
Multifaceted Metaphor: Gogol's Portrayal of St. Petersburg in *Dead Souls*

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In an early letter to his mother, Nikolai Gogol observed that St. Petersburg was not truly Russian: "Petersburg is not at all like other European capitals or Moscow. In general, every capital is characterized by its people, who throw their stamp of nationality on it; but Petersburg has no such character-stamp: the foreigners who settled here have made themselves at home and aren't like foreigners at all, and the Russians in their turn have turned into foreigners—they aren't one thing or the other" (29).¹ This quotation provides an important insight into Gogol's personal disillusionment with St. Petersburg which he expressed through increasingly elaborate and veiled means in his great works that culminated in *Dead Souls*. A close reading of *Dead Souls* in light of letters and biographical information highlights how Gogol purposefully subverted the glamorous representation of St. Petersburg typical of his day with the hope that his fellow countrymen would in turn examine their superficial and indolent lifestyles. Although written to his contemporaries, *Dead Souls* remains important because it continues to be read in schools and by the larger Russian population. Thus, a critical study of Gogol's portrayal of St. Petersburg highlights an imperative aspect of the historical and contemporary consciousness that has been shaped by Russians around its cultural and artistic capital.

While scholars and readers alike acknowledge the importance of *Dead Souls*, this classic has received less critical attention than it merits; further, critics have not yet investigated the role of St. Petersburg in it. Yet the culminating effect of Gogol's portrayal of St. Petersburg in *Dead Souls* becomes an extended and complex metaphor that should be considered one of the great accomplishments of Gogol's writing career. Through repetition and association, the capital comes to represent what is false, foreign, and deceitful about fashion, culture, the Enlightenment, and the upper class. This portrayal, however, is not overt but rather cloaked in the portrayal of the village of N. that is at once the opposite of the ideal capital and a satirical copy. The village of N. mimics St. Petersburg by trying to be like foreign capitals, especially Paris. Falsity becomes more false until it is comi-

cally fantastic. The multiple nuances and the humor of *Dead Souls* cannot be fully appreciated without this understanding of Gogol's portrayal of St. Petersburg. Further, this angle is essential in recognizing Gogol's professed intentions of showing the spiritual deficiencies he saw in all classes in Russia and especially in the cultured society of St. Petersburg.

Although critics have not examined the role of St. Petersburg in *Dead Souls*, Robert Maguire analyzes the role of the capital throughout Gogol's short stories in his essay "Place as Nature." Maguire's argument traces the development of St. Petersburg in Gogol's work but stops short of *Dead Souls*. His essay, however, supplies an important foundation for the present research. According to Maguire, Gogol drew his images of St. Petersburg from a variety of historic and contemporary sources, including Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman." Like his literary predecessor, Gogol portrays the city more as an enemy to people and nature than a friend (Maguire 74). In the final scene of "Nevsky Prospect," for example, Maguire contends that both the light and dark scenes of the story become ominous. He argues that the story portrays more than the "grim reality" that the hero Piskaryov visualizes; it also shows that the perceived and unperceived realms are controlled by satanic whim (77-78). In the same way that the glittering Nevsky Prospect becomes a dark world, the heroes' superficiality and romantic idealism turn ominous. Accordingly, "Nevsky Prospect" expresses a criticism of society, since St. Petersburg was founded by Peter the Great to be the ideal Russian city: "Gogol goes beyond skepticism to outright mistrust of the Enlightenment and all its manifestations, particularly order, symmetry, and reason, with the corresponding loss of intuition, vitality, emotion, and religion. He seems to feel not so much that Peter's great idea has disappeared as that there was never any real idea to begin with, in the sense of a vital, inspiring principle" (78). While the ideas that Maguire pinpoints in his essay prove fairly obvious, Gogol handles the same material much more obliquely in *Dead Souls*.

The reason for Gogol's shift in treatment of St. Petersburg relates directly to his own complex relationship with the city. The young Gogol's expectations of the city were idealistic and mirrored his expectations of himself. He dreamed of a perfect union with a locale that would allow him to serve his country and become great: "Perhaps I will be able to live my whole life in Petersburg—at least I outlined just such a goal a long time ago already" (*Letters* 26). When he moved to the capital as a young man, however, he soon became disillusioned with his idealized image of St. Petersburg because of the high cost of living and the difficulties he had finding and keeping a job. He began to explore and portray these notions in his short stories—notably "Nevsky Prospect."

