element”) or an *attitude d'esprit* (“spiritual attitude”; quoted in Pokhodnia 6); Candace Lang, in her treatise on the post-structuralist conception of irony, distinguishes between “the old irony [i.e. rhetorical irony]” which would become “the vomited stereotype of the paternal voice” (272) and the irony of a writerly text, which bears no semantic closure.

All seem to struggle with the relationship with what is, on one hand, a concrete organization of language that generates some form of resultant meaning that stands in opposition to the literal content of the utterance and, on the other, an abstract form of vision that seems tied to no particular use of language and incorporates affirming and negating tendencies under its purview. What differs from scholar to scholar is usually the importance accorded to one form or the other. Either the rhetorical facet of irony is considered a limited and banal form of the worldview, or the worldview is considered an abstracted and sometimes dangerous form of the rhetorical.

There have been attempts to revise this binary, either by imparting a note of multivalence to the rhetorical variant, or by describing the force of ironic vision as strictly negating in nature.<sup>12</sup> And there are even those who try to ground the broad scope of ironic vision in concrete structural elements of a text by creating some sort of third

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<sup>12</sup> For examples of the former, see: Group μ, “Ironique et iconique,” *Poétique* 36 (Nov. 1978): “Let us make clear first of all that the encoder, when he states x, does not give up the idea of making us understand x as well as not-x. To neglect this polysemous intention, this wish to assume two isotopes at the same time, would lead us to confuse rhetoric and simple transcoding (with a cryptographic function, for example) and to fall back into the idea that the ‘figurative sense’ is only an ornamental translation of the ‘proper sense.’” (quoted in Stringfellow, 6-7); or, the work of Catherine Kerbat-Orecchioni, who although championing the resultant meaning, nevertheless asserts the importance of both components of what she sees as the ironic structure: “. . . an ironic sequence is never equivalent to its literal translation. In this regard, irony is related to the trope, whose smooth functioning implies, similarly, the recognition of two superimposed semantic layers, neither of which must obscure the other” (quoted and translated in Stringfellow 9). For an example of the latter, see A.A Shcherbina’s “Zametki o prirode i tekhnike ironii” (Notes on the Nature and Technique of Irony) in which she describes the attribution of any affirmative sentiment into the workings of irony as “fruitless abstract humanism” (42).

category.<sup>13</sup> But these attempts tend to result in abstractions that offer little additional clarity or definitional paradoxes.

As Candace Lang points out, any definition of irony that casts it as a producer of meaning ultimately disregards elements of ironic understanding that make it so distinct:

The need to reduce all texts to tropes – or to a series of tropes – blinds the message seeking critic, as it does Freud at times, to an important aspect (the “Other” side) of literary production, the process of figuration, or the production of semantic effects through the establishment of relations among terms in praesentia. (289)

Thus, for Lang irony is more about the arrangement of verbal materials before the eyes of the reader than it is about the generation of a paraphrasable result. As Dan Sperber puts it, “An ironical utterance carries suggestions of attitude which cannot be made entirely explicit in propositional form. In this respect, a logical-pragmatic model does not provide a better description than a semantic model. On the other had, our analysis of irony . . . crucially involves the evocation an attitude – that of the speaker to the proposition mentioned. This attitude may imply a number of propositions, but it is not reducible to a set of propositions” (316). But as Sperber adds, “. . . how are attitudes and impressions to be dealt with in a theory of communication?” (71).

But we need a starting point: In order to isolate how irony works in Gogol’s prose, we need to set before us at least a provisional idea of what we’re looking for, if only to consider the extent to which the data ultimately departs from the definition.

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example: Pivoev’s notion of irony as a linguistic structure giving rise to a *tsennostnaia orientatsiia* (“value orientation”) or *tsennostnoe otnoshchenie* (“value relationship”) in *Ironiia kak fenomen kul'tury* (72-84); Pokhodnia's notion of irony as a mode founded on an *'ironicheskii smysl'* (“ironic sense”) in *Iazykovye vidy i sredstva realizatsii ironii* (60); and Warning’s term “ironic discourse” as that which is “suited to mediate between the indispensable foundation of ironic speech in rhetoric and the no less indispensable insight of the philosophy of irony” (256).

Perhaps the most flexible definition of irony – and it is barely a definition, being more a description of the experience that is present whenever we perceive something as being said or written “ironically -- is provided by Booth. Hostile to definitions himself, Booth operates from a tentative description of an ironic utterance as one that is structured such that it cannot be read “straight” (1).<sup>14</sup> Reading Gogol, we cannot help but sense that very little of what confronts us is being said (or, more specifically, “narrated”) straight. What we find is a puckish distance from the language used and the objects that language is employed to describe that seems to hint at something between “mental reservation” and outright mockery. It is this narrative presence that we “hear” tonally and “see” in the form of that determined smirk on the face of the narrator.

According to Booth, the ironist declares that perspective through the orchestration of an incongruity, either between words in an utterance or between words in an utterance and something else the reader knows or has read. In other words, the irony relies on a logical, moral, or stylistic inconsistency, a conflict. Such incongruities, Booth concedes, are not based on any *a priori* logic, and are subject to shifts in moral values (across borders or over time) that can render some intended ironies imperceptible to the observer. Thus, the most enduring ironies are those that operate in a realm of broadly shared moral, logical, and conceptual assumptions.

This description of the mechanisms of “being ironic,” in addition to having a history of critical acceptance that extends back to Quintilian,<sup>15</sup> provides an ideal starting

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<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, even de Man lends Booth’s initial definition credence: “Booth’s approach to irony is eminently sensible: he starts out from a question in practical criticism, doesn’t get involved in definitions or in the theory of tropes” (165).

point for understanding Gogol's ironic language in that he seems to rely on the very types of disjunctions Booth is talking about. Gogol's prose is famously "difficult." It digresses, meanders, elaborates on the seemingly irrelevant, ignores the seemingly significant, and otherwise makes our lives as readers as complicated as possible by violating the very norms of prose economy, causal logic, and relevance with which we normally make sense of a text. Much of the joy we take in reading Gogol is the mastery with which he suspends his literary castles in the air, making much ado about nothing (at least nothing of relevance to the continued progress of his story), and indulging in all sorts of ridiculous violations of logic. The very fact that this type of joy is acknowledged not only by modern readers and critics, but by Gogol's contemporaries (or again, at least those who "got" him) is incredibly telling in that it suggests that Gogol is toying with norms that have a tremendous shelf-life, and may go so deep as to be part of the fundamental conditions of readership.

### *Tropes Gone Wild*

That Gogol's ironic glance is directed at the world he describes, be it the ridiculous peregrinations of urban bureaucrats or the grotesque stasis of petty landowners, goes without saying. His satiric portraiture – with ironic manipulations of language as one of its formative tactics – is a prominent feature of his work. His earliest reviews, Vissarion Belinskii foremost among them, latched onto the satiric component of his work

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<sup>15</sup> States Quintilian, "[Irony] is made evident to the understanding either by the delivery, the character of the speaker, or the nature of the subject. For if any one of these three is out of keeping with the words, it at once becomes clear that the intention of the speaker is other than what he actually says" (quoted in Muecke 57).

in an effort to champion Gogol as a determined realist, bent on ferreting out the vices of contemporary Russian society.

Take almost all of Gogol's stories: What distinguishes them? Of what does each consist? Ridiculous comedy, beginning with buffoonery, continuing with buffoonery and ending with tears, which, finally, we call "life." All of his stories are like this: funny at the outset, then sad! And such is life: comic at the outset, then sad! What poetry, what philosophy, what truth! (342)

While the status of Gogol as a realist and the question of his social mission vis-à-vis Russian society has sparked fierce debate ever since, the focus of the following investigation is Gogol's relationship to the literary tradition and hence, the relationship between Gogol's ironic posture and the conventions of literary narrative. Much of the playfulness we sense in the Gogolian narrators of the latter half of his career stems from what seems to be those narrators' tomfoolery with the very structures and formative principles we come to expect out of a well-made story.

These patterns of willful ignorance or travesty have been duly noted in the scholarship as well. The violence they do to the integrity of story tends to be accounted for by two distinct critical movements. The first attempts to wring meaning out the narrative fragmentation by positing an alternate framework for understanding these so-called "stories."<sup>16</sup> As Cathy Popkin notes, this first movement "views each detail, no

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<sup>16</sup> Members of this camp include Bely, who views the proliferation and elaboration of verbal material ("the overloading of the storylines with a splendor of images and the power of sound") as a means of making the ordinary extraordinary in service of a deeper kind of vision (43); Yuri Mann comments that Gogol's use of Sternian tendencies (the abstention from the norms of logic, narrative propriety, and story progress) is the means by which "... the fantastic enters existence (byt'), things and the conduct of people and their manner of thinking and speaking" (116-117); Sergei Bocharov joins in the Symbolist trend of thought in viewing these tendencies as reflecting the "... artistic



matter how petty, as inherently meaningful [. . .] Reading Gogol, then, becomes a challenge to interpret these abundant ‘clues,’ [. . .] to urge the text to reveal its ‘secrets’”(129). These “secrets” are revealed either through the interpretation of often opaque image or motif symbolism, color symbolism, sound symbolism, or a kind of experiential indulgence in the transportive tricks championed by the Symbolists. Proponents of this first camp tend to view narrative structure (or any transgression thereof) as an aside, a bare and broken framework for the “real” literary effects at work, many of which require such literary acumen and accumulation of context, it is unlikely that they would be palpable to the average reader, then or now.

Describing his virgin response to Gogol’s stories, Robert Maguire, a chief proponent of this first camp, writes, “Except in format, these works were not really prose fictions at all, but tightly knotted poems, which produced a profound, disturbing, and unforgettable impression” (ix). Granted, Gogol’s prose is a performance that, even at first glance, tends to resist its consumption as prose. However, Maguire takes this as an invitation to jump to the only other literary form available; if it’s not prose, it must be a poem; he spends the rest of his work trying to untie that poetic knot:

Reading Gogol was like visiting a house here the door was open and welcoming but we were admitted only part way. We had to be satisfied with what we could see by craning our necks from the well-lighted hallway, but we yearned to explore the whole house, particularly the attic and the basement. Over the years, I have returned to that house again and

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conception of man as a physical-spiritual being, a conception that seems to be scattered about the world of Gogol . . . scattered in innumerable features and details which do not submit to rational transcription, but in each and very one of which, in the words of Andrei Bely, ‘the dog is buried’” (20).

again, with exploration as my purpose. The book offered here has been written in the first instance as an account of these explorations, and in the second instance as a testimony to my belief that Gogol is accessible not only to specialists but to readers with no knowledge of Russian. In fact, it is to them that I primarily address myself. (xi)

There seems to be a fundamental contradiction in Maguire's appraisal: either Gogol is accessible to the average reader, or his work represents a labyrinthine set of symbols and structures that require returning "again and again." Maguire's brand of analysis is deep and thought-provoking, but it represents the kind of intellectual puzzling for which most readers have neither the time nor the resources. There are certainly brands of literature that are geared for the "in" crowd -- for other artists, or even for specialists in certain arenas.<sup>17</sup> In this light, literature is privileged as a private language amongst "seers" whose acumen or degree of enlightenment has earned them access to truths the rabble simply would not or could not understand.

However, my feeling is that such a vision of literature cannot completely account for the work of a writer who clearly saw as his mission the renovation of the Russian literary language and the establishment of a homegrown prose tradition. And while the two aspects are not necessarily mutually exclusive, keeping the public mission in view -- and Gogol's letters and expository works suggest that he did just that -- implies a far more democratic vision of the literary text. It must allow the public some access and not be the private provenance of a select cadre of visionaries.

The second camp of scholars, while far more democratic in terms of its appraisal of Gogol's accessibility, consigns to his obfuscating discourse the status of a kind of

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<sup>17</sup> Consider, for example, the playful jokes and epigrams of the Arzamas circle or the private references popular in Decadent and Symbolist works.

generally pleasurable aimlessness, or at least ascribes it to an intention so abstract it is barely palpable. This faction of the critical community includes such members as Donald Fanger and, to a certain degree, A.P. Chudakov, who prefer to view Gogol's obfuscating tactics as either a demonstration of some sort of artistic freedom or instrumental in fashioning an experience of pure delight apart from any considerations of meaning or story-related purpose.<sup>18</sup>

The general drift of this second camp seems to be predicated on the notion that “play” or “fun” or “laughter” or “sheer exuberance” cannot be motivated toward a particular end, or if it is motivated toward some end, that end is inward facing, self-reflexive, and ultimately of a personal nature. It is my contention that both camps undervalue a particularly important aspect of reading Gogol, either by shunning a narrative-based approach to Gogol’s prose, or by characterizing his obfuscating tactics as some variant of pure, self-contained performance. Gogol is just too much fun for all of us, casual reader and scholar alike, not to consider his work as a conscious act of interaction between a writer and a broader public with a goal far more serious than simply inviting them to join in the fun.

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<sup>18</sup> Fanger considers Gogol’s maneuvers as constitutive of his exploration of “the possibility of literature, the freedom and power of writing to affirm its own material existence in the very registering of absences” (26). Chudakov claims that Gogol’s profusion of seemingly irrelevant detail “excites in the reader an especially burning and irresistible fascination (quoted in Popkin 130). However, Chudakov has a foot in the first camp in that he also considers Gogol’s use and abuse of narrative detail as part of Gogol’s particular vision of the physical/metaphysical world. Gogol’s tendency to extend “a certain quality . . . to its outer limits” (28), often using associations based solely on the words initially used to describe a given thing, reflects his investment of the fantastic in the material world. Thus, ultimately, Chudakov ascribes a mimetic purpose to the profusion of detail, though certainly a non-traditional one.

When we recognize the place of these obfuscating tactics as part of a full-fledged ironic discourse that emerges in the latter half of Gogol's career, both the structure and the function of Gogol's texts becomes clear.<sup>19</sup> The goal of this investigation is to describe that interaction, that exchange of action and reaction, writing and reading, to give voice to the reading experience of the attentive (though perhaps non-scholarly) reader.

*Gogol's Limpid "I"s*

So how do we determine how and where Gogol (or perhaps one of his narrative stand-ins) is "being ironic?" To start, the very phrase "being ironic" has two major implications, especially in terms of the distinction between "irony" and "the comic."<sup>20</sup> First, "being ironic" not only involves an "ironist," it also implies a three-way interaction between "ironist" (the source of irony), the "ironic victim" or object (that which is being revealed as comic), and the "observer" (the one who is led to see the ironic object as comic); (Kaufer 452).<sup>21</sup> Second, the presence of "ironist" means that there is a creative person intentionally employing a technique involved in that dynamic.

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<sup>19</sup> A through description of "ironic discourse" (as distinct from other forms of irony) follows.

<sup>20</sup> Here, "comic" is meant in its conventional sense as something that appears to us as funny or worthy of laughter. Contending with "irony" as a term is enough of a rabbit-hole for one investigation.

<sup>21</sup> This scheme can be complicated in a literary work by the presence of an intervening narrator-character. Thus, the "ironist" may be either the implied author or the narrator

Regarding the first of those two points, “being ironic” in a literary text is the process of revealing to the reader the narrator’s view of someone or something as comically insufficient (or, put simply, as “funny”) through the organization of verbal material or as Lang puts it, establishing a “relationship of terms *in praesentia*.” As distinct from something, which is simply “comic,” irony in a literary work, involves a conscious organization of verbal material to reveal the relationships between those terms. The author enjoins the reader to “see” someone or something as “funny” or, as Booth puts it, irony relies on the “silent act of reconstruction of the author’s superior edifice, and on our assent to dwell with him in silent communion while the meaningless drama enacts itself down below, on the surface of things” (263). Being ironic constitutes an entire discourse structure, a give and take between reader and author that ultimately consummates in a solidarity building effect between the two parties. Thus, a thing may be “comic,” but “irony” in a written interaction is the author’s process of leading us to understand that that thing is comic, and enjoining us to see it his way.

As David Kaufer notes, “Speakers can invoke irony to build group cohesion by victimizing the position of outgroups [ . . . ] Ironists can also achieve affiliation with a targeted audience by identifying common victims through their irony” (459). But irony does not simply build solidarity through the identification of a common enemy. Solidarity is built by the very process through which the listener/reader recognizes that the author/speaker is “being ironic,” especially in the context of a literary composition.

Rainer Warning notes that in the case of ironic discourse:

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him/herself. As we will see, a shift in the locus of irony from one discourse layer to another can dramatically change the reading experience.

The simulation of the victim becomes a test for the reader, for his textual sensibility, for his intelligence . . . Thus here too it is finally a matter of complicity, of establishment of solidarity. The establishment of solidarity, however, is less a strategy against the object of irony than a strategy of exclusion of the reader who proves unequal to the ‘discipline’ of ironic discourse. (263)

In recognizing that there is irony at work, the reader feels himself part of a select few, at one with the author, and essentially “in the know.”

As for the second implication of the term “being ironic,” given that “being ironic” involves an ironist, this means that irony involves the presence (via their written word) of someone “*consciously and intentionally* employing a technique” (Muecke 42; emphasis mine). Our understanding of the *intentions* of an interlocutor is dependent upon our image of that person. In other words, the presence of the ridiculous (Booth’s “disjunctions”) forces the question, “Given what I know of this person, could he or she have made a given statement sincerely?” As A.A. Shcherbina puts it, the same holds true for literary discourse: “Irony in the stylistics of a literary work is, first and foremost, irony in authorial discourse, in all of its forms connected with the ‘image of the author’” (23).

Thus, in order to qualify as “ironic” and not simply “comical,” Gogol’s obfuscating discourse has to be said to be issuing from a knowing voice; if we are to claim that there is a tonal nod-and-wink to the voices of the narrators in Gogol’s later works, this perception has to be based on some sense that these narrators bear an awareness of their own violations of narrative propriety. “Being ironic” requires a knowing violation of propriety on the part of the speaker/narrator in the name of comic

effect. Otherwise, the target of the irony is the speaker himself, and these narrators would simply emerge as various shades of rube.<sup>22</sup>

If the perception of irony depends in part upon our image of the narrator, then every reader is challenged to answer the question “Just who is telling this story?” This is an easy enough question to answer when considering most literary works. First-person narratives usually reveal the dramatic profile of the speaker over the course of the story, and although that profile may be loosely sketched, the relationship between the narrating “I” and the world depicted is usually made explicit. And even third-person narratives -- be they objective, omniscient, largely impersonal or heavily voiced -- tend to demonstrate consistency in terms of the relationship between narrator and content.

But in Gogol’s fiction we are treated to a massively hybrid collection of voices, often in the course of a single story. Gogol’s prose is a veritable potpie of discourse fragments representing oral and literary sources, contending evaluative and ideological positions, and even varying ontological relationships between teller and tale. As a result, the question of the exact identities of the narrators who populate Gogol’s fiction has challenged generations of scholars. There are those who attempt to wrestle the multiple discourses used by any one of these narrators into the guise of a single character.<sup>23</sup> There

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<sup>22</sup> The latter situation can be characterized as “ironic portraiture,” a kind of prose analogue to “dramatic irony,” in which the narrator, though providing us with comically ridiculous assertions or stylistic buffoonery, does so sincerely. A comic portrait of the narrator emerges, but one that is unbeknownst to the narrator and contrary to his or her self-concept. The difference between the experience of a narrator “being ironic” and “ironic portraiture” will be addressed in greater length in the following chapter.

<sup>23</sup> In a recent public address, Gary Saul Morson claimed, “The typical Gogol story is a tale about two idiots told by a third idiot” (“Gogol at 200”).

are those who choose to view the ever shifting mix of discourses as a means of prompting certain emotive effects or as a reflection of the socio-cultural realities of Gogol's day.<sup>24</sup>

And there are others who reject any kind of systematized understanding of Gogol's narrators as characters and prefer to view their protean nature as some sort of grand artistic assertion of the "primacy of play" (Fanger 92).

Thus, the first part of this investigation (Chapters 1-4) will focus on the image of the narrator in Gogol's short fiction. My contention is that this image experiences a distinct evolution over the course of Gogol's career. His initial narrators, treated in "Chapter 1: Bumpkins, Bullshitters, and Hacks – The Character-Narrator in Gogol's Early Prose," challenge our innate tendency to assume that one integrated speaker is responsible for a given tale, but ultimately, they accommodate that tendency by revealing themselves as convincing character-narrators with unorthodox, but perceptible, profiles. As a result, these works constitute a series of "ironic portraits." We are enjoined to view the narrators' transgressions of logic or narrative sense against the backdrop of their character profiles; as a result they read as the natural products of narrators who are untutored in the ways of composed literature and we merge with the author in viewing their gaffes as comic affectations. Here we have the implied author functioning as "ironist," our narrators functioning as "ironic objects," and the reader functioning as "ironic observer." By the time Gogol has reached the apex of his creative powers, a period treated in "Chapter 4: Being a Nothingness: The Narrator-Character and the

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<sup>24</sup> For an example of the former, see Boris Eikhenbaum's "How 'The Overcoat' Is Made" in which Eikhenbaum contends that the various verbal fragments work together to establish the grotesque (pp. 284-285). For an example of the latter, see Vinogradov's claim that Gogol's protean narratives reflect the cultural war between "gentrified" and "bourgeois-democratic" speech tendencies" ("Iazyk" 286).



Foundations of Ironic Discourse,” he completely subverts this tendency. He learns to manipulate the various discourses he includes in his tales such that they become paper-thin pretenses behind which we sense the lurking presence of Gogol himself.<sup>25</sup> Despite the bare trappings of an intervening narrator, Gogol becomes the true “speaker”; once we recognize this (and my contention is that even those new to his prose recognize this at some fundamental level), we interpret those abrogations of logical or moral or narrative sense as being intended by the “speaker,” for such a speaker would be aware of the norms his own discursive tendencies violate. Thus, we merge with this speaker in comic contemplation of his own pretended narrative incompetence. The shift in speaker from bumbling character to one with an authorial profile and the attendant shift in ironic object, from character-narrator to the very language used by the narrator-character signals the move from ironic portrait to “ironic discourse.”

In “Chapter 5: From the Ridiculous to the Ridiculously Sublime – Ironic Portraiture v. Ironic Discourse,” we will consider the impact of this shift in the image of the narrator. Again, when we read Gogol’s disruptive discourse against a backdrop of bumpkins, bullshitters, and hacks – the early narrators – it tends to be experienced as the charming, comic affectations of ultimately untutored storytellers. However, when we recognize Gogol as the “ultimate speaker” in his mature work, these confounding elements are revealed as part of Gogol’s own discourse without an intervening character-narrator; we as readers then merge with Gogol in the comic contemplation of his own discourse, and what emerges is a much deeper attack on the very expectations Gogol’s

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<sup>25</sup> By “Gogol himself,” I mean Gogol as the implied author of the work, not Gogol as an historical figure whose biography can or should be mined as a source of textual meaning.

original readers brought to his stories and, to a certain extent, we as contemporary readers continue to bring to his stories. Although the mode of analysis in this investigation is primarily narratological, this movement will also be described as part of Gogol's attempt to renovate the literary discourse of his time. As a means of characterizing this project, his stylistic development will be contextualized in terms of both his personal creative biography and the broader cultural situation he confronted.

In "Chapter 6: The Greatest Story (Is One Never Told)," we will investigate more specifically the target of Gogol's ironic attack. If his ironic discourse can be characterized as a carefully orchestrated challenge to the reading presumptions of his audience, just what were those reading presumptions? And just how successful was Gogol's effort?

Finally, we will conclude with a speculative look at the limits of ironic discourse. Gogol was able to engineer a relationship with his readers that allowed him to mock their dependence upon story without alienating them in the process. While he was never able to purge the popular dependence on story as an organizing principle for literary fiction by positing some palpable alternative, he contributed to a cultural situation in which writers and readers could begin to consider how narrative could be reshaped. Gogol's efforts (with ironic discourse as their crowning weapon) cleared the cultural air such that others could create works that shifted, rearranged, and loosened the bounds of traditional narrative. The last section of this investigation considers what Gogol's successes and failures say about the nature of how irony operates in a literary text. Do still-prevalent definitions and descriptions of irony adequately account for what Gogol has done – or failed to do? Or are there other linguistic models that can better accommodate the interaction between author and reader that his irony makes possible?

**Chapter 1:  
Bumpkins, Bullshitters, and Hacks – The Character-Narrator in Gogol’s Early  
Prose**

Whenever we determine that a person is speaking to us ironically, that judgment is based on an almost unconscious assessment of the character of the person speaking. That is, we consider, given what we know about the moral and intellectual profile of the speaker, whether the speaker “means” what he or she says: is the statement consistent with what the speaker might honestly believe? An evaluation of the pure content of the utterance is not enough to make such a determination. A statement may be comic, fantastic, or downright wrong, but that is not a sufficient condition for detecting irony.

I would contend that even though a literary text is not an oral performance, the same dynamic holds true in the sense that when we read a story, there exists a presumption that this story is coming from *someone*. Whether this someone is the author of the tale operating through a relatively transparent narrator, or more complexly, through a system of one or more fully developed character-narrators, when we read, we read with the understanding that there is someone in whom this language is rooted. This vision of the literary text is all the more relevant when considering Gogol’s work, as Gogol seems to force a consideration of his work as a quasi-oral performance. Boris Eikhenbaum notes that “. . . the basis of a Gogolian text is skaz, and that it is made of actual elements of speech and verbalized emotions” (272).<sup>26</sup> Gogol’s very language resists classification as

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<sup>26</sup> There are a number of definitions of “skaz” many of which apply Gogol’s work at various points in his career. Skaz, at its most fundamental, is a form of oral folk narrative

a kind of translucent “direct discourse,” an objective device, a neutral window on a world. Its origin is always a person, a speaker. And beyond his linguistic choices, there is the simple fact that Gogol demonstrates a dogged resistance to embracing an impersonal mode, instead choosing to populate his works with narrator-characters who announce themselves as determined “I”s, but take very little part (if any) in the main action of the tales they tell.

Therefore, while the question, “Who is telling this story?” is a much more complicated one in the context of a piece of literature, determining a portrait of a simulated “speaker” is as much a part of detecting irony here as it is in casual conversation.

As noted previously, a key signal that we are in the presence of irony in a literary work, much like in casual conversation, is an incongruity, either between words in an

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in which the events depicted are presented as having taken place in the present or recent past, and often take the form of a personal reminiscence. The more evolved meaning, popularized by the Formalists, pertains to a literary work engineered to give the illusion of an oral performance, liberating the literary text from the stranglehold of “good taste” and enriching the literary vocabulary with diction from all social strata. Eikhenbaum himself extended this conception, in which the text’s “tendency toward orality” is not simply an attempt to enrich the literary lexicon with living speech, but to construct a literary discourse that takes on the role of an oral performance with the very sound shape (“phonic gestures”) of language as the primary expressive tool. What is significant here is that all of these definitions share the presumption that skaz works have an oral foundation, whether real or “illusory” -- as such, they foreground the presence of a speaker, even in a premeditated literary work. Although, as Hugh McLean argues in his entry on “skaz” in the *Handbook of Russian Literature*, the orality of the literary variant of skaz became a hotly contested issue and a supposedly more rigorous definition was worked out by A.P. Chudakov and M.O. Chudakov who defined it as “a special type of narrative structured as emanating from a person distanced from the author (whether concretely named or presumed) and one who possesses a distinct manner of discourse” (420). But one wonders how this supposedly more rigorous description of “skaz” is distinct from any first-person narration. It seems that in attempting to refine a definition, these scholars have neutered the term of its distinct character and made it equivalent to a previously established variety of narrative point of view.

utterance or between words in an utterance and something else the reader knows or has read. In other words, irony relies on a logical, moral, or stylistic inconsistency, a conflict.

Throughout Gogol's career, from the very first words of his initial prose effort, *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1831) to the closing exhortations of the first volume of *Dead Souls* (1842), his work is rife with such incongruities, many of which center on the extent to which his narrators dispense quite violently with traditional storytelling norms after explicitly or implicitly invoking those very norms. But in order to qualify as "irony," these incongruities must be intended. That is, they must represent a conscious violation by the party "responsible for the creative choices that made the work" (Booth 11).

But locating intention in a literary work can be far more complicated than doing so in the context of oral communication. As we have already noted, in a composed text the "source" of the tale can inhabit multiple planes. In the case of a first-person narrative, we find a character who operates as the proximal source of the tale, an intermediary who is separate and apart from the author (whom we know to be the story's "ultimate" source). In this case, we must fashion both an image of the narrator (the fictional character telling the tale) and develop an understanding of the implied author. We then make judgments as to the points of similarity and distance between author and narrator. On the other end of the spectrum, in literary works that employ third-person narration, the distance between implied author and narrator tends to shrink, and we are more apt to assume some degree of parity between the narrating voice and the implied author.<sup>27</sup> Thus,

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<sup>27</sup> This is merely a tendency. There are certainly heavily voiced third-person omniscient narrators that pose the same difficulties as fully developed first-person narration.

in literary works, intention (and hence irony) can be detected on one or more planes: on the level of the narrator, the level of the implied author, or both.

As a series of first-person narratives, Gogol's stories put before us a two-tiered structure of "persons responsible" for the narration of his tales. There is, of course, Gogol (and even when we speak of Gogol, we are speaking here of him not in the biographical sense, but as the "implied author" in the broader sense). Then there is a system of character-narrators who are depicted as making choices regarding the telling of their tales, and so we must be careful about where we place intentionality within that two-tiered structure. As long as intentionality is detected on one of those levels (either solely in the implied author or in author and narrator both) and we are struck by the kinds of incongruities noted previously, we are in the presence of irony. But the exact locus of intention is crucial in terms of the reach of that irony and in terms of its ultimate effect on the reader's relationship to the story.

The image of a given narrator or implied author is, to a certain degree, inseparable from the language that narrator uses. Speakers are created largely out of their language and the process of reading them for irony, as Booth also notes, takes on a kind of hermeneutic trajectory. We begin with an initial set of presumptions about the character-narrator (which may be conditioned by extra-textual considerations such as an author's previous works or the genre of the given work, the title, subtitle, etc.) that conditions our understanding of the language the narrator uses; but at the same time, that language can exert a reverse effect, reshaping the image of the narrator, and around and around we go, part and whole exerting a fluid influence on each other. The language conditions our

understanding of the narrator, and our developing understanding of the narrator shapes our reception of his language.

At the same time, Gogol's narrators are determinedly "fashioned" creatures. Their images are intricately constructed not only by their use of language, but also by deft manipulations of context, self-description, and their relationship to other character narrators. Over the course of his literary career, we find Gogol toying with a whole range of narrative guises, some thickly painted for comic effect, and some tissue-thin pretenses for his own delightfully confounding abuse of storytelling convention. As Dmitry Chizhevskii notes, Gogol's tales are " . . . told not by Gogol himself, but by a narrator whom Gogol very deliberately keeps at a certain distance or remove from himself" (299). That "certain distance" varies over the course of Gogol's career as he learns how to manipulate his disruptive tactics for the most far-reaching literary effects.

*From Ironic Portraiture to Ironic Discourse*

When we find ourselves in the presence of one of Booths' "incongruities" – a piece of verbal ridiculousness – and intention is detected on the level of the implied author, but not on the level of the narrator, we have what Booth refers to as an "ironic portrait": "[. . .] the reconstruction of messages or content seems to be for the sake of revising and completing a picture of the speaker or of an action in which he is involved" (137). In other words, these are instances in which character (or in our case, the character-narrator's) speech is manipulated for the purposes of establishing a portrait of the narrator that conflicts with that character's appraisal of him or herself. An "ironic

portrait” is essentially a comic vision of the narrator rendered unknowingly by the narrator’s own performance. The implied author creates a situation in which we laugh *at* the speaker, not with him. Here, the narrator is speaking sincerely but the performance is viewed as ironic from the shared perspective of author and reader.

As we will see, in his early fiction Gogol creates a series of relatively full-fledged portraits of bumpkins, bullshitters, and hacks as his character-narrators. As a result, the digressions, omissions, revisions and other radical narrative improprieties emerge as violations of storytelling norms whose comedy is, to some degree, not perceived by the narrators themselves.

