

ІЗ ЗАРУБІЖНОГО ГОГОЛЕЗНАВСТВА

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WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF GOGOL'S NATIONALITY?

The title of my presentation (*What Are We to Make of Gogol's Nationality?*) immediately gives rise to the question of – *who are «we»?* – in the above question.

If the answer is – *professional patriots or literary-minded politicians*, – who are trying to appropriate Gogol and make him exclusively Russian or exclusively Ukrainian, then we should not worry about them too much. By and large, they don't read literature and they have a pretty short attention span. Once this anniversary is out of the way they will be onto something else. Besides, Gogol is not a piece of furniture or some real estate. The truth is you can never really own an artist. They are very slippery customers. Gogol, in particular, can never be used as the basis of «patriotic education» or «national spirituality» or, in fact, anything that could be useful in promoting some political or cultural agenda. So the question of «Gogol or Hohol» is, in fact, a manifestation of the national identity problem that is yet to be resolved, but it has nothing to do with literature.

If the «we» in that question is – *readers* – then those of them who are fluent in Russian can enjoy Gogol in the original, while the rest will have to make do with the translations (there are dozens of wonderful translations of «Dykan'ka» and «Myrhorod» into Ukrainian, some of them done by the renowned masters of Ukrainian letters who successfully compete with the author, as if telling him «see what you could have done had you made the right choice!»). The rest of the readers do not really care about these squabbles, they tend to appreciate the author for what he really is – a giant of the world literature.

If «we» is – *literary critics*, then it is useless to expect that anything about the writer will ever be resolved once and for all. Critics thrive on Gogol, they live off him. For every literary theory he was and will always be a boon, a God-send case study. Right now because of the jubilee and the political uncertainties of the Eastern European politics the toast of the day is still the same as it was way back in the 1840s, namely the issue of Gogol's «national soul».

This whole discourse basically leads us to two sources. One is Romanticism, the German idealist philosophy, Johann Herder, the notions of *geist* and «national spirit», the glorification of irrational and unconscious that somehow go hand in hand with the process of nation-building. The vitality of this discourse is indicative of the fact that for both Russia and Ukraine this is still an ongoing project. Yet because of the lack of reliable positivistic instruments it is impossible to handle this topic in a scholarly way.

The second source is religion, Christianity in particular. But we can hardly find a theologian who talks about a national rather than individual soul. (It is politicians who are eager to promote the notion of a collectivistic – say, Aryan – soul, or *geist*, or destiny. And we all know where it brought them, don't we?) After all, the Creator of Heaven and Earth tested Abraham as an individual before making him «an offer he could not refuse». But again, as S.Beckett once wrote (in his novel «Watt»): «God is a witness that could not be brought to court».

It is interesting that a Ukrainian critic V. Zviniatskovskij, the author of a 542-page long monograph *The Mysteries of the National Soul* (Kyiv, Lykej, 1994) after a thorough examination of every aspect of Gogol's life and all his works, admits that «the more I study Gogol, the less I understand him» [1]. Perhaps, the closest V. Zviniatskovskij could ever get to defining the writer's «national soul» is this: «Gogol [is] an Orpheus who tried to get the shadow of Eurydice – his national soul – out of the hell of national relations «[2]. Sounds like a cocktail of Greek mythology and Marxist terminology. But how much does his definition really explain?..

Another road to nowhere is «the national idea». The underlying assumption here is that every nation is unique and has its own purpose and destiny. (There are numerous manifestations of this, like «УМОМ РОССИЮ НЕ ПОНЯТЬ» («One cannot fathom Russia by the reason alone» F. Tiutchev) or «The business of America is business» (H. Truman). And it could very well be true. However, the connection between the artist and «the national idea» is never direct or straightforward.

In our case, Gogol himself, on many occasions, declared his strong political and ideological preferences. So it is only natural that he is considered to be an ardent supporter of the Russian Empire. (Likewise, there exists a revisionist undercurrent. There are critics who claim that Gogol, in fact, was a hidden Ukrainian patriot, a mole, if you will.)

But let us consider two of his most frequently quoted pronouncements, one – T. Bulba's speech and another – the equally famous lyrical digression about Rus-Russia-troika.

A Ukrainian (or a Little Russian) Cossack Taras Bulba on the brink of a decisive battle addresses his troops, «not to cheer of freshen them up – their fighting spirit was strong enough – but just because he wanted to pour his heart («просто самому хотелось высказать все, что было на сердце»)). The subject of his speech is «our brotherhood» («товарищество»).