It was after his play *The Inspector General*, though, that Gogol's relationship with St. Petersburg became more complex. Although *The Inspector General* does not take place in St. Petersburg, the capital still plays a dominant role in the farce, since it is held up as the epitome of Russian culture by the characters. The hero, Khlestakov, has just arrived in the village from St. Petersburg and, though he is a fool, the villagers all treat him with respect, fear, and deference because of his supposed power and influence. Petersburg is shown here to have a strong conferring power even though it is not physically present. Not only does the governor see the move to St. Petersburg as the ultimate career advancement, but so do others in the village. It is not until the end of the play that Khlestakov is shown to be a fraud and, by association, so is St. Petersburg.

Gogol had hoped his play would pinpoint his countrymen's spiritual deficiencies and cause them to inspect their souls and the culture around them. Instead, the audience merely enjoyed the comedy and became angry at his portrayal of officialdom and St. Petersburg. Gogol was very unhappy with this response: "I am not angry because my literary enemies, whose talents are for sale, curse me. But I am sad to see the universal ignorance which moves the capital; it is sad when you see how the stupidest opinion of a writer shamed and spat upon by them has an effect on them and leads them by the nose" (*Letters* 56). Increasingly, Gogol does not distinguish between the city of St. Petersburg and his readers; they are one and the same to him.

In another letter Gogol emphasized the ambivalence he felt about writing in the future about St. Petersburg because of the general reaction to *The Inspector General*: "I am not embittered by the present violence against my play; my sad future concerns me. Provincial life is already held weakly in my memory, its features are already pale; but Petersburg life is bright before my eyes, its colors are vivid and sharp in my memory. Its slightest characteristic—and then how will my countrymen talk?" (*Letters* 57). While Gogol acknowledged St. Petersburg's sensitivity to criticism, he also felt that city life was all he knew. He complained that if people living in the capital were sensitive to a satire about six provincial officials, they would be outraged if he parodied city officials—a treatment he felt they deserved (*Letters* 56-57). Gogol recognized that the censors and his readers did not understand his intentions, but he also acknowledged their influence on his subject matter.

In 1836 Gogol left Russia altogether and returned only for a few short trips through the remainder of his life. Shortly after moving to Rome, Gogol began to work again. Because of the reaction of the audience and the censors to *The Inspector General*, however, Gogol decided not to complete the comedy he was writing.

The play he abandoned, *The Vladimir Cross*, was set in St. Petersburg and was an overt critique of the capital and its upper class. Instead, he turned to writing *Dead Souls*. In *Dead Souls*, Gogol explored the idea of a landowner who desired to buy deceased serfs. Unlike in his earlier works, St. Petersburg seems to play almost no role in the novel; yet, a close reading shows Gogol's sharp interest in the capital as a cultural icon: "The locus of the negative had been identified in the work as Petersburg, the capital of illusion.... But it is no longer the denizens of Petersburg that interest Gogol; it is the appeal of the idea of Petersburg, whose potency is here demonstrated even in the remote heart of provincial Russia" (Fanger, *Creation* 133). While Gogol did not relinquish his plans for critiquing St. Petersburg culture, his disclosure became more covert in *Dead Souls*. Still, according to his letters, Gogol knew that thoughtful readers who recognized his satire of St. Petersburg would be upset with the portrayal; hence, he decided to mask his critique in humor (*Letters* 56).

Gogol believed the comedic affect of his work would allow his readers to recognize their own faults: "Through a process we might today call consciousness-raising, the individual reader would be moved to a new life in the moral sense; and readers in their collectivity would be moved to a new consciousness of community, which might replace in real life the social void depicted in the book" (Fanger, "Gogol" 89). Gogol hoped St. Petersburg readers would perceive the shallowness of the villagers (who were in effect copying them) and relate this to their own lives. By writing in contradictions and oppositions, Gogol was able to expose the spiritual decay of St. Petersburg and its elite social class (Fanger, "Gogol" 91). Thus, Gogol used comedy to covertly attack the capital.