When intentionality is registered at both levels – author and narrator – we find that which Booth calls “stable irony” (3) or, to use Douglas Muecke’s more flexible phrase, “being ironic” (43).<sup>28</sup> That is, when we are in the presence of a speaker (or in our case, a narrator) who is “being ironic,” the direct source of the language is cognizant of the ridiculous improprieties he or she is uttering; we laugh along with the narrator (and implied author) at the unfortunate target of that ironic utterance.

But as his career evolves, Gogol goes further than simply imbuing his character-narrators with a consciousness of their own improprieties. In fact, he heads in the opposite direction by radically destabilizing the whole character-narrator plane. While the likes of Rudy Panko and Foma Grigorievich, the narrators of his early stories, exist as thickly painted characters, Gogol begins to fragment the narrator-plane by introducing vague and/or radically contradictory characterizing features, preventing us from building

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<sup>28</sup> Muecke actually uses the phrase “being ironic” to help define verbal irony (otherwise known as rhetorical irony) and distinguish it from situational irony, or ironies of event (“It is ironic that . . .”).



a coherent image of a character-narrator. This results in a situation in which the levels of character-narrator and implied author collapse. And while Gogol retains the pretense of first-person narration throughout his career, the conflicting and contrasting shards of narrative personae woven into each tale emerge as paper-thin pretenses for play with narrative improprieties on the part of an “authorial” narrative presence that we recognize as Gogol himself.

Booth and Muecke embrace a vision of irony that foregrounds it as a trope – a localized manipulation of language. What we ultimately find in Gogol’s mature work is better described as “ironic discourse,” a concept introduced by Rainer Warning, in which, “. . . these islands of ironic negation [local ironies] expand so that they wipe out the areas between and in this way merge into a pragmatically founded *factio totius voluntatis*, that is, one founded in the narrative situation itself . . .” (262). Here, irony maximizes the field, creating a situation in which there is no stable ground, and even the fabric of the narrative personae is subject to ironic play on the part of a higher authorial presence.

The goal of the first part of this investigation will be to describe how Gogol’s initial narrators are *sdelany* (“made”) only to be unmade as his career progresses. We will create a kind of portrait gallery of narrator images, chronologically organized, through which we can chart the evolutionary movement of Gogol’s career – from ironic portraiture to ironic discourse – in order to ultimately better understand how they affect our relationship to character and text.

*Rudy Panko – Portrait of the Narrator as an Old Beekeeper*

The 1831 publication of the first volume of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* brought Gogol his first taste of public notoriety, but the voice with which he first addressed his reading public was decidedly not his own. Instead, the voice we read—or, to be more accurate, hear – is that of one Rudy Panko, a beekeeper, who functions as the collection’s nominal transcriber and editor. This fictional conceit, the notion that the contents are simply the transcribed renderings of an impromptu oral performance, will condition our understanding of the narration of all of the character-narrators who appear in the two volumes of *Evenings*. But Gogol goes further here with the development of his character-narrators, especially Panko, granting them each a distinct personality, a kind of sub-literary profile that allows us to calibrate the tenor of their oral-made-written performances.

The act of naming Panko, though it seems a simple stroke, severs Gogol-the-author from Panko-the-narrator in a very fundamental way. While Panko certainly serves the ends of his master, and at times the puppet strings are almost visible, at the same time he assumes a definitive profile of his own. Gogol not only names Panko, but grants him a trade, a home, a socioeconomic profile, and therefore, generates a set of assumptions about the type of discourse appropriate to the character.

But Gogol’s most effective feat of character construction is having Panko construct his own profile by anticipating the reactions of others to his “literary” project. Indeed, strictly speaking, the first voice we hear is not Panko’s direct discourse, but the appropriated voice of his potential detractors, those of the *bol’shoi svet* (“high society”) whom Panko imagines would casually reject his pseudo-literary offering. Panko’s

discourse is inherently dialogic, not simply in the sense that he is addressing the reader, but in that he anticipates the objections of his “learned” readers and not only reacts to them, but apes them in a convincingly satiric manner:

“What oddity is this: *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*? What sort of Evenings have we here? And thrust into the world by a beekeeper! Glory to God! As though geese enough had not been plucked for pens and rags turned into paper! . . . Really, there is such a lot of paper nowadays that it takes time to think what to wrap in it.” (Kent I:3, SS I:113)

Within the stream of his own monologue (or implied dialogue with his audience), Panko is named from within and without; he is at once, “a beekeeper” in the neutral descriptive sense, and “a beekeeper! Glory to God!” a playfully invoked characterization of himself as a low sort, an interloper in the world of letters. He is at once a *khutorianin* (“villager”) and a *muzhik* (“peasant”) [“Get out, peasant, out you go”(3)], so called by even the lowliest servants of the *bol'shoi svet*.

The narrator is aware of the extent to which he is violating literary or written tradition and anticipates critiques of his endeavor, more specifically the supposed unworthiness of his subject (Ukrainian rural culture), and his supposed unfitness as an arbiter of story-worthy topics. But he very deftly hierarchizes the village/society binary in his favor by contrasting the zestless formalities of the society ball -- where one goes to “move your legs and yawn with your hand over your mouth” (Kent I:4, SS I:114) -- with the organic merriment of the village evening party.

This binary is not simply one constructed as an opposition between “us” and an unspecified “them,” but quite openly declares itself as one of “us” vs. “you” (*u nas / u vas*), “you” being his readership. The reader is implicated as potential critic, as one

unprepared for the type of discourse Panko is about to introduce. It is a conscious way of preparing for a type of extra-literary discourse, a means of garnering tolerance for a type of tale telling that may not accord with the dictates of “bon ton” and efficient exposition. By thematizing the extent to which Panko stands outside the norms of “good society” and in opposition to his imagined reader, Gogol allows Panko to paint his own portrait: that of the uneducated but goodhearted peasant, jovial and good natured, provincial perhaps, but not necessarily dumb.

Panko’s lush appreciation of his own village milieu further augments our sense of his place in it: “. . . and you will find no better honey in any village, I will take my oath on that. Just imagine when you bring in the comb, the scent in the room is something beyond comprehension; it is as clear as a tear or as costly crystal such as you see in earrings. And what pies my old woman will feed you on! What pies, if only you knew: simply sugar, perfect sugar!” (Kent I:7, SS I:119). These reveries build a real sense of Panko as a denizen of his own folksy world.

But on the simplest level, Panko is ultimately marked by his own diction and speech patterns, which land him squarely in a village milieu -- albeit a largely imagined one. In the voice of Rudy Panko, we find the requisite “village” speech, or at least what passes for it. His discourse is marked with exclamations [*batiushki moi* (“good heavens”)], folksy locutions and figurative play, and conversational and dialogic interjections [*“Ia vam skazhu . . . Da chto govorit!”* (“I can tell you . . . what can you say!”)]. The very act of conversational direct address to the reader within the context of an intentionally “written” undertaking paints a portrait of, if not literary incompetence, then a kind of hokey, unintentional impropriety borne of an oral tradition: “At home, dear

readers – no offense meant (you may be annoyed at a beekeeper like me addressing you so plainly, as though I were speaking to some old friend or crony)” (Kent I:4, SS I:114).

Dmitry Chizhevskii notes this tendency of Gogol’s narrators to resemble their untutored characters, even to the point of disrupting the supposed aims of art: “Such impoverishment [of diction in the narrator] would seem to contravene the fundamental intrinsic law of every work of art, which necessarily strives to achieve the greatest possible richness, fullness, and plenitude. But in this case, the possibilities for a richness and fullness of diction are obviously limited by the inarticulateness that is so characteristic of the narrator and the heroes” (300). Chizhevskii’s logic is somewhat flawed; he fails to consider that “richness, fullness, and plenitude in art” can involve not only a vivid portrait of the world of the story, but also a vivid portrait of the character telling the story. This is the tendency of Panko’s language. Its expressive effect is as much directed at its source as at its intended object.

In carefully constructing that source (i.e. Panko), Gogol is very attentive to the ironic dynamic here. If “being ironic” means that there is a creative person intentionally employing a technique, when we confront Panko’s responsibility for instance after instance of Booth’s incongruities (those violations of storytelling propriety), we are pushed toward the conclusion that the intentionality is not Panko’s. Panko’s abrogations of storytelling propriety, when viewed against the image of him as an untutored bumpkin, emerge as unwitting products of his “un-literary” nature. They are comic affectations, revealed by an authorial presence and not intended by the proximate speaker. Thus, the “object” of irony is revealed to be Panko himself.

This is not to say that Gogol has constructed a portrait of a “real” Ukrainian peasant. As Michael Aucouturier puts it, Gogol’s characters, “. . . are not typical representatives of the Little Russian peasantry, but the young lovers and old greybeards of the theater, Ukrainian descendents of the Cléantes and Elises, the Orgons and Gerontes of Moliere” (quoted in Pevear xii). In collecting source material for these stories, Gogol relied as much on the portrait of Ukrainian peasantry provided by popular representations of that milieu as he did on any direct knowledge of the real conditions of the Ukrainian peasantry.<sup>29</sup> In a letter to his mother, Gogol wrote, “There are lots of superstitions, horror stories, traditions various anecdotes, and so on, current among the people; all of that will be of great interest to me . . . “ (SS I:681).

However, the fact that Gogol’s portrait of the Ukrainian peasantry lacks in ethnographic accuracy is largely irrelevant. A caricature is still a character and the profile of a character is the background upon which we make determinations of tone. It is verisimilitude, not mimesis that counts here. What is significant is the extent to which, within the world of the text, Panko coheres as a character. This is not to say that Panko is painted in three dimensions, but only that Gogol paints enough strokes to make us strive to put together a coherent portrait of the character. At this point in his career, Gogol is at least courting our natural tendency to assume that a speaking voice issues from an integrated speaker. Panko contains enough traits of the “country bumpkin” (real or

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<sup>29</sup> Gogol’s early life provided ample exposure to popular representations Ukrainian peasant culture. His own family tree included several published authors of dramatic comedies and light verse. Most significantly, Gogol’s father Vasiliy wrote a series of comedies in Ukrainian that “grew out of a tradition of character-types and migratory motifs as embodied in anecdotes” (Gippius 17). For a thorough description of Gogol’s early cultural influences, see Vasiliy Gippius’s *Gogol* (pp. 14-27).

imagined) that he assumes an independent existence within the world of the text. Fanger notes, “Neither Rudy Panko nor Foma Grigorievich is what could be called a developed character, but both are vivid and effective presences as voices” (89).

In the preface to the second edition of *Evenings*, Gogol even has Panko anticipate claims that he is a bogus character: “I expect you imagine, dear readers, that I am only pretending to be old” (Kent I:89, SS I223). He might as well have said, “pretending to be a beekeeper.” We can almost see in this methinks-he-doth-protest-too-much moment Gogol himself peeking out from behind the Panko mask. But these moments are fleeting. Most of the time we are focused on calibrating Panko’s own degree of self-awareness: “Only don’t scold me!” (Kent I:89, SS I:223), he cries in anticipation of criticism for introducing another volume of stories. Although a provincial figure, Panko too displays a kind of playfulness that ranges from a humorous awareness of his own weaknesses to a sense that he might be playing the rube at the expense of his “educated” readers. Although the exact tenor of Panko’s narration is sometimes debatable, what is clear is that the text pushes us to construct a coherent character of Panko out of a trail of discourse and dialogue. That is, we spend our time trying to pin down Panko as a character, as a fictional backdrop against which we judge his utterances.

*“There’s a Story to Do with This Story”*

Panko serves not only as a source of information on his own character, but on the other character-narrators who inhabit his “collection.” From the crotchety old sexton Foma Grigorievich to the *panich* (“fine young gentleman”), the two who bear

responsibility for the tales of the first volume, to the honorable Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka, whose home can be easily found thanks to the directions provided by Panko, many of these narrators are forcibly located in the “village” milieu established by Panko himself. This is not to say that they are all of a piece. On the contrary, these narrators demonstrate marked distinctions in narrative style, range of diction, and relationship to oral and written traditions; but all of them are framed as a range of speakers within a recognizable (however artificial) social context, and derive their being, to a certain extent, with reference to each other and the Dikanka landscape they inhabit. As Panko puts it in his prefatory remarks to “Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Auntie,” “There was a story to do with this story” (Pevear 106, SS I:333). There’s a story to do with each of these stories or, at the very least, there is a character to do with each of these stories. The frame narrative, no matter how sketchy it may be in parts, pushes us to piece together the profile of each narrator as a character within the larger “real” framework of their conscious acts of narration. The character portraits that emerge continue to support our reading of any unexpected violations of normative or storytelling sense as unwitting (and hence comic) products of these characters' implied back-story.

Indeed, Panko attempts to marshal evidence as to the “respectability” of his narrator friends despite “rational” evidence to the contrary. Foma Grigorievich is characterized by his attention to hygiene, which is superlative, at least relative to other gravediggers:

. . . if you go to see him, even on working days, he will always receive you in a gabardine of fine cloth of the color of cold potato mash, for which he paid almost six rubles a yard at Poltava. As for his high boots, no one in the village has ever said that they smelled



of tar; everyone know that he rubs them with the very best fat, such as I believe many a peasant would be glad to put in his porridge. Nor would anyone ever say that he wipes his nose on the skirt of his gabardine, as many men of his calling do; no, he takes from his bosom a clean, neatly folded white handkerchief embroidered on the hem with red cotton, and after putting it to its proper use, folds it up in twelve as his habit is, and put it back in his bosom. (Kent I:5, SS I:115)

The comedy here lies in Panko's claim that Foma's propriety as a narrator, nay, as a citizen, resides in his meticulous use of a handkerchief. Panko's attempts to legitimate his crowd in the eyes of what he conceives as a "high society" reading public are ridiculous in that they completely misgauge the readership's conception of propriety, which we assume extends beyond not wiping mucus on your own clothing. This passage certainly characterizes Rudy as a bumpkinish figure, but it also aligns Foma and Panko in terms of socio-economic profile and expectations regarding education and worldview.

This is not to suggest that Foma is stupid, per se, simply that, like Panko, Foma can be characterized in part by a certain provincial ignorance that will dominate our understanding of his discourse, of the conventions of his speech. However, his ignorance of social politesse or the niceties of polished Pushkinian prose does not mask his determined ability to cut through pretension and satirize both the characters that inhabit his stories and even the "fine young gentleman," who presents such a determined counterpoint. Foma's tale of the Latin student who insists on referring to all things in Latin until he mistakenly steps on a rake (at which point his native tongue "returns" to him) allegorically characterizes the Gentleman's discourse as a kind of mannered pretension. The Gentleman's rejoinder, "Cast not thy pearls before swine . . ." (Kent I:6,

SS I:117), reflects his own self-concept, that of the relatively educated man of the world forced to contend with a bunch of country hicks.

Panko himself, though openly approving of Foma's mocking tale, also defends the Gentleman's elevated narrative style:

Sometimes he will hold up his finger, and looking at the tip of it, begin telling a story – as choicely and cleverly as though it were printed in a book! Sometimes you listen and listen and begin to be puzzled. You can't make head or tail of it, not if you were to hang for it. Where did he pick up such words? (Kent I:5, SS I:116)

Although describing the Gentleman's language as being as clever as “though it were printed in a book” is a potentially backhanded complement given that the preface generally serves as an argumentative plea for the superiority of impromptu oral culture, it is difficult not to impart to Panko a genuine sense of humility before that which he might not understand, and a sincere joy in the simple act of storytelling regardless of content and even meaning. And ultimately, it is Panko who welcomes both narrators to his table, reconciling their tiff with a lyric paean to his wife's cooking. Although the ultimate sense here is one of disdain for high-cultural pretension, Panko emerges as the good-natured assembler of various voices, welcoming all, and legitimating his own non-traditional contribution.

In these pitched battles over storytelling itself, Panko, Foma and the Gentleman reveal their personalities. Foma emerges as the comically crotchety provincial, a product of the village milieu, ignorant perhaps, but certainly not stupid, and one who can manipulate his colloquial idiom for satiric effect. The Gentleman, by contrast, emerges as someone of relative education, who is familiar with “literary” forms of prose fiction and

whose discourse, at least in part, operates on that plane. Viktor Vinogradov calls attention to what he refers to as a “stylistic antagonism” between these various characters, revealing this very brand of “social stratification” (383). But for Vinogradov, these characters existence *as characters* is secondary to their symbolic value: as testaments to Gogol’s artistic mission as a supposedly determined Slavophile. Vinogradov’s analysis does not consider how their continued coherence as characters affects our reception of their narration, and instead concentrates on the “novelty of Gogol’s style” which “lies in the naked democratization, the infusion of Ukrainian ‘vulgar’ language” (383-384). What is of interest to us is the extent to which these characters’ narrative improprieties emerge as unintentional. For when we see a piece of narrative nonsense as an unwitting product of character, it dictates that three-way interaction referenced in the Introduction – that between “ironist,” the “ironic victim,” and the “observer.” In this case, it is our implied author who is the ultimate ironist, the character-narrator the object of that ironic gaze, and the readers who function as “observers,” and who join with the author in comic contemplation of the character-narrators so carefully constructed before them.

*Vmesto predisloviia (In Lieu of a Preface)*

The problem of relying too heavily on Panko as a means of constructing a framework with which we will judge the status of the speakers of the individual tales lies in the historical fact that Panko was a post-hoc creation, a suggestion of Gogol’s friend P.A. Pletnev. Pletnev wished to guard the young Gogol against those who might be predisposed against the publication due to a personal familiarity with Gogol or with his

earlier, somewhat bumbling literary attempts, such as the an ill-fated, self published poem *Hans Kukhelgarten* (1828; SS I:682).

If Panko's prefaces and his prefatory comments that appear in the individual stories are afterthoughts, shouldn't (or couldn't) the stories be read without the framework provided by Panko? According to Cathy Popkin, the skaz framework and the character of Panko himself were a means of providing an organizing principle that the stories themselves lacked: "In this retroactively supplied 'telling bee' in which the prospective narrators are gathered at the home of Rudy Panko and 'simply chatter,' Gogol has been asked by his editor to do what readers regularly attempt to do for themselves: to motivate the overload" (174). However, I would contend that Panko's prefatory comments simply make manifest that which is already latent in the individual stories and the relationships between them. Panko's characterization of Foma and the Gentleman is simply a reflection of the character profiles generated by the discourse of the individual stories themselves.

A look at the image of those individual narrators as they represent themselves bears out Panko's characterization and, what's more, legitimates Panko himself as a "local" denizen, reinforcing our sense of him as a fully fledged character, no matter how potentially playful he may be. Panko comes across as a mediator between his narrators, between Foma Girgorievich and the Gentleman and Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka and even those unnamed narrators who inhabit the second volume. Panko's discourse is a kind of mathematical mean, derived in various degrees from the discourses he transcribes.

*A Gentleman and a Scholar (Sort of)*

From his very first words, the Gentleman marks his distance from both Panko and Foma. His discourse shows signs of literary construction, of a linguistic and stylistic polish that suggest a degree of formal education and familiarity with the prevailing “literary” vocabulary -- and by this we mean the language of Sentimentalism -- that Panko and Foma lack. The opening lines of “The Fair at Sorochintsy,” our first introduction to the voice of the Gentleman, demonstrate this:

How intoxicating, how magnificent is a summer day in Little Russia! How luxuriously warm the hours when midday glitters in stillness and sultry heat and the blue fathomless ocean covering the plain like a dome seems to be slumbering, bathed in languor, clasping the fair earth and holding it close in its ethereal embrace.  
(Kent I:8, SS I:120)

Here we find the oohs and aahs regarding the pastoral splendor of nature, the exalted emotional vocabulary (intoxicating / magnificent / luxurious), the syntactic repetitions reminiscent of the poetic ode (how / how / how), and ornate, nested figurative play involving heavy personification and emotionalization of the natural world. In short, in the voice of the Gentleman, we find the lyric pose and sentimental mentality one might find in one of Nikolai Karamzin’s founding texts of the Russian strain of Sentimentalism, such as his short story “Poor Liza” (1792).<sup>30</sup> This brand of discourse finds a place not

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<sup>30</sup> The following passage from the opening of “Poor Liza,” demonstrates some of the very same verbal tendencies – the hyper-investment of emotion in the natural world, frequent exclamations, lyric syntactic repetitions, the ecstatic diction -- noted in the Gentleman’s narration:

Perhaps none of those living in Moscow know the city’s environs as well as I do, because no one spends more time than I in the fields, no one wanders about on

only in this story, but in “A May Night or The Drowned Maiden,” the other story in the collection attributed to the Gentleman:

Do you know the Ukrainian night? Aie you do not know the Ukrainian night! Look at it: the moon looks out from the center of the sky; the immense dome of heaven stretches further, more inconceivably immense than ever; it glows and breathes; the earth is all bathed in a silvery light; the exquisite air is refreshing and warm and full of languor, and an ocean of fragrance is stirring. Heavenly night! Enchanting night!” (Kent I:53, SS I:180)

This fine young gentleman, at least in this mode, is consistent almost to the point of imaginative limitation. Stylistically the passages are virtually identical; they feature a determined adherence to literary conventions already on the wane.

This lyric mode is simply one of a number of disparate elements of form and content contained in this hodgepodge of a tale. The narrator of “The Fair at Sorochintsy” shuttles between lyric appreciations of the Ukrainian landscape, a ribald sub-plot reminiscent of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century popular prose, elements of folk-inspired trickery, an embedded tale of the religio-supernatural, a light satiric pose regarding the bumpkinish superstitions of the village inhabitants, and broad comic strokes. In a very short space, the prose (and the narrative pose) can shift from a kind of conscious sentimental excess to a determinedly farcical construction of character and action. When asked what he desires

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foot more than I, without plan, without goal -- wherever my whim takes me -- through meadows and groves, through hill and valley. Each summer I find pleasant new places or new beauties in the old. But for me, the most pleasant place is the one from which the gloomy gothic towers of Si . . . nov Monastery rise. Standing on this hill you can see almost all of Moscow to the right – the awful mass of houses and churches that that resembles a grand amphitheater: a marvelous picture, especially when the sun shines on it, when its afternoon rays burn on the countless golden cupolas, on the countless crosses, rising to the heavens! (605)

by the stepmother figure of the tale, the priest's son doesn't skip a beat: "Your love, of course, incomparable Khavronya Nikiforovna!' the priest's son whispered, holding a dumpling in one hand and encircling her ample waist with his arm" (Kent I:20, SS I:135). Emotional ecstasy and comfort food go hand-in-hand in this passage and in this tale as a whole.

The story cycles through these sentimental, satiric, and farcical keys only to return to a kind of folksy happy ending with the uniting of bride and groom and a simplistic moral sense that justice has been served, only to veer off into a rather unexpected personal reflection completely inconsistent in tone and content with that which has preceded it. The marriage scene, initially one of jovial good will, turns into a macabre dance of death:

But an even strange and more disturbing feeling would have been stirred in the heart at the sight of old women whose ancient faces breathed the indifference of the tomb, shoving their way between the young, laughing, living human beings. Caring for nothing, indifferent, long removed from the joy of childhood, wanting only drink, it was as if a puppeteer were tugging at the strings that held his wooden puppets, making them do things that seemed human; yet they slowly wagged their drunken heads, dancing after the rejoicing crowd, not casting one glance at the young couple. (Kent I:32, SS I:151-152)

This passage is completely unanticipated. Its relevance to the rest of the story is doubtful. It introduces a seriousness of theme, a disturbing grotesquerie of imagery, and a perspective completely foreign to previous treatment of this material. All of the previous narrative modes express a brand of goodwill toward the world created, no matter how self-consciously artificial that world appears.

The narrator then expands thematically on the now grotesque scene, taking on a distinctly personal tone:

Is it not thus that joy, lovely and fleeting guest, flies from us? In vain the last solitary note tries to express gaiety. In its own echo it hears the melancholy and emptiness and listens to it, bewildered. Is it not thus that those who have been playful friends in free and stormy youth, one by one stray, lost, about the world and leave their old comrade lonely and forlorn at last? Sad is the lot of one left behind! Heavy and sorrowful is the heart and nothing can help him! (Kent I:32-33, SS I:152)

We find a rumination on the loneliness so irrelevant to the rest of the story proper such that we are left wondering just what this narrator is talking about. The only real clue lies not in any thematic or narrative relationship of this passage to the content of the story, but in its relationship to the portrait of the narrator himself. The almost wailing, exclamatory nature of the passage suggests that the narrator can be talking about no one other than himself. It is his loneliness, his emotional pain, his torment at having been “left behind” that is at issue. Of course, we really don’t know who has left him behind or for what reason other than the supposed process of aging and death to which he refers.

Fanger reads the Gentleman’s statement as a commentary on the process of narration itself, the performance of storytelling being one of pleasure and communion, its termination one of loneliness and finality and (metaphorically) death. Indeed Fanger reads the story’s overall patchwork quality as Gogol’s assertion of the ultimate freedom of the artist and the primacy of play: “The problematic is thus removed from its usual locus in the narrated event or psychology and made to function on the level of narration itself. Bewilderment, a constant theme, is not confined to the experience of Gogol’s



characters but comes to color the reader's experience of Gogol's protean narration. Perceiving the collection as a play of contrasts, the reader is compelled to recognize the primacy of play" (92). Fanger essentially takes the Gentleman out of the equation, choosing instead to view his narration as an intentional structure generated by Gogol to directly inspire an experience of bewilderment. And while I think this observation is incredibly applicable to Gogol's later works, it is too early here to disregard the importance of the narrating intermediary, given the lavish personal close to the story, which serves no narrative end other than to characterize the narrator psychologically.

Indeed, the story's hodgepodge construction is perfectly reconcilable with a vision of the Gentleman as a character. The story's movement from highbrow to lowbrow, from lyricism to slapstick, from ornate landscape portraiture to folk motif, and its final outburst of personal woe, all speak of a narrator whose social position places him between these discursive worlds. In the Gentleman, we find the dramatization of an early – and most importantly for our purposes, bumbling -- attempt at assimilation. He is a comic portrait of a literary culture in flux, and ultimately, the story's inconsistency is psychologically, socially and historically motivated. In its massive inconsistency, it both reveals and reinforces the portrait of the character, and also sets the stage for the ironic reception of those travesties of stylistic consistency and sense, here in the form of ironic portraiture; that is, the Gentleman's efforts are revealed as being earnest, yet his results are comically sub-par.

Even if we concede, as Fanger suggests, that Gogol's use of narrative frameworks allowed him to delve into language and storytelling structures that were previously shunned by the conservative cognoscenti of Russian culture, this does not mean that those

features of the text, even those that demonstrate inconsistency, are without an organizing principle, even if that principle is simply at the level of the basic literary incompetence of the “character-narrator”; I use this hyphenated expression, “character-narrator,” intentionally, because at this point in Gogol’s career, the terms are hierarchized as such. The Gentleman is first a character, and second a narrator, and the stylistic and content inconsistencies that characterize his text are not evidence of a kind of randomly thrown together series of sketches, but constitute characterizing features of a raconteur posited at a transitional place in the Russian cultural geography and a transitional time in its cultural history.<sup>31</sup> Fanger himself notes that Gogol was painfully aware that the prose fiction of the 1830s was hampered not only by the relative linguistic inflexibility of Russian, but also by problems of inexperience in structuring longer works. The Gentleman’s voice is a dramatization of this process -- the clash of high and low that had yet to resolve itself into a national voice.

And ultimately, Gogol never lets us forget that this performance, while brought to us in written form, is framed as a transcription of an oral performance. The Gentleman’s narrative refers to its own impromptu nature not only through its assimilative inconsistency and Panko’s prefatory characterization of the speaker, but also through the extemporaneous revisions and corrections that occur in the “real-time” telling of the tale: “Such was the splendor of a day in the hot August of eighteen hundred . . . eighteen hundred . . . yes, it will be about thirty years ago, . . .” (Kent I:9, SS I:121). We are

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<sup>31</sup> For a detailed exploration of Gogol’s own “liminal” place in Russian cultural history, see Vinogradov’s *Ocherki po istorii russkovo literaturnovo iazyka XVII-XIX vekov* (pp. 378-385) in which he characterizes Gogol’s language as demonstrating a “tendencies toward both the professionalization of and the democratization of literary language” (378).

constantly reminded that a process of revision and correction that usually attends a work composed for a reading audience is absent. Such a revision process would most likely have taken care of the patchwork inconsistency, the impromptu self-correction, the visible struggle to recall material, and the personal outburst at the tale's close that so visibly mark this text. Such a process of revision is characteristic of the professional author -- not so the casual tale-teller, no matter how grand his intentions. The nature of the narrative personae Gogol creates in the form of the Gentleman encourages us to accept the Gentleman's inconsistencies, his gaps, his corrections, because we are witness to a work in progress, a creative improvisation that tells as much about the nature of the teller as it does about the tale related, and to read those narrative "errors" as unintended; thus, we join with the implied author in comic contemplation of the Gentleman as character, with all his comic insufficiencies as a narrator. This is ironic portraiture enabled by the development of a character-narrator coherent enough to bear that load.

The Gentleman's other tale, "A May Night or The Drowned Maiden," features a similar inconsistency of components, an assimilative urge that moves from high sentimentalism to a kind of bawdy, broad humor in the farcical machinations of its peasant characters. The oral sources here are slightly different. The sentimental and satiric keys found in "The Fair" are augmented in "A May Night" by fairy tale tropes and a stylization of both character speech and the narrator's discourse. Peasant speech in the initial tale is certainly stylized, though here in the direction of the folksy, the ribald, and the aphoristic. For example, when we find the young lovers addressing each other, their speech is inflected with a brand of melodramatic artificiality, a heightening of emotional diction and terms of endearment that we might find in chivalric tales or *skazki*: "Oh, do

not tremble my lovely Guilder rose! Cling closer to me!” (Kent I:50, SS I:174), cries the young lover, Levko. Here we are, however briefly, in the world of “fair maidens” and “bold lads,” of stock sentiment and a level of observation that seems frightfully in excess of any realistic framework. Apropos of nothing, Galya, Levko’s love interest, responds, “How softly the water murmurs, like a child lying in its cradle” (Kent I:52, SS I:176). It is an unlikely bit of lyricism, however simple, for any kind of casual exchange among Ukrainian peasants, and it grants the tale a determined sense of artificiality. The net effect borders on parody, especially when the lofty endearments are intertwined with homey diminutives. Poor Galya is referred to by Levko as *krasnaia kalinochka* (“a lovely Guilder rose”) and in virtually the same breath *rybka* (“a little fish”), a somewhat more dubiously positive comparison (Kent I:50, SS I:174).

“A May Night” (much like “The Fair”) features a frustrated-love narrative whose pleasing young couple eventually triumphs over the forces of old and evil, but instead of Christian metaphysics (the devil being the locus of evil spirituality in the initial tale) here we find folk magic in the form of a water sprite (Rusalka) with deep roots in the Russian folk tradition, and shades of Gothic mystery. And whereas the supposed presence of metaphysical forces is revealed as mere peasant superstition in the initial tale, here they assume a reality within the borders of the story, and the water sprite eventually plays a role in uniting the lovers and foiling the degenerate father who strove to keep them apart.

All of these elements – the artificiality of character speech, the use of stock phrasing and the conventions of a variety of literary and oral sources, the fantastic subject matter – despite and even due to their heterogeneity -- find their motivation in the character of the Gentleman. Or, put differently, they easily push us toward the type of

psycho-social profile of the narrator we have been describing thus far: a man on the borders of written and oral culture, on the borders of popular knowledge and formal education, one engaged in a bout of oral storytelling for the purposes of sheer entertainment. The nature and variety of the Gentleman's discourse do not merely find some post-hoc rationale in this image of his character, but are constitutive of it, with or without Panko's preamble.