«Нет, братцы, так любить, как русская душа – любить не то, чтобы умом или чем другим, а всем, чем дал Бог, что ни есть в тебе, а ... Нет, так любить никто не может! Знаю, подло завелось тепер на земле нашей: думают только, чтобы при них были хлебные стоги, скирды да конные табуны их, да были бы ценны в погребах запечатанные меды их. Перенимают черт знает какие бусурманские обычаи; гнушаются языком своим; свой со своим не хочет говорить; свой своего продает, как продают бездушную тварь на торговом рынке. Милость чужого короля, да и не короля, а паскудная милость польского магната, который желтым чеботом своим бьет их в морду, дороже для них всякого братства. Но у последнего подлюки, каков он ни есть, хоть весь извалялся он в саже и в поклонничестве, есть и у того, братцы, крупица русского чувства. И проснется оно когда-нибудь, и ударится он, горемычный, об полы руками, схватит себя за голову, проклявши громко подлую жизнь свою, готовый муками искупить позорное дело. Пусть же знают они все, что такое значит в Русской земле товарищество! Уж коли на то пошло, чтобы умирать – так никому ж из них не доведется так умирать! ... Никому, никому! ...»

Come to think of it, Taras's speech is hardly a piece of logical, coherent discourse, it has so many dizzying turns and twists, and it is riddled with inconsistencies.

Apparently, Gogol writes about the Cossacks' brotherly love-friendship or *filia*. Then he proceeds by claiming that it is, in fact, a feature of any «Russian soul» («to love not just with one's mind or with something else, but with everything that God gave you and that there is in you...»). This definition clearly oversteps the boundaries of «*filia*». The educated guess tells us that, most likely, the mighty «Russian soul» has managed to roll all «the four loves» in one. A truly gigantic achievement.

Then Taras Bulba blames his fellow-countrymen for their greed, for adopting Muslim («busurmanskije») customs and ways, for discarding their native language and for currying favors with the Polish nobility. What Muslim customs is he referring to? Shouldn't it be Catholic customs and ways? Does he mean Ukrainian language? Or is this soliloquy aimed at the Russian 19th century nobility who favors French and shuns Russian, the language their serfs are using? Then all this passage about a wretched no-good of a man all covered in soot and boot-licking (!) («v sazhe i v poklonnichestve») (what a combination! – V. D.) who one day will rise up, curse his pathetic life and with his suffering will redeem that shameful deed – clearly begs for some explanation. What «shameful deed»? The way the «non-brothers» live? And who are the «all of them» / «they all» («oni vse») of the final part of this speech, the ones who should know the real meaning of «brotherhood»? The Poles? Or Gogol miserable contemporaries? In short, what is it all about? One even begins to suspect that it is some kind of a parody of a xenophobic (and quite possible drunken) Russian patriot? Or is it a tongue-in-cheek commentary on Taras Shevchenko's «Zapovit» (Testament), in which the greatest Ukrainian poet magnificently unfolds his millenarian eschatological vision («Як понесе з України в Чорное море кров ворожу, / отоді я все покину і полину до самого Бога молитися. / А до того я не знаю Бога»)?

One can never be sure with Gogol.

And then there is the Zaporozhian Cossacks. Although both Gogol (as well as the Slavofiles) and Ukrainian nationally-minded politicians tried to use them as the core of the national mythology (both Russian and Ukrainian) the Cossacks are not exactly your solid-rock nation building material. Under Hetman P. Sahajdachny they fought against Moskovy on the side of Rzecz Pospolita, many of their ways and military organization were clearly Oriental, in the crucial year of 1709 they were split between I. Mazepa and Peter I. Later on Russian tsars used them to weaken the Ottoman Empire, then destroyed their military settlements and sent them en masse into exile.

So no matter how we look at Taras Bulba's paean, one has to admit that this is an oddly irregular speech for a high style oratory. At the same time its very unpredictability, wild imagery and occasional babbling makes it look like an imprint of a classic Ukrainian mind, big on «sound and fury» and very often «signifying nothing». Perhaps that is why it went down so well with his audience. Gogol wrote that Taras's speech effected the Cossacks profoundly and reached the bottom of their hearts («разобрала речь, достала до самого сердца»).

Gogol's famous musings on the glory and destiny of Mother-Russia at the very end of volume I of the «Dead Souls» are even more scandalous. Many generations of Russian and Soviet children were told that this is the metaphor for their country – a powerful and enigmatic, fast moving force that inspires admiration and awe in the hearts of its friends and foes alike. But a slight change of perspective reveals that this juggernaut is driven, at best, by a crook («proxindej» – as a Russian writer V. Shukshyn calls Chichikov in his story «Troika»), or, at worst, by the Devil himself, because the Evil One is the real collector of dead souls.