In light of this biographical information, a careful investigation reveals that Gogol imbedded his beliefs in *Dead Souls* in such a way that he hoped would both admonish and encourage his readers. Gogol does this by setting the village of N. in contrast to St. Petersburg's supposed splendor and sophistication. Although Gogol's methods are subtle, a pairing of the locales entails a critique of the capital both directly by comparison and indirectly by contrast. Gogol manipulates this situation in several ways: the villagers of N. are shown to be ignorant in their beliefs about St. Petersburg and even unable to mimic their ill-chosen models. St. Petersburg is portrayed as an imitation of foreign cities; and both the village of N. and St. Petersburg represent the false values and shallow religiosity Gogol associated with foreign culture that was infiltrating Russia—especially in the upper classes.

The villagers' copy of a copy is hilarious and their actions are profoundly removed from the original high culture they believe they are representing. These

undercurrents lend the book a certain haunted quality beneath the surface comedy: “The background against which *Dead Souls* is set is the awareness that the world is somehow in a bad state, that it has taken the wrong path, that it is somehow cancerous and has irretrievably fallen prey to the devil” (Setchkarev 187). Ultimately, recognition of the village of N.’s contrast to St. Petersburg aids the reader in understanding much of the humor in Gogol’s celebrated work.

The opening description of the village of N. shows its lack of refinement and is paired with St. Petersburg: “In the beginning one never sees the whole broad flow and volume of a thing. The entrance to any town whatever, even a capital, is always somehow pale” (247). As seen in the following examples, the village of N. is shown to be like St. Petersburg at the same time as it is opposite of the capital. Additionally, the atmosphere of both locales conveys an impression of distrust similar to the way St. Petersburg and the village function in *The Inspector General*: “Petersburg is peripheral—almost a legend which fosters both the fear . . . and awe of its brilliant social life and assemblage of important personages. . . . The important point is the function of the name of the capital at the outset and the mood it creates” (Nordby 272, 280). A similar mood is evident in *Dead Souls*.

The opening descriptions in *Dead Souls* show how the villagers attempt to make their town a smaller replica of St. Petersburg but fail at every point, though the town is said to have “yielded in nothing to other provincial towns” (7): “The houses were of one, two, and one and a half stories, with those eternal mezzanines so beautiful in the opinion of provincial architects. In some places the houses seemed lost amid the street, wide as a field, and the never-ending wooden fences; in others they clustered together, and here one could note more animation and human commotion” (7). The narrator describes the mezzanines and height of the buildings as if they were a special feature similar to Peter the Great’s mandate that all the buildings in St. Petersburg must conform to strict height standards; however, the phrase “in the opinion of the provincial architects” throws a shadow over this supposed beauty by implying that the architects are not “certified” or at least not “city” architects. It is also implied that the village architects are the only ones who find their buildings attractive.

Further, the houses have an animated quality as if they had a mind of their own: they “get lost” and “cluster” together. This life-like quality, however, is not cultured, as the narrator intimates, but rather reminiscent of confused chickens. While the liveliness of the village is humorous, it also signals the chaos Gogol associated with foreign philosophies: “The Enlightenment was a foreign concept, which Russians associated especially with France. I think this explains why Gogol’s later landscapes of Paris are virtually identical to his landscapes of Petersburg, built

as they are on images of light, disorder, fragmentation, and rapid movement” (Maguire 78). The disorder of the houses ties the village to St. Petersburg, foreign ideals, and to Gogol’s beliefs about art: “Gogol does seem to have been convinced of the notion that harmony is essential to beauty and truth—and it is to a revelation of this harmony that art aspires. Further, art, so far as it has an effect upon mankind, brings peace, tranquillity, and, perhaps most important of all reconciliation” (Zeldin 37). Since the chaos of the village of N. lacks harmony, by Gogol’s tenets it is dishonest. The turmoil represented by the houses will quickly become apparent in the villagers’ lives and actions.

In many ways the introduction of Chichikov parallels the introduction of the village of N.: Chichikov is stereotyped by the narrator as a “middling sort” of traveler stopping at a typical village. All of his physical attributes are common, and the reader discerns that the protagonist is neither the classic hero nor the evil villain. Soon, Chichikov is also set in contrast to St. Petersburg and used to elucidate Gogol’s larger theme. In language that strongly echoes a letter to his mother describing the city of St. Petersburg, Gogol forces Chichikov to decide whether he wants to belong to the men associated with the cultured elite. These villagers “were the slim ones, who kept mincing around the ladies; some of these were of a kind difficult to distinguish from Petersburgers, having side-whiskers . . . sitting down casually beside the ladies, speaking French and making the ladies laugh in the same way as in Petersburg” (11). The thin gentlemen are distinguished, young, educated and feel comfortable in mixed company.