To the very end of his final tale, the Gentleman moves from highbrow to lowbrow, from lyric to comic, from the sublime to the ridiculous:

And in a few minutes the entire village was asleep; only the moon floated, radiant and marvelous in the infinite spaces of the glorious Ukrainian sky. There was the same triumphal splendor on high, and the night, the divine night, glowed majestically. The earth was as lovely in the wonderful silvery light, but no one was enchanted by it; all were sunk in sleep. But from time to time the silence was broken for a moment by the bark of a dog, and for a long while drunken Kalenik was still staggering along the slumbering street looking for his hut. (Kent I:76, SS I:208)

If, in Gogol's later prose works, as Donald Fanger puts it, we find the principle of *ne to* ("not that," as in "neither this nor that"), at work here is a resounding *i . . . i . . .* ("both this and that"). The Gentleman's discourse reflects the assimilative urge; it is an attempt at synthesis whose clumsiness is borne of the extemporaneous demands of the improvised oral act. As a "man of letters," the Gentleman is a bit of a hack, a failed aspirant whose "pearls" that he casts before his supposed "swine" of an audience owe as much of a debt to the traditions of that audience as they do to the "loftier" prose traditions of Karamzin and Pushkin. Thus, when we pose the question that constitutes Booth's acid test for irony -- "Given what I know of this person, could he or she really be saying all this sincerely?" -- the answer in the Gentleman's case is a resounding "yes." In divining this dynamic, we

earn a position of solidarity with the implied author, and from that vantage point, view the Gentleman's attempts as earnest, but ultimately comic.

No system is ever perfect. Language is slippery and, even at this young stage, Gogol is even slipperier. There are discourse elements that do not seem to fit tidily under the rubric of "character," even a relatively literate and educated character such as the Gentleman. We do see brief flashes of the type of narrative discourse that will characterize Gogol at the height of his powers, and that will become indistinguishable from the voice of the author himself. Here I am speaking specifically of the Gentleman's treatment of the local mayor, a passage that demonstrates the heavily satiric treatment of delusions of grandeur, the unmasking of baseness masquerading as propriety:

Oh, he was an important person in the village . . . All the villagers took off their caps when they saw him and the girls, even the youngest, wished him a good day. Which of the young men would not have liked to be mayor? He was free to help himself to everyone's snuff, and the sturdy peasant would stand respectfully, cap in hand, all the time while the mayor fumbled with his fat, course fingers in peasant's birch bark snuffbox.  
(Kent I:57, SS I:182-183)

Here, the mayor is satirized by appropriating a stylized version of social voice ("Oh, he was an important person . . ."), then revealing the appropriation as ironic by pairing it with details that completely undermine the expected notion of "importance." That is, the mayor's "importance" is revealed to be a product of his ability to victimize the citizens of the town, and not as a result of any real moral or ethical responsibilities or duties. The Important Personage of "The Overcoat," Collegiate Assessor Kovalov of "The Nose," and virtually all the unfortunate denizens of *Dead Souls* receive comparable narrative treatment. The Gentleman even engages in the type of meta-commentary that will so

heavily populate Gogol's later tales: "But we have said almost all that we need about the mayor . . ." (Kent I:58, SS I:184). But here this type of discourse is just a flash, just a whiff of narrative things to come, perhaps pulling against our ability to reconcile all the elements of the Gentleman's discourse with a concrete image of him as a character, but not completely derailing that process. The treatment of the mayor is not yet a fully developed derailment of the progress of story itself, and while it does suggest a playful jab at the artificiality of the content, at the status of the story as a story, the fabric of the story as an entertainment rendered by a predominantly coherent narrative presence remains.

*A Bullshitter – in the Philosophical Sense of the Word*

If Gogol roots Panko squarely in his fictional village milieu, he renders Foma Grigorievich the local standard bearer. In other words, Foma makes Panko look like a "man of the world."

Again, this image of Foma emerges both from without and within Foma's own discourse. Panko's preamble in the first and second volumes of *Evenings* and the prefatory narrative he appends to Foma's inaugural story, "St. John's Eve, A True Story Told by the Sexton," characterize Foma not merely as a person, but also as a storyteller, one who "mortally disliked telling the same thing over again" (Pevear 3, SS I:153). Foma's penchant for oral improvisation is dramatized by the mini-narrative told about him by Panko, in which Foma's tale is originally told to a scrivener at a fair. The

scrivener publishes the transcription and this transcription is read to Foma by Panko himself. Literary chaos ensues:

“Wait! first tell me, what’s that you’re reading?”  
 I confess, I was a bit taken aback by such a question.  
 “What’s this I’m reading, Foma Grigorievich? Why, your true story [byl’], your very own words.”  
 “Who told you those are my words?” (Pevear 3-4, SS I:154)

If the sheer act of naming Panko has far-reaching effects on our relationship to him as a narrator, then the representation of Foma in dialogue form, where we are witness to him in-scene, even more fundamentally courts our tendency to view him as a character first-and-foremost, before he takes the reins of narration.

The fundamental dramatic impetus of this scene lies in the simple comedy of Foma’s unwitting massacre of notions of “truth.” In refusing to ever tell the same story in the same manner (while insisting upon the truth of the story at any given moment) Foma makes a mockery of the conventional understanding of a “true story” -- that being one in which the story matches some actual course of events. Not only does Panko good naturedly comment on this tendency, he also playfully insists on titling the story a “true story” [byl’], which could be construed as a playful jab at Foma and at the contents of his tale.

Foma’s claim that the written transcription of his tale is not “his words” (and hence, a massacre of the “truth”) could be interpreted as a commentary on the deadening effect of transcription. According to this logic, whatever story Foma is currently telling at the moment is the “true” one, not in that it accurately renders a pre-existing series of events, but in that its improvisational nature, its imaginative free play, its refusal to be



bound by any kind of objective course of events, represents, if not a “true story” then “true storytelling.” Foma, thus interpreted, represents a plea for the norms of oral storytelling. Of course, Panko’s own project represents a danger to these principles and, to a certain degree Panko is no different than the “writers, no not writers, but the same as dealers at our fairs” who “snatch, cajole,” and “steal” the gems of oral storytelling (Pevear 3, SS I:153). But Panko’s critique of these “scriveners” can be interpreted not as an instance of ignorant hypocrisy, but as an opening shot in an attempt to do the impossible, to recreate the oral arena in written form and perhaps to do so by the acknowledgement and development of the characters who tell those stories and an attempt to represent the environment in which the tale was “told.” Perhaps it is an attempt to give these narratives back to their “living” narrators. Indeed, when the original scrivener titled his transcription of Foma’s story as a “byl” it was done so sincerely, in an attempt to legitimate its content. When Panko titles his transcription in the same manner, having redefined notions of truth in his interaction with Foma, the term takes on a meaning that is decidedly in opposition to that intended by the scrivener. In this distance, we find a shift of values away from content and the truth-value of that content, toward style and manner, in the imaginative improvisational relationship of a speaker to a story. In this re-imagination of storytelling “truth,” Gogol (via Panko) foregrounds the issue of the narrator as a character and focuses our reading efforts on the building of a narrative voice that is decidedly not Gogol’s.

But again, the dramatic heart of this scene is ultimately the ridiculousness of Foma’s claims to truth. As a result, we are forced very early on to make a basic character judgment about Foma: if even Panko acknowledges that Foma’s tales are not “true” in the

conventional sense, what do we make of Foma's assertions that they are? There are several possible responses: 1) he is lying; 2) he is deluded; or 3) he is being playfully ironic. The first and the last, though tempting options, seem at odds with Foma's vociferousness, his seemingly earnest surprise that he is credited as author of the transcription that Panko reads. It seems most likely that Foma is deluded, confusing his own perpetually changing fictive concoctions with hard and fast reality. However, "delusion" is such a clinical term for such a likeable character so clearly afflicted with such a harmless and even entertaining compulsion. And while Gogol will toy with serious delusion as a means of motivating similar imaginative and discursive tendencies,<sup>32</sup> perhaps the most appropriate term for Foma is "bullshitter," as defined by Harry Frankfurt:

The fact about himself that the bullshitter hides, on the other hand, is that the truth-values of his statements are of no central interest to him; what we are not to understand is that his intention is neither to report the truth nor conceal it. This does not mean that his speech is anarchically impulsive, but that the motive guiding and controlling it is unconcerned with how the things about which he speaks truly are. . . . His eye is not on the facts at all, as the eyes of the honest man and of the liar are, except insofar as they may be pertinent to his interest in getting away with what he says. He does not care whether the things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose. (56)

Foma's claims to truth are not "lies" in that he does not recognize a concrete reality outside of storytelling itself. His own assertions of the "truth" of his tales are bullshit in

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Gogol's 1835 short story "Diary of a Madman," in which the narrator, Popryshchin, a low-ranking civil servant, describes his infatuation with the daughter of a high-placed official, an obsession that leads to increasingly ridiculous delusions, including the belief that he is heir to the throne of Spain. The culminating scene is imagined by Popryshchin as his coronation; the reader recognizes the setting as an insane asylum.

the sense that they are a functional necessity, a kind of prop for the entertainment purposes of his story. His tales are unabashedly fantastic and their potential reality, or at least his ability to conjure the belief that they may be “real,” is crucial to their dramatic interest. Contrast his claims to truth, which are overt and expansive, to the offhand “authentication” the Gentleman offers, and which emerge as a kind of storytelling *topos*, an obligatory aside, a formal obligation having no real weight because the story itself is so avowedly artificial, a piece of self-consciously constructed entertainment whose artificiality is built into the very tone and stylized literary forms it employs. Foma’s stories, on the other hand, depend upon the illusion of truth-value for their dramatic import; they must be perceived to be real (by both teller and listener) in order to have the “hair-raising” effect so desired.

Hugh McLean writes, “. . . *skaz* lies on the neutral ground somewhere between *skazka*, which specifies that the contents are unreal, magic, fantastic, and *byl’*, whose contents are claimed as true” (420). Though Foma’s story is titled by Panko as a “*byl’*,” as I’ve already suggested, this is not an objective statement of genre, but more of a knowing commentary on Panko’s part of Foma’s unconventional sense of truth. Foma’s tales are better understood as *skaz* pieces, encompassing both overt claims to objective truth and a contextual frame that contests the “truth” value of what is represented (although champions an alternate value system, that of “true storytelling”). McLean’s claim for a kind of semantic “neutral ground” for *skaz* suggests that *skaz* can include both a range of material (from the fantastic to the realistic), and also a range of relationships between the narrator and that material (from firm belief to conscious awareness of artificiality). The Gentleman embodies the latter pole on this spectrum. His tales, though

certainly not realistic in any sense of the word, include both the out and out fantastic (as in “A May Night”) or the fantastic revealed as superstition as a means of satirizing peasant culture (as in “The Fair at Sorochintsy”), yet his pose is one of the conscious fictional storyteller. Foma, on the other hand, concerns himself with material that is patently fantastic, yet maintains a bumpkinish insistence on the reality of the supernatural tales he tells.

Indeed, virtually every one of his tales begins with a meditation on or appreciation of the thoroughgoing truth of the mystical. Foma begins his narration of “St. John’s Eve” with an appreciation of his grandfather’s storytelling craft: “Once he began to talk, you wouldn’t budge from your place the whole day for listening” (Pevear 4, SS I:154). Yet the heart of this prowess seems to be some basis in fact:

But the main thing in my grandfather’s stories was that he never in his life told a lie, and whatever he used to say, that was precisely what happened . . . I know there are lots of those smart alecks who do some scribbling in the courts and even read civic writings, and who, if they were handed a simple prayer book, wouldn’t be able to make out a jot of it – but display their teeth shamefully, that they can do. For them, whatever you say is funny. Such disbelief has spread through the world! (Pevear 5, SS I:155)

And in “The Lost Letter”:

Ah, the old days, the old days! What joy, what gladness it brings to the heart when one hears of what was done in the world so long, long ago that the year and the month are forgotten! And when some kinsman of one’s own is mixed up in it, a grandfather or great-grandfather – then I’m done for . . . (Kent I:77, SS I:209)

It is the presence of corroboration, even the mere pretense of “factuality” that throws Foma into ecstasy, and he lards his own tales, no matter how fantastic they may be (or how far they diverge from his previous versions of the same story) with the same sense of

earnest fidelity to a wild and wooly past. But this is no mere pretense for Foma, the pathological bullshitter. His assertion of truth is functional, though his end goal is altruistic, not mercenary. The whiff of truth is a necessary prerequisite for the successful story. Therefore, whatever is told is true and there is no divide between the real and the retold. Foma believes. He needs to.

Given the patently ridiculous nature of Foma's claims to truth, there is an urge to ascribe a degree of irony to him, to cast him as the wily old storyteller, playfully toying with his audience behind a mask of disingenuous naiveté. But the repetitive and elaborate nature of his claims, the urgency with which he presses those claims, and his anticipation of mockery from the "scribblers" (a high/low culture binary Panko also exploits to persuasive effect), all point to a degree of sincerity on the part of Foma. Thus, we gravitate to an appraisal of Foma as the "ironic object," one whose patent ridiculousness is unintentional.

This profile is supported by the semantic and syntactic profile Gogol grants him, perhaps the most caricatured representation of peasant speech in the two volumes, a brand of discourse that marks Foma off forcibly, not only from the Gentleman, but even from Panko, whose patois, relative to Foma's, seems positively refined. Foma is a completely unabashed "muzhik," who levels his idiomatic expressions vociferously against the literary and metaphysical evils of his world. The wonderfully hokey cursing, the smattering of vernacular Ukrainian and archaic particles, the hokey exhortations with which he champions his heroes ["God rest his soul! And may he eat nothing in that world but white rolls and poppyseed cakes with honey!" (Pevear 4, SS I:154)] and the crude castigations with which he maligns his enemies ["Spit on the head of the one who printed

it! He's lying the dad-blasted Muscovite! Did I say that? The devil it's the same! He's got a screw loose! Listen, I'll tell it to you now" (Pevear 4, SS I:154)] all work toward the construction of a character portrait, however comically caricatured it may be. We see Foma quite vividly as the cantankerous village taleteller, comically voluble and sharp of tongue, unquestionably uneducated and provincial, yet capable of powerful expression all the same. This is an artificial representation of Ukrainian peasant speech, and even a caricatured representation of local superstition and bumpkinishness played for comic effect. Nevertheless, we find in Foma's character a determined verisimilitude, the "air" of the bumpkin, however "inaccurate" in the traditional sense.

Foma's colorful figurative play often says as much about him as a character as it does about the object of description. His excited descriptions of elements both physical and supernatural are vivid and entertaining. Whether lyric or satiric in intent, aphoristic or figurative in structure, they have a kind of hyperbolic scale. Vodka always "stings like nettles," (Pevear 9, SS I:161) the hair of young beauties is always "soft as young flax" (Pevear 7, SS I:159) and of course, "it's easier for a woman to kiss the devil, meaning no offense, than to call another woman a beauty" (Pevear 7). But beyond the relationship of language to object, Foma's language is also expressive of his provincial character. Though laden with figurative play, the terms of comparison are always grounded in his socio-economic milieu. His comparisons are based on the material reality of the peasant world -- "before another man would have had time to get out his horn and take a pinch of snuff he was on the other side" (Kent I:83, SS I:216) -- or constituted by a kind of localized knowledge so particular at times, they can even limit the expressive effect of

the resulting trope -- “trembling like a Pole in the hands of Cossacks” (Kent I:83, SS I:216).

And lest we rely too heavily on Foma’s discourse as some sort of unquestionably objective statement on the narrated world, Gogol is careful to return our attention very forcefully to Foma’s role as Dikanka’s foremost bullshitter. In “A Bewitched Place,” Foma’s final contribution to the second volume of the *Dikanka* tales, the story begins not with the narrative proper, but with Foma’s crotchety castigation of his audience. While Panko addressed the projected *reading* audience of *Evenings* in his prefatory remarks (a move that, in its frank, conversational manner focused our attention on the oral speech act), Foma addresses *the original witnesses to his oral performance*:

Here one of you has been raking an ember for his pipe out of the stove for the last hour and the other has run behind the cupboard for something. It’s too much . . . ! It wouldn’t bother me if you didn’t want to hear what I had to say, but you kept annoying me for a story. . . If you want to listen, then listen! (Kent I:198, SS I:366)

This careful re-rooting of Foma in the original scene of performance returns our attention to his role a character first and foremost (as opposed to a narrator, whose profile becomes subordinated to the tale he tells). The tactic also works to augment our sense of him as the crotchety bumpkin, the old-time yarn spinner, most certainly a Russian version of one of Moliere’s “greybeards.” He is a caricature, but an endearing one, and no less a character for it, for it is against this image of him that we measure the tenor of his discourse over the course of his tales.

This is not to say that Panko and his sub-literary cohorts have no ironic powers at their disposal. There are certainly instances in which they consciously manipulate language to satirize their objects – they too can “be” ironic in localized instances. And all

of them, especially Panko, can laugh good-naturedly at their own narrative foibles. But ultimately, we view them as bumpkins, bullshitters and hacks, and their larger scale violations of narrative sense – whether it's Panko's tendency to give directions to his hut to the broader reading public, the Gentlemen's chronic vacillation between differing literary styles and content over the course of a single story, or Foma's assertions of the "truth" of the patently fantastic – when viewed against that backdrop, read as unintentional comic products of those who just don't know any better. In isolated moments we may vacillate between an image of Panko as the through and through bumpkin, and Panko as the bumpkin with some sense, who can have some fun at the expense of the "bol'shoi svet" and even at his own, but the bumpkin strain is never truly overturned.

It is unlikely (and perhaps even undesirable) that such issues can be parsed "scientifically." But ultimately, Panko and his Dikanka brethren are characterized by their distance from standard literary convention, and hence, their abrogation of that convention is ultimately read as largely unwitting. As Richard Peace notes, "The Ukrainians had a reputation for disingenuous naiveté, and it is obvious that behind the simpleton, Rudy Panko, lurks the all-knowing Gogol, who is quite happy to hide behind the idiot's mask" (14). The key here is that in the early stories, Gogol remains decidedly hidden, allowing a sub-literary intermediary to be the ultimate narrative image against which narrative impropriety is read. Again, though these early character-narrators are no strangers to "being ironic" in their ability to satirize their characters and even acknowledge a certain joy in the artificiality of their own tales, they do not demonstrate any conscious subversion of the conventions of storytelling itself, and their comic



distance does not consciously undermine the very fabric of the world they've created.

Ultimately, the comic eye of the early narrators, when it flashes, is trained on the world of their creation, not the medium of creation itself.

## Chapter 2: More Pearls for Swine? – Panko’s Voice Cracks

The first volume of *Evenings* introduces us to a series of character-narrators whose coherent profiles structure our understanding of their discourse. The cavalcade of bumpkins, bullshitters, and hacks we find there emerge as a series of ironic portraits, as their bumbling attempts at storytelling are read as just that – bumbling attempts made by earnest and unwitting speakers. We, as readers, join with the implied author in observing the insufficiencies of these narrators from a safe distance, standing on Gogol’s “high perch” as the comedy enacts itself below (or in this case, on the page). But the very structural feature that makes ironic portraiture possible – an integrated narrating intermediary – begins to undergo a change over the course of this collection. We begin to see Gogol make fledgling attempts to shear away key facets that make his narrating stand-ins cohere as characters and this is the first step en route to the full-fledged ironic discourse that populates his later stories.

The second volume of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1832) represents both a continuation of and a departure from the presumptions that structure the initial volume. Panko returns in fine form with his preface, reiterating his basic contours as a character – a lovable, laughable bumpkin and raconteur -- re-introducing and refining the cast of character-narrators that we find in the second volume. Foma returns. The Gentleman departs after an argument over the proper pickling of vegetables. We are introduced to Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka, who is responsible for a tale he himself wrote down and passed on to Panko, though the formal mode of composition does not preclude

interruption by the human element in a story's path to the reader (i.e. we soon find out that the latter half of the story was appropriated by Madame Panko for use in baking pies, precluding any of us from finding out how the story ends!).

If the "telling bee" frame and the character of Panko himself were simply a post-hoc addition, something non-essential to the progress of the story adopted purely out of authorial apprehension, one would assume that both would have been dropped after the success of the first volume. But then again, everyone loves a guaranteed audience; most artists -- not unlike businesspeople -- can't resist a franchise for that very reason; perhaps Gogol was simply cashing in on the success of the first volume? We could speculate endlessly on Gogol's motives -- economic, psychological, artistic and otherwise -- for choosing to reprise the "telling bee" framework. What is evident is the manner in which the framework continues to structure our understanding of the individual stories by dramatizing them as a product of a series of character-narrators, integrated voices whose merits and foibles structure our calibration of their discourse.

At the same time, the second volume is witness to Gogol's fledgling attempts to liberate his narration from the limits of an integrated character-narrator. Two of our narrators in the second volume go unnamed -- although they reference other characters to whom we've already been introduced -- and although they both demonstrate the kind of heterogeneity of content and style to which we are privy in the first volume, the notion that this heterogeneity can be motivated, or, conversely, is expressive of a particular character profile seems, if not totally cast aside, then certainly thinner here.

This is particularly so in "The Night Before Christmas" where, I would contend, we are in the presence of two distinct voices, the reconciliation of which into one

integrated character is virtually impossible. The tale begins with a voice that we might well mistake for Foma's. The simple diction, the basic emotional vocabulary, the figurative and comparative play with terms rooted in the peasant milieu -- all suggest a humble denizen of the Dikanka world. Again, we find playful comparisons and hyperbolic hypotheticals that are based on references so local that they almost undermine their own expressive purpose: In one instance, the smith is described as one “. . . whom the devil found more disgusting than Father Kondrat's sermons” (Pevear 21, SS I:229). Although the expressive intent of the example is relatively clear as we can imagine the contents of the average sermon, the fact that it is *Father Kondrat's* sermon adds nothing to the expressive power of these speech acts for the average reader. What this attention to localized detail calls to mind is a narrator accustomed to oral tale telling, because this in turn suggests a local audience, one for whom such references would have added expressive significance. Not only does this stylistic penchant place the narrator within the local milieu, but it also calls attention to his status as someone firmly within an oral and not written tradition. He is aligned with Foma in terms of character profile and not the Gentleman. However, as this narrator soon makes reference to Foma, we understand that it is not indeed Foma who is speaking, but someone with a comparable verbal range.

Although the story demonstrates consistency of content throughout – and by that, we mean a consistently heterogeneous mix of Christian and folkloric supernatural elements, ribald farce, and a frustrated love narrative with its eventual skazka-esque closure – there is an undeniable change in narrative voice after the story's first several pages. Gone are the local idioms, the colloquial particles, and Ukrainianisms (at least in the narrative voice -- they certainly remain as quoted speech). In their place, we find a

much higher level of diction, an emotional vocabulary that is far more flexible and graduated, and perhaps most importantly, a level of light satire rendered by the self-consciously effete treatment of lowbrow characters.

This is not to say that the Foma-esque voice was incapable of satire. On the contrary, he too takes a comic view of the progress of the story, but his major weapon is his hyperbolic figurative play that again depends upon local frames of reference. When mocking the devil, he describes the devil's attempt to catch hold of the moon as follows: "Running up to it, he suddenly seized the moon with both hands, wincing and blowing, tossing it from one hand to the other, like a muzhik who takes a coal for his pipe in his bare hands" (Pevear 21, SS I:229).

The source of this new narrator's comic distance, by contrast, lies in the playfully effete treatment of these characters' ribald interactions. These are none other than localized tracts of verbal irony, or put differently, instances in which we find the character-narrator "being ironic" at the expense of the characters described. For example, the narrator describes Choub, the story's bumbling father figure as being "somewhat vexed at the chum's unfailing indifference" (Pevear 25, SS I:232). The jarring disjunction between style and subject, between the high-flown diction with its patina of politesse generated by the mitigated verbal forms [*nekotoroi* ("somewhat") / *neizmennoe* ("unfailing")] and the baseness of the characters is a key ironic signal. It is one of those contradictions that, as Booth notes, "no mind can live with comfortably." These are characters who rage and scream and brawl -- they do not become "somewhat vexed"; these are characters who "don't give a damn" -- they don't demonstrate "unfailing indifference." This determined sense of linguistic propriety in the face of the often-bawdy

content renders the antics of these characters all the more comic, insinuating a reality far grosser than the language denotes. But again, in order for this to qualify as being ironic, even in a local instance, we need to be able to read it as an intended disjunction, an instance of the narrator consciously using a stylistic impropriety to highlight the comedy of his characters. In this case we have a narrator (or, at the very least, one of two narrators in this tale), who is capable of high-levels of articulation demonstrating a level of refinement such that we would reasonably expect an awareness of the distance between his style and the substance he is treating. Thus, in this case, we as the readers join with the narrator in comic contemplation of a shared target, Choub and his cohorts. In the case of “The Night Before Christmas,” irony has yet to maximize the whole field of the story, but is present in instances when one of our character-narrators, or in this case, one of the distinct voices that make up the narration, registers an ironic comment on a character he is describing. Here, those voices still cohere as voices, separate and apart from Gogol’s and may still be subject to ironic portraiture themselves.

Later on in the story, we see the same pattern of litotes, elevated diction, and perspective appropriation that Gogol will later use to treat his denizens of urban bureaucracy and rural estate:

In Choub’s chests there were quantities of linen, fur coats, old style jackets. . . All this Solokha thought it not superfluous to join to her own property, reflecting beforehand on the order that would be introduced into it once it passed into her hands, and she redoubled her benevolence toward old Choub. (Pevear 30, SS I:240)

Here, the duplicitous witch Solokha’s mercenary efforts are characterized as “not superfluous” -- a characterization which in its intense degree of understatement and

absence of moral judgment, reads as intensely ironic; her “redoubled benevolence” (*udvoivala blagosklonnost’* – notice the almost awkwardly stylized diction here) reads as anything but benevolence as again, the phrase is used to describe an act of theft. These satiric tactics bespeak an entirely different relationship between speaker and subject. Our first narrator was within the world of the description, and despite his sardonic verbal jibes at his subject, his language rendered him on the same narrative level as his subject. The second narrator’s language relationship with the same subject results in a decidedly more God-like, high-low differential, a perch from which he views the comic flailing of his subjects in a world with which he has only a passing relationship at best.

The second narrator even begins to assume the narrator-subject relationship typical of Sentimental prose, establishing transitions with the kind of playful “roaming eye” ontology, skipping nimbly from character to character while the drama enacts itself below: “Now let’s have a look at what the beautiful daughter was doing, left alone” (Pevear 25, SS I:234). This type of narrative self-construction is completely foreign to the presumptions that structure skaz narration -- more specifically, the notion that the events narrated either happened to the narrator, or happened to someone he knows. And while this presumption can appear as mere pretense in a skaz-based tale, here it is directly undermined by a competing vision of the narrator.

Previously, the *Dikanka* stories seemed to encourage the construction of a character voice in response to a basic need to understand a tale (especially one that has claims to oral performance) as issuing from a unified narrator, a speaker with a discernible profile. Here we find a kind of narrative schizophrenia, a series of linguistically disassociated parts, unified only by content. In other words, in place of one

narrator, here we find two without any real motivation for this switch. This confounding situation is almost comically dramatized when we find the second narrator appropriating the voice of the first narrator. At the story's outset, we find the first narrator claiming:

If the Sorochintsy Assessor had been passing by just then, driving a troika of hired horses, in a hat with a lamb's wool band after the uhlan fashion, in a dark blue coat lined with astrakhan, with the devilishly woven whip he used to urge his coachman on, he would surely have noticed her, for no witch in the world could elude the Sorochintsy assessor. (Pevear 19-20, SS I:228)

Notice how this comment returns, however altered, later on in the story. Commenting on the public debate over whether Solokha was, in fact, a witch, the narrator notes:

But all this was pretty doubtful, because no one but the Sorochintsy assessor could see a witch. And so all the notable Cossacks waved their hands on hearing this talk. "The bitches are lying!" was their usual response." (Pevear 30, SS I:241)

Here, the first narrator's response returns as an echoing of bumpkinish social opinion.

Although the first narrator's comment was phrased as a hypothetical ("If the Sorochintsy assessor had been passing by, due to his keen eyesight, he would have seen here" – a hypothetical overtly intended to characterize how small the witch appeared in the sky, but also throwing a subtle jab at the assessor, whose eyesight is most often used in service of ferreting out the peasants' every possession for taxation purposes), here it returns as a flat statement of belief (" . . . because no one but the Sorochintsy assessor could see a witch"). Gogol is treating us to a lesson in ironic voice appropriation, in which the original utterance is not simply repeated (although it can be), but is stylized, flattened, hyperbolized, to both indicate the narrator's distance from the utterance and satirize the



provinciality of the subject. We are led to understand and share in the latter narrator's distance from the former narrator's statements because of the distinct difference in their personae (low-brow vs. high-brow), rendered by the differences in their very use of language over the course of the story.

*A Terrible Vengeance: Concerto for Bandura and Battle Axe*

Much like its predecessors, "A Terrible Vengeance" is a pastiche of the stylistic and content features of genres oral and written. Content-wise, it is a *mélange* of Christian supernatural themes, gothic horror, folksy anthropomorphic mythology, political intrigue, and historical chronicle. Stylistically it ranges from ornate figurative play that demonstrates a degree of poetic articulation well beyond the ken of your average raconteur, to stock phrasing deriving from the folk idiom and its most potent expressions – the *skazka* and the folk ballad. But the fulcrum of this work proves to be the latter pole of that spectrum – the oral. And even though we are presented with incongruities here, they are not so radical that they disrupt the notion of a coherent speaking voice (although the outlines of that speaker are determinedly vague) nor are they so radical that they disrupt the ultimate assimilation of the whole as a coherent story.

We begin on a highly poetic note in which the narrator spins a web of personifying phrases, constructing an entire narrative out of the Ukrainian landscape in a manner that extends far beyond the Sentimental attribution of emotion to the physical sphere we found in previous tales:

Only the muted rush of the Dnipro can be heard below, and on three sides, one after the other, the echo of momentarily awakened waves. The river is

not mutinous. He grumbles and murmurs like an old man: nothing pleases him; everything has changed around him; he is quietly at war with the hills, forests, and meadows on his banks, and carries his complaint against them to the Black Sea. (Pevear 76, SS I:297-298)

Here the net effect of the passage is certainly not pastoral; the description renders an almost mythically proportioned conflict. Of course, here the animation of the physical world is purely figurative, geared to render a kind of existential commentary on man's surroundings.<sup>33</sup> Stylistically, the passage features all the marks of composed poetry – the extended, interlocking figurative phrases; the variable sentence pacing dictated by the alternation of flowing, elaborated sentences and short, declarative bursts. We swoop in and out on the strength of the syntactic shape of this passage. Notice how the interior sentences with their short, choppy, wave-like repetitions are bookmarked fore and aft by the longer sentences that pile phrase on top of phrase, expressing a more panoramic view of the river as a whole.

But this brand of what we might call “composed” literary discourse vies with (and is actually swamped by) a determined orality that permeates the stylistic composition of the text, the narrator's relationship to his subject, and hence our vision of the narrator as a “speaking” presence. By “orality” I simply mean the extent to which the tale borrows its major components from an oral genre. Those cues, even when transposed to written form, still conjure a strong sense of a speaker, even if the character of that speaker is delineated by the borders of the genre's conventions.

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<sup>33</sup> However, this figurative description does prepare the way for the anthropomorphic animation of earth and sky that rounds out the tale. The land will eventually “live” in a way that is quite literal and directly affects the fate of the characters.

We don't have to look very far to find the oral cornerstone of this story. As is the case in much of his work from here on out, Gogol demonstrates the very convenient penchant of "footnoting" his stories with the genres and norms he then appropriates or subverts. That is, whatever Gogol references he tends to incorporate some mention of the original in his own text. Here the tendency is one of appropriation and assimilation, though the source is revealed only at the end of the text. The genre in this case is the folk ballad and Gogol "footnotes" his source by including a framed folk ballad within the text, using it to close out the story and to provide the back-story for the narrative's supernatural conclusion. This is the first instance of a number of works in which Gogol essentially ends with the beginning, but the issue of play with the linear progress of the narrative is not as essential here, for although the ending is unorthodox in its post hoc explanation of the somewhat confusing conclusion, the story – to put it bluntly—gets to where it's going. It answers all questions, leaves us with a sense of moral justice having been done, and rids us of any momentary confusion the inversion might have caused. In future works, Gogol will whip that confusion into a frenzy by similar inversions, but never grant the same sense of closure and therefore, truly frustrate our ability to create a narrative whole – a story with a beginning, middle and end – out of the fragments he presents.

In this tale the embedded folk ballad that appears at the end of the tale (which, granted, is itself a stylization and not an authentic reproduction), serves more as a stylistic reference point, a source that explains the relationship between discourse levels in the work by defining the oral foundation upon which "composed" figures are added and embellished. We see almost identical syntactic and verbal structures within the closing

ballad and within the frame story that precedes it. Syntactical inversions and repetitions are everywhere and not only grant the prose an archaic flavor, but also provide rhythmic hooks that structure whole passages.