The question is: did Gogol do it deliberately? Was he a sincere believer who got carried away by his own enthusiasm? Or a spoiled brat, an enfant terrible who was playing some dangerous games? Or, could it be just a slip of his pen? A case of too many censors and not a single decent editor?

My take on it is that he was not exactly a political thinker. He was not cut out for that kind of activity. He was a writer. A natural born artist. And as with all true artists when he immersed himself in the process of writing he totally let himself go, submitted himself to the creative forces, and, to put it bluntly, he was enjoying the ride. And then when he realized that he was being watched he would startle (just like St. Peter when he was walking on water in a Gospel story) and he would panic. And he started asking himself questions like, what was that? What was I doing? Was it a proper thing to do? Was it appropriate to have so much fun? Isn't a writer supposed to be a kind of a socially conscious animal? Maybe even a prophet?

And so all his social and private insecurities finally took over him and made him sing «the proper» tune. The way I see it, all his «ideological» pronouncements are, in fact, damage control, the desire to prove that, yes, he is a «khokhlik» (I love this word, this is how he was called by one of the ladies from the high society with whom he was corresponding) but he is not one of those hopelessly parochial little Russians, he is a truly Great Russian patriot. Yes, his books make people laugh, but he is a serious writer. Sure, he is steeped in Ukrainian folk demonology, but he is also a pious Orthodox Christian. Great artists usually are extremely clumsy at trying to explain their works. Some even ruin themselves by doing so.

For *writers* the question of Gogol's nationality (i. e. belonging to Russian or Ukrainian literature) has always been a topic of acrimonious debates. The Ukrainians talk about the joint custody (because of Gogol's origin), while the Russians are bent on denying them even the visitation rights (because Gogol wrote in Russian).

V. Nabokov, an otherwise extremely insightful reader, when it comes to «Dykan'ka» and «Myrhorod»(which he dismisses as «juvenilia»)

completely loses his cool and says that «there is nothing more dull and sickening to my taste than romantic folklore or rollicking yarns about ... Ukrainian good companions. ... In those artificial works of his youth Gogol was skirting a very dreadful precipice. He almost became a writer of Ukrainian folklore tales and «colorful romances». We must thank fate ... for his not having turned to the Ukrainian dialect» [3].

But apart from the 19th century Russian philosopher V. Rozanov (who thought that Gogol is not «truly Russian» i.e. too devious, unruly, not totally trustworthy, and not Orthodox enough), nobody denies that N. Gogol is a Russian writer. As one wit once remarked «the Great Russian literature was created by a Negro and a Khokhol» (S. Burda).

A Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in a private conversation once remarked that Ukraine saved Russia from agelasm. Of course, he meant, first of all, Gogol.

This notion of agelasm and agelasts is one of the key ideas of M. Bakhtin's in his ground-breaking book *The Works of Francois Rablais and the Folk Culture of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*. The great French writer coined this neologism from the Greek to describe, broadly speaking, the «proper» type of culture – high, «serious», well-regulated, highly ritualized and sanctioned by the state religion, as opposed to the «low», popular, pagan and often eschatological, circular culture of the Medieval and early modern Europe.

And «agelasts» are the people who suffer from the affectation of gravity, who are incapable of laughter and who do not understand or appreciate humor.

(This notion was extremely popular in Kyiv underground literary circles, and one of bon-mots they came up with was the definition of communism as the ultimate triumph of a agelasm).

I never found this term anywhere else, but in M. Bakhtin's book. And then to my surprise I ran into it in the latest book by Milan Kundera *The Curtain*. In fact, he describes his writings and his whole life philosophy as the fight against agelasm.

«In the presence of agelasts I censor my remarks to avoid being misunderstood, to avoid being cynical, to avoid wounding them by some frivolous word. They do not live in peace with the comical» [4].

So Gogol firmly rooted himself in the Russian literature. F. Dostoyevsky once famously said that «we all came from the sleeve of Gogol's overcoat». And I do not think he meant the «realistic» but rather (what M. Bakhtin called) «the carnival» tradition. Gogol epitomized the «natural» way of cultural development, from the roots upward, as opposed

to the other way round when «the high culture» (usually bookish or of foreign origin) slowly trickles down and eventually reaches «the lower depth» (Pushkin's prose was precisely that).

But what about Ukrainians? What are their claims on Gogol based on?