In deciding if he wants to join the thin men, Chichikov must determine if he can fulfill the cultivated role of a St. Petersburg elite, or if he wants to mingle with those more like himself: “The other kind of men consisted of the fat ones, or those like Chichikov—that is, not all that fat, and yet not thin either. These, contrawise, looked askance at the ladies and backed away from them, and only kept glancing around to see whether the governor’s servant was setting up a green table for whist” (11). The fat gentlemen are not as socially nimble as their counterparts and include the class of men to which the officials belong: “Alas! the fat know better than the slim how to handle their affairs in this world. . . . Whereas the fat never occupy indirect positions, but always direct ones, and once they sit somewhere, they sit reliably and firmly, so that the position will sooner creak and sag under them than they will fall off of it” (11). It is these “fat men” that Chichikov decides to join and become associated with throughout the remainder of the work. In this way, Gogol both mocks the St. Petersburg gentlemen who only care about superficial conversation and manners and the provincial officials who do not even possess those shallow capabilities.

In a later chapter, the narrator of *Dead Souls* explains that the distinction between the fat and thin men is important because it emphasizes the spiritual state of the men. Just as Maguire argued that the heroes in “Nevsky Prospect” reflected the frivolous St. Petersburg society around them, so the men in these passages reflect the larger village of N. and the capital it parodies. The narrator claims that “to him those gentlemen of the grand sort mean decidedly nothing, who live in Petersburg or Moscow, spend their time pondering what they would like to eat the next day and what dinner to devise for the day after, and who will not partake of that dinner without first sending a pill into their mouths” (59). These refined gentlemen are preoccupied with the type of food they eat and are overly concerned with their health. They are careful to eat only the finest fare—or at least the most fascinating. They “swallow oysters, sea spiders, and other marvels” (59). Despite their abilities to buy fine food, however, the rich men are still envious of the middling sort: “More than one gentleman of the grand sort would instantly sacrifice half of his peasant souls and half of his estates, mortgaged and unmortgaged, with all improvements on a foreign or Russian footing, only so as to have a stomach such as a gentleman of the middling sort has” (59). Unfortunately, riches alone cannot acquire such a physique (60).

The town officials are correlated with the noble diners of St. Petersburg who feast on delicacies and extravagant foods. These luxuries are associated with foreign influences by Sobakevich: “It was the German and French doctors who invented it all ... they fancy they can take on the Russian stomach too! ... They say: enlightenment, enlightenment, enlightenment, and this enlightenment—poof! I’d use another word only it wouldn’t be proper at the table” (98). According to Sobakevich, when the foreign foods are brought into Russia they become tainted. They are no longer “enlightened” but pointlessly borrowed. This is Gogol’s serious censure of the Enlightenment cloaked in humor. When Sobakevich explains he would rather have honest food, Gogol implies he needs honest Russian spirituality to be fulfilled: “With me it is not like that.... Better that I eat just two courses, but eat my fill, as my soul demands” (98). The type of stomach a gentleman has implies the spiritual state of his soul. The fat men seem to be heading in the right direction in Gogol’s mind because they like honest Russian fare, but the villagers of N. are overly gluttonous; they turn a good thing into a bad one by indulging too much. On the other hand, the gentlemen of St. Petersburg deny their dietary needs by eating foreign food. Hence even when their stomachs are full, they cannot be satisfied.

Although Chichikov initially chooses to associate with the fat men, his role is more complex because the fat men are merely opposites of the St. Petersburg men.

The villagers see Chichikov as a St. Petersburg type of man when he takes on the role of the hero-millionaire after acquiring the dead souls; but the reader sees Chichikov as a scoundrel who is not intelligent or willful enough to be truly evil. As a traveler, Chichikov moves between the roles symbolized by the fat and thin men but never quite fits into either group. Thus, he fulfills the same role as the village of N. in an individualized form: Chichikov both copies the St. Petersburgian ineffectively and is shown in direct contrast to the ideal man.