For example, consider the syntactic versions that appear in the “actual” ballad: “This man is a great sinner! [in the original ‘*Velikii est’ greshnik sei chelovek*’ – A great sinner is this man!]. . . Terrible is the punishment you have devised, man!” (Pevear 103-104, SS I:331). It is no accident that it is God speaking here, for the syntactic pattern has a kind of dusty authority, a Biblical resonance, but it also favors easy memorization due to its memorable disruption of Russian sentence development and its tendency to push the emphasized word to the head of the clause. Beyond isolated instances of syntactic inversion, the ballad demonstrates patterns of lexical and syntactic repetitions, granting its passages a singsong cadence and a symmetry that again calls our attention to the mnemonic roots of this brand of artistic construction.<sup>34</sup>

“Look, Ivan, whatever you gain, it’s all half and half: when one of us is merry, the other is merry; when one of us grieves, we both grieve; if one of us gets some plunder, the plunder’s divided in two; if one falls into captivity, the other sells everything and pays the ransom, or else he, too, goes into captivity.” And truly, whatever the Cossacks got, they divided everything in two; and if they stole cattle or horses, they divided everything in two. (Pevear 102, SS I:329)

Identical structures are strung throughout the frame story -- “Fair is the sight . . .” (Pevear 66, SS I:286), “Grim is the sorcerer . . .” (Pevear 82, SS I:305), “Wondrous is the Dnieper” (Pevear 90, SS I:314) -- not only aping the syntactic inversions present in the

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, despite its being framed as a sung ballad, it is not laid out in verse form in the original and features neither a regular metrical nor rhyme scheme.

“actual” ballad, but also providing rhythmic hooks that structure whole sections of text, granting them the musical phrasing of sung verse or even religious chant. As a result, we sense the quasi-oral nature of not only the embedded ballad, but also the frame story.

Other elements of folk-ballad design construct the narrator’s temporal and emotional relationship to the story being told. Foremost among these elements is the presence, in both embedded ballad and frame story, of rapid and inconsistent tense shifts. In the embedded ballad, the singer/narrator shifts from past to present and back to past within the space of three sentences: “King Steven made war [simple past] on the Turks. For three weeks he fought the Turks [literally: for three weeks he has been fighting (present perfect progressive)] and was still unable to [literally: and he still can’t (present)] drive them off” (Pevear 102, SS I:329). The frame also demonstrates these fluid shifts, “Noise and thunder at the end of Kiev: Captain Gorobets is celebrating [present tense] his son’s wedding. Many people have gathered [present perfect] . . . The guests marveled [simple past] . . . (Pevear 64, SS I:283). This is unlike any of the previous narratives, whether told by bumpkinish peasants or educated “gentlemen.” The previous stories demonstrated a rather firm adherence to the past tense. Those skaz-based works attempted to narrate events that, at least superficially, had a close temporal relationship to their narrators. That is, the narrators sustained the pretence that they were recounting events that occurred in the recent past or with which they had some direct family connection. The folk ballad, on the other hand, sets before itself the task of narrating the “days of old,” the heroic, mythic and fantastic doings of an age beyond reach of both singer and audience. Fluid tense shifts are part and parcel of making those distant doings present to an audience; it is a device geared toward generating maximum participation in

events that are not only distant temporally, but are heavily mythologized. But beyond the expressive power of the historical present, the use of the present tense in the ballad results in a very different relationship between singer and content. Instead of narrating that which occurred in the past (although that is essentially what is being done), the historical present establishes the illusion of the narrator as a powerless commentator on events that seem to occur before his eyes in the moment of telling. It is the position of someone watching a horror movie who shouts at the screen, “Don’t go into that room! The man-eating zombie is in there!” In this role, the narrator makes evaluative comments that reflect the audience’s fears, desires, and judgments on action that is constructed as occurring independently of all concerned.

In the embedded ballad we see this quite clearly in sung comments such as: “Do not dare, Cossack, the mountain roads are dangerous!” (Pevear 103, SS I:330). This brand of spectatorship is strung throughout the frame narrative, constructing the very same type of relationship: “They swing . . . ough! The sabers clang . . . and the blades fly clattering aside” (Pevear 72, SS I:293); “Never has there been such temptation in the Russian land, not even from the Tartars. It must be that God destined her to suffer this disgrace for her sins!” (Pevear 86, SS I:310); “Slash, Cossack! Carouse, Cossack as your brave heart pleases!” (Pevear 88, SS I:313); “Cossack, you are going to your ruin!” (Pevear 89, SS I:313).

And while there are other stylistic elements of less determinate provenance, many of them still fall within the realm of oral poetics. Though our narrator/singer is clearly capable of a wide and complicated range of emotional expression, he consistently relies on stock phrasing and formulaic character identification. The characters consistently

“freeze with fear” and “burn with anger,” walk through huts as “dark as night” and rooms as “bright as day,” and young Stetzko never appears unless preceded by the adjective *vernyi* (“trusty”). These are not the limitations of education or literary horizon, but of a determined insistence on the conventions of oral genres.

But what of it? Our concern here is less with the expressive potential of oral poetics (folk ballad, *skazka*-derived, or otherwise), than with the very fact that the determined use of oral poetics focuses our attention on the presence of a speaker. Whereas earlier stories relied on the conventions of *skaz* to paint portraits of their narrators via their socially or psychologically motivated use of language, here Gogol reminds us of the presence of a narrative “speaker” by having that speaker manipulate a genre that brings that notion of a speaking voice to the fore. Our sense of character-narrator here is motivated not by individuated quirks of speech, but by the narrator’s participation in the conventions of a genre that shouts out its own orality. Again, the individual profile of the narrator has receded here. We don’t know him as we know Foma or the Gentleman, but we know him as a speaker, as an oral performer mixing styles and levels. Just who is speaking, however, has become somewhat more nebulous.

If this nebulosity were also combined with a degree of narrative schizophrenia that challenged our ability to trace a coherent narrative line through this tale, we might be in the presence of ironic discourse. However, the disruptions that occur – namely the “beginning with the ending” structure of the tale -- are not radical enough to destabilize the whole (a move that would suggest some sort of playful commentary on the conventions of the genre); it’s certainly an odd conglomeration, but the shift in narrative style from the ballad-inflected frame story to the “genuine” ballad that closes the tale

does not sufficiently frustrate our attempts to understand the basic story such that we might be tempted to view them as either bumbled assimilative attempts on the part of an incompetent character-narrator, or even incompetence at the level of the implied author. There is something determined and purposeful about the inclusion of the closing ballad and the stylistic mimicry of that ballad that occurs in the frame story that takes this out of the realm of any brand of irony. The stylistic and structural disruptions do not reveal insufficiencies, but seem to be geared at marking out an assimilative process, an oral source text and a composed elaboration on that genre, that take this tale outside the realm of ironic play, even at the level of ironic portraiture, that we've seen in previous tales. Indeed, this tale emerges as idiosyncratically sincere.

*If We Could Only See Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka as Others See Him . . . He Would Be a Windmill*

If our starting point was the notion that Panko's narrative framework was, though a post-hoc creation, an organic extension of the content of the individual stories, by the time we reach "Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Auntie," we see how Gogol's skills and ambitions chafe against the logic of the "telling bee." If initially the frame grew out of the stories, here we find the story outgrowing the frame, demonstrating a mastery and unity of form and content that finds and indeed needs no external justification.

Here we find a signal shift in subject matter, milieu, and tone. Gone are the folksy themes, the fairy tale and folk stylistics, the supernatural; but also absent are the wild swings from sentimentality to farce. Gone is the heterogeneity of subject matter and style, the hotchpotch of high and low, old and new, oral and composed stylistics. In their place



we find a consistently satiric pose vis-à-vis the world of the petty gentry. This is a world Gogol will return to in *Dead Souls*, a work whose stylistic core we can find in embryo form in “Shponka.”

In terms of narrative voice, we are still in the realm of the first person. Panko’s prefatory remarks ensure that by introducing our narrator from without. However, Panko’s comments are less about Kurochka than they are about the story’s path to the reader and its truncated appearance in the text – we are only treated to half the story, the remainder having been used by Madame Panko for baking pirozhki (dumplings). And although Kurochka is very firmly fixed within the fictional Dikanka landscape (with Panko even providing ridiculously detailed information as to how to find him should the reader wish to hear the story’s conclusion) the little we hear of Kurochka himself consists of a few scattered personal habits and a hint of physical caricature:

Or else you may meet him in the market, where he spends every morning till nine o’clock choosing fish and vegetables for his table and talking with Father Antip or the Jew tax farmer. You’ll recognize him at once because nobody but he has printed duck trousers and a yellow nankeen frock coat. Here’s another token for you: he always waves his arms as he walks. The local assessor, the late Denis Petrovich, always used to say when he saw him in the distance: “Look, look, there goes the windmill.” (Pevear 107, SS I:334-335)

However, Kurochka proves himself unworthy of such treatment, for within the world of his own story, using the very brand of localized irony we first saw in trace form in the “The Night Before Christmas,” he constructs a narrative pose for himself that holds the hyperbolic world of the petty gentry at a determined distance, despite the fact that according to Panko, he is a denizen of that very world. Panko’s characterization, while in

a sense suited to the world of the text, does not match the image of the narrator established by the discourse of the narrative, once Shponka takes the reins.

Even within the framed story, we are reminded that this is a first-person construction, and indeed, the narrator maintains the skaz pretense of personal contact with his subject, but just barely: “if I remember correctly,” he states at one point. It is a token reference and an almost imperceptible declaration of the first person “I.” Here we see the first glimmers of an inversion of the character-narrator dynamic that dominated Gogol’s earlier tales. Here we find our first narrator-character, meaning one who dwells vaguely in the realm of the first-person, but whose presence begins to fuse with that of the author, in that he is our absolute point of reference for judgments about the events depicted. We never step around him, as we do Foma or the Gentleman, in the course of the embedded narrative. Never is the story more about him than about the subject matter. Never does his mode of expression foreground his character as much as it renders an absolutely evaluative vision of those depicted. Kurochka, within the world of his story, begins to attain that Godlike presence we ascribe to a third-person narrator or, more importantly, to the author himself. His relationship to the content is never contingent, it is absolutely determinative. The place in the fictional world accorded to him by Panko’s characterization seems to be completely inconsistent with the authority generated by his own discourse.

On the sentence level, this new relationship between narrator and subject matter is rendered by the brand of satiric stylistics that will come to dominate the remainder of Gogol’s most famous works. This poetics of satire consists partly of a highly developed pattern of ironic voice appropriation, another instance of our narrator “being ironic.” For

example, of his “hero,” Ivan Fyodorovich, Kurochka relates the following: “‘I think, that is, had occasion to observe that there are such remote countries in the world,’ said Ivan Fyodorovich, *heartily pleased to have uttered so long and difficult a sentence*” (Pevear 124, SS I:355; emphasis mine). The characterization that the quoted sentence was “so long and difficult” clearly issues from the character, Shponka, whose difficulty communicating with anyone -- much less the father of a potential love interest -- has been well established; but the notion that this sentence is so “long and difficult” in any absolute sense is clearly undermined by the sentence itself, a piece of content-less nonsense. Yet the characterization is embedded in Kurochka’s narration as if it is an objective state of affairs. We are then left to consider whether Kurochka, who, as a narrator has already established himself as one able to communicate rather effectively in written form, actually shares this opinion; the preponderance of the evidence suggests that not only does he not share in this opinion, but recognizes the inherent vacuity of Shponka’s statement and is echoing Shponka’s characterization for the purpose of bringing into high relief Shponka’s chronic insufficiency as a speaker (nay, as a thinking being). This is textbook ironic voice appropriation and it will come to be a major weapon in the comic characterization of urban bureaucrats and provincial landowners in works to come.

Also prominent here is the use of hyperbolic figurations and playful comparisons for satiric effect: “. . . and Grigory Grigorievich tumbled into bed, and it looked as if one huge featherbed were lying on another” (Pevear 115, SS I:344). Although the register is decidedly different from Foma’s caustic castigations of his characters, the relationship between narrator and character is equally definitive: Kurochka is mocking Shponka – and

convincingly so. And this stance contributes to our narrator's proto-authorial position as we laugh along with him at the caricatured image of Shponka. That is, there is little wiggle room regarding the speaker's evaluation of the subject in describing it in such a manner. The comic-satiric nature of the comparison is self-evident and demonstrates a knowing comedic vision on the part of the narrator.

And of course, there is the brand of "kalambury" or "plays on words" that Eikhenbaum famously draws our attention to with reference to "The Overcoat." These can take the form of puns that take advantage of comic coincidences of word roots, as in the following description of Ivan Fyodorovich's regiment:

The P--- infantry [*pekhotnyi* – from the Slavonic root *pekh* - meaning foot] regiment was not at all of the sort to which many infantry regiments belong; and, even though it was mostly quartered in villages [*stoial* (stood) *po dereviam*], it was nevertheless on such a footing [*na takoi noge*] that it would not yield to certain cavalry regiments. (Pevear 109, SS I:337)

Wordplay also takes the form of an almost onomatopoetic richness of alliterative tomfoolery, structured to render character actions and reactions comically grotesque. Notice the dense play with "v" and "s" sounds in following description of Shponka's nasal proclivities:

Tut Grigorii Grigorievich eshche *vzdokhnul* raza dva [ *vz* – *z*- *v*] i *pus'til strashnyi* nosovoi *svist* po *vsei* komnate, *vs*khrapyaia po *vremenam* [ *st* – *st* – *s* – *sv* – *sv* – *vs* – *v* – *v*]. (SS I:344)<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> "Here Grigory Grigorieavich sighed another time or two and sent a terrible nose-whistling all over the room, occasionally letting out such snores . . ." (Pevear 115).

This comic splutter of woven consonants transfers the semantic representation of an object onto a plane of oral mimicry. Sound becomes substance here in incredibly caricatured fashion.

Also present here for the first time is an evolving grotesquerie of social behavior found in the characters' various obsessions and personal habits – the pickling of cucumbers, the relative size of melons and turkeys, and the weaving of rugs, for example. That is, we find Gogol, for the first time here, really extending the bounds of human behavior to the borders of the absurd. Whereas before, comedy abounded in the form of broader farce and slapstick, or in the name of the artificial conventions of oral or literary genre, here we have a comic exaggeration of character traits (other than those of the narrator) that will become a hallmark of the Gogolian style.

This is not to say that these elements were absent from previous stories, but only that here they are used with a patterned consistency, leveled at a completely new and thoroughly consistent subject matter, and conveyed by a narrating personae about whom we've been given enough evidence to view as capable of manipulating these tactics knowingly. The result is a unity of voice (and a consequent authority of that voice) that discourages the kind of narrative fragmentation previous stories encouraged. The comic authority that emanates from the image of the narrator transfers *Kurochka* to a kind of authorial plane, a position of God-like distance from the world he describes where he can comment, critique and mock with a degree of objectivity, a pose totally inconsonant with a figure who is supposedly a denizen of that world and whose most recognizable feature, if we are to believe "the local assessor, the late Denis Petrovich," is his physical resemblance to a windmill. As such, this story looks forward to a creative era in which

our implied author becomes even more convincingly our “true speaker” and the consequent birth of a thoroughgoing ironic discourse.

**Chapter 3:  
Get Your Pankos Out!  
Mirgorod, Arabesques, and Beyond**

If the second volume of *Evenings* presents us with hints of a schism between frame and content, between the setting of the telling bee -- which shapes and motivates our understanding of the speakers just as it reciprocally takes its impetus from the stories themselves -- and the image of the narrator or narrators we find in the individual stories, by the time we reach the fateful year of 1835, Rudy Panko and the oral-cum-written framework he represents are hanging by a thread. That year saw the publication of both *Mirgorod* and *Arabesques*, two volumes that contributed, each in its own way, to the fragmentation of the typical narrative situation in which we understand language to be issuing from a character who is an integral part of the world described. In so doing, these volumes signal a decisive shift from the predominance of ironic portraiture -- which results in an ironic dynamic in which we view, along with the implied author, the narrative gaffes of the narrators as comic aspects of those narrators personae -- to the initial flowering of ironic discourse, in which this narrating intermediary will effectively disappear, resulting in a shift of the object of irony to the disruptive discourse we will begin to attribute to the implied author himself. Thus, the net effect of solidarity with the implied author shifts from a shared awareness of the insufficiencies of Gogol's comic character-narrator's to the shared awareness of the insufficiencies of the reader's continued attempts to build coherence out of a text that imperturbably strives to frustrate those attempts with greater and greater violations of narrative sense.

In *Mirgorod*, the oral storytelling framework Gogol labored so heavily to establish in the earlier volumes is reduced to a mere pretense by a highly ambiguous subtitle: “Stories serving as a continuation of *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*” (SS II:377). Just exactly what “serving as” implies with regard to our consumption of the new volume of stories is somewhat of a mystery. Are we to understand that they are part of the same locale of production, i.e. Panko’s homely hut? Perhaps, but here the stories appear without preamble or prefatory remarks by Panko that would firmly root the stories in the set of presumptions that anchored the *Dikanka* tales.

And what about the shift in fictional locale? We are clearly no longer in the environs of Dikanka, which, though fictionalized, represented some link with the real world. Now we are in the realm of Mirgorod, or “Peace-town,” a screamingly metaphoric moniker that seems to indicate a new form of relationship between the world of these stories and the “real” world of the reader, and hence, a new understanding of the types of narrators we will confront here.<sup>36</sup> Of course, Mirgorod is a real town, just as Dikanka is, but instead of creating a fictional counterpart to an existing locale as he does in *Evenings*, Gogol seems to call our attention to the distance between the “real” Mirgorod and the fanciful worlds constructed by the stories themselves. He does so not simply by refraining from creating a fictional frame that would present the fictionalized scene of narration, but also by tossing us some epigraphs that are comic in their sheer impropriety:

Mirgorod is an exceedingly insignificant town by the Khorol River. It has one ropeyard, one brick factory, four waterwheels and 45 windmills.

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<sup>36</sup> Legend has it that the fort from which the town developed was the site of peace negotiations.



–Ziablovskii’s Geography

Although the rolls [bubliki] in Mirgorod are baked from black dough,  
they’re tasty enough.

–From the notes of a certain traveler. (SS  
II:378)

The exalted place of the epigraph, home of the grand statement, the thematic moment, the elegant or pithy summary of a book’s aims and ends, is here occupied on the one hand with the most workaday, seemingly logistical content, and on the other an instance of damning with extremely faint and specific praise.<sup>37</sup> The net effect is not only a violation of literary form, but also a commentary on the distance between the circumstances of literary production and the sublime end products of such an act. If in *Evenings* the style and substance of the stories was an organic extension of the “world” from which those stories issued, in *Mirgorod*, Gogol introduces a decided split between the world of literary fancy and the banal circumstances from which they may issue.

Any suggestion that *Mirgorod* is also the product of some sort of roundtable telling bee – again, a notion weakly conveyed by the subtitle -- seems to be a holdover from the popularity of the previous volumes, an afterthought without real structural consequence for the current volume. Though the narrative “I” persists here in a number of different forms, it begins to become somewhat disembodied, or at the very least, freed from a living oral context and entering a somewhat fixed “literary” context. That is, the images of our narrators tend to emerge from the genre expectations embedded in the

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<sup>37</sup> Gogol most likely derived his epigraph from E.F. Ziablovskii’s *Geography of the Russian Empire*, published in 1831. Ziablovskii is credited with producing the world’s first textbook on forestry (Teplyakov 21). He held the position of professor of geography at St. Petersburg University during the time of Gogol’s brief tenure there.

types of discourse they partake; we know “who is speaking” more from the types of preexisting genres which they invoke than from any sort of living socioeconomic context, and the “experimentation” with those genres that they represent is not dependent for its motivation on the living process of oral discourse (the very process dramatized by the Panko framework).

*If a Tale Is Heard in Ukraine and No One Is There to Tell It, Does It Make a Sound?*

In fact, in both “Viy” and “Taras Bulba,” we find stories that are determinedly third person, despite the fact that they depend on oral sources for both their subject matter and style -- the former on fictionalized folkloric sources and the latter on the mythologizing tradition of the historical epic. The barest pretense of oral transcription, in the case of “Viy,” is maintained outside the framework of the story itself by a footnote attributed to the author (that is to Gogol himself) in which he claims to have rendered the tale simply as he heard it.<sup>38</sup> This footnote is itself a slippery literary object, and in it we can’t help but hear the lilt of ironic play that will become so familiar to us from this point on. As critics have noted, the beast at the center of the tale has no known source in Ukrainian folklore; although certainly inspired by that tradition, the Viy is a thoroughly Gogolian creation, and hence, the notion that Gogol is simply transcribing a tale pre-existing in popular memory is a ruse.<sup>39</sup> Whether it is one that was meant to be seen

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<sup>38</sup> The original footnote reads: “I did not want to change it in the slightest and I have retold it almost exactly as I heard it“ (SS II:559).

through (in which case, it would comprise the kind of shared joke with the reader that is ironic discourse), or it remained a kind of private joke, or it is simply a kind of fictional conceit meant to link a personal creation with a preexisting tradition is debatable. But what is significant for our purposes here is that it is Gogol, not Panko, who steps forward to frame the tale. That is, the tale finds its genesis not in some fictionalized telling bee, but in some supposed congress with Gogol himself. The fictional layers begin to slide away and we move a step closer to the author.

Although the stylistic and content components of these two texts bear witness to the oral tradition in terms of their motifs and lexical choices (and also demonstrate the kind of patchwork embellishment of heterogeneous sources we saw in earlier stories), here there is no real development of an individualized speaking character à la Panko, Foma or the Young Gentleman. Therefore, we are left with the sense of an authorial presence guiding the construction of these tales. As the authorial voice steps forward and begins to sound in these narrators, we begin to experience these stories as a series of conscious embellishments of the norms of either oral folklore or the historical epic, rendered by an author riffing off traditions; and although the original sources are embellished, those moves they do not create the kind of disruptions and disjunctions that might lead us to believe the author is attempting to parody or subvert those norms. They implicitly raise the expectation of story and its constituent components -- plot and character – but the norms that grant those elements coherence (causal logic, relevance,

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<sup>39</sup> Vasili Gippius, in his seminal volume on Gogol, comments on the bogus link to Ukrainian folklore: “Gogol himself called his main figure, Viy, a ‘colossal creation of the popular imagination’ and at the same time the chief of the gnomes – creatures which were and are unknown in the Ukraine or in transcriptions of folk tales. If in fact Gogol was working from some folk-figure we know nothing about, he had a very foggy notion of it” (47).

and brevity) are not violated to the extent that they were by narrators such as Foma or Panko. Here, Gogol's play with genre conventions transgresses some of the basic tenets of those genres, but not to the point of undermining the basic coherence of these stories; they still retain a comprehensible shape, and any departure from the norm emerges as elaboration and adaptation, not parody. Thus, although the development of a distinct authorial presence as the true speaker (our first precondition for ironic discourse) is met here, the latter (those disjunctions that frustrate the progress of story) are markedly absent.

Even in those stories that bear a first-person stamp, the narrative "I" begins to become a kind of thin pretense for a determined authorial presence. In the case of "Old World Landowners," this presence is draped in the bittersweet oohs and aahs of sentimental retrospection:<sup>40</sup>

To this day I cannot forget an old couple from times past, who, alas, are no more, yet my soul is still filled with it and my feelings are strangely wrung when I imagine myself coming again some day to their former, now-deserted dwelling and seeing a cluster of tumbledown cottages, an untended pond, an overgrown ditch in the place where the little low house used to stand – and nothing more. Sad! I feel sad beforehand! (Pevear 133, SS II:380-381)

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<sup>40</sup> Gitta Hammarberg characterizes the Sentimental pose as follows: ". . . the memory of the concrete story is particularly conducive to intensifying the narrator's awareness of his own emotions, opinions, and character, and is thus especially pleasurable to him . . . by fully giving himself up to all his emotions, grief as well as joy, and empathizing with the full range of vicarious experiences (with his own conscience clear), he can experience his own virtue, and everyday objects and events take on an aesthetic aura" (145). Although we might characterize this as a "personal" stance, the narrator figure in the sentimental canon exists to provide a vicarious feeling of superiority in the reader. Thus, he is not an "individual" whose emotional and psychological makeup contribute to him as a fictional character, but as a type, whose emotional investment serves not to sever him from the reader, but to provide a basis of non-judgmental participation in the superiority he feels.

This brand of emotional investment takes the narrator out of the realm of individual, character-driven psychology and places him in one of pre-established stock-authorial positions -- this one introduced into the Russian sphere primarily by Nikolai Karamzin.<sup>41</sup> This is not to say that Gogol does not put his own personal spin on the tradition, simply that the dominant relationship between narrator and content is one of God-like authorial control founded in a literary-ideological philosophy that has a distinct history; the language serves to construct not a true character, but a privileged vantage point on the world. The same is certainly true of the collection's crowning story, "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich," a story that represents a fuller flowering of the ironic pose (those tracts of "being ironic" for the sake of mocking the characters depicted) introduced in the "Shponka" tale. As if in contradistinction to that earlier tale, instead of Panko's prefatory testimony as to the "actual" character of our narrator, this tale was originally collected with a preamble by the author in which he trumpets the *fictional* nature of the tale.<sup>42</sup> Again, even with supposed claims by the

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<sup>41</sup> Compare the narrative pose here to the one affected by the narrator in Karamzin's "Poor Liza" (1792), a tale of the downfall of a young girl at the hands of a local playboy: "But most often it is the memory of the lamentable fate of Liza, poor Liza, that draws my attention to the walls of Si . . . nova Monastery. Ah! How I love those stories that touch my heart and compel me to shed tears of tender sorrow!" (606-607).

<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, "The Two Ivans" was originally published in A.F. Smirdin's *Novosel'e* (Housewarming) in 1834 with the subtitle "One of the unpublished tales of the beekeeper Rudy Panko." However, when first published in book form in the first edition of *Mirgorod*, the story featured a preface by Gogol himself, warning of the fictional nature of the tale. Again, these "authorial" prefaces are as slippery as the statements of fictional narrators, and here we certainly see the beginnings of a kind of tongue-in-cheek play with the reader that will be embellished to such elaborate heights that contradictory statements about the "factual" nature of a given story can be found in the same paragraph (see the ending of "The Nose," for example). However, the simple fact of identifying himself as the speaker, no matter how slippery his words may be, has great significance. Gogol's

“author,” there is no stable ground. But the net effect is to render the narrative persona -- a certain gentleman given to traveling through the story’s locale and who is familiar with the two Ivans and their quarrel -- the thinnest of masks through which Gogol satirizes and laments the fate of his fictional heroes. That is, the development of the narrator as a character is so thin here, so punctured with its own self-professed artificiality and at the same time given to such persuasive commentary on the story’s state of affairs, that the narrator-character’s discourse and that which we might attribute to the implied author himself tend to meld. While we are, to a certain degree, aware of the three planes -- implied author /fictional narrator/ fictional subject matter -- the distinction between the first two layers ceases to sound significantly. And when this happens, the famous illogic that dominates the discourse -- those exhausting digressions, seeming irrelevancies, and truncations and dislocations of story progress that will run rampant in the later stories -- reads as an intentional practice geared to satirize the stories characters, and not as the unwitting product of a bumbling character-narrator.

But perhaps what is most striking about *Mirgorod* is that -- with the exception of “The Two Ivans”-- its stories demonstrate a marked absence of that distinctive brand of obfuscating discourse. Thus, these stories emerge more as sincere attempts at the adaptation of preexisting literary styles and subject matter native to the Ukrainian cultural scene than an attempt to subvert them by sabotaging their overall coherence.

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prefatory remarks for “The Two Ivans” were eventually removed in favor of an extended ending for “Viy,” the story that preceded it in the original printing, proving that not every choice made by an author is motivated by aesthetic values; sometimes it’s just a matter of page count. However, the very fact that Gogol discarded the association with Panko and introduced his own voice, however fleetingly, seems to point at a determined stylistic trajectory. Here, he is clearly working out the most effective narrative setting for his playful poetics (SS II:713-714).

*Arabesques* or “It’s My Collection and I’ll Theorize If I Want To”

As Carl Proffer notes, “There are two works of Gogol which nobody reads: *Arabesques* is one and *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* the other” (quoted in Tikos, n.p.). Both volumes are distinguished by the fact that they represent Gogol’s attempts at non-fiction -- the former, a hodgepodge of essays, stories and “historical” novel fragments, and the latter, a socio-religious commentary in faux epistolary form.

The best that contemporary scholarship can seem to do with these pieces is to use them to trace the development of some sort of ideological system, seeking out the overt expression of that which is covertly suggested by the fiction, or to use them as a foil for Gogol’s more successful fiction. But *Arabesques* takes on a certain piquant significance in the context of this investigation if we consider both *Arabesques* and *Selected Passages* as evidence of a pressing need on Gogol’s part to speak in his own voice.<sup>43</sup>

Virtually every one of Gogol’s early stories and the collections they comprise are a pastiche of style and substance. And as we have seen, as we move from volume to volume, from the thickly painted “telling bee” framework of the first volume of *Evenings* to the spare subtitle that introduces *Mirgorod*, each volume seems to be progressively lighter in terms of an overt unifying framework. But in *Arabesques* we find absolutely no overt unifying framework, save for a rather weak preface in the author’s own voice:

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<sup>43</sup> We will return to the role of *Selected Passages* later in this investigation, when we consider the relative reader impact of ironic portraiture versus ironic discourse.

This collection consists of pieces written by me at various times, in various periods of my life. I did not write them to order. They are expressions of my soul and I chose only those subjects that strongly interested me. Amongst them, the reader will undoubtedly find much that is naïve. I confess that several of these pieces I might not have included in this collection, if I had published it a year earlier, when I was more critical of my old work. But it is better to be uncompromising toward your current labors than to strictly judge your past [ . . . ] Besides, if this collection includes only two or three previously unuttered truths, then the author would be remiss in withholding it from the reader and in the name of two or three universal truths, it is possible to forgive the imperfection of the whole. (n.p.)

The preface is “weak” only in the sense that it is constituted by a series of apologies and self-deprecating comments that, if they were sincerely intended, would be enough to stop any reasonable reader in his or her tracks. Of course, the presence of Gogol speaking in his own “voice” does not prohibit the presence of irony. As Laszlo Tikos notes, “Here we see the familiar technique of playing hide-and-seek: a mixture of half-truths, pretensions, and expectation that the perfection of the two or three untold truths will overshadow and excuse the imperfections of the rest of the volume” (Ch. 5: n.p.). But regardless of the degree of irony we locate in the tone of the foreword, the essential turn here is that we are playing this game of tonal interpretation with discourse we attribute to the author himself (or, at the very least, to an image of the implied author). Gogol at least seems to step forward as Gogol; the Chinese-boxes of semi- and fully-defined narrative voices with which we were forced to contend with in *Evenings* and *Mirgorod* are absent.

But beyond this point, we will set the volume’s non-fiction contributions aside in favor of the fictional compositions, since it is the relationship of the author to his fictional narrators that concerns us. And even several of the fictional contributions legitimate only



passing notice, as they dispense with irony entirely, or they embrace a degree of ironic portraiture of even greater consistency than that found in the Panko stories.

In the case of “The Portrait” -- both in its original incarnation in *Arabesques* and in its substantially revised form appearing in the 1842 edition of Gogol’s collected works – there is a marked absence of both the obfuscating tactics that concern us and even the isolated tracts of “being ironic” we found in previous narrators who demonstrated the ability of satirize the world of their creation. “The Portrait” emerges as a relatively straightforward tale (at least in terms of narrative stance) in which the main character descends into madness due to the futile pursuit of an ideal of romantic or artistic perfection; it mixes elements of horror and suspense with the themes and plot structure of the traditional “artist’s tale.” The overall impression is one of a sincere attempt at the allegorical presentation of philosophical themes using motifs and situations already well established by a homegrown, or at least thoroughly assimilated, Romantic tradition.<sup>44</sup>

And while “Diary of a Madman” is replete with the very kind of obstructive discourse -- the rambling, digressive prose that is at issue in this investigation -- it appears here under the banner of the most obvious and most conventional of motivations: madness. In the story’s very title, the narrator’s claim to control over his own discourse is disrupted. Indeed, the story’s comedy lies in the extent to which his discourse diverges from a quasi-realistic world we view through the cracks and fissures of that very

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander Pushkin explored the Romantic fascination with the supposed irreconcilability of creativity and aesthetic perfection with reason in both verse and prose; see for example, “God Grant that I Not Lose My Mind” (1833), “The Queen of Spades” (1833), and “The Bronze Horseman” (1833); see also, Prince V.F. Odoevsky’s “Russian Nights” (published in 1844 but composed during the 1830s); Mikhail Lermontov contributed his own spin on the artist’s tale with “Shtoss” (1841).

discourse. The story's narrative tension lies in the slow (but largely unambiguous) establishment of the narrator's madness and the extent to which he misinterprets and delusionally embellishes the events occurring around him.