I believe, to use the same «sleeve» analogy, that this whole overcoat – buttons, holes, dirt smudges and all – is part and parcel of the Ukrainian literature. I would go even further and say that Gogol is «our everything», a lot more than Pushkin is Russian's «everything» (as critic A. Grigoriev claimed). Gogol's overcoat (i.e. his whole oeuvre) covers all Ukrainian literature. We don't really have anything better or more revealing, when it comes to expressing our true nature or our secrets and lies.

And (oh, yes!) I nearly forgot Taras Shevchenko. The great Romantic poet who, allegedly, holds the keys to the soul of his nation, who shares with his people the mysterious code that enables him to communicate with «the quick, the dead and the unborn». And this code is so much «for internal use only» that our poetic genius could be read, appreciated and revered exclusively by Ukrainians.

Unlike Shevchenko, Gogol is a truly universal writer. Not because he wrote in Russian (as many think) but because (to paraphrase one English literary critic who wrote about W. Gombrowicz) «Gogol was the first (and, perhaps, the only! – may I add) Ukrainian writer for whom the tragedy of being a Ukrainian is of less importance than the tragicomedy of being a human».

So what is it that makes Gogol a Ukrainian writer?

Let me mention just the main points – the language, his rootedness in all things Ukrainian, his world view, his characters and his style.

Language.

Contrary to popular belief, almost every Ukrainian language writer either started out writing in Russian or, at the very least, wrote something in that language. (Beginning with Shevchenko, Kvitka-Osnovianenko and Kulish in the early 19th century and all the way to our contemporaries Hryhir Tiutiunyk, Ivan Drach and the latest and post-independence recruits to the Ukrainian literature.)

The fact that Gogol wrote in Russian does not prevent practically all major Ukrainian language writers from proudly calling him their teacher and to acknowledge his significant influence on them (the first to come to mind only in the XX-th century are O. Dovzhenko, O. Vyshnia, and M. Khvyliovyy with his «Literaturnyj Yarmarok»).

Many contemporary critics who so eagerly embrace the decolonization theory and discourse, in my opinion, turn a blind eye to the obvious fact that Ukrainian rulers, educators and gentry were from the get-go among the most zealous empire builders. And the Russian language was the instrument for promoting their aim.

To name just a few. Th. Prokopovych and his Kiev-Mohyla circle provided the young tsar with the imperial ideology, hetman Mazepa was his most trusted foreign policy advisor, M. Gogol created a new type of Russian prose, and so on and so forth. Fast forward to 2009: Gennady Padalka (a very Russian sounding name!) is the latest Russian cosmonaut and the head of the Soyuz spaceship team that was launched on March 26th from Boikonur.

The lure of the Empire was too great to ignore. And very often those who stayed behind in their rural paradise were either budding Ukrainian patriots (whose time had not come yet) or losers who couldn't make it in St. Petersburg or Moscow.

Having said that, I have to admit that Ukrainians don't really make good Russian patriots. And Gogol with his Rus-loving Cossacks, or his troika, or his Russian peasants at the beginning of *The Dead Souls* is a vivid example of that.

Ukrainians like to speculate on the subject of «if only». If only Gogol switched to Ukrainian, some of them would say, right now we would have an internationally recognized Ukrainian literature. I doubt that. Choosing the language you want to write in, is like buying a package tour or using a set menu. At that time to become a Ukrainian language writer was like joining the Army. You were automatically given the title of a defender of the national spirit, and you were supposed to be the voice of a marginalized people speaking a noble but threatened tongue. There was no way Gogol could have escaped the political and cultural imperatives that overwhelmed practically all the Ukrainian writers. Survival was the order of the day for all minor (i.e. non-imperial) European literatures. We would never have any of Gogol's comedies or many of his St. Petersburg's stories. (If you don't believe me, try to translate «Getting Married» or «Gamblers» of «Madman's Diary» into Ukrainian. So, I guess, this is where I have to agree with V. Nabokov).

Gogol's rootedness.

A. Pushkin's «Tatiana, russkaja dushoju» was not really fluent in Russian. Ukrainian landed gentry, on the contrary, were deeply rooted in Ukrainian rural life, and in that they did not differ too much from their serfs. After all, it was not half a century (or two generations) ago that the tsars had turned these Cossack chieftains into a new imperial aristocracy.

The old-timers («starosvits'ki» landlords) from «Myrhorod» or the Korobochkas and Sobakieviches or Piotr Pietrovich Pietukh from «The Dead Souls» are inseparable from the land and the «souls» that they «owned».

This proximity to the grass-roots often translates into the shared sensibility and for a writer like Gogol – the uncanny ability to put maximum information behind the minimal number of words. And I do not mean names like «Dovhochkhun» or «Holopupenko». That would be humor bordering on satire.