In turn, both the village of N. and Chichikov represent (though not realistically) Russia as a whole in Gogol's eyes. As one scholar notes, the "actions are not limited to a circle of personal relationships, but, rather, present these relationships as components of a collective life" (Ivanov 201). This allows the individuals to stand for a microcosm and in turn "that social confederation to whose entertainment and edification the comic action is directed" (Ivanov 201). Gogol's damning portrayal of the village of N. and St. Petersburg condemns Russia for what he saw as "an all-embracing form of spiritual and emotional stagnation that he attributed to the divisive effects of modern European civilization" (Woodward 38). I disagree with Woodward; Gogol did not see St. Petersburg's spiritual state as stagnant. He considered it warped or twisted from the "genuine" or "true." Gogol did see these negative effects entering Russia from outside of her borders:

Both in the masses and in individuals taken separately "he discerned evidence of a profound dissatisfaction" with "that perfection to which modern civilization and enlightenment have raised us" and a no less profound aspiration to attain, with the aid of "a genuine law of behavior," to "a kind of desired mean (seredina)." (Woodward 38)

According to Woodward, Gogol recognized that his fellow countrymen were not fulfilled by their false spirituality, and he hoped to provide them with a truth through his writings.

In *Dead Souls*, St. Petersburg remains peripheral and legendary due to the criticism that was leveled at Gogol for his earlier representation of the capital. This "otherness," however, allows the villagers to interpret loosely and project their own fears and desires on the capital and also allows Gogol to critique St. Petersburg indirectly. As Chichikov wanders down the village streets for the first time, many of Gogol's chief disagreements with Russian society come to light.

The narrator of *Dead Souls* explains that in the business district "one came across signboards all but washed out by rain, with pretzels and boots, or, in one place, with blue trousers pictured on them and the signature of some Warsaw tailor; then a shop with peaked caps, flat caps, and inscribed: VASSILY FYODOROV, FOREIGNER" (7). In addition to this scene being chaotic, the

merchants named are foreign. Another sign indicates the villagers' presumption to fashion: "In another place a picture of a billiard table with two players in tailcoats of the kind worn in our theater by guests who come on stage in the last act. The players were depicted aiming their cues, their arms somewhat twisted back and their legs askew, having just performed an *entrechat* in the air" (7). The billiard players look overdressed and foolish because their posture is awkward. According to the narrator, the shops are further "solidified" by the pronouncement "AND THIS IS THE ESTABLISHMENT" written under the names, but this only serves to heighten the preposterousness of the signs.

In *Dead Souls*, the above description of the signboards serve as a tool or "sign" for interpreting the women's imitation of foreign styles and fashionable culture. The narrator explains, "The ladies of the town of N. were what is called presentable, and in this respect they may boldly be held up as an example to all others" (159). While it is the men who are "presenting" their wives as showpieces, the narrator implies the women are the source of their artificiality: "As for knowing how to behave themselves, keeping tone, observing etiquette, a host of proprieties of the subtlest sort, and above all following fashion down to the least detail, in this they surpassed even the ladies of Petersburg and Moscow" (159). St. Petersburg and Moscow are held up as the epitome of prosperity and propriety; the ladies of N., if they outclassed the women from the capitals, would be the fashion leaders of the country.

Though Gogol's concern with women's manners seems excessive, he chose to use them as an example of his greatest practical and philosophical arguments against the St. Petersburg nobility. By doing this, Gogol was taking part in a larger conversation within Russia that discussed whether Russia should copy her culture from foreign ideals or create them from her own heritage. During Gogol's time, Russia was trying to find and balance her ideas of culture and society: "More often than not, the obsession with Russianness, which lay at the heart of cultural discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, moved between two poles: an imitation of European ways and a discovery of indigenous values" (Maguire 135). Russia had to decide how she was going to "find herself," and Gogol was intent on expressing his viewpoint on the matter. It is for this reason, perhaps, his portrayal of the women of N. is so damning—Gogol found imitation of foreign ideals to be one of the most dangerous influences in Russia as he shows in the following examples.

As Chichikov proceeds through the village of N., Gogol continues to play with imitation as the narrator describes other merchants: "Some places there were tables simply standing in the street, with nuts, soap, and gingerbreads resembling soap"

(7). Even the gingerbread mimics something wholly unlike itself and entirely different in function—like the merchants, their signs, and the village of N. While the gingerbread simulates soap, the merchants seem to resemble honest businessmen. As he did in *The Inspector General*, Gogol creates humor between these disparities of common life: “*The Inspector General* is intrinsically and Aristophanically comic in that the triviality, inanity, and depravity of a way of life based on a generally accepted and unshakable hierarchy of rights that sanctions swindling, fleecing, tyrannizing, coercing, and repressing, are presented as constituting a certain harmonious and foreordained social cosmos” (Ivanov 201). Gogol makes it possible for the reader to simultaneously accept and reject the rationale of the village.