There is a temptation to interpret this character's refusal (or inability) to be bound by the strictures of the real and his free-play with both the substance of the world and the conventions of reason-bound discourse as a mark of creative superiority. This would be very much in line with the Romantic vision of the binary between the rational, staid, limited vision of the masses and the true vision of the artist, which, in its disregard of the rational, is often branded "madness." And there's certainly something to this. Our sympathies lie with the narrator, Popryshchin, and those sympathies seem to increase with the degree to which his deluded self-image departs from the facts of his world, which are revealed by comparison to be superficial, dull, and mercenary.

Nevertheless, our base-level reading experience is guided by the unwavering impression that Popryshchin is, in fact, loony. Regardless of whatever sympathy we might feel for him, and regardless of whatever secondary philosophical implications we might draw between the contrast between the "real" the "imagined," Popryshchin's meandering, digressive transgression of the bounds of reason and sense is inevitably chalked up to this unambiguous psychological motivation. His discourse is simply and overtly character-motivated and implies no knowledge on the part of the speaker of the extent to which what he is saying departs from the broader world portrayed by the narrative. There is no "being ironic" here.

Thus, with the exception of "The Two Ivans" and "Nevsky Prospekt" (which we will consider below), both *Mirgorod* and *Arabesques* represent an odd "sincere" period in

Gogol's development. Caught between the early comedy of the *Dikanka* tales and the mature work represented by the "Petersburg Tales" and *Dead Souls*, Gogol attempts to manipulate and elaborate on source material – the Ukrainian folk tradition in the case of *Mirgorod* and the particularly Russian strain of the Romantic tradition in *Arabesques* – with a marked absence of ironic play. But of particular import for this argument is the fact that these tales are witness to the progressive liberation of Gogol's stories from the limitations of the narrator-character structure, such that when he returns to the massive abrogations of causal logic, relevance, and brevity that flourish in his mature work, we find the emergence of a fully developed ironic discourse that represents his most significant achievement.

*Gogol Turns on "Nevsky"*

If you like Gogol, you've read "Nevsky Prospekt." And even if you don't like Gogol, if you've studied Russian literature, someone probably made you read "Nevsky Prospekt." But Proffer's comment regarding *Arabesques* –that nobody reads it – remains prescient in that if you've read "Nevsky Prospekt," chances are you have not read it in its original setting. More likely, you've read it as part of a volume of "The Petersburg Stories," or in some version of Gogol's collected works, or in some abbreviated variation thereof.

And if its original setting in *Arabesques*, amongst a loose collection of essays with a vague authorial preamble, did little to construct an image of the narrator, the post-hoc designation "Petersburg Stories" does even less, as it was thought up by critics and

publishers who were responding to the stories' consistency of subject matter, locale, and tone. It is certainly not a useless designation in that it does point to a particular stage in Gogol's creative evolution, but it does not figure significantly into the reader experience of any one of the stories. That is, it does not provide an external foundation upon which we begin to build our image of the narrative voice in each of the stories, in stark contrast to the framework provided in *Evenings* and to a much lesser extent in *Mirgorod*.

"Nevsky Prospekt" hangs suspended, its narrative voice at issue from the moment of its first ridiculous exhalation. Though it is a distinctly first-person creation, gone is the traditional skaz framework. Gone are the crude locutions of peasant narration and the simple figurative play. Though we find a wide and certainly idiosyncratic range of vocabulary here, it is not determinative of any particular sub-literate socio-economic profile and indeed, the ability to shift between language levels, from the ridiculously onomatopoeic to the figuratively sublime, suggests a level of literary prowess on the part of our would-be narrator.

We've certainly seen a linguistic profile comparable to this in earlier stories ("Shponka," "The Two Ivans," and even traces of it in the Young Gentleman's tales in the first *Dikanka* volume), but here it is coupled with an almost complete absence of personal detail. The narrator is, though stubbornly an "I," now someone nameless, one who "doesn't serve in the civil service," a local denizen, but that is all we know. We accepted a degree of omniscience and character penetration from our earlier character-narrators, as there was an understood presumption that they were recounting tales they themselves had heard from the participants, or that they themselves were creating for the entertainment of others. The hints of "documentation" dropped by these character

narrators were either sincerely presented corroboration, pro-forma skaz topoi, or a “realistic” grounding for a tale understood to be pure embellishment. However, in “Nevsky Prospekt” the narrator’s ontological relationship to the content becomes questionable in that, while he is ostensibly a first person narrator, he attains a level of omniscience inconsistent with that which he describes as a series of “events”: “Marvelous is the working of our world,” I thought as I walked down Nevsky Prospekt two days ago, calling to mind these two events” (Pevear 277, SS III:50). Not only is the suggestion of the factuality of the events recounted inconsistent with the narrator’s access to those events, but the decision to inform us that he recalled them “two days ago” is a particularly confusing piece of information that simply clutters the already complicated temporal relationships between the story’s various parts. It also constitutes an incredibly weak *raison d’être* for the act of storytelling itself, for if the narrator felt comfortable enough to allow two days to lapse between the recollection of these “events” and the act of telling (or, here, composing) them for public consumption, that hardly makes a compelling case for the interest level of these events. This represents a total travesty of a major motive force for storytelling – namely that the given story is suggested by the moment, a kind of “that reminds me of the time” rationale that would sound totally natural coming from the lips of any one of Rudy Panko’s storytelling friends. Here, however, when the time frame is extended, the motivation becomes far weaker. The narrator is basically saying that a couple days ago he recalled these “events” and is just now getting around to putting them to paper. How compelling those events must be.

What we are beginning to see here is not simply the absence of an integrated character profile for the narrator, but the active fragmentation of any consistent position

from which the narrator recounts the story's "events." Our narrator is at once: a local citizen, faithfully recalling an historical occurrence; a being capable of a kind of omniscience such that he is privy to the intimate thoughts and feelings of one of the main character's Romantic internal struggles (that were supposedly experienced in the isolated seclusion of the character's own chambers!).

The narrator also employs transitions and turns of phrase we would normally associate with the God-like relationship of a traditional third-person narrator, or at least a narrator who makes no claims as to the factual nature of his content and disavows any personal relationship with his subject matter. The narrator sweeps over the content, jumping nimbly backward and forward, addressing the reader directly and enjoining him or her to stand with him and gaze from his panoramic vantage point: ". . . but let us turn to him [Pirogov] . . ." (Pevear 267, SS III:36) the narrator states, attempting to elide (or perhaps highlight?) the awkward transition between the story's two major sub-narratives. "It seems we left Lieutenant Pirogov at the point of his parting from poor Piskarev" (Pevear 267, SS III:36), he adds, enforcing the notion of narrator as one who controls the progress of events, starts and stops time, a being whose characters await his (and our) attention to play their parts. These self-conscious transitions lay bare the fabula aspect of storytelling, highlighting the constructed component of tale telling, instead of allowing for a series of invisible transitions and chronological organizing devices – such as a simple "meanwhile" – that do their work unnoticed.

Coupled with tracts of localized irony we have seen in evidence in tales such as "Shponka," "The Two Ivans," and in bits and pieces elsewhere in Gogol's developing oeuvre, these elements actively stymie any attempt to construct a coherent portrait of a

narrator who might actually inhabit the world of the story. The net effect is the emergence of an authorial voice, peeking through these irreconcilable fragments of narration whose very lack of coherence makes the sound of that voice audible. And it is the very experience of perceiving that dynamic, of recognizing the author's hand in the chaos, the results in the feeling of solidarity with the author mentioned by Kaufer.

But just when we begin to grant our narrator a proto-authorial profile, Gogol has him indulge in tracts of pathetic exposition, the nature of which has confounded many critics:

My heart is always vexed at the sight of a rich catafalque and a velvet coffin; but my vexation is mixed with sadness when I see a drayman pulling the bare pine coffin of a poor man, and only some beggar woman met at an intersection plods after it, having nothing else to do. (Pevear 267, SS III:36)

This brand of what seems like sincere emotional communion with character and situation has been read variously. Critics tend to read such passages either as the voice of Gogol himself, rendering serious thematic and interpretive comment on the world of his own creation, or as a structural contrast to the story's comic tracts, lending the whole an element of the grotesque (Mills 1106).<sup>45</sup> It is particularly tempting to adopt this stance as here (and elsewhere, most notably in "The Overcoat" and *Dead Souls*), the themes presented are decidedly humanistic and ostensibly reasonable. Indeed, the tale's closing reflections, in which a seemingly overcome narrator recants his initial appreciation of Nevsky Prospekt, seem to be an accurate reflection of the thematic implications of the

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<sup>45</sup> For a summary of the critical appraisal of these passages, see Judith Oloskey Mills' "Gogol's 'Overcoat': The Pathetic Passages Reconsidered" (pp. 1106-1107).

experience of his main characters; one, the Romantic, falls to wrack and ruin due to the discovery of a sordid reality that fails to accord with ideals of beauty conjured by his youthful imagination; the other, a rake, simply forgets about his lusty fixation on a young German woman and the attending fact that he has been flogged for his efforts. The world of Nevsky Prospekt is dramatized as being all flash and no substance.

But note the almost complete reversal of the opinion contained in the story's opening "monologue":

There is nothing better than Nevsky Prospekt . . . And the ladies! Oh, the ladies find Nevsky Prospekt still more pleasing. And who does not find it pleasing? The moment you enter Nevsky Prospekt, it already smells of nothing but festivity. (Pevear 245, SS III:7)

By the time we reach the narrator's closing commentary, the boulevard even seems to have changed its "smell":

Oh do not believe this Nevsky Prospekt! . . . Everything is a deception, everything is a dream, everything is not what it seems to be! . . . You think these ladies . . . but least of all believe the ladies. Peer less at the shop window; the knickknacks displayed in them are beautiful, but they smell of a terrible quantity of banknotes. . . (Pevear 278, SS III:50)

Note how this passage is an almost exact negative image of the narrator's initial remarks. Equally voluble, equally exclamatory, yet their overt content is diametrically opposed in terms of its assessment of Nevsky Prospekt. The closing comments are a rant, a seeming loss of control on the part of the narrator, and a vaguely believable one given that the comments seem to reflect the conclusions one might draw from the dramatic content of the work, were it not for the fact that they completely contradict the opening appraisal.

As a result, I tend to side with Eikhbaum, who sees these "pathetic" tracts as simply another piece of scripted discourse, another thread woven into the fabric of



Gogol's ever shifting narrative guises, none of which are to be believed as "sincerely" emanating from Gogol himself, and behind which stand the author himself, never to be completely associated with any given brand of stylized discourse he creates. As Eikhenbaum notes: "Proceeding from the basic proposition that in a work of art not a single sentence can, in and of itself, be a mere 'reflection' of the author's personal feelings, but rather is always a construct and a performance, we cannot and have no right to see anything other than an explicit artistic device in such a passage" (286-287).

But we need not deal solely from abstract propositions about art's inherently constructed nature. The very hybridism of the discourse, its patent inability to be contained within any consistent vision of narrating character or literary mode, as well as the evident stylization of each component, forbid the construction of a consistent speaking voice and prevent our seeing any individual component of the discourse as being equal to the voice of the author himself. As we have already noted, the ontological position of the narrator is perpetually undermined, moving from a vision of the speaker as an authorial presence with all the rights and privileges contained therein (omniscience, ironic detachment, and control over literary form) to a personal pose in which the speaker is a citizen of the world he describes, a confrere of his heroes, and a character whose own psychology is on display and is indeed part of the narrative itself.

But even within the "authorial" modes, there is an amazing degree of hybridism. While bookended by discourse that is distinctly personal, both in its praise and in its disdain for Nevsky Prospekt, the two internal narratives that make up the meat of the story begin with a thoroughly Romantic "Kuntslerroman" (concerning one character,

Piskarev) only to shift abruptly to a farcical story of lowbrow lust and broad, physical comedy concerning the Piskarev's comrade, Pirogov.

The personal and the impersonal, the authorial and the psychological, the satiric, the Romantic and the farcical, are all juxtaposed to create an ever-shifting groundwork of ontological relationships and literary modes. Now of course, hybridism has been characteristic of virtually every story we have considered thus far. The difference here is two-fold and, as is characteristic of Gogol's convoluted enterprise, those folds happen to overlap.

The first distinction that emerges with the arrival of this first of the "Petersburg Stories" is a shift in both milieu and the literary material associated with that change in milieu. While *Evenings* and *Mirgorod* witnessed the predominance of oral genres (the folktale, the fairytale, the tale of the supernatural, the folk epic, etc.) and the peasant milieu that is presumably their source and their place of propagation, "Nevsky Prospekt" transports us to an urban space and its attendant "literary" sources (or in the case of the farcical play that characterizes the second half of the work, "composed" sources). While the former intrinsically implies a speaker, the latter moves us to the world of impersonal, authorial narration. Whereas the folk tale is associated with a particular socio-economic milieu and therefore a vague profile of the teller most likely to propagate that brand of tale, the Romantic "Kuntslerroman" and the other pre-meditated modes of literary discourse suggest an impersonal narrative stance. Now of course, this is not to suggest that "literary" modes of discourse cannot involve a narrating character -- or, put more bluntly, cannot be told from a first-person point of view. My point is that when we shift the range of reference discourses from those associated with an oral tradition to those

associated with a written tradition, then any reflex assumption of the type of character who would be telling such a tale is lost. In the realm of literary discourse, the narrator-character must be a worked creation, not a default presumption. In fact, unless a degree of unreliability is established by the author with regard to his narrating cipher, the reader will assume a kind of “authorial authority” on the part of the narrator, the personal psychological relationship of narrator to story disappears, and instead the narrator becomes the ultimate point of reference on the “truth” of the world created – the difference between that role and the role of the “author” is almost indistinguishable.

In the early collections, oral discourse is the starting point, established by the predominating content, and reinforced both internally – by the type of diction, syntax, and narrative stylistics of untutored, unrefined, unpremeditated speech à la Foma – and by the narrative frame, the telling-bee that tells us explicitly that we are in the realm of human performance, of “real” characters whose act of telling tells us as much about them as characters as it does about the worlds they construct. Hence, when we encounter hybridism in those works -- shifts in mode, shifts in tone, inconsistencies in the relationship between narrator and his material -- we are more likely and even encouraged to assume a psychological or dramatic explanation for them. The various motives that lie behind the inconsistencies of these early texts have already been explored at length, but suffice it to say that when we encounter an emotional outburst such as that of the Young Gentleman at the conclusion of “The Fair at Sorochintsy” – a story in which the prose (and the narrative pose) can shift from a kind of conscious sentimental excess to a determinedly farcical construction of character and action and back again in a very short space – Gogol has already provided us with a framework in which to read such an

outburst as a product of a character whose language may be hybrid, but whose intentions and abilities derive from one comprehensible voice. In other words, in the early stories, we can easily reconcile the heterogeneous nature of the stories with a portrait of these speakers as amateur raconteurs who, swept up in the unpredictable process of impromptu creation, assimilate various kinds of verbal material from all strata of storytelling genres and even, in the case of our poor Gentleman, lose control of their own narratives and engage in a kind of personal reverie only barely legitimated by the content of the story itself. Here the Gentleman's outburst represents a loss of composure, his emotional tangent a product of his uniquely personal relationship to the story's subject matter, to his audience, and to the social act of telling itself.

But by the time we reach the "Petersburg Stories," the hybrid pieces of the narrative have become so distant as to be antagonistic, completely resistant to any comprehensible vision of consistent character; they cannot bear the weight of any kind of rational psychological or dramatic framework we try to impart to them. Whereas the Young Gentleman's outburst represented an inappropriate delving into the personal, a breach of storytelling etiquette, it was again, inappropriate, not illogical. In "Nevsky Prospekt," the narrator's moralistic condemnation of the superficial wasteland that is the locus of his story completely contradicts his praise of the milieu we find in the opening pages. Faced with this contradiction, we struggle to rationalize it psychologically. Perhaps the act of telling has caused the narrator to reconsider his view? Perhaps we are witness to a learning process, a kind of processing that leads to unexpected results? But this is doubtful, as the opening remarks are already punctured by a palpable sense of ironic play. What is more, this plucky, playful ironic distance that attends the opening is

completely at odds with the bombastic tenor of the close. One could not possibly lead to the other, not within the confines of reasonably rational character growth. Plus, the appalled excitement of the close is at odds with the tenor of the internal stories themselves. Again, though they both thematically jibe with the narrator's final words, tonally they are completely disjointed, especially the latter story, with its broad humor, its ribald playfulness, and its caricatured portrait of Petersburg denizens. Nothing justifies the closing comments. We have moved from improprieties and heterogeneity that can be explained away with reference to the character of the speaking voice, to logical disjunctions that cannot be contained in any ONE character portrait. We move beyond the world of inconsistency to that of outright nonsensical contradiction.

The net result of this increased fragmentation is, in part, the skaz framework outlined by Eikhenbaum in possibly his most famous piece of scholarship, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made." In this case, we are referencing skaz not in its traditional variant, with its sources, structures and images rooted in oral storytelling, but in its "literary" variant, defined by Eikhenbaum himself, in which composed texts are constructed to evoke the essence of oral performance (even if there is no peasant character-narrator constructed within the text who is credited as "telling" the tale). We see the same fundamental narrative dynamic taking shape here in "Nevsky Prospekt," one that will continue throughout the remaining "Petersburg Stories" and reach its apogee in *Dead Souls*. As Eikhenbaum puts it, ". . . skaz is not a narration, but instead a mimesis and a declamation; it is not a teller of tales who hides behind the printed text of 'The Overcoat,' but, rather, a performer, almost a comic actor" (285). Gogol's "Petersburg Stories" are not "told" per se, but acted out in comic fashion, the product of a voice assuming various

stylized guises. The heart of these tales is not the movement of plot, but the teller's constantly changing relationship to the world depicted, related through the appropriation of these various guises that have no need of consistency or reconciliation: chatty local denizen, able member of the literati, morally indignant citizen, etc. Eikhenbaum writes, "In this sense, the mind of the artist as a man who experiences various moods always remains and must remain outside the bounds of what he creates" (287). And by this, Eikhenbaum does not simply mean that the artist and narrator or narrating-character are never one and the same narrating "person." He means that the very fabric of his brand of skaz narrative is a series of stylized poses, a shifting sand of assumed guises that the author weaves together for comic effect: "His characters are only petrified poses. They are dominated by the mirthful and ever-playful spirit of the artist himself, as stage director and real hero" (275).

But Eikhenbaum is merely interested in the formal composition of the text, the combination and conflict of the various narrative pieces and their impact on the reader (comic, grotesque, etc.). He ignores several fundamental elements of the reading experience and hence, the ontological implications of skaz as regards our vision of the narrating voice. While he parses the various types of discourse that predominate in "The Overcoat" (mainly what he refers to as the punning comic mode and the pathetic, declamatory mode that heightens the net effect to one of the grotesque), he fails to note how this movement between discourses – each with differing implications as to the profile of the speaker – cannot be contained within one speaking voice. Eikhenbaum disregards our fundamental tendency as readers not to simply view a text as a series of devices, but to understand a tale, especially one that announces itself as being told from a

first-person perspective, as issuing from some form of integrated, understandable source with a finite and consistent profile. If we take Eikhenbaum's own notion that the tale is not really "told," but "enacted" by a comic actor, we run up against this gap in Eikhenbaum's analysis, in that when we are in the presence of a true comic actor engaged in his craft, the actor disappears in the role. We are treated to an experience of laughing at a comic character that completely masks the presence of the actor at its core. But if the same comic actor is engaged in playing five, six, seven comic roles shifting abruptly between them, the effect is still comic, but our perceptual experience is markedly different. That is, we are never fully allowed to immerse ourselves in the extended dream of a narrative fiction with fully developed characters, but are made forcibly aware of the actor behind the series of masks, switching artfully between them, pulling the strings, and ultimately sneering through the buffoonery he or she presents. Such is the dynamic created by the ever-increasing fragmentation of narrating character Gogol presents. As a result, we see the author himself stepping forward as the true "speaker." And again, when we say "author," we mean this in Booth's sense, not as Gogol the historical figure, but as "the creative person responsible for the choices that made the work" (11). This author figure, and all the assumptions of professionalism, awareness of literary convention, etc., is the axis around which the stylized tapestry of skaz discourse turns, all of which is separated from the author by radii of varying distances, but both levels -- the speaking core and the stylized discourse -- can be discerned at every point. When we find ourselves in the presence of such a narrator and we witness this narrator violating the norms of causal logic, relevance, and brevity while vigorously championing those norms at the same time, those actions read as both radically ridiculous AND thoroughly intended; the

net effect of “figuring all this out” is that feeling of solidarity with our implied author noted by Kaufer – we join with the author in comic contemplation of his own intended “incompetence.” This is ironic discourse.

Therefore, returning to the seemingly irreconcilable personal opening and personal epilogue of “Nevsky Prospekt,” we find them both bound at the axis of our implied author, the one discourse sounding as “disingenuous” as the other. If Eikhenbaum characterizes the dynamic of “The Overcoat” as one in which the “mimicry of laughter alternates with the mimicry of sorrow” (284), here, the mimicry of valorizing fascination alternates with the mimicry of moral indignation. The narrator-character is actually no one character, but a series of stylized verbal masks, all of which are animated by “the mirthful and ever-playful spirit of the artist himself, as stage director and real hero” (275). According to Fanger, “Gogol has created a puzzle that many keys may fit, but none open up” (120). In a sense, by providing too much information in the form of a series of incongruent discourses, Gogol prevents us from creating a coherent image of a character-narrator: “When Gogol subordinates the experience of his characters to that of an individualized (though unspecified) narrator, he virtually disarms criticism because every contradiction and peculiarity may be justified by its contribution to the reader’s sense of that shadowy and brilliant persona” (109). What Fanger fails to note is the extent to which that fragmentation, the very protean nature of the narrating presence, leads to the default construction of a predominating authorial (rather than fictional-narratorial) presence -- the lurking genius, the “shadowy and brilliant persona” behind those contradictions and peculiarities. Gogol’s evolution as a writer hinges upon his development of an efficient nesting structure for his obfuscating deformations of



discourse and narrative order. By the time we arrive at “The Overcoat” he has learned to strip away the trappings of coherent character-narrator, and concurrently heighten the degree of schizophrenia in the range of discourses invoked by his narrators; the underpinnings of story have become so radically unmoored, that a motivation of mere incompetence cannot suffice to explain the narration, nor does madness provide a satisfactory framework for understanding them.

What this ultimately means to the latent ironologist in all of us is that we find a narrative structure that has firmly moved from ironic portraiture, in which disjunctions and comic disharmonies are both attributed to and rationalized as features of an unwitting narrator and therefore are viewed as a comic feature of those narrating voices. What we have now is a thoroughgoing ironic discourse, in which those disjunctions are viewed as a brand of conscious ridiculousness that can be attributed to a knowing presence, our implied author. As a result, we join with that author in comic contemplation of the fact that those disjunctions are such massive abrogations of storytelling practice, we begin to question those very presumptions.

**Chapter 4:**  
**Being a Nothingness: The Narrator-Character and the Foundations of Ironic  
 Discourse in “The Nose” and “The Overcoat”**

“Nevsky Prospekt” represented a crucial break for Gogol. While composing largely sincere experiments in synthesizing oral and written literary traditions in the form of *Mirgorod*, Gogol’s shift to the Petersburg milieu triggers the beginning of a completely different relationship between the author/narrator and his material, albeit one that involves many of the same discourse features Gogol cultivated in his earlier stories. We have seen in “Nevsky Prospekt” the beginnings of the fragmentation of any solid narrative position through the acceleration of the wealth and variety of narrative voices -- chatty local denizen, able member of the literati, morally indignant citizen, satirist, humanist -- beyond them to the point of irreconcilable contradiction. The result is a shift in the ironic object from narrating character to the obfuscating discourse perpetrated by our new “true” speaker.

In “Nevsky Prospekt,” the contradictions made by the narrator are primarily of an evaluative nature. Put simply: Nevsky Prospekt – good or bad? Is it a glittering locus of metropolitan bustle or a base whirlwind of deceiving appearances? Is it the stuff of romantic fantasy or ribald comedy? Should you get there as fast as you can for there is “nothing better,” or should you “not believe this Nevsky Prospekt”? In the absence of any real possibility of constructing cohesion out of contradiction, we begin to hear the author’s famous giggle through the chaos. Everything becomes suspect, canted, a source of play. And when that realization occurs, something incredibly far reaching begins to

happen, something that transcends the joyful comedy of Rudy Panko, and even the skewering satire of “Shponka.” Because the obfuscating discourse is no longer attributed to a bumbling character-narrator, the focus of the ironic gaze moves to the discourse itself. That is, when we begin to see the ridiculous violations of sense-making as an intentional act on the part of our implied author, those violations themselves become the ironic object and we join with the implied author in contemplation of them. The object of irony shifts from the character-narrator to the discourse itself and the extent to which it often makes the simple act of reading for coherence of story and character difficult (if not, in some cases, downright impossible).<sup>46</sup> The whole field of discourse becomes an object of tongue-in-cheek play.

In “The Nose” (1836) Gogol deepens his arsenal of conflicting narrative postures that makes this possible by creating a story whose chaos is not evaluative (that is, it does not consist of a series of irreconcilable moral positions on the story’s subject matter), but ontological. That is, “The Nose” consists of a series of contradictory poses regarding the very reality of the events depicted. By the time we reach the 1842 publication of “The Overcoat,” Gogol will have perfected this technique, stringing both axes of impossibility (evaluative and ontological) together to maximize the transformative potential of his obfuscating prose. Indeed, “The Overcoat” represents the final stage of this period (the last successful creative period of Gogol’s life), and it represents in microcosmic form the narrative presence he incorporates so effectively into his masterwork *Dead Souls*.

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<sup>46</sup> The implications of this shift will be treated in greater detail in Chapter 6.

*“The Nose”*: *This Is Serious Business (So Don’t Blow It)*

From the story’s opening salvo, our narrator notes the unlikely nature of the events to be narrated: “On the twenty-fifth day of March, an extraordinarily strange incident occurred in Petersburg” (Pevear 301, SS III:52). On the other hand, in acknowledging this event’s deviation from the normal course of events, the narrator earns a certain amount of “reliability.” That is, we are more likely to believe someone who recognizes the unlikelihood of that which he is telling. The sentence also establishes the narrator’s initial (though fleeting) relationship with the world of his story: he is a local chronicler, a man in close temporal and geographical proximity to events that have purportedly occurred. The sentence even includes a dateline, supporting the notion of the “factuality,” though with the notable omission of the year.<sup>47</sup>

The tense structure of the opening also supports our sense of the narrator as one who inhabits the world of his description. Of the drunken barber, Ivan Yakovlevich “who lives [*zhivushchii* – present tense participle translated as present tense] on Voznesensky Prospekt (his family name has been lost [*familiia ego utrachena* – past passive participle translated as present perfect] (Pevear 301, SS III:52). Notice how radically different the presumptions would be if Gogol had composed this in the past tense: the barber “who lived on Voznesensky Prospekt (his family name had been lost).” The narrator in the

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<sup>47</sup> As originally published in Alexander Pushkin's *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary; 1836), the dateline included a year – 1832 (III:667). The year was eliminated in later redactions, having a dual effect. On the one hand, it undermines the authenticating tendency of a dateline for the obvious reason that it makes the time of occurrence vaguer. On the other hand, it can also be read to suggest a time in the recent past (i.e. March of this year), placing the narrator in close temporal proximity with the events, furthering a sense of reliability on the part of the narrator and “reality” for the events depicted.

second version, setting his characters indelibly in the past, severs his relationship with them, both temporally, geographically, and even in terms of his relationship to the story's subject matter (factual recounting v. conscious artificial creation). Given that the past tense predominates in third-person fictional storytelling, if Gogol had employed it in his narration, all bets regarding the image of the narrator would have been off. But in having the narrator render these details in the present tense -- the barber "lives," his name "has been lost" -- the narrator is implicated as being a denizen of the world he depicts. At the very least, his speech implies direct familiarity with the characters and the milieu. He is of this world.

And not only is he of this world, but he demonstrates humility before it. Our narrator, at least as far as he characterizes himself, is a mere conduit, a slave to the preferences and predilections of its inhabitants. If Collegiate Assessor Kovalev prefers to be addressed as "Major," then so be it: "For which reason, we shall in the future refer to this collegiate assessor as a major" (Pevear 305, SS III:57).

At various points in the story, the narrator insists upon the story's complete independence from his own creative influence. ". . . the reader may now judge for himself" (Pevear 306, SS III:58), he notes at one point; "The major, as may be seen from that, had decided to fawn a bit this time" (Pevear 312, SS III:68), he claims at another; and at yet another point he writes, "And therefore, it could be foreseen that the collegiate assessor's arrival . . ." (Pevear 314, SS III:69). All of these preambles, appositives, and caveats position the narrator as subservient to a series of independently occurring events; these events are supposedly conveyed un-refracted by the prism of his discourse. What's more, the narrator seems to be so subservient to the world he is describing, it holds

hypothetical possibilities he cannot completely account for: “. . . and I do not know whether he would have been received all that cordially even if he had brought him several pounds of sugar” (Pevear 314, SS III:69).

And just as the narrator’s initial acknowledgement of the “strangeness” of the story’s events seems a rhetorical attempt to shore up reliability, so too does his attempt to distinguish the story’s “actual” events from the “rumors” that inevitably attend it: “Meanwhile, rumors of this remarkable incident spread all of the capital and, as usually happens, not without special additions” (Pevear 322, SS III:79). That people gossip is a truism. That society fops and socialites do so is an even truer truism. In acknowledging this truth, the narrator places himself on the side of reason and common sense. The fact that in this case the rumors are no more ridiculous than the events off which they are riffing is certainly a comic element here. However, on the surface, these rhetorical moves could generally be considered authenticating devices. This is one of a battery of reliability-building elements that figure into the following description:

Just then, everyone’s mind was precisely attuned to the extraordinary; only recently the public had been taken up with the experiments on the effects of magnetism. What’s more, the story about the dancing chairs on Konyushennaya Street was still fresh, and thus it was no wonder . . .  
(Pevear 322, SS III:79)

Not only does the narrator invoke broad, readily acknowledgeable generalizations as a means of establishing a sense of reliability for his depiction of events, he also situates the events relative to actual historical events “only recently” preceding the events depicted in the story. Indeed, there was a yen for the fantastic in 1830s Petersburg. Magnetism was a popular interest and the story of the “dancing chairs” was a rumor making the rounds at

the time (III: 667-668). The integration of actual events (or, in this case, actual trends and rumors) to garner support for an argument against the supposed rumor mongering that was making “special additions” to the events at the stories’ core again casts our narrator as a simple chronicler, one who is recounting actually occurring events, strange as they may be; his discourse suggests that he stands at the barrier between the real and the contrived, the fantastic-but-true and the product of bored elaboration. What’s more, the introduction of the reference to the “dancing chairs” without full explanation bolsters our image of the narrator as a city resident with direct access to these events, for his argument relies on information shared between him and his intended reader (the other residents of Petersburg), such that the full story behind the incident would be a superfluous addition. It is a rhetorical move that implicates not only narrator and characters in the world depicted, but even suggests that it is a world shared by us, the reader, as well.