To describe the uncertain times in the wake of Chichikov's arrival Gogol simply gives us the names of Sysoj Pafnutijevych or McDonald Karlovich, «the likes of whom were never seen or heard before». Or with one matter-of-factly dropped hyphenated last name of «Neuvzhaj-Koryto» he produced a quintessential Ukrainian character, someone who is big on the pomp and pretense but riddled with complexes. Or he could squeeze the whole history of the country into the name of one city – «T'xuslavl'». How can you translate this into any foreign language? If this is not the secret code, I don't know what is.

For the Russian literature, that was the product of the radical reforms of Peter I, the «arrival» of Gogol meant that it could put its roots down and grow, not as an imitation of the French literature, but as a totally new world phenomenon.

For the Ukrainian literature, which, unlike its Russian counterpart, enjoyed a more «natural» development (i.e. moving from folklore and the «low», popular tales to the «high» genres) it meant even more. Thanks to Gogol within a short period of ten years it went all the way from the imitation of local legends to a multi-layer story (*Nose*, *Overcoat*) and a fully-fledged novel (*The Dead Souls*), from Gogol's father's and Kotliarevsky's vaudevilles to a brand new drama genre.

And it is a great irony as well as a testimony of a profound malaise that effected the contemporary Ukrainian culture that our present writers and critics turn their backs on their own humble, democratic beginnings and go out of themselves to prove their «European-ness» or «elitism» or their alleged «high cultural» origin. By doing so they not only make a laughing stock of themselves, they lose their readers and, which is even more dangerous, they sever the umbilical cord that connects them to their base.

The world view.

I am using this category neither in a political sense nor along the lines favored by the Romantics. I don't believe that there exists such a thing as a unified «national ideology» or «mentality» or «spirit». And yet it is hard to deny that there is something intrinsically American in *On the Road*

or *The Sun also Rises*, or that *Madame Bovary* could not have possibly been written by a non-French, or *Gimpel the Fool* by a non-Jew.

Denis Diderot once said: «Scrupez un Russe and vous devient un Tartar». Now what will you get when you «scrub a Ukrainian»? My answer would be «un pagan».

Paganism, practically speaking, boils down to two things:

1. Worshiping the nature and its forces (W. B. Yeats describes it best in just one phrase: «Everything we look upon is blessed»). In other words, opting for primeval magic instead of church services, for the customary law and a set of superstitions instead of Scriptures.

2. The world structure that can be described as Manichean (after prophet Mani). In Eastern Slavic lands it manifested in the beliefs of the Bogomilian sect. Manicheans preach the dualism of good and evil, and perceive the fight between these two «equal» forces as the engine of the world history. In practice, they blur the distinction between humans and animals and make the Creator responsible for universal pain. As one astute observer notices « the tendency of Russian sects to represent the world of matter as the domain of the devil, if not as directly created by the devil, may have been part of their Bulgarian heritage» [5].

One of the perks of this belief system is the fixation on, fear of and even fascination with the forces of darkness (or «Mother-Night, as J.Goete said in his *Faust*).

And this pattern seems to fit Gogol like a glove. V. Nabokov who was no theologian could not help observing that Gogol «believed in the existence of Devil far more seriously than he did in that of God» [6].

Russian writer and critic Dm. Merezhkovsky (D. S. Merezhkovsky, *Gogol. Tvorchestvo, zhizn' i religija*. Panteon, Saint Petersburg, 1909) devotes the whole book to Gogol's demonological beliefs and idiosyncrasies. He writes that [7] «According to Gogol's religious views the devil (chort) is both a mystical substance and a real creature, which epitomizes the rejection of God or the eternal evil. And so Gogol-the artist investigates the nature of this mystical substance, and as a human being he fights that real creature with his laughter. Gogol's laughter is the weapon with which a human fights a devil».

Hardly a canonical view on this subject. Christianity, indeed, recognizes the Evil One and his legions of smaller fallen angels as part of the Creation, but until further notice they firmly belong to the realm of things invisible. While to the non-believers Gogol's artistic crusade might look either like a manifestation of visionary abilities (for which they have no plausible explanation) or some mental disorder.

Poetic world of pagan superstitions is dominated by charms, spells and evil eyes that can drive their poor victims completely insane. Khoma Brut from *Viy* and Chartkov from *Portrait* have a thing about human eyes or about their representation in arts. Abram Tertz (Andrei Siniavsky, *V teni Gogolia*, Overseas Publications Interchange in association with Collins: London, 1975) is quite convincing in tracking down Gogol's obsession to the pre-monotheistic magical practices [8].