After Chichikov inspects the houses and stores, he turns his attention to the town garden “which consisted of skinny trees, badly rooted, propped by supports formed in triangles, very beautifully painted with green oil paint” (7). The villagers ignore the true state of their trees and make up a myth about them: “However, though these trees were no taller than reeds, it was said of them in the newspapers, as if they described some festive decorations, that ‘our town has been beautified, thanks to the solicitude of the civic ruler, by a garden consisting of shady, wide-branching trees that provide coolness on hot days’” (7). The myth soon reaches hyperbolic proportions: “It was very moving to see the hearts of the citizens flutter in an abundance of gratitude and pour forth streams of tears as a token of thankfulness to mister governor” (8). The character of the town is reflected in the citizens’ artificial feelings and reactions to the ugly trees.

The introduction of the village of N. is similar to the disordered scenery and characters of St. Petersburg in “Nevsky Prospect.” The story portrays Nevsky Prospect as the ideal Russian street: “There is nothing better than Nevsky Prospect, at least not in Petersburg; for there it is everything. What does this street—the beauty of our capital—not shine with!” (Gogol, “Nevsky” 245). The narrator describes this splendor for several pages, but much of the account is tongue-in-cheek or satirical. “What a quick phantasmagoria is performed on it in the course of a single day! How many changes it undergoes in the course of a single day and night!” (Gogol, “Nevsky” 246). The narrator implies that while Nevsky Prospect seems to be the height of beauty and refinement in Russia, it is a copy of foreign cities and false ideals.

As the “best street,” Nevsky Prospect supposedly represents the ideal in Russia. However, Gogol finds these standards—its wealth, foreign influences, “mercantile interests,” and the “exhibitions” of the elite class—to be ugly and deceitful: “This second part of ‘Nevsky Prospect’ does also, of course, contain a satire on banality, on *poshlost*. Indeed, it may be—and often has been—read as a social at-

tack on the mores and the emptiness of the Russian capital in Gogol's day.... The point is that it is all a lie" (Zeldin 42). While Gogol critiques St. Petersburg for the same reasons in both "Nevsky Prospect" and *Dead Souls*, his stylistic techniques in the later work are more mature and covert. Still, the overt critique of St. Petersburg in "Nevsky Prospect" is important because it makes clear that Gogol's images of confusion, disorder, and strange light in a city are indications of the characters' artificiality and spiritual deprivation.

Gogol believed that Russians, if they wished to express themselves honestly, should do so in Russian. In *Dead Souls* the narrator claims the strength of the Russian language is derived from its ability to be precise:

Aptly uttered is as good as written, an axe cannot destroy it. And oh, how apt is everything that comes from deep Russia, where there are not German, or Finnish, or any other tribes, but all is native natural-born, lively and pert Russian wit ... in one line you are portrayed from head to foot! (108)

The narrator claims the more "pure" the Russian language is—the fewer foreign influences there are in it—the stronger and more superior it is: "Strongly do the Russian folk express themselves! And if they bestow a little word on someone, it will go with him and his posterity for generations, and he will drag it with him into the service, and into retirement, and to Petersburg, and to the ends of the earth (108). The narrator mentions Petersburg specifically because this is where foreign languages, under the pretext of culture, were spoken the most.

The narrator in *Dead Souls* grants that other languages have their admirable qualities (although the quality of French is cited as negative, as is the German): "A knowledge of hearts and a wise comprehension of life resound in the word of the Briton; like a nimble fop the short-lived word of the Frenchman flashes and scatters; whimsically does the German contrive his lean, intelligent word, not accessible to all" (109). Still, the narrator contends, Russian is the best language: "There is no word so sweeping, so pert, so bursting from beneath the very heart, so ebullient and vibrant with life, as an aptly spoken Russian word" (109). Gogol's strong belief in the qualities of the Russian language drove his attack on the use of foreign languages by the upper class of Russia in general and represented by the elitist class of St. Petersburg in particular. He portrays