At the same time, the narrator takes no direct part in the drama, and there is no real indication as to how he has been made privy to the details of this story. As much as the grammatical and authenticating details implicate him in this world, they do so only in the broadest sense. He does not step forward in any biographical manner. If there is any doubt as to the point of view of this story, it is banished by the third page, in which the narrator openly invokes the first person and chastises himself (“But I am slightly remiss . . .”) for neglecting certain details regarding the “worthy” Ivan Yakovlevich. But, as in all narrative poses, there is the element of pretense here; the narrator’s “face” is completely unclear. We have no real sense of him as a character beyond the discourses he invokes and those -- as we will continue to demonstrate -- are many, varied and ultimately, irreconcilable. Thus, when we witness our narrator invoking the basic tenets of

storytelling propriety by promising to abide by the dictates of logic and swift narrative movements, and then in virtually the same breath, flouting those very dictates, we cannot help but see those maneuvers as part of a grand joke, one that through our very ability to divine them as such, allows us to join with the narrator in comic enjoyment.

Perhaps the most blatant of these discourses – and the one responsible for Gogol’s intermittent fame as a realist -- is the ironic/satiric mode. This is the mode we first saw in “Shponka,” in which our narrator nimbly undermines his characters’ vision of the world (and the class and milieu structure they represent) by appropriating their voices and pairing them with details that pointedly undermine that perspective. Again, by “ironic/satiric” I mean localized patches of rhetorical irony directed at the foibles of a particular social set or class. The perception of these tracts as ironic (and not sincere) also depends upon the broader image of the “speaker,” which is itself evolving (or, more accurately, devolving) over the course of the story. Thus, these tracts both depend on and amplify the general fragmentation of the narrator-character plane that in turn generates an image of the speaker as author, which then in turn further confirms our perception of these passages as ironically intended. This reading process is further fostered by the extreme nature of the disjunction between evaluation (what is said of the characters’ supposed propriety) and the image of the characters (rendered in detail that so wildly flouts any earthly notion of propriety).

We find a typical example on the first page of “The Nose.” Indeed, no character escapes the breach between his or her conception of the “respectable” and the rather sordid reality of his or her existence. Take Ivan Yakovlevich: “. . . For the sake of propriety, Ivan Yakovlevich put his tailcoat on over his undershirt . . .” (Pevear 301, SS



III:52). Now this is clearly Ivan Yakovlevich's notion of propriety. Yet the spectacle of this sordid drunk donning his coat over his greasy undershirt hardly jibes with any "reasonable" notion of propriety. I say "reasonable" in that one could imagine a world in which it is "respectable" to do such a thing, but it would bear no resemblance to our contemporary world, and I am willing to wager notions of respectability did not include such spectacles even in Gogol's day. The sheer fact that the story was originally slated for publication in *Moskovskii nabliudatel'* (The Moscow Observer), but was rejected on the basis that its characters and contents were deemed irredeemably vulgar, is testament to the notion that standards of "respectability" have a hefty shelf life, and characters such as Ivan Yakovlevich, to extend the metaphor, were hardly top drawer, even then. Thus, given our emerging image of the narrator as the implied author, there is a tendency to assume that someone in an authorial position would agree with those "reasonable" standards of respectability and therefore intend the disjunction between the language of respectability and the sordid reality presented. The problem with the editors of *Moskovskii nabliudatel'* is that they just didn't catch the irony.

One might argue that the narrator shares Ivan Yakovlevich's warped vision of propriety. This would render the narrator (and situation) comic, but would not constitute an instance of "being ironic" in that there would be no consciousness of the disjunction on the part of the speaker. But here, a look back at the language (and profile) of Rudy Panko provides an instructive contrast. Just as the disjunction between Ivan Yakovlevich's sense of propriety and the gritty spectacle of him donning his frock coat is the source of humor in this passage, so too is the proposition that Foma Grigorievich's

“respectability,” nay, his very right to speak truth to kings at the finest salon buffets in Petersburg, is testified to by the fact that he wears:

. . . gabardine of fine cloth of the color of cold potato mash, for which he paid almost six rubles a yard at Poltava. As for his high boots, no one in the village has ever said that they smelled of tar; everyone knows that he rubs them with the very best fat, such as I believe many a peasant would be glad to put in his porridge. Nor would anyone ever say that he wipes his nose on the skirt of his gabardine, as many men of his calling do; no, he takes from his bosom a clean, neatly folded white handkerchief embroidered on the hem with red cotton, and after putting it to its proper use, folds it up in twelve as his habit is, and puts it back in his bosom. (Kent I:5, SS III:115)

Blows his nose on a handkerchief (not on his shirt)! Rubs his boots with fat good enough to eat! Foma is truly ready to dine at court. Again, the comedy of both passages (both at the time of publication and now) rests upon the extent to which the supporting detail contradicts the premise of “respectability,” notions that are shared between reader and author. However, the signal difference between the two passages is that in the case of the narrator of “The Nose,” we have no reason to assume that the speaker does not share our notions of respectability as well. In the case of Rudy Panko, it is the exact opposite. Gogol has labored so much attention in the construction of Panko’s language and back story, we are encouraged to believe that Panko sincerely believes that Foma’s supposed fastidiousness truly represents an inordinate degree of respectability (at least for a gravedigger). With our nameless, faceless (pun intended) narrator of “The Nose,” no such care has been taken. As a result, we default to a certain degree of parity between our own value system and that of not only the author, but the narrator as well – especially as the border between the two progressively disintegrates as the story unfolds. Unless convinced otherwise, we are willing to assume that the narrator is aware of what appears to us as a

massive moral or aesthetic contradiction. Therefore, what we find in “The Nose” is not the bumpkinish participation of the narrator in the comic norms of the depicted world, but the artful lampooning of that world not merely by the author, but by the narrator as well.

The sense of conscious irony (and the development of this satiric facet of the cacophony of narrative discourses here) is made all the more obvious when our narrator seems to engage in direct discourse. That is, when he breaks free of character perspective and claims to be rendering a broad evaluative comment on this world and its self-professed “respectability.” At one point, the narrator breaks off the forward progress of the narrative, directly addressing the reader, in order to give greater attention to Ivan Yakovlevich, whom he claims is “a worthy man in many respects.” One of the many details he offers us as reliable support for that thesis is the following: “Ivan Yakovlevich, like every decent (self-respecting) Russian artisan, was a terrible drunkard” (Pevear 303, SS III:55). It is not merely the determined repetition of the lexicon of “respectability” (here, the term *pochtennyi*) that undermines the claim, but also its obvious pairing with a grotesque personal habit. It is very difficult to imagine a world in which there is a smooth logical or moral transition between self-respect and drunkenness. The net result is not only a comic indictment of Ivan Yakovlevich, but also a kind of indictment of the whole class of Russian artisans and perhaps Russian society as a whole. Any doubt as to whether there is a contradiction between the two terms of the statement is banished by the testimony of other characters (themselves the subject of the same satiric gaze) to the effect that Ivan Yakovlevich is a disgusting pig. Whether it is the Inspector’s claim that he has had an eye on “that drunkard” for ages, or Kovalev’s testimony that Ivan’s hands stink, all of these elements suggest that the disjunction between decency and drunkenness

exists within the world of the text itself. We, as modern readers, are not simply importing our own standards of decency. The disjunctions upon which our perception of irony rests are culturally relevant to the time and place described. In the face of such a glaringly comic disjunction, Gogol would have had to put in some heavy-duty characterizing work to make us believe that such a statement was being uttered sincerely. Indeed, it would have taken exactly the type of framing he includes in *Evenings*, and pointedly excludes here.

And beyond the specific disjunction between character assessments of “propriety” and the sordid reality highlighted by the narrator, we find what is variously termed “familiarization” or “comic alogism.” As Alexander Slonimskii puts it:

This device consists of the comic destruction of logical and causal connections. It runs through the entire system of Gogol’s work; it comes out in the language of the characters and the narrator, in the way the dialogue is constructed, and in the motivations given for actions and events. Finally, it develops into the grotesque spectacle of an “overwhelming muddle” which is both funny and terrifying at the same time. (346-347)

Gogol consistently pits character and even narrative responses to the story’s central premise against broader notions of reasonableness. The narrator blandly and almost impersonally records the reactions of his characters to the fantastic central event of the story. Those reactions are ridiculously mundane (and often propriety-obsessed as well) and hence, inappropriate. The response to the initial discovery of the nose demonstrates this point nicely:

He stuck in his finger and pulled out—a nose! . . . Ivan Yakovlevich even dropped his arms; he began rubbing his eyes and feeling it; a nose! and, what’s more, it seemed like a familiar one. Terror showed on Ivan

Yakovlevich's face. But this terror was nothing compared to the indignation that came over his wife. (Pevear 302, SS III:53)

The barber's initial shock seems perfectly natural, though framed for comic effect here by the amplification of the emotional vocabulary and exclamation points akimbo. But then comes the addendum regarding the familiarity of the nose, which screechingly derails any notion of appropriate response. The impropriety is heightened by the logical connective *i eshche* ("and, what's more"), which leads us to believe that the following clause will introduce something even more shocking. The fact that the nose looks familiar seems like an odd priority of impressions, once he has processed the appearance of a nose in their bread . . . say, maybe after six to eight months of solitary reflection. And although this logical connective might be considered an instance of voice appropriation, the narrator then repeats this structural relationship when introducing the wife's response, which is beyond Ivan Yakovlevich's perspective: "But this terror [an understandable response] was nothing [logical connection, here a comparison of degree that anticipates an even more dramatic reaction] compared to the indignation [in the face of the absurd, dignity seems a ridiculous counter] that came over his wife" (Pevear 302, SS III:53). This superficially impersonal, seemingly objective account on the part of the narrator, in light of both the absurdity of the content and the syntactic construction of the sentence, reveals the narrator's ultimate comic distance from the world described. That is, there is no overt comment here on the world of the text, only the wry, satiric smile that emerges through the combination of content that violates norms of reasonableness that we can feel confident are shared not only by author and reader, but by author, reader and narrator.

But just as we begin to recover from the switch from narrator-as-objective-chronicler to narrator-as-satirist, Gogol switches modes again with the introduction of a highly personal mode, a kind of scatterbrain, whose control of his text at least seems to slip away from him, requiring constant impromptu revision:

Learned collegiate assessors . . . But Russia is such a wondrous land that, if you say something about one collegiate assessor, all collegiate assessors, from Riga to Kamchatka, will unfailingly take it to their own account. The same goes for all ranks and titles. Kovalev was a Caucasian collegiate assessor. (Pevear 305, SS III:57)

Now of course, this mode of discourse is shot through with irony as well. Its patina of concern with decorum is paper-thin and the net product of this passage is a kind of backhanded slap at Kovalev through insinuation. But again, this perception is based on an image of the speaker as an authorial presence, which is in turn established by this cycling through discourse modes that are fundamentally incompatible. As a result, we view all of them as ironically canted masks barely hiding the author-cum-true-speaker behind them.

Added to this mix of discourse fragments is what Eikhenbaum refers to as Gogol's "declamatory" mode, stretches of sententious proclamations regarding life and letters, and empathetic pronouncements about much-mocked characters. Consider this statement describing Kovalev's recovery of his nose:

But nothing in this world lasts long, and therefore joy, in the minute that follows the first, is less lively; in the third minute it becomes still weaker, and finally merges imperceptibly with one's usual state of mind, as a ring in the water, born of a stone's fall, finally merges with the smooth surface. (Pevear 318, SS III:74)

As noted previously, there has been a tendency among some scholars to view this mode as the “true” Gogol stepping forward in defense of an artistic theme, or, in the case of “The Overcoat,” in defense of the humanity of a poor clerk. Eikhenbaum, however, views this mode as simply another discourse thread in Gogol’s skaz fabric: “The work of art is always something that is made, fashioned, contrived; it is not only artful but also artificial, in the best sense of the word” (286-287). And like all of the voices collected here, this discourse mode does not last long. The saccharine commentary is quickly eclipsed by a return to the punning mode: “But it still had to be attached, put in its place” (Pevear 318, SS III:75). Indeed, the quick and persistent return to other discourse modes not only undermines any sustained sense of seriousness, but also renders the pathetic tracts themselves targets of the ironic puncturing by the authorial presence that stands behind all of these whirling personae.

Choosing one facet among the many as being “sincere” is an impossibility in that they all so radically contradict each other, both in terms of their qualitative appraisal of their subject (mockery, sympathy, moral approval, indignation) and also in terms of their implied vision of the speaking voice (chronicler, literary man, ironist, gossip, common citizen). There is no stable ground. All of these discourse modes are unmoored from any controlling perspective other than a kind of “irony of ironies” a penetrating smirk that cants all of the discourse layers. The tectonically shifting plates of Gogol’s fractured discourse create a default supposition of the implied author as the true speaker, and thus both the localized bits of verbal ridiculousness and the broader poses suggested by each of those discourses are put at arms length. In recognizing this, we join with our implied

author in comic contemplation of both the characters depicted, and the broader scale fragmentation of narrative sense that the author orchestrates.

*I'm a Narrator Here Myself*

But again, while Eikhenbaum notes the contingent nature of all of these discourse threads, he views them, true to his formalist leanings, as a series of functional devices that work singly or in tandem to produce various effects. In the case of the “pathetic” passages, they are present to establish the effect of the grotesque when added to the comedic pulse of the punning mode. Eikhenbaum is intensely attuned to the structural fabric of Gogol’s text, but he has a somewhat mechanical vision of the relationship between text and reader, neglecting the constructive process with which the reader attempts to solidify, consolidate and integrate the discourse(s) of any given fictional text into a coherent profile of ONE speaker. The constructive efforts of the reader should be considered. Stories are not simply a system of linguistic hammers that act upon the understanding. Reading is essentially a dialogic set up. Narrative implies a living context, albeit a simulated one. If a story is present, someone is there to tell it.

This presumption is exactly what Gogol is counting on and ultimately, playing with. When we are presented with a text that is fundamentally and radically inconsistent, when it just doesn’t seem to make sense, we are generally left with two possibilities regarding our image of the author: incompetence or irony. Incompetence tends to lead to simply putting the book down. But a verdict of irony means we simply shift our vision to a higher discourse plane. That is, no individual voice is identified as the true speaker, nor



can we construct an integrated composite of those voices. Instead, we default to the voice of the author himself, and presume the conscious manipulation of these various discourses in the form of comic distance between the real speaker (the authorial presence or “implied author”), and the assorted verbal pieces. We sense the puppet master behind the linguistic puppets.

For the contemporary reader, making the irony/incompetence distinction is a somewhat rigged affair. Once the tradition has canonized a writer, we tend to see all structures as intentional. It is all part of the author’s “genius.” What remains are disputes about function. But I would contend that even for Gogol’s contemporaries, the comic mastery demonstrated by the story’s characters and situations was readily available, perhaps even more so to a relatively untutored reading public. That is, even before historical or contemporary readers get to the point of articulating subtle (though I would contend, almost intuited) distinctions about the intentions behind the discourse, everyone is confronted by the simple fact that Gogol is very funny. When an author is able to make us laugh, we are ready to attribute a sense of competent intentionality to all of his linguistic machinations. And competence, that is, knowledge of storytelling conventions and in this case, basic logic, in conjunction with prose that violates those norms, leads to a vision of that prose as “ironic,” at least at some level.

The net result in “The Nose” is a sense of conscious plan permeating the disorder; we see play in the chaos, and every fact of this protean narrative presence becomes shot through with the smirking presence of the author himself. The traditional notion of the narrator as an intermediary that must be considered separately from the author himself is rendered null and void here. Instead, we find a dynamic that posits our narrator(s) as a

series of manipulable discourses, all of which, due to their ultimate irreconcilability, take on an added dimension, and which is the presence of the author as ultimate speaker, ironically canting the discourse of chronicler, gossip, sentimentalist, and satirist. It is chaos, but it is deliberately (and delightedly) fashioned chaos.

Gogol even provides a shorthand version of this dynamic, a schematic presentation of this rotation of discourses in miniature, in the final pages of the story. Here the discourse fragments are whipped into a kind of pseudo-schizophrenic frenzy, with the added touch that character discourses now become absorbed into what we might call the narrator's "direct discourse." The characters' language of indignation and propriety, as well as their massively inappropriate concern with the latter in the face of the absurd premise (a freestanding nose gallivanting about Petersburg), now jumps the fence and assumes the field of the narrative voice proper, ultimately engaging in a meta-commentary on the story's subject matter itself. And I say "pseudo-schizophrenic" in that a psychological explanation for the chaos of the story's ending is completely unsatisfactory. Here, it is the playful impersonation or "mimicry" of craziness that is communicated. It is helpful to at least try to parse the source and character of this series of discourse fragments that have been so chaotically (and at the same time, entirely intentionally) juxtaposed, nested, exaggerated and recontextualized.

Just as in the story's opening, the main axis around which these conflicting fragments rotate is the "truth" status of the story itself. Our narrator begins with the impersonal mode, the objective chronicler garnering plausibility for the events he narrates by acknowledging them as being unlikely: "Perfect nonsense goes on in the world. Sometimes there is no plausibility at all . . ." (Pevear 323, SS III:81). This seemingly

objective statement of support for the story's unlikely premise is then bolstered when the narrator distinguishes his tale from the progressive layers of gossip and supposed "elaboration" the story undergoes when unleashed on the broader public. Bogus sightings, dinner party gossip, and the eventual indignation on the part of "enlightened" citizens, all attest to the general public's well-known tendency to elaborate. By appealing to this truism, the narrator curries favor for the believability of his own narrative.

He then continues in this vein -- "Such was the story that occurred in the northern capital of our vast country!" -- a Russian addressing a Russian audience in an impersonal manner about a series of "actually" occurring events. But then we follow the narrator on his downward descent into contradiction and chaos: "Only now, on overall reflection, we can see that there is much of the implausible in it." What at first glance might be considered a rational objection to the story's premise is completely subverted by the impromptu caveat "only now." Only now? What about three sentences prior, when he nonchalantly noted this very implausibility? What about at the outset of the story? This impromptu reconsideration reeks of a kind of off the cuff personal relationship with the reader completely at odds with the chronicle-like opening and signals an even further descent into the language and mentality of the world depicted: "To say nothing of the strangeness of the supernatural detachment of the nose and its appearance in various places in the guise of a state councilor . . ." This is not the punning language play of the satirist. It is the awkwardly high-flown phrasing of the indignant citizen that our narrator now marshals against his own narration. In other words, the language so heavily satirized throughout the story begins to seep into what can only be direct discourse.

Here it is the narrator himself who registers his absolute horror at Kovalev's appeal to the newspaper office: " – how was it that Kovalev did not realize that he ought not to make an announcement about the nose through the newspaper office? I'm speaking here not in the sense that I think it costly to pay for an announcement: that is nonsense, and I am not to be numbered among the mercenary. But it is indecent, inept, injudicious!" Here too, we find the exact logical pattern with which the narrator "ups the ante" of his characters actions and reactions, only this time, it is embedded in his own direct discourse. Recall this description of Kovalev's decision not to appeal to the Nose's place of business: ". . . to seek satisfaction from the authorities in the place where the nose claimed to work would be unreasonable, because it could be seen from the nose's own replies that nothing was sacred for this man, and he could be lying in this case just as he lied when he insisted that he never saw him before" (Pevear 309-310, SS III:63). The two statements have the same logical structure: They begin with what seems like a rational objection to a situation and then trail off into a rationale for that objection that is even more absurd than the original situation. The only difference lies in that fact that the earlier passage is attributable to Kovalev's perspective, and the latter has no home other than the constantly morphing discourse of our narrator. Here, the hollow notions of propriety that guide the characters' absurdly mundane response to a patently crazy situation have penetrated the narrative voice proper. Our narrator then devolves into an indignant rant:

And then, too – how did the nose end up in the baked bread and how did Ivan Yakovlevich himself . . . ? no, that I just do not understand, I decidedly do not understand! But what is the strangest, what is most incomprehensible of all is how authors can choose such subjects . . . I

confess, that is utterly inconceivable, it is simply . . . no, no, I utterly fail to understand. In the first place, there is decidedly no benefit to the fatherland; in the second place . . . but in the second place there is also no benefit. I simply do not know what it . . . (Pevear 310, SS III:84)

The narrator continues to depart not only from the persona of the objective chronicler, but also from the vision of this text as a premeditated literary composition. At least for the moment; for just when the discourse is about to spin out of control, it returns to a pose of controlled and measured mastery of the subject matter:

And yet, for all that, though, it is certainly possible to allow for one thing, and another, and a third, perhaps even . . . And then, too, are there not incongruities everywhere? And yet, once you reflect on it, there really is something to all this. Say what you like, but such incidents do happen in the world, rarely, but they do happen. (310, SS III:84)

Our narrator journeys into the world of the story armed only with his characters' hollow notions of propriety and back out again just as rapidly. His subject is ultimately the plausibility of the story and its qualitative value, an axis across which he bounces back and fourth with such brain busting self-contradiction that the net effect is to render all positions untenable. It is essentially like dealing with someone who claims, "I lie all the time."

Or, of course, he might just be crazy. When confronted with this brand of schizophrenic inconsistency, one is tempted to ascribe, say, schizophrenia to the speaker. But there is little else in the story that would support a claim that this narrator is crazy. We have seen Gogol do "crazy" before and he does it very well. In "Diary of a Madman," (originally published in *Arabesques*, 1835) the entire force of the story depends on the disjunction between the narrator's warped vision of his world and the world that we see through the cracks in his narration. In "Diary," we find the

dramatization (however comic) of madness through discourse that reaches beyond the original communicative intent of the speaker. Here, no such integrated motivation can be created, nor is this the true dramatization of a personal relationship between narrator and subject matter. There is no world beyond the discourse of our narrator here. He is our all, our ultimate point of reference, and therefore, describing him as “mad” denudes the whole story of interest in that it would reduce the whole thing to mere fantasy, without any pointed contrast between it and a “real” world behind it.

And how would this supposed psychic breakdown even parse situationally? Are we to believe that the narrator is in the midst of a sputtering fit and has decided to transcribe it? This kind of frenetic dialogism, with its ellipses, argument and counterargument, statement and retraction, has no rational place in a pre-planned composition and as such, it can only be considered a kind of localized performance piece. While this kind of discourse can certainly be found in *Diary of a Madman*, notice how the “diary” format allows for this type of instantaneously transcribed mental disorder. It provides a rationale for written-yet-unrevised chaos. It grants us a text production situation that would allow for this kind of discourse appearing on the page. A composed piece of literary material geared for public consumption (and those are the presumptions invoked by the narrator of “The Nose”) does no such thing. What begins as an effort of organized retrospection in written form now devolves into impromptu, oral discourse made legible on the page, not only clashing with that previous image of the narrator, but also undermining that narrator’s assertion of the truth-value of the events. The net result is what Wayne Booth would call “infinite, unstable irony” (242), which is the pervasive undermining of all assertions through the presentation of statement, counterstatement,

and succeeding counterstatement. In other words, there is no firm ground upon which to plant the flag of the real. Just as the broader course of the story generates a sense of distrust of any individual facet of the narrator's multifaceted persona through the sheer incompatibility of those facets, here too this performance is revealed as such by the sheer incompatibility of its assertions, and the incompatibility of its superficial motivation (crazed indignation) with the other discourse planes of the text. Has the narrator truly lost control of the narrative? No. This is a pretense of confusion. He assumes an indignant or confused pose for the sake of pointing out the comic artificiality of the whole text itself. We are not meant to "figure it out" in the sense of determining what is "true" and that which is "false," but to revel in the playful indecision that results in the puncturing of all supposed realities. Ascribing a dramatic motivation of madness (even locally) to the chaos of this discourse does not reconcile any of the previous facets of this narrator's rotating series of personae. The ending simply presents another irreconcilable addendum to that multifaceted personality.

But the "author's ironic epilogue" (SS III:667) takes on special significance when we consider the historical fact that it is part of a substantial revision undertaken by Gogol after the story's initial rejection by *Moskovskii nabliudatel'*. The initial version relied on what is perhaps the lamest plot resolution device in literary history: the dream explanation. Favored by primary school fiction writers the world over, the dream rationale allows ready escape from any plot conflict. Of course, it does so in a completely unsatisfying manner in that it does not solve the conflict; it simply renders the problem irrelevant by consigning it to the world of illusion. And perhaps Gogol initially

considered it the one meta-narrative that could contain the disjunctive fragments of the tale.

In the replacement of the dream rationale with an epilogue that cultivates ambiguity and chaos instead of resolving it, we see a major intensification of a kind of poetics that had been largely latent up to this point. In developing mistrust of the very fabric of the story itself, Gogol realizes yet another level of ironic play . . . that which takes aim at the conventions of story itself. Already hinted at in previous works such as “Nevsky Prospekt,” this tendency comes to its full flowering here. Every level of story is thrown open to ironic puncturing through this feat of cultivated chaos.

*The Overcoat: Flashing the Public (a Smile)*

By the time of the 1836 publication of “The Nose” in Pushkin’s *Sovremennik* (The Contemporary), Gogol had developed all of the necessary ingredients for an almost completely fragmented narrative pose. By vigorously juxtaposing a series of mutually irreconcilable ontological (chronicler, gossip, belletrist) and evaluative (satiric, lyric, personal) narrative discourses, Gogol grants us no steady ground, no consistent image of a narrator, nor any way to prioritize these facets into some sort of consistent image of the narrator. Gogol had identified the essential components and strategies of order (or planned disorder), by this point in his career. What remained for him was calibration, bringing forward one plane, mitigating the presence of another, complicating the whole scheme with multiple, crisscrossing patterns of contradiction, such that the reader,



recognizing this, could join with him in observing the frustrating travesty of literary convention with which he confronted them.

What so radically distinguishes “The Overcoat” is the extent to which the so-called “pathetic” discourse wars with the satiric threads of the narrative. In “Nevsky Prospekt,” we saw such an evaluative contradiction destabilize the whole, but “Nevsky” is clunky and simplistic in its maneuvers when compared with “The Overcoat,” which moves briskly from pole to pole, often embedding layer upon layer of evaluative contradictions within passages, between passages, and between large tracts of text. “The Overcoat” features more strict pathos than we found in “The Nose.” In the latter, it is just a whisper, a brief flourish, one that often emerges as an over-determined preamble to an ironic punch line, a misdirection that allows for the eventual joke that renders the lyric component simply a localized instance of ironic play. But here, the lyric component assumes a life of its own, occupying whole tracts of text without any obvious devaluation by a closing pun or a vulgar image. Again, this is not to say that the lyric tracts are “sincere,” for they are not. However, they do occupy a place beside the satiric mode and in direct opposition to it, contributing a *pro* to the satiric *con* so directly that it destabilizes both positions.

The ridiculous scene describing the derivation of Akakii Akakievich’s name, replete with the bogus logic and clever puns that characterize the satiric mode, gives way to the “I am your brother” passage, that supposed paean to basic humanity seized upon by Belinskii and every other critic who demanded social critique out of Gogol.<sup>48</sup>:

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<sup>48</sup> In the scene describing how Akakii Akakievich received his moniker (the name is evocative of his stuttering manner of speech), his mother is given a choice of names from the religious calendar, each one more ridiculous sounding than the last. She states her

Only when the joke was really unbearable, when they jostled his arm, interfering with what he was doing, would he say, “Let me be. Why do you offend me?” And there was something strange in the words and in the voice in which they were uttered. Something sounded in it so conducive to pity that one recently appointed young man who, following the example of the others, had first allowed himself to make fun of him, suddenly stopped as if transfixed, and from then on everything seemed changed before him and acquired a different look. Some unnatural power pushed him away from his comrades, whose acquaintance he had made thinking them decent, well-mannered men. And long afterwards, in moments of the greatest merriment, there would rise before him the figure of the little clerk with the balding brow, uttering his penetrating words: “Let me be. Why do you offend me?” – and in these penetrating words rang other words: “I am your brother.” And the poor young man would bury his face in his hands and many a time in his life he shuddered to see how much inhumanity there is in man, how much savage coarseness is concealed in refined, cultivated manners, and God! Even in a man the world regards as noble and honorable . . . (Pevear 396-397, SS III:159)

So ornate and elaborate is this anecdote that it tends to usurp the satiric mode and lose all possibility of being easily subsumed by local rhetorical irony. That is, it maximizes our field of vision (at least temporarily) such that it becomes the dominant key, and is therefore resistant to any kind of ironic undermining by means of a contradicting punch line.

But it is then swapped again for the grotesque description of Akakii Akakievich’s monomaniacal obsession with copying, which is itself crowned by the following pun-capped barb:

But Akakii Akakievich, even if he looked at something, saw in everything his own neat lines, written in an even hand, and only when a horse’s muzzle, coming out of nowhere, placed itself on his shoulder and blew

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preference for a series of “normal” names, which are as clunky and awkward sounding as those she rejected. She finally settles on naming the boy after the father, a move that both she and the narrator describe as one motivated “entirely from necessity” (Pevear 385, SS III:158). The logic here is, on one level, bogus in that there is no real necessity presented. At the same time, the name so metaphorically suits the stuttering, diminutive character that we do see a kind of poetic necessity at work.

real wind from his nostrils onto his cheek – only then would he notice that he was not in the middle of a line, but rather in the middle of the street. (Pevear 398, SS III:161)

Here the terms linked by the repeated connective “only when” / “only then” sustain the logic of their connector. “Only when” something ridiculous happens does Akakii emerge from his copyist’s reverie. The sentence parses logically. It concludes a general critique of Akakii as exhibiting an outsized characteristic. According to the next logical connective (“even when”), the paragraph that follows should support this evaluation through illustrative contrast, and initially it does just that:

Even in those hours when the gray Petersburg sky fades completely, and all clerical folk have eaten their fill and finished dinner, each as he could, according to salary and his personal fancy – when all have rested after the departmental scratching of pens, the rushing about seeing to their own and other people’s needful occupations, and all that irrepressible man heaps voluntarily on himself even more than is necessary— when clerks hasten to give the remaining time to pleasure . . . (Pevear 398, SS III:161)

The satiric position on Akakii is complemented with a lyric appreciation of the fading Petersburg day and the “pleasures” it promises the weary clerking world. The logic being: even when the average man gives himself over to entertainment (and what reasonable man would not want some form of entertainment), Akakii remained at his post, either literally or in spirit. The contrast is supported by the assumption of a panoramic perspective (“in those hours”) complemented by the lazy, lyrically cadenced repetition of elaborated clauses and strategically placed alliterative elements to push the reader musically along.

But then we find a signal break in evaluative mode:

[ . . . ] the more ambitious rushing to the theater; another going out to devote it to gazing at silly hats; another to a party, to spend it paying complements to some pretty girl, the star of a small clerical circle; still another, and this happens most often, simply going to his own kind, to some fourth or third floor, two small rooms with a front hall and kitchen, with some claim to fashion, a lamp or other object that cost great sacrifices, the giving up of dinners, outings – in short, even at that time when all clerks disperse to their friends' small apartments to play cutthroat whist, sipping tea from glasses, with one-kopec rusk, puffing smoke through long chibouks, repeating while the cards are being dealt some gossip blown over from high society, something even a Russian man can never give up under any circumstances, or even, when there is nothing to talk about, retelling the eternal joke about the commandant who was brought word that the horse of Falconet's monument had had its tail docked – in short, even when everything strives for diversion – Akakii Akakievich did not give himself up to any diversion. (Pevear 399, SS III:)

The network of details that should support this supposedly positive portrait of pastoral ease becomes not only so massively specific, but also so laced with overtly negative qualifications (the hats are “silly”; the love interest is “some pretty girl”; the locales have “some claim” to fashion) as to become squalid and pathetic, if not outright boring. The notion of giving oneself over to “pleasure” has been totally gutted by the supporting content, even while the vague outline of the lyric mode – the lazy cadence enforced by the syntactic repletion, the list of elaborated clauses – remains. And while a disjunction between style and substance or between a professed evaluation and its supposedly supporting detail is one of the key signals of rhetorical irony, by nesting this passage in the broader evaluation of Akakii Akakievich (in which this passage is supposed to play the part of instructive contrast), Gogol deprives us of any stable position on either Akakii or on his bureaucratic peers. Considered in isolation, this passage could be considered an instance of simple rhetorical irony aimed at a satiric portrait of the vacuous off time of your average clerk. However, given that this passage is nested in a larger logical syntax

that prepares us for a different evaluation, we are deprived of any kind of “sincere” ground. No piece of the puzzle can be prioritized as being “straight” talk. Gogol whips contradiction into an evaluative schizophrenia that makes every piece suspect. The kind of logical conflicts we witness here extend far beyond any notion of evaluative ambiguity that attends modern literature. This is not the mix of sympathy and comic distance that attends Chekhovian irony. There we find some degree of reconciliation of the two tendencies. Or, at the very least, there we can let those two opposing tendencies exist side by side. Here, this evaluative schizophrenia renders discomfort with both sympathy and mockery.