It is no coincidence that Ukrainian literature of the early 19-th century, unlike its Russian counterpart, was particularly interested in this subject. Both Gogol's *Portrait* and his contemporary H. Kvitka-Osnovianenko's *Saldats'kyj patret* deal with the power of art and its influence on people. But whereas Kvitka sees the comical aspect of such a plot (in the Kotliarevsky travesty tradition and as a variation of the ancient Greet story), Gogol «digs deep» and is terrified by the demons that lurk behind every eye.

There is something profoundly un-Christian in Gogol's preoccupation with spells and evil eyes. It betrays a deep-rooted reliance on the cruel and incomprehensible pagan fate rather than on God's mercy. In Christianity, where a faithful always makes a leap of faith, this surrender to the all-loving God does not exclude but, in fact, envisages exercising one's free will. According to A. Siniavsky [9] man in Gogol's stories and plays is «from the beginning of time somehow indebted to Devil and now Devils demands a payback from him».

And here is how Gogol, who just burned the second volume of «The Dead Souls», explains his action to Count Tolstoy [10]: «Хотел было сжечь некоторые вещи, давно на то приготовленные, а сжег все. Как лукавый силен! Вот он до чего меня довел ...»

As Gogol himself instructs his readers [11]: «Жить в Боге значит уже жить вне самого тела, а это невозможно на земле, ибо тело с нами». If that is true, concludes D. Merezhkovsky [12], then Christianity is impossible. A. Siniavsky explains the apparent contradiction between Gogol-the writer and Gogol-the preacher (the author of «The Selected Extracts from the Correspondence with Friends») by the fight between paganism and Christianity that was the essence of the writer's inner turmoil [13] «The rationalism in his Christianity was the reaction to the pagan mysticism that permeated his writings». In other words, Christianity for him was a refuge from his visionary Paganism, some kind of a «proper», tame, well-regulated and rational construct. If that is so than he should not have chosen Orthodox Christianity especially in its very rigid and legalistic Russian modification. Its motto is not exactly «cogito ergo sum», but rather

«credere absurdum est». One of the protestant denominations, Calvinism, probably, would have been a more appropriate choice.

It is customary to write about Gogol being torn between writing and devoting himself to religion. But, apparently, at some point a compromise was reached. Gogol wrote [14]: «Я примирился с писательством своим, когда почувствовал, что на этом поприще могу служить земле своей».

Another possibility (and most recently it was voiced by O. Zabuzhko [15]) would be that «for Gogol literature was a part of (his) religious mission».

But I tend to think that as a religious writer Gogol is more of a reactionary amateur than a serious thinker. In fact, half of what he proclaims does not make sense at all. And in this he joins the ranks of many Ukrainian poetic geniuses who, when they choose to put on an air of philosophical importance sound very fuzzy or flat-out bizarre.

T. Shevchenko»: «І день іде, і ніч іде, І голову схопивши в руки, дивуюся, чому ж не йде апостол правди і науки?»

P. Tychyna: «Поете, любити свій край – то не злочин, якщо це для всіх».

On the theological front Gogol is part and parcel of a very strong tradition. Even today, despite the experience of more than a millennium of state religion (the Soviet period aside) and the existence of at least four Orthodox Churches, the impression one gets from the Ukrainian literature is that Christianity remains very much outside the manichean core of people's beliefs and life philosophy. The works of V. Stus, Val. Shevchuk and L. Kostenko, probably the three most noted late XX century Ukrainian writers, are full of open or hidden polemics with Christianity. And what can you expect from a country where «every woman, child and man» is brought up on *Zapovit* (The Testament») in which the poet Bard proudly boasts that «a do toho ja ne znaju Boha» – in other words, until certain preconditions are met I'm not going to recognize the existence of God.

A «national» ideology is indeed a danger zone for any writer.

Gogol's characters.

They are a kind of repository or a bouquet of Ukrainian national archetypes. Many critics admitted (Nabokov among them) that Gogol's knowledge of Russia was «essentially Ukrainian youth spent in Mirgorod, Nezhyn, Poltava» [16]. Perhaps, that is why most of his characters cannot be understood outside of or without the Ukrainian context. And, by the same token, Ukraine cannot be understood without Gogol's characters. And I do not mean only the «clearly marked» peasants, Cossacks and landlords of the *Evenings* and *Myrhorod*.

If you want to understand why Ukraine behaves the way it does at home and on the international arena – read Gogol. Probably, the best explanation to Ukrainian stance toward NATO is provided by Podkoliesin in *Getting Married*.

Ukrainian leaders are a motley crew of Skvoznik-Dmukhanovskys from *Government Inspector* (bossy, heavy-handed, pragmatic, smart and down-to-earth all at the same time), Kochkariovs from *Getting Married* («ну і шчо, шчо плінут?») and (?) Chertkovs from *The Carriage* (remember, the one who invited to his house a crowd of officers and the county elite and then escaped and hid from them in his carriage – talking about the promises of the Orange Revolution).

Oh, and don't forget the omnipresent Khlestakov. Way back in January 1991 a former dissident and a member of the Ukrainian Parliament Mykhajlo Horyn, when speaking to the Congress of the American Ukrainians promised to them that in 5 years time Ukraine will be a major European power (watch out France and Germany!), in 10 years time Ukrainian will become one of the world languages, and in 15 years time Ukraine will be a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

In the aristocratic salons of 1840s Gogol was accused of portraying the Russians in the negative light (Nozdriov) and the Ukrainians (Korobochka) as harmless, nice albeit whimsical geezers. They got it all wrong. Who told them Nozdriov is Russian? You still find Nozdriovs pretty much running the show in Ukraine. Earlier this year, for example, a well-known Ukrainian scholar and educator wrote a letter to me. It started out with «ну ти, ja tobi skazhu, tezh svynia!» («come to think of it, you are a swine, as well»?)

Gogol's style.

Ukrainian writers have an unmistakable natural propensity for talkativeness, excessive ornamentation and getting themselves into the emotional overdrives. Add to that the (perhaps inevitable) conservatism tendencies and the so called «worshiping the Word» and you will understand why we are dealing with a literature crying out for a major riot or a poetic revolution that would have «austerity, simplicity and transparency» written on its banners. It is not happening yet, but what is interesting is that each literary period always begins with attempts to shed this flowery style. M. Zerov and the neo-classics attacked «Kotliarevshchyna», present day critics discard «populism» or treat the whole 'socialist realism» as kitsch. The writers of the 1920s, maybe, the most promising time for the Ukrainian letters, were mostly Europe-oriented and were successfully copying the latest Western avantgard trends. But no

matter how hard they tried to get rid of their Ukrainian «literary garments» they were never able to break free from the magnetic field created by Gogol. (I mean M. Yohansen, O. Vyshnia, M. Khvyliovyj and others.) The same can be said about Hr. Tiutiunnyk who in 1960s – 1970s wanted to write like E.-M. Remarque and E. Hemingway.

Now, the secret of Gogol is that his verbal dexterity, abundance, and even his excesses (what can be more Ukrainian than that?) are all grounded in his tremendous self-discipline and total control of his material and its texture. Take, for instance, Chapter 7 of *The Dead Souls* devoted to Chichikov's shady transactions with Sobakevich, his trip to the governor's office to legalize the purchase, in short, events strategically important to the development of the plot. But, as we see, at the end of the Chapter the author is suddenly distracted by Selifan and Petrushka, the two servants, who are so drunk after spending some time in a nearby pub, that walking back to the hotel they make frequent stops and just stand there leaning against each other. And then the author's attention becomes totally consumed by the sight of a junior officer from Riazan' who lovingly polishes his high boots. What has this officer got to do with «the theme» and «the idea» of the novel? And yet try removing this «non-event» and the whole picture will lose its completeness. It turns out that this very officer is as indispensable to the universe of the novel as, say, some insect – to the ecosystem of the Earth. But only a true creator would know that. Gogol's style is yet another proof that a work of art is not so much about «ideas» or «agenda» or «mission» but about the unpredictability and the excitement of a free flight, that a creative process should be.

And although all Ukrainian writers belong to Gogolian school, I could think only of P. Tychnya's *Chernihiv* and O. Dovzhenko's *The Enchanted Desna* who used the Gogolian recipe to their advantage and escaped turning that blessing into a curse.

The universality of Gogol.

There are two things, in my opinion, that make Gogol a world or a universal author, a writer «for all the seasons», if you will.

The first is his subject matter. He is not really writing about Russia, or Ukraine or the Russian Empire at the reign of Nicholas I. Neither he is interested in the broadly defined human conditions. Rather, his country is a land where the Devil masquerades as a nice-looking middle aged man, a former governmental official, and everybody is OK with that so long as appearances are being saved or better yet, if they can benefit from the opportunities, the above-mentioned gentleman offers them. A land where ghost tales are merely pale variations of true stories, where parts of the body

acquire lives of their own, and where «normal» people are forced to live their lives as if it were some kind of a game. The rules of the game are never known or fully understood, and your opponents are either sleazy gamblers with the card packs full of jokers or invisible jokers themselves. It is a twilight zone of such moral squalor that the only possible response to it is laughter.

The American writer William Styron once said that «human beings are a hair's breadth away from a catastrophe at all times – both personally and on a larger historical level». So, I guess, we can all relate to Gogol-land, no matter where we live – be a decaying village in a swamp or a prosperous metropolis in a sunlit valley right underneath the beacon on the hill. Everything around us is by design an «occupied territory», as C. S. Lewis wrote, (Gogol, whose many characters are «possessed» by the life-forms with evil eyes, would appreciate this definition), the country where time is constantly «out of joint».

And his second quality that immediately puts Gogol in the ranks of the greatest world writers is the presence of That Other dimension practically in all of his works. There is a school of thought that claims that it is the aim of art – to make you aware of the existence of that «other» reality. You don't have to be explicit about it lest you become a dangerous ideologist or an over-bearing preacher. But once you are given that gift you are not supposed to squander it or to exchange it for prosperity or adulation. And Gogol never lets us down. When you open *The Night in May* or *Nose* or *Getting Married* (in fact any of his stories or plays) you immediately feel the magnetic field of that other dimension. For some of his characters this encounter proves to be fatal, others are smart enough (or dumb enough) to run from it. (For example, one of the lucky ones (Podkoliesin from *Getting Married*) is well aware that by jumping out of the window and fleeing from his own wedding he, in fact, will avoid meeting the Evil One himself).

Artists and mystics with the ability to see or feel that other dimension are sometimes called visionaries (W. Blake, for instance, whose «doors of perception» were «cleansed» and «he could see things as they are» was one of them).

Other examples (to give you just a few) include B. Pascal («Le silence profond de ses espaces infinis m'effraye»).

R. Frost, as if arguing with Pascal in his *Empty Spaces* declared: «They will not scare me with their empty spaces between the stars, where no human race is. I have them in me, so much near home, to scare myself with my own empty spaces». Very brave, very American.

Lewis Carroll in his mock-epic *Hunting of the Snark* gives us a Victorian version of the things mystical and hard to grasp. An expedition is set out to catch Snark, a mysterious creature that epitomizes everything good one can find in this world. The only danger for the daring explorers can come from Bujum, Snark's equally mysterious sworn enemy and thus the embodiment of evil. In the final line of the poem we learn that Baker, the only member of the crew who catches a glimpse of the elusive Snark, is immediately gobbled up by Bujum. «Because Snark, – concludes L. Carroll, – was the Bujum, you see».

Whatever Gogol really experienced or felt he, most likely, recycled and poured right into his books. (He also complained in one of his letters that everywhere he looked he saw pigs).

I'll let other critics elaborate on the symbolic meaning of that animal in the world folklore and mythology or on its representation, say, in the Bible. Instead, to sum it up, I will state the obvious.

What we do know is that two centuries ago a writer was born who gave us (the whole world and Ukrainians, in particular) our country. For us, Ukrainians, it was «the gift outright», as R. Frost put it («the land was ours before we were the land's»). All of it, not piece by piece, but the whole beautiful and terrifying picture, in a flash. But, apparently, we are still blinded and haunted by this vision. One of the manifestations of this predicament, in my opinion, is the fact that contemporary Ukrainian literature is being written not by Gogol's heirs but by his characters, most prominent among them being the later day versions of Khlestakovs and Poprishchyns. The good news, though, is that nobody is able to take Gogol's gift away from us. So, hopefully, if and when we come to our senses and grow up we will be able to pick up where Gogol left off. Because that is what the idea of life and of continuity is all about.

March – April 2009

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Анотація

Автор статті намагається дати відповідь на питання про національність Гоголя, досліджуючи його мову, коріння, світогляд, героїв і стиль.

Ключові слова: національна ідентичність, «національна ідея», «національний дух», дискурс, релігія, традиція «карнавалу», язичество, християнство, диявол, архетипи.

Аннотация

Автор статьи пытается ответить на вопрос о национальности Гоголя, исследуя его язык, корни, мировоззрение, героев и стиль.

Ключевые слова: национальная идентичность, «национальная идея», «национальный дух», дискурс, религия, традиция «карнавала», язычество, христианство, дьявол, архетипы.

Summary

The author of the article tries to give the answer on the question «What are we to make of Gogol's nationality?» exploring Gogol's language, his rootedness, his world view, his characters and his style.

Keywords: national identity, «national idea», «national soul», discourse, religion, agelasm, «the carnival» tradition, Christianity, Paganism, Devil, archetypes.