These contradictions along the axis of evaluation are complemented by the ontological contradictions mentioned earlier, forming crisscrossing patterns of irreconcilable positions, a situation that again, destabilizes the lot, introducing the reader to the real speaker, the controlling, guiding presence of the author himself, the puppet-master manipulating these various discourse performances for his own playful ends.

With the narrative (or narrator’s) components in place, what remained for Gogol was to apply the technique on a grand scale. This he did in the form of *Dead Souls*. As Fanger puts it, “‘The Overcoat’ in its range of tones and themes, is Gogol’s amplest story, manifesting in little the qualities that inform his novel. A hermeneutic challenge, endlessly evocative, intrinsically elusive, it is his monument to the capacity of art—not to ‘reflect’ the great realities of life, but to join them” (163).

**Chapter 5:**  
**From the Ridiculous to the Ridiculously Sublime –**  
**Ironic Portraiture v. Ironic Discourse**

So what is the point of this progression? What is the ultimate goal of this development beyond ironic portraiture, which had already brought Gogol popular appeal and even critical attention (from the likes of Pushkin no less)? The answer lies in the fantastically transformative reach of ironic discourse as wielded by Gogol, a self-avowed bearer of a literary and cultural mission.

The comedy of ironic portraiture is limited in scope, at least as regards its effect on our reading practices. The gaffs, goofs, and silly violations of storytelling practice that accompany the narratives of Panko, Foma, the Young Gentleman, and indeed most of the narrators of the stories that precede the publication of “Nevsky Prospekt,” ultimately emerge as charming affectations of these character-narrators; for the most part, we read them as discourse features that can be rationalized as elements of character, and in that character they find their *raison d’être* and their ultimate organizational unity. These discourse features, when set against these early character backdrops, do not disrupt the fundamental fabric of storytelling. Although they disrupt our reading, these disruptions do not ultimately force us to question the normative presuppositions we have brought to the act of reading a story, for the “unreliable narrators” that result from this practice have a place in that traditional pantheon. We can readily understand how untutored narrators may not tell stories in an effective manner and any interference between reader and story

can be chalked up to an attempt to present “local color.” Thus, we join with our implied author in shared contemplation of these characters’ comic insufficiencies.

For example, when Panko claims, “But there, I have forgotten what is most important [ . . . ]” (SS I:118) and that information proves to be directions to Dikanka, we measure this incredible confusion of the bounds between composed literary narration and personal storytelling against the background of our already established image of Panko as the local resident, untutored in the ways of the printed page. As a result, this violation emerges as unintentional, an honest statement issuing from and further adding to Panko’s peasant profile. It remains comic, but the comedy is the result of the character’s ignorance of literary convention, not his conscious defiance of it. His comments are part and parcel of the portrait of incompetence previously established by the language itself; it both issues from and reinforces that image.

But the following disruption of storytelling practice at a tension ridden point in “The Nose” evokes an entirely different relationship to both narrator and text: “Ivan Yakovlevich blanched . . . But here the incident becomes totally shrouded in mist, and of what happened further decidedly nothing is known” (Pevear 302, SS III:56). This massive abrogation of narrative responsibility, the stymieing of story in the face of the promise of plot is now read against the backdrop of the image of a narrator that has shed the pretense of first-person narration due to the complete fragmentation of the character-narrator pose. This portrait of storytelling authority suggests an awareness of narrative convention on the part of the “true speaker” and hence an awareness of the ridiculous extent to which he is violating those conventions. Here we resolve the disjunction by assuming, not incompetence or madness on the part of our “speaker,” but conscious and

intended play with the reader on the part of an authorial presence. If our response to Panko is, “Ha! That’s ridiculous. What a boob,” our response to the narrator of “The Nose” is “Ha! That’s ridiculous, but how the heck am I supposed to figure out what’s going on?”

But perhaps we are jumping the gun here. Might Gogol’s discursive practices, when invoked by an authorial narrative presence, be considered a part of a conscious (and sincere) attempt to create literature that dispenses with narrative convention? We might argue that there are certain mimetic demands on “literature” separate and apart from the need for linear drive to a narrative end and that these demands could rightly justify Gogol’s brand of digression. The world often resists the very structuring, selecting and editing that the principle of brevity demands. Shouldn’t art reflect the unstructured nature of the world itself? If this is “literature,” we might claim that literary discourse dispenses with brevity in the name of beauty, that it is not linearly driven toward a conceptual or narrative end, but is free to take its time, to dwell, to describe in detail, to luxuriate in its own freestanding creativity, to subordinate content to the play of the word, or to engage in symbolic and not linear forms of understanding.

There are certainly forms of literary discourse that at least seem to divest themselves of the need to move through a series of events that build to a palpable conclusion -- the psychological sketch, the vignette, or the prose poem. One might even say that “high” culture has made it its mission to distance itself from story, consigning plot to the boulevard (or to the likes of Rudy Panko!). And maybe even beyond this “documentary” ideology that crops up periodically in the world of aesthetics – call it what you will: naturalism, realism, modernism -- from the consumption end, there may



well be a human desire for the very type of splayed discourse found in Gogol. As Roland Barthes has noted, in addition to the hunger for sense in the form of plot, there is a set of reading practices that are more content to “graze” (paraphrased in Popkin 133). Perhaps Gogol is simply courting these reading practices?

The key distinction that precludes an interpretation of Gogol’s discursive practices as an attempt to posit an alternative aesthetic system is the sheer fact that in Gogol’s works, his digressive, disruptive prose is preceded, punctuated and bookended by statements trumpeting the virtues of clarity, relevance and precision. Here the dictates of narrative are not only cited, but harped upon as goals to strive for – then just as quickly transgressed with such violence that both the commentary and the contradiction of the dictates of that commentary emerge as comic fictions.<sup>49</sup> If Gogol’s successors sought to construct works that violated narrative dictates, they did so without overtly citing those dictates. They just violated them. When Tolstoy pontificates on the warping effect of narrative, he does so in all seriousness, in what Gary Morson would refer to as his “absolute” language (*Hidden* 9), which finds its source not in the fictional world of the text, but in some (presumably) unconditioned beacon of Truth. Tolstoy then follows his own dictates as best he can and any failure to live up to them is a failure of the author, not the pretended incompetence of a narrator.<sup>50</sup> Without Gogol’s paradoxical preambles and

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<sup>49</sup> A more complete examination of the narrative norms Gogol cites and their relationship to his literary aims is presented in the next chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Morson argues that Tolstoy ultimately fails in that the power of Tolstoy’s introduction of non-novelistic (non-dialogic) language depended for its force upon its violation of novelistic convention: “. . . by including non-novelistic language, an author would not be ignoring novelistic conventions, but deliberately violating them. That is, the effectiveness of his strategy would depend on those conventions and would, therefore, bear tacit witness that they are in force. If readers ever stopped assuming those conventions, or if a

the development of a reliable authorial personae standing behind the comic chaos, Gogol's efforts could either be read (by the sympathetic) as earnest attempts to create a non-narrative prose system, or (by the unsympathetic) as incompetence. But as is, Gogol's stories achieve their comic dynamism not only due to the extent to which they violate narrative norms, but due to the fact that they violate norms *overtly endorsed in direct proximity to those violations*.

As a result, statement and counterstatement, proclamation and stylistic violation are viewed askance, the former because they are so clearly and consciously violated, the latter because the violation so deliciously stymies the achievement of the former. Gogol's prose derives its whole energy, its whole raison d'être and emotional effect, from the extent to which it violates those norms. Once the fragmentation of the narrating intermediary reaches its peak and we view the implied author as the source of these radical contradictions and we perceive them as part of an intentionally constructed ironic discourse, their reach extends to the very fabric of our expectations. They emerge as a conscious frustration of our traditional means of constructing an organic narrative whole. We confront a text that at once acknowledges those practices, either through overtly citing them or by invoking them more subtly, and at the same time allows us no-entry if we insist upon them.

Andrei Sinyavsky describes *Dead Souls* as "a book written about how it is written" and consequently, a book about how it should be read (quoted in Fanger 172).

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writer violated them too frequently, the power of non-dialogic speech in a novel [or that of any stylistic or structural element that defies narrative convention] would begin to fail. The novelist would not be able to violate his readers' expectations, for those expectations would have changed" (13).

But I would phrase it in the negative. That is, Gogol's prose developed into a demonstration of how it should *not* be read. Helpful here is Roland Barthes' distinction between texts that afford us "pleasure" and those that render a sense of "bliss":

Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fill, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading. Text of bliss: the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (14)

Ironic discourse is ultimately the narrative tool that allows Gogol to move from the construction of texts of pleasure to those of bliss, from texts that confirm, albeit in their own idiosyncratic way, pre-existing cultural presumptions, and those that ultimately "impose a state of loss" by completely undermining those presumptions. Discomfited by his early successes with pleasurable texts, Gogol longed for bliss and he achieved it. If he felt the compelling need to bind his discursive tendencies early in his career – and the post-hoc layering of the Panko character over an already character-driven series of stories is testament to this – his later development can be seen as a gradual process of liberating those tendencies from the bounds of character as a means of exploring the "educational" possibilities of being ironic.

*Please Join Me in This Celebration of Your Stupidity . . . Regards, N.V. Gogol*

Though this investigation is not intended as either cultural history or literary biography, it should be mentioned that the artistic evolution outlined here jibes with both

the well-documented cultural situation Gogol confronted as a writer, and biographical evidence suggesting Gogol's intended response to this situation. Gogol's appearance on the literary scene occurred at a time when, "Russia was awaiting an artist who would, through the creation of new prose forms, provide works in which a broad public could find the basis for a sense of collective cultural identity" (Fanger 6). Karamzin and Pushkin had made inroads in terms of broadening and refining Russian as a literary instrument and their own end products were smoother and more economical than their 18<sup>th</sup>-century antecedents. However, their work represented the adaptation of foreign literary norms more than the composition of an original prose language. As Fanger puts it, "Pushkin's experiments with prose were highly conscious and principled ones, conducted by a professional on literary materials, and (as his finished prose makes clear) informed with an awareness that a whole range of problems (from formal and generic to syntactic and lexical) remained to be worked out before the instrument might be applied as the times seemed increasingly to require. The result was to invest much of his fiction with an aura of stylization, other literary presences tending to loom more or less distinctly through the translucent character of his writing" (32).

This cultural situation was compounded by an emerging class conflict ignited as the "reading public" expanded beyond the limited confines of the aristocracy. The result was a rift between an elitist salon culture based on the "civilizing" norms of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian salon society (Todd 3) and a growing mass-market publishing industry that fed the entertainment needs of a broader audience. There had been few attempts to bridge the gap, the elite on the one hand accusing the popular press of

pandering to the lowest common denominator and the popular press firing back with accusations of snobbery.<sup>51</sup> Both were accurate.

As hopes for the gradual amelioration of Russian society through the spread of civility faded, and as the advent of new literary movements and writers (Byron, Rousseau, Scott, later Balzac and Sand) helped foster the conflicting views on polite society that were arising within Russian culture, its fragility, exclusiveness, and potential for hypocrisy and self-delusion became increasingly apparent to many Russian thinkers [ . . . ].” (Todd 4)

What was needed was an author who would bridge that gap by elevating the taste of the masses, and renovating the derivative character of the ruling cultural elite.

Of course, Gogol did not necessarily set out to remake the Russian cultural sphere. At first, he simply wanted to be liked. After the failure of “Hans Kuechelgarten,” Gogol sought popularity, and he found it in the then vogue for all things “Little Russian.” That he transformed Ukrainian “folk” materials (most of which he came by second hand) beyond recognition is certainly the case. But here, what is crucial is the early interest in success, in popular approval. The basis of this success was, at least in part, the product of a cunning marketing sense coupled with the masterful comic aspect of his early stories. The publication of the first two volumes of *Evenings* moved Pushkin to exclaim, “How we have been astounded by a Russian book that has made us laugh like we haven’t laughed since Fonvizin’s time” (*V vospominaniakh* 80).

However, this success seems to have made Gogol somewhat ambivalent as to the artistic and social merit of comedy. At the sight of a group of typesetters chuckling over the proofs of *Evenings*, Gogol remarked, “I am a writer quite to the taste of the rabble”

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<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed description of these cultural battles see Fanger, pp. 25-40.

(*Perepiska* 137). The readily accessible laughter of the ironic portraiture in *Evenings* contributed to the volume's success; it also limited its scope, a situation of which even a young Gogol must have been aware. His well-documented entry into the literary circles of Petersburg and increasing familiarity with their lofty aesthetic and social ideals concurrent with his own off-putting experiences with the massively bureaucratized, social climbing, vice-ridden Russian urban culture, may have contributed to this desire to do more with his writing. What we find in Gogol's letters is an increasingly prominent desire to raise the caliber of his craft to high art and to address the broader issues of the day, social, cultural, and eventually spiritual.<sup>52</sup>

Writing to Zhukovskii in 1847, Gogol characterized his early works as a effort to soothe his own melancholic temperament: "And these very maladies were the reason for that mirth that appeared in my early works: in order to distract myself, I concocted heroes without any ultimate goal or plan, put them in comic situations – this was the genesis of my stories!" (*Perepiska* 212). But I would contend that instead of abandoning the comic component of his texts, Gogol sought another narrative framework for his discursive tendencies, a setting that would allow those tendencies not to provoke laughter at the expense of some fictional other, but to direct them at both social and literary evils. Gogol strove to engineer comic devices whose effects would be not simply appealing, but transformative. In that same letter to Zhukovskii, Gogol wrote that the aim of art should

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<sup>52</sup> See for example, Gogol's 1835 letter to Pushkin in which he writes of his grander ambitions for *Dead Souls*, "I want to show the whole of Russia, at least from one point of view" (146); to Aksakov he writes "At the very least, surely, some will recognize the substantial thoughts and deep realities to which an insignificant plot can lead" (1840;13); and to Zhukovskii he writes, "I never thought that it was my lot to be a satiric writer and make my readers laugh" (1847; 212).

be “to direct the viewer not to the castigation of the actions of another, but toward the location of vice in himself” (*Perepiska* 215). Instead of turning his back on comedy, he began to distinguish between types of laughter and hence, types of comic forms, moving toward a form that, based on the “profundity of its irony,” would raise the comic element of his work beyond the “laughter born of superficial impressions, a passing witticism or word play” (quoted in Fanger 81)

Concurrent with his prose efforts, in the mid-1830s Gogol began to explore theater as another format for his comic stylistics. Gogol approached theater as “a pulpit from which a lively lesson is read at once to a whole crowd, where, in the solemn glitter of the lights, to the thunder of music, in the presence of general laughter, a familiar vice that has been trying to hide is exposed and, with the secret voice of universal sympathy, a familiar, timidly revealed, lofty feeling comes to the fore” (quoted in Fanger 81). However, the theatrical pulpit proved less than heavenly, at least as far as Gogol was concerned. The negative public reception of *The Inspector General* in its initial St. Petersburg staging moved Gogol to comment, “Now I see what it means to be a comic writer. The least shadow of truth – and not one man but whole classes rise up against you” (quoted in Fanger 83).

Thus, the problem of comedy becomes one of the relationship between text and audience: How do you mock the insufficiencies of your audience – literary or moral – without alienating that audience? The answer lay in finding the means of incorporating that audience in the process of comic revelation without allowing them to completely externalize the object of that mockery as an “other.” That means proved to be the evolution of Gogol’s dominant narrative style from ironic portraiture – which both on the

page and on stage either externalized the ironic object or implicated the spectator so directly it became off-putting – to a full-fledged ironic discourse. Why? Because ironic discourse allowed Gogol to both mock the expectations his readers brought to the experience of reading a “story,” and to provide a structure that would let them in on the joke; in the solidarity building potential of irony noted by Kaufer, Gogol sensed his ultimate weapon.

Without naming this phenomenon as irony, several critics have more or less vaguely perceived this dynamic at work at work in Gogol’s texts. Fanger claims that Gogol’s narrative pose serves “an end about which one can say with certitude only that it involves a feeling of superiority in the reader as in the author” (231). Citing a personal communication with Robert Belknap, Cathy Popkin notes “Belknap proposes a process by which the ‘real’ reader of Gogol’s clutter regards the fictional one (the narratee) as an illustration of the position the real reader should not take. Gogol, he suggests, provides in his imaginary addressee a negative example of readerly taste. The real reader, in turn . . . feels comfortably superior to the narratee, who presumably enjoys the discursive deluge” (Popkin 149). What else are these comments describing than the solidarity building effects of ironic discourse?

The brilliance of Gogol’s ironic system is that it allows for good-hearted communion with us on the level of ironic identification (the solidarity with the author that emerges as the result of our mutual recognition of irony at play noted in the Introduction), and at the same time makes us the object of that very same ironic process. We are both in on the joke and the butt of the joke at the same time. Thus, ironic discourse makes the



bitter pill of our own reading insufficiencies palatable by flattering our intelligence with the same narrative maneuvers.

Writes Popkin, “It is annoying to be perpetually derailed by diversions of no apparent significance” (133). This is certainly true, but it is also frightening to be pursued down a hallway by a knife-wielding maniac fresh from the grave, and yet the horror movie industry does a very brisk business. The key to success in both instances is that they grant some kind of participatory agency on the part of the spectator/reader. In the case of the horror film, it may be the simple act of purchasing a ticket, or the knowledge that when the lights finally go on all will be well. In the case of the ironic text, it is the recognition of irony at work, the earned knowledge that the author is fooling around, that allows us not only to be intellectually provoked by the degree to which he flouts our own narrative expectations, but even to enjoy the absurd artistry with which he does so. Both experiences provide a framework for enjoying the vicarious experience of something that would otherwise be quite unpleasant. Like Laurence Sterne before him, Gogol realized that he “could only instruct by amusing and to do this [he had to implicate [ . . . ] audiences in contradiction, force them to participate with riddles, insults, cajolery, ambiguity and love” (Moglen 5).

So, as his publication history attests, instead of turning his back on comedy, Gogol continued to work in comic prose, elaborating and stylizing the obfuscating practices, the genesis of which we saw in his earliest stories. He further fragmented his narrative presence in “The Nose” (1836), “The Overcoat” (1842), and ultimately *Dead Souls* (1842). Thus, a full-fledged ironic discourse, made possible by a combination of radically discursive prose practices embedded in a fully fragmented narrative presence,

provided Gogol the ultimate solution to the problem of comic interaction with his intended readership.

## Chapter 6: The Greatest Story (Is One Never Told)

So what then is Gogol's ultimate beef? If his developed ironic discourse was geared to take aim at the reading presumptions of his public -- presumptions, I would contend, we contemporary readers continue to share -- how can we characterize those reading presumptions and what reading practices should take their place?

As I have been hinting throughout this investigation (for it is almost impossible to describe the development of ironic discourse without involving the target of that mode) those presumptions are best characterized as those that relate to traditional story structure; thus, Gogol's later works can be considered an argument *against story* as the organizing principle for great literature.<sup>53</sup> Every frustrating movement of Gogol's discourse can be seen as a harangue against the very underpinnings of narrative development by means of travesty of, parody of, or outright abstention from the traditional demands of narrative art.

Just as the development of the Gogolian narrative presence consists of a progressive fragmentation of a unified persona, Gogolian discourse experiences a progressive stylization over time, the discourse features that disrupt the project of plot-making becoming either more syntactically and semantically elaborate, or more bald-faced and violent, and hence, progressively more destructive to the principles of causal relationship and linear progress that form the very fabric of plot. When Foma botches the causal relationships between the details he provides and the main narrative, we can still

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<sup>53</sup> However, as we will see, creating a literary argument against something does not necessarily mean positing a positive alternative to it.

piece those relationships together. However, when the faceless narrator of “The Nose” shrouds Ivan Yakovlevich’s participation in the narrative in “mist,” there can be no narrative whole, at least not one based on causal relationships. And while the narrator of “Nevsky Prospekt” may pitch us backward with misplaced back-story, we beat on, readers against the narrator, until, in “The Nose” and “The Overcoat,” the background occupies the fore to the point at which the main narrative is nearly swamped by seeming irrelevancies, digressions, and omissions. Gogol begins his career by littering our reading with bumps and stutter-steps, and ends it by consistently derailing our ability to perceive a coherent plot outline.

That story exists as only a framework for subversion is evident in the lack of energy Gogol is willing to spend on the independent construction of plot. He was a shameless pilferer of plots, using overheard anecdotes and recycled narrative lines as the basis for his “real” work -- the elaboration, hyperbolization, and truncation of that bare skeleton in the name of comic refutation of the very norms upon which those borrowed plots are based. “Do me a favor,” Gogol once wrote to Pushkin, “give me some sort of plot, it may be funny or not, but a truly Russian plot. Lately my hand has been itching to write a comedy” (*Perepiska* 146). Pushkin did provide a plot sketch, which would become the basis for *The Inspector General*.<sup>54</sup> Note that the source of the comedy is not inherent in the actions or events that constitute a plot, for the plot “may be funny or not,”

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<sup>54</sup> Other stories based on borrowed plots include “The Carriage” (1836) and “The Overcoat” (1842). The former has been traced to well-known anecdote from the life of one Count Vielgorskii, the latter to a bureaucratic anecdote relayed to Gogol in the presence of P.V. Annenkov, who recalled, “Everyone laughed at the anecdote, which was based on a true story, except for Gogol, who listened thoughtfully with a lowered head” (quoted in Gogol III/IV).

but in the ironic process to which the structural underpinnings of plot would be subjected. Gogol's sights were set on ripping out the very roots of story.

We will not attempt an exhaustive catalog of Gogol's discursive discourse features here for several reasons. Firstly, many of Gogol's specific prose features and the narrative principles they subvert have already been referenced in this inquiry in terms of their relation to the development of the Gogolian narrative personae; the extent to which storytelling norms are violated throughout Gogol's stories is a crucial contributor to the development of those personae.

Secondly, there have already been a number of essays and books that attempt to catalogue the various devices he employs. Some scholars attempt to categorize these discourse features as identifiable brands of logical or moral disruption.<sup>55</sup> Others seek to boil them down to relationships between Gogol's lexical or syntactic choices.<sup>56</sup> Others seek to focus on the manipulation of one or more traditional literary devices or tropes.<sup>57</sup> And still others attempt to find a preexisting literary model to characterize a type of vision that can encompass Gogol's layered and far ranging practice of narrative obfuscation.

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Slonimskii's "The Technique of the Comic in Gogol," in which he foregrounds alogism as the basis of Gogol's discourse maneuvers.

<sup>56</sup> See, for example, Vinogradov's "Iazyk Gogolia" in which he characterizes Gogol's style as stemming from the "structural combination of various stylistic layers" (309).

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Carl Proffer's *The Simile and Gogol's Dead Souls*. Proffer, along with A.P. Chudakov (*Slovo - veshch' - mir*, pp. 38-39), characterizes Gogol's extended similes as an opportunity to include a wealth of descriptive material that strict adherence to the linear movement of the story would otherwise make impossible.

The prevailing tendency has been to rely on a previous literary model for a comprehensive framework for these structural devices. At least in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Laurence Sterne has been a favored reference point. Credit for this is most likely due to Viktor Shklovskii, whose article “The Novel as Parody: Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*” not only characterized Laurence Sterne’s use of disruptive narrative devices as the quintessence of prose art, but provided descriptions of those devices in Sterne’s work that are almost eerily applicable to Gogol’s:

The action commonly breaks off, the author constantly returns to the beginning or leaps forward. The main plot, not immediately accessible, is constantly interrupted by dozens of pages filled with whimsical deliberations on the influence of a person’s nose or name on his character or else with discussions of fortifications. (147)

Thus, “sternianstvo” not only become a code word for a battery of structural devices including seemingly extraneous detail, alogism, plot redirection, shifts in narrative line, and narrative digressions, but also became a term often used to quickly characterized Gogol’s narrative style.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For examples of additional critical works that reference *Tristram Shandy* in characterizing and cataloging Gogol’s anti-narrative devices, see Vinogradov’s “Gogol’ i natural’naia shkola” (Gogol and the Natural School; p. 20), Mann’s *Variatsiia k teme* (Variations on a Theme; pp. 116-117), John Kopper’s “The ‘Thing-in-Itself’ in Gogol’s Aesthetics” (p. 59), Elena Dimitrieva’s “Sternskaiia traditsiia i romanticheskaia ironiia v ‘Vecherakh na khutore bliz Dikan’ki’” (The Sternian Tradition and Romantic Irony in ‘Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka’”; p. 18). Other authors often referenced when cataloging or characterized Gogol’s devices include Charles Dickens, Washington Irving, Walter Scott, and representatives of the French “*école frenetique*.” See, for example: Michael Futrell’s reference to Gogol’s use of seemingly extraneous detail in “Gogol’ and Dickens” (p. 444); Futrell also notes that comparisons between Gogol and Dickens were commonplace in the 1840s. Proffer notes the influence of Washington Irving’s use of a series of fictitious narrators, framing devices, and other playful, skaz-related techniques on Gogol’s early stories (“Washington Irving in Russia,” p. 330).

Perhaps the most exhaustive, and, at the same time, the most concrete systematization of Gogol's practices (and the storytelling norms they subvert) can be found in Cathy Popkin's *The Pragmatics of Insignificance: Chekhov, Zoshchenko, Gogol*. Popkin divides them into groups of discursive ploys that subvert the basic narrative aims of describing, informing or providing logical coherence. Within these categories, she provides a series of stylistic subcategories (describing: extended simile and preterition; informing: diachrony, documentation, specificity, enumeration and redundancy; illogic: lack of connectivity, lack of relevance, and lack of control).

So recounting all of Gogol's obfuscating practices here would be both redundant and add little to existing scholarship. But it is worthwhile to consider the norms against which these practices are arrayed, if only to point out that we need not travel far and wide – either into the realm of academic criticism, theoretical treatises on the nature of literature, or even down the rabbit hole of Gogol's literary influences – in order to establish exactly what they are and hence, that their violation was a conscious effort on Gogol's part.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Tracking Gogol's influences proves even more slippery than analyzing his own texts. Previous scholars seem to conclude that his influences included either “everyone” or “no one.” Writes Belinskii, “Gogol had no model and no precursors, either in Russian or in foreign literature” (quoted in Fanger 18). Fanger himself seems to concur: “His [Gogol's] correspondence gives us little notion of his reading, knowledge, tastes or even specific awareness of literature in the form he himself cultivated” (13). And with a facility only Fanger can seem to muster, he also contends just the opposite: “To argue whether Gogol is faithfully extending or willfully ransacking a tradition is to quibble; to find precedents for most of his narrative tones and devices is only to show what can be shown of his later, non-Ukrainian works as well; he was a literary magpie, taking traits for his own creation wherever he could find them, from published and unpublished sources, much more often than from observation or direct personal experience” (88-89).

Why? Because, as noted previously, Gogol quite meticulously cites the very set of norms his textual practices then violate. In virtually every short story and even in the opening pages of *Dead Souls* he -- or one of his narrative minions -- quite overtly tells us that he is going to tell us a story and abide by extremely basic and deep-seated conditions of storytelling. What's more, his narrators tend to voice objections to their own prose themselves, or rely on false (or disingenuous) promises of greater fidelity to norms so fundamental, they remain applicable to our own reading expectations, even today.

So we need not look outside the text, (though it is certainly helpful at times) for either historical, theoretical, or psychological justification for expecting a story out of whatever it is Gogol's texts turn out to be. They implicitly and explicitly raise not only the expectation of story and its constituent components -- plot and character -- but the norms that grant those elements coherence: causal logic, relevance, and brevity.

In *Evenings*, the storytelling expectation is raised by the overt scene-setting of the frame narrative, in which Rudy Panko announces his intention to put to paper the oral tales of his gathered guests; this expectation is then bolstered by the interjections of the individual narrators, such as the Foma Grigorievich, who, when prompted to tell yet another story by his implied audience, responds, "So you want me to tell you another story about Granddad?" (Kent I:77; SS I:209); in the following volume, he repeats his intention, a bit more contentiously this time: "Oh, very well, I will tell you a story, then; only remember, it is for the last time" (Kent I:198; SS I:366). Never mind that both of Foma's "tales" are subtitled as such (in Russian, "byl'"), lest we be confused about garrulous Foma's ultimate aim.



Stripped of the hokey locus of oral tale swapping, the narrators of Gogol's later stories find different (though no less subtle) means of announcing their intention as one of storytelling, and not merely storytelling, but *plotted* storytelling. The nameless narrator of "The Nose" kicks off his effort with the following sentence: "On the twenty-fifth day of March, an extraordinarily strange incident occurred in Petersburg" (Pevear 301; SS III:52). The expressed goal is the recounting of an event that is strange, unexpected -- in a word "eventful."

As Iurii Lotman puts it, a narrative event is a "meaningful departure from the norm" (234). He uses a topographic metaphor to explain what constitutes a meaningful departure: "An event in a text is the shifting of a persona across the borders of a semantic field" (233). Once this initial event has occurred, the conflict created must be resolved: "Once the agent has crossed a border, he enters another semantic field, an 'anti-field' vis á vis the initial one. If movement is to cease, he has to merge with the field, to be transformed from a mobile into an immobile persona. If this does not happen, the plot sequence is not concluded and the movement continues" (241). Although the precise metaphor or language used to describe the structure of plot varies from theorist to theorist, this same basic formulation -- the plot as the account of a series of events that center around the development and resolution of a conflict caused by the disruption of some form of established status quo -- has been echoed throughout the ages. As Aristotle puts it, plot making is an "imitation of the action." By "action," Aristotle means not simply deeds, but what he refers to as the working out of a "rational purpose," that which derives from the central conflict of a given narrative. And Gogol's stories are certainly not lacking in "action." In fact, they are almost comically direct. The action in "The

Nose”? Find the Nose. The action in “The Overcoat”? Scrimp and save to buy the overcoat (and when it is stolen? Get it back!). And as Boris Tomashevskii puts it, “The development of the intrigue leads either to the elimination of the conflicts or to the creation of new conflicts” (71).

In an even more bald-faced expression of the Structuralist expectation of a narrative event, the narrator of “The Overcoat” states:

So flowed the peaceful life of this man [Akakii Akakievich] who, with a salary of four hundred, was able to content himself with his lot, and so it might have flowed on into extreme old age, had it not been for the various calamities strewn along the path of life, not only of titular, but even of privy, actual, court and other councilors, even of those who neither give counsel nor take any themselves. (Pevear 399; SS III:162-163)

Here a state of peace or “normalcy” (which is boring and uneventful by narrative standards) is interrupted, requiring either the return of the original norm or its replacement by a new version that somehow integrates the disruption in a new state of stasis. Regardless of the fact that this statement appears roughly six pages into the tale, is partially obscured by a descriptive preamble, and couched in layers of punning wordplay, it remains a bold statement of narrative intent.

Even in *Dead Souls*, where our narrator is even cagier regarding the profile and intentions of his characters, we find a comparable statement of intent:

Such was the opinion, highly flattering to the guest, that was formed of him in the town, and it remained unchanged until such time as a certain strange characteristic of the guest, and an enterprise, or, as they say in the provinces, a turn of events, of which the reader will presently learn, threw virtually the entire town into utter bewilderment. (Maguire18; SS V:22)

Here we have the promise of a mystery (“a certain strange characteristic”) compounded by the promise of an established state of affairs being disrupted by “a turn of events.” Not only do these stories promise narrative in the form of a disruption of a static and hence un-narratable state of affairs, but deliver with narrative events so violent and fantastic, that plot as primary locus of reader interest is practically guaranteed. Gogol’s texts present happenings that are inevitably strange, absurd and unexpected by anyone’s reckoning. These are not the mere sneezes and “pinpricks” of Chekhovian ambiguity, but disappearing noses, coat-stealing ghouls from beyond the grave, tragic deaths, and ridiculous financial schemes. Granted, the whole point of the Structuralist critique of narrative is that an “event” is eventful only relative to the norm it disrupts – in other words, any occurrence (say, a sneeze) can be eventful and worthy of narration if it proves to unsettle the world around it – but if there were an objective scale for “narratable occurrences,” the “supernatural detachment of a nose and its appearance in various places in the guise of a state councilor” (Pevear 325; SS III:83-84) would probably rank right up there.

Regarding issues of character, specifically the centrality of character as a facet of storytelling, we may at least tentatively appeal to the narrator of “The Overcoat”: “[. . .] there exists a rule that the character of every person in a story be well delineated [ . . . ]” (Pevear 400: SS III:164). And if the term “well-delineated” gives us pause as a general rule, Gogol is quite willing to provide guidance on the descriptive requirements of virtually every one of his characters, telling us explicitly when he needs to say more about a given character -- “But I am slightly remiss for having said nothing yet about Ivan Yakovlevich, a worthy man in many respects” (Pevear 303; SS III:54) -- or when he

has said quite enough -- “But we have said almost all that we need about the mayor . . .” (Kent I: 57-58; SS I:184) -- or when a given character’s relevance to the events of the narrative requires more or less descriptive attention -- “Although as characters they are not, of course, so prominent, but are rather what is called secondary or even tertiary, and although the main levers and springs of this poem do not rest on them and only here and there touch and lightly catch at them [ . . . ] this will not take up much time and space, because there is not much that needs to be added to what the reader already knows “ (Maguire 19; SS V:23 ) -- or even the nature of description merited by certain personality types -- “. . . [ describing Manilov] such gentlemen are dreadfully difficult to portray. Here you will have to concentrate your attention to the utmost, until you compel all the fine, almost invisible traits to emerge before you . . .” (Maguire 24; SS V:28).

And not only does Gogol pique our expectation of plot and “well-delineated” character as the locus of his stories’ interest, as I have noted previously, he references the very principles that undergird the coherent construction of these narrative elements: causal logic, relevance, and brevity.

The more Gogol’s distribution of details and actions seem to defy fundamental causal sense, the more his narrator stand-ins defend the extent to which they represent the paragon of logical development. Regarding the genesis of Akakii Akakievich’s comic moniker, the narrator notes: “The reader will perhaps find that somewhat strange and farfetched, but he can be assured that it was not fetched at all, but that such circumstances occurred of themselves as made it quite impossible to give him any other name, and here is precisely how it came about” (Pevear 395; SS III:157). And elsewhere, “We have told it so that the reader could see for himself that it happened entirely from necessity . . .”

(Pevear 395; SS III:158). And when he is not trumpeting what Lotman would call “a particular temporal, cause-result or other relatedness,” he affirms those values by critiquing their absence in his own texts: “Such was the story that occurred in the northern capital of our vast country! Only now, on overall reflection, we can see that there is much of the implausible in it” (Pevear 325; SS III:83).

As for the value of relevance, Gogol’s narrators are consistently assuring us that they will do their best to cull through endless logical possibilities to select the series of events that best forwards the development or resolution the central conflict, or in the case of characterization, illuminates those features of character that bear on that character’s participation in the story’s events. Most often this takes the form of a call for a return to “the point” of the story and the locus vehicle for getting to that point: the “hero.” In *Dead Souls*, these repetitions form a consistent refrain, “. . . it’s time for me to return to our heroes” (Maguire 27; SS V:32); “But back to the road! Back to the road! [. . . ] and have a look at what Chichikov is doing” (Maguire 150; SS V:170). In other cases, the narrator overtly notes the significance of resolving the plot conflict, and taunts the reader with the prospect of a key that will create a logical whole out the series of plot events experienced thus far: “The author is quite certain that there are readers curious enough to wish to learn about the plan and internal layout of the casket. That’s fine with me: indeed, why not satisfy them!” (Maguire 60; SS V:70); “It may be that he was prompted to do so by another, more substantial motive, by a matter more serious and closer to his heart. But about all this the reader will learn gradually and in good time, if only he has the patience to read through the entire tale that is being set before him . . .” (Maguire 19; SS V:22).

As Popkin rightly notes, “Gogol’s distended discourse violates the principle of prose economy, that maxim which prompts the speaker/narrator to ‘get to the point’ and gives the reader some hope of getting there too” (12). And yet, whether in the service of forwarding action, describing a character, or establishing a setting, Gogol’s narrators consistently trumpet efficiency of expression as a prime value, most notably in his constant recourse to the phrase *slovom* (“in a word” or “in short”): “In short, everything tries to get ahead!” (Pevear 22; SS III:231). “In short, even when everything strives for diversion – Akakii Akakievich did not give himself up to any diversion” (Pevear 399; SS III:161-162); “Through the gate of a hostelry in a provincial capital that will remain nameless rolled a small, rather handsome britzka on springs, of the kind in which bachelors travel: retired lieutenant colonels, staff-captains, landowners possessing a hundred or so peasants would – in a word, all those who are know as gentlemen of the middling sort (Maguire 5; SS V:7); “. . . in a word, everything was as it should be . . .” (Maguire 12; SS V:16); “. . . in a word, he did not omit a single important official” (Maguire 8; SS V 11). This refrain is a consistent fixture of Gogol’s discourse, increasing in number of instances as Gogol’s work progresses;<sup>60</sup> narrator after narrator appeals to it in order to return us the narrative, but only after increasingly long and dense passages of supporting detail.

Writing on the original reception of Gogol’s work, Fanger notes:

These readers sought character and story, fidelity to the reality of the world they took for granted – and found only a semblance of those things. They expected to be touched or amused unambiguously but found themselves confronted by a

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<sup>60</sup> The phrase appears four times in the first volume of *Evenings*, five times in “The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikoforovich,” eight times in “The Overcoat” and a whopping 64 times in the first volume of *Dead Souls*.

radical denial of the code that guaranteed some final resolution of attitude in one of these keys. They expected the reinforcement of ‘normality’ as they conceived it – in artistic decorum and in the experience conveyed – and they found that expectation mocked. (104)

So Gogol’s original readers approached with the expectation of “character and story,” found those expectations courted by Gogol’s narrators, and then found themselves completely unable to construct meaning based on those categories’ underlying principles. So deep seated are the narrative norms that Gogol’s work rejects, that the “readers” to whom Fanger refers can be considered any literate person with access to a copy of “The Nose.” The classic conditions of story undergird the literary predilections of both salon culture, educated on Western European models, and, for example, the growing merchant class, whose tastes ran to boulevard forms, and even of those nurtured on oral traditions. These norms bridge those spheres, conditioning Karamzin’s ostensibly highbrow “Poor Liza” and the creative products of Russia’s unchallenged “national poet” Alexander Pushkin, just as they condition the decidedly lowbrow “Povest’ o Frole Skobeeve” (Tale of Frol’ Skobeev) or the oral products of the “skomorokhi” and their descendents.<sup>61</sup>

But the scholarly tradition (Fanger included) either fails to note the relationship between this “mockery” of story and ironic discourse, or notes the presence of ironic discourse and fails to see its eventual “anti-narrative” stance. Fanger himself ultimately attributes Gogol’s mockery of plot expectations to a vague series of incredibly unsatisfying “pro-art” missions. “The great idea that informs all his mature writing,”

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<sup>61</sup> The “Tale of Frol’ Sokobeev” (unattributed) is an early 18<sup>th</sup>-century adaptation of the picaresque novel to the Russian sphere. Its unabashedly ribald content and scamp-hero lent it considerable popularity. “Skomorokhi” were itinerant entertainers present throughout Russian cultural history; they dealt in humorous narrative songs, folklore, and folktales.

Fanger writes, “is the transforming and liberating power of literary creation, its ability to transcend limitation in the present” (261). In other moments, Gogol’s defiance of plot strictures is characterized as representing the “larger, life enhancing potencies of literature” or communicating “aspiration” (262-263). But what are these “potencies” and “aspirations”? Presaging Fanger’s abstract reaction, Charles Bernheimer writes that Gogol, “[. . .] triumphantly asserts literature’s independence from the repressive forces of reality and gleefully demonstrates its freedom to play with the realms of matter and spirit, life and death, to which it refers but by which it is not bound” (59). These vague claims to “artistic freedom” simply prompt the question, “What then is art free to do?” And even Bely, who is part of a cadre of symbolists whose critical re-evaluation of Gogol’s work is said to have liberated it from the prevailing assumption of its “realism,” ascribes no real artistic end to the playful aspect of Gogol’s discourse, dismissively characterizing it as “irony without a clear consciousness of the aim of irony” (quoted in Fanger 232).

The problem these critics run into is their desire to turn a negative into a positive. That is, they attempt to turn a fundamentally negative poetic strategy into an independently positive poetics. By “negative poetics” I mean a poetic system that is fundamentally reactive, basing its operations on the refutation of some pre-existing norm. Irony is a fundamental component of any negative poetic system in that irony works to deny the validity of its object. And in Gogol’s fiction, ironic discourse so completely maximizes our field of view, it allows no positive or affirmative vision of prose stylistics to emerge. As Fanger himself puts it, Gogol’s prose is dominated by one central principle: “The principle is that of ‘ne to’ – a constant denial (as fact or value) of what appears in the represented reality and in the representation itself” (256). But to say “ne



to” to one system does not necessarily posit another in its place. It simply opens the field for an unlimited number of possible alternatives, none of which is positively asserted within the confines of Gogol’s extant prose. Again, Fanger and company attempt to interpret “ne to” as a positive value, as Gogol’s refusal to be confined within the confines of any static, ossified system. But these rather flimsy abstractions fail to adequately characterize the net effect of this “assertion of freedom” and its relationship to broader patterns of cultural development.

I would contend that Gogol’s poetics could be more concretely and accurately characterized as part of a natural process of artistic evolution inextricably linked to the broader waxing and waning of socio-cultural change, what Eikhenbaum calls the “dialectical self-creation of new forms” (135). Gogol’s irony is a grand space-clearing gesture, a project that aims to take the reader into new territory by burning down the old, but does not itself demarcate that territory. As V.S. Pivoev puts it in *Ironiia kak fenomen kul'tury*, irony is a “wonderful instrument for uncovering and re-evaluating outlived values” (4). Or, for a more literary expression of the same idea, Kierkegaard writes, “If one must warn against irony as a seducer, one must also praise it as a guide” as there is “much disease” in modern life and “irony is an excellent surgeon” (338). Kierkegaard was wary of irony, calling it “absolute infinite negation.” But as critics like Lillian Furst note, Kierkegaard failed to see ironic negation as part of a dialectical swing that assumes a chronological trajectory in which irony negates the old and outlived in order to usher in a period of sincere affirmation of new values. Furst writes, “The destructive de-creation of irony is envisaged as a vital step for the subsequent re-creation on a higher plane” (28). Or, to put a Marxist spin on it, irony appears in that moment of the historical dialectic at

which outlived moral forms need to surrender to new forms (Pivoev 25). But when considering any dialectical model of artistic development, there is an important distinction to be made here: while ironic discourse negates the prevailing thesis, but does not itself represent some form of antithesis. It is not itself a “new form.”

All new forms are ultimately reactive in that they gain their distinctiveness (and hence their expressive power) from the extent to which they defy the dictates of old forms. But ultimately, a new form “exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony” (Shklovskii “Art” 12). The new form does so in that it is geared “to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception . . .” (12). Gogol’s ironic discourse doesn’t just slow perception -- it STOPS it. It prevents us from reaching any kind of referent by completely destroying the very principles by which we normally make meaning out of texts. Its workings are “reactive” not only in that they defy conventional storytelling norms, but also in that their whole energy is directed at tempting us with those norms, and then preventing us from employing those norms to make sense of his texts. To return to Kierkegaard, “Irony as the negative is the way; it is not the truth, but the way” (339-340). Gogol’s ironic discourse is the way, but it does not posit its own alternative truth to that which it attacks. Tynianov writes, “Any literary succession is first of all a struggle, a destruction of old values and a reconstruction of old elements” (198). Gogol’s work represents the “destruction of old values” but does not achieve the “reconstruction of old elements.” Irony is only one step in the process of literary succession.

If we accept this premise of historical and cultural change assuming a process of creation, de-creation, and recreation, with irony as a key device in the de-creation phase, then a young writer, especially one confronted with a cultural sphere consumed with a massive identity crisis, must first clear the brush before planting new trees. Harold Bloom puts this process in Freudian terms, claiming that *all* young writers struggle with this very problem – namely, how to free themselves from the burden of their literary forebears that they experience in the form of an inherited “literary” language (5).

Regardless of how it is characterized (aesthetically, psychologically, or historically), we find this progression echoed in the careers of many authors whose literary maturation bridges a significant transitional moment in cultural histories.<sup>62</sup> Irony has proved a major weapon, a means of satisfying a burning desire to stamp out inherited norms, before the work of blazing new ground is begun. The ironically saturated early career works of many authors are less a proclamation of their own autonomy than a necessary preamble to the formation of a unique identity that is not reactive, but free-floating, independent, totally new.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Writing to P.V. Annenkov, a young Ivan Turgenev proclaimed, “Yet something will come from me only if I can destroy the literary man in me . . .” (41). See also Elizabeth Cheresch Allen’s description of Lermontov’s struggle with this very dynamic in *A Fallen Idol is Still a God: Lermontov and the Quandary of Cultural Transition*: “. . . Romanticism might have lost its authority to command unquestioned allegiance, but it still merited a certain reverence and respect. Those works thus retain many of the trappings of Romanticism, incorporating numerous Romantic images and ideas, but they do not wholly affirm those images and ideas. Lermontov could find inspiration in Romanticism, but he could not find unequivocal conviction. So he was left with ambivalence. . . reflecting a distinctive place in literary history as an author at the time when Romanticism was on the wane but when nothing had emerged yet to replace it” (x).

<sup>63</sup> Of course, new forms are not totally “new.” Shklovskii notes: “Each new literary school heralds a revolution, something like the appearance of a new class. But, of course,

*I May Not Get There With You*

Gogol's letters and criticism echo an awareness of this developmental curve. Referring to *Dead Souls*, Gogol explained, "If God helps me to carry through my poema as it should be done, this will be my first respectable creation. All Russia will be summoned up in it" (quoted in Fanger 165). This is an oft-quoted line, but most criticism focuses on the latter sentence, regarding Gogol's intent to summon up "all Russia." But what interests me more is the first sentence, in which he refers to *Dead Souls* (as he envisions it in its completed three-volume form) as his first "respectable" creation. This speaks to far more than the typical writerly humility that dismisses all that has come before as amateurish. Here, Gogol is suggesting that comedy (and more specifically) irony, had served its cultural/historical function. "Respectability" is a code word for the type of positive poetics he had yet to fashion. Bakhtin notes, "Gogol deeply sensed the profound and universal character of his laughter and, at the same time, could find neither an appropriate place, nor a theoretical basis and justification for such laughter in the landscape of "serious" 19<sup>th</sup> century culture" (409). The first volume of *Dead Souls* is a continuation and a culmination of the negative poetics developed in his short fiction. A fragmented narrative presence and hyperbolic patterns of obfuscating devices dominate

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this is only an analogy. The vanquished line is not obliterated, it does not cease to exist. It is only knocked from the crest; it lies dormant and must again arise as the perennial pretender to the throne. Moreover, in reality the matter is complicated by the fact that the new hegemony is usually not a pure revival of previous forms but is made more complex by the presence of features of the younger school and with features, now secondary, inherited from its predecessors on the throne" (quoted in Eikhenbaum 134).

this first volume, creating an “Inferno” of negated social and literary images. Sergei Bocharov notes that in contemplating the first volume of *Dead Souls*, Gogol was forced to consider, “What did it mean -- this “gloom and disturbing absence of light’ that he witnessed and that he himself had given form to in the events of [the first volume of] *Dead Souls*? And where was the way out? That Gogol planned *Dead Souls* as a three-volume work aping Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is well established (Rabinowitz 158). From this, we can infer that the “Purgatorio” and “Paradiso” of the planned second and third volume were to proclaim a positive image rising from the ashes of the ironic negation presented by the first.

However, as literary history tells us, he never really got there. Gogol’s genius lay in his ability to manipulate the mimetic and narrative conventions of the past to an unprecedentedly absurd degree. His talent was irony. And when he strove to break free of his own genius in the second volume to *Dead Souls*, to posit something more than “ne to,” his prose either became flat and lifeless, or crawled back unwittingly into the ironic mode, puncturing and lampooning any positive assertions he managed to squeeze out. Whether this contributed to his madness is a matter for literary historians. But what is certain is that he was never able to liberate himself from his own ironic machinations. He burned the second volume of *Dead Souls* and turned to non-fiction, perhaps in the hopes that in that mode he could write directly and sincerely about the way the world should be. Commenting on Gogol’s appraisal of his work on the second volume of *Dead Souls*, Stanley Rabinowitz and Frederick Griffiths note, “Literary criticism has produced few experiences odder than hearing this unsurpassed ironist test and reject his work on the touchstone of sincerity and monolithic truth” (166).

A number of critics have commented on the relationship between Gogol's mounting didactic urges and his undoing as a literary artist. G. A. Gukovskii, in his tome on Gogol's realism, rejects what he sees as the prevailing assumption that as Gogol aged he evolved artistically. According to Gukovskii, while the artistic-didactic conflict always raged within Gogol, it was the predominance of the didactic impulse after the publication of the first volume of *Dead Souls* that destroyed Gogol's ability to create convincing fiction: "It is incorrect and even foolish to see in the young Gogol some sort of lesser version of the Gogol of *Selected Passages*. The genuine, historically significant, great Gogol is the Gogol of *The Government Inspector*, and not the other. But that other late Gogol did not emerge by accident; rather, it was conditioned by the dialectic of the great Gogol of the 1830s and both of these together constitute Gogol in his tragic development" (24). For Mikhail Bakhtin, Gogol's irony, and specifically the polyphonic nature of ironic discourse, became a prison, defeating any attempts to give form to Gogol's moral and spiritual impulses: "Once having entered the zone of familiar contact he was unable to leave it, and he was unable to transfer to his sphere distanced and positive images" (quoted in Rabinowitz and Griffiths 158).

We can sense in Gogol's literary evolution a fundamental incompatibility between ironic discourse and the brand of absolute truth Gogol ultimately wished to convey to his readership. Whether any literary language would be adequate to express such truth is beyond the scope of this investigation. But what is clear is that ironic discourse's fundamentally negating power leaves little room for "a way out" of the "gloom and disturbing absence of light" that it so effectively conjures for the devoted conjuror.

**Conclusion:  
Doing Its Work Elsewhere**

*Irony and Its Discontents - What Irony Can't Do*

So the question remains: Was Gogol successful? And what does that success or failure say about the reach of ironic discourse in, as Sperber puts it “a theory of communication”? If we interpret his career as determined push toward renovating the literary consciousness of his people with ironic discourse as his crowning weapon, did he do so? Even if we concede that he fell short of creating a positive poetic creation that would provide some sort of alternative to narrative prose, did his attempt to purge his public of a nasty dependence take root? Well, it all depends upon how we frame the term “success.”

If we consider success the expulsion of narrative from high literary art, then of course the answer is “no.” Though his work represents a consistent attack on plot as an organizing principle for prose, we do not live in a literary world of plot-less creations. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what form those creations would take, though there have certainly been many experiments in this vein -- prose poems of free-floating linguistic play, the psychological sketch, or loose representational vignettes, for example. But the very fact that by 1994, James Hadley Chase, a B-grade detective novelist whose vogue has long since passed in Western popular culture, had eclipsed Pushkin as the favorite

author of the Russian populace, speaks to the persistence of plot as a favored principle for prose creation (Barker 186).

*And Now for Something Completely Indifferent*

However, if we consider Gogol's efforts as a kind of aesthetic catharsis, a kind of radical literary cleansing that contributed to a situation in which future generations of writers and readers could begin to think about the ways that narrative could be reconfigured, then his work was a resounding success. In the wake of Gogol's career, the borders of story were made malleable, its components rearranged and challenged, supplemented and subverted in ways that never totally dispensed with story, but nevertheless, provided modes of writing that represented significant departures from storytelling convention, rendering them more responsive to those elements of modern existence that seemed most hostile to story's restrictive influence. If Gogol did not provide the antithesis to a thesis he took aim at, he certainly contributed to a cultural situation that made that antithesis possible.

If Gogol led a one-man rebellion against narrative, then, if you believe Gary Saul Morson, Tolstoy declared all out "war." Writes Morson, "Tolstoy intended *War and Peace* as a challenge to the genre of the novel, indeed, as a challenge to all narrative, both fictional and nonfictional. To that end, he constructed a work that is highly idiosyncratic in form" (1). To some degree, the same can be said of virtually all the giants of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century prose – Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, Bely, Kharms, Babel, the list goes on. All constructed works that variously defied the conventions of traditional



narrative construction, with the aim of establishing an independent, “positive” poetics that could in varying degrees supplant traditional narrative form. Whether there can be any prose form that is truly independent of story is debatable. As Morson himself states regarding Tolstoy:

By including non-novelistic language, an author would not be ignoring novelistic conventions, but deliberately violating them. That is, the effectiveness of his strategy would depend on those conventions and would, therefore, bear tacit witness that they are in force. If readers ever stopped assuming those conventions, or if a writer violated them too frequently, the power of non-dialogic speech in a novel [or that of any stylistic or structural element that defies narrative convention] would begin to fail. The novelist would not be able to violate his readers’ expectations, for those expectations would have changed. (13)

Honor the convention and you affirm it; defy the convention and you re-affirm it.

So according to Morson, all anti-narrative stances are necessarily reactive. Tolstoy’s prose “implicitly bears witness” to novelistic convention because it only implicitly violates them. Gogol’s violation is explicit, and hence the violation is the subject of ironic play, a move that mocks narrative convention without positing an alternative. However futilely they attempt to free themselves from the gravitational tug of story, Gogol’s literary descendents were attempting to make aesthetic progress by positing something separate and apart from traditional narrative practice; Gogol sought to do the same, but found himself ultimately limited by his greatest strength: a wickedly amusing ironic discourse whose power lay in its ability to destroy outmoded norms, but bore no constructive power itself.

In this light, the statement often attributed to Dostoevsky (“We all came out of Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’”) attains an added valence. According to Bakhtin, “Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it” (22). Though many later authors had little in common with Gogol as regards subject matter, diction, or even the tactics with which they disputed the primacy of narrative, they all operated in the liberated creative space Gogol’s laughter made possible.

*A Free Radical (Ironically Speaking)*

The significance of Gogol as a purveyor of ironic discourse extends far beyond his role in the history of Russian letters. Indeed, Gogol’s work is so extreme in form, so consumed with irony, that it provides an excellent case study for an evaluation of the nature of irony itself.

If, in Gogol’s mature work, ironic discourse provided a powerful instructive tool by incorporating the reader into the comic treatment of narrative norms they themselves held dear, the net effect of that treatment was essentially to “negate” those norms. By “negate,” I mean to say that the reader is led to understand that those norms have no place in the Gogolian world for he or she is forced to contend with a deluge of prose that radically defies those norms. But it is a two-step process. If the reader were simply meant to view the digressive discourse ironically, we might presume that the device would serve to confirm its opposite (i.e. classical narrative norms). However, as mentioned above, the process is compounded by Gogol’s repeated declamations regarding the necessity of

those norms and the almost total violation of those norms throughout the remaining narrative space. As a result, both statement and counterstatement are ironized, the whole subject to playful undermining, and therefore, the net effect is not to affirm those norms, but to do the opposite. So even though Gogol's (and hence, the reader's) laughter is partially directed at his own ridiculous obfuscations of narrative development, the ultimate victim of mockery is the reader's continued insistence on those norms, as he or she charges again and again into the fray, attempting to piece together the work, only to be derailed again and again, to the delight of all involved.

Thus, Gogol's irony is significant not in terms of what it means (within a given sentence or as a total literary phenomenon) but in terms of what it *does* to the reader. In fact, his irony has very little relationship to the semantic content of any individual utterance. It pertains largely to the connective threads with which any given sentence, or even larger narrative units, are normally strung together to form a narrative whole. When we are treated to an irrelevant detail, a ridiculously extended simile, an abrupt truncation, or a muddled string of cause and effect, the semantic meaning of a given unit is not at issue (unless, of course, it is our complete inability to wring any semantic meaning from the utterance whatsoever!). What is of comic consequence is the sheer impossibility of creating larger units from these ridiculously disjointed pieces, and hence the very irrelevance of those principles upon which those larger units traditionally rest. The reader is forced to assume a position of comic distance from the *type* of information provided and its structural arrangement (or disarrangement) in the text. The net effect, as Donald Fanger suggests, is a grand *ne to* ("not that") to any narrative based approach to the text,

and hence the redirection of the reader (and future generations of writers) toward an open-ended search for some kind of unifying alternative.

In Gogol's hands, irony is a cooperative process that creates a functional result by placing the reader in an emotionally charged position vis-à-vis some element of the text. Irony is a "doing" with language that DOES something to the reader; it does not "mean" anything in the traditional sense.

Seen in this light, irony à la Gogol doesn't quite fit into any of the conceptions of irony introduced at the outset of this investigation. From Quintillian to Derrida, classical rhetoric to post-modernity, prevailing understandings of irony have never incorporated at least a category of irony that features both of the major tendencies demonstrated by Gogol's ironic discourse: 1) a complete hostility to "resultant meaning" as the aim or end of irony, and 2) the establishment of a comic distance that has a specifically negating tendency with respect to a given utterance.

One general approach to language that has yet to be directly applied to the operations of irony is suggested by analytic philosophy, which posits communication not as the packaging and transmission of conceptual content, but as a form of action.

For analytic philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, words "signify" only inasmuch as they are used to effect certain ends in the world. "To imagine a language," he writes in *Philosophical Investigations*, "is to imagine a form of life" (8). Like a hammer striking a nail, words are tools with which man achieves desired goals.

In *How to Do Things With Words*, Austin picks up where Wittgenstein leaves off, expanding the notion of "meaning as use" by introducing what he calls the "illocutionary" dimension of language -- saying something *with a certain force*, or in

other words *doing something* in saying something – as opposed to doing something with a certain “sense and reference” (a “locutionary” act). Ultimately, Austin attempts to demonstrate that even the locutionary element is subsumed under the illocutionary, as the truth and falsity of a given statement (the supposedly objective criteria that characterized the locutionary act as representing things in the world) are proven to be merely labels we give to the degree to which an utterance is appropriate to a particular instance in a particular language game (145). “Use” is all. Words “mean” only in so far as they are used to do things in the world.

However, we need not be too concerned whether language can or cannot be tidily divided into “use” and “sense/reference” components. The analytic tradition has more than its fair share of detractors. However, this school of thought calls to our attention a formerly ignored dimension of language and a “way in” to a more dynamic characterization of irony that seems to better accord with how irony functions in Gogol’s mature texts.

One scholar who has already applied the analytic tradition to literary tropes is Donald Davidson, whose *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* takes on the subject of metaphor. According to Davidson, “. . . metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation mean, and nothing more” (245). Davidson is battling a traditional conception of metaphor that is not unlike Booth’s “reconstruction” scheme for irony. According to this conception, metaphor is thought to have a “literal” meaning, what it means on its face, but also a “metaphorical” meaning that it either contains or implies or inspires based on the comparisons it seems to enjoin us to make. Davidson employs the following example: “Tolstoy was an infant.” According to the prevailing scheme, the

metaphor has a literal meaning – Tolstoy was a baby – which, due to its literal nonsense (assuming we’re actually talking about Tolstoy as an adult) gives rise to a metaphorical meaning that embodies a comparison between the two elements taking the form “Tolstoy was immature” or “Tolstoy acted foolishly, selfishly, childishly, etc.” (247). Davidson concedes that metaphors do inspire or push us to attend to likenesses between things, but “. . . metaphor belongs exclusively to the domain of use. It is something brought off by the imaginative employment of words and sentences and depends entirely on the ordinary meanings of those words and hence on the ordinary meanings of the sentences they comprise” (247). Although, “metaphor and simile are merely two among endless devices that serve to alert us to aspects of the world by inviting us to make comparisons,” proponents of the “substitution” model of metaphor “. . . think they provide a method for deciphering an encoded content, they actually tell us (or try to tell us) something about the effects metaphors have on us. The common error is to fasten on the contents of the thoughts a metaphor provokes and to read these contents into the metaphor itself” (261). In other words, although metaphors push us to juxtapose certain objects or concepts, the conceptual end products of that vision cannot and should not be located in the metaphor itself.

That which distinguishes metaphors from “straight” utterances is how words are used, not what they “mean.” Metaphors use literal meaning in a way straight utterances do not, but they are not vessels of some sort of additional, coded meaning. When proponents of the “substitution” theory of metaphor voice what they feel to be the resultant meaning of a metaphor, they are actually paraphrasing that which the metaphor brings to our attention. This is problematic for two reasons. First of all, as Davidson notes

“there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention” (263). To return to the Tolstoy example, there are a million different metaphorical paraphrases we could spin out of the original utterance, and once we begin to do so “there is no end to what we want to mention” (263). But it is not simply that we cannot paraphrase exhaustively the “real” cognitive content of the metaphor, the problem lies in that there is no metaphorical cognitive content to paraphrase: “The central error about metaphor is most easily attacked when it takes the form of a theory of metaphorical meaning, but behind that theory, and stateable independently, is the thesis that associated with a metaphor is a definite cognitive content that its author wishes to convey and that the interpreter must grasp if he is to get the message” (262). Propositions are the wrong medium with which to approach metaphor, and meaning the wrong conceptual tool: “Words are the wrong currency to exchange for a picture” (263). In other words, an author does not take a proposition, such as “Tolstoy was immature,” code it into “Tolstoy was an infant,” and expect us to decode to the original. Propositional content is entirely the wrong medium with which to discuss literary discourse. The author has a vision of a character and is charmed or intrigued or inspired by the juxtaposition of that character and an object. Through that juxtaposition, the author enjoins us to see what he or she sees. As Davidson notes, it is the difference between “seeing” and “seeing that.” Metaphors don’t ask us to see *that x* is the case, they force us to *see x*. They enjoin us to see the subject and see the compared object and experience the complex of emotional and intellectual reactions the comparison inspires. Davidson notes, “. . . metaphor can, like a picture or a bump on the head, make us appreciate some fact – but not by standing for, or expressing, the fact” (262).

The application of the analytic philosophy of language to ironic utterances (à la Davidson) should be readily apparent by this point. Instead of positing the interpretation of an ironic utterance as a “reconstructive” process, in which the literal meaning is discarded in favor of a decoded meaning which stands in some degree of opposition to the former, what an ironic utterance truly does is, through a manipulation of literal content, to enjoin the reader to assume a certain perspective on that literal content, to “see” that content in a certain way. In metaphor, the reader is enjoined to view seemingly disparate things comparatively, to hold the disparate elements in his or her field of vision. In irony, the reader is enjoined to view the textual and extra-textual incongruities the utterance presents. The qualitative nature of metaphoric vision and of ironic vision are different, but both depend on the “use” of language, and not upon the development of resultant meaning. Not only is "full reconstruction" beyond the purview of an ironic utterance, but in a sense, there is nothing beyond the literal meaning to reconstruct. Irony is not concerned with what an author eventually means beyond what is literally said, but *how* he or she means what is literally said. Even Booth admits that the "pleasures of the ironic dance itself simply disappear in any paraphrase, however complete," and this is due to the fact that the effects of irony cannot be accounted for by a stateable resultant meaning.

Given that Gogol’s use of ironic discourse is geared to negate the very framework with which we make sense of a text, is a rhetorical model (one that characterizes irony as a mechanism for the generation of resultant meaning) adequate to describe the type of experience that attends ironic discourse? T.S. Eliot notes, “. . . ‘meaning’ is the piece of meat the bugler distracts the hound dog with. The intellect gnaws at the meaning, but the



real work of the poem goes on elsewhere, unobserved” (quoted in Booth 266). If we tentatively accept the notion that the broader practice of literary composition is (at least in part) geared toward something other than resultant meaning, such as vicarious experience, then certainly the oblique tropes -- metaphor, simile, and oh yes, irony -- that so typically characterize “literary” discourse must have a hand in Eliot’s “real work” of literature. Gogol’s radical demonstration of irony proves a valuable means of illustrating just what this “real work” may be.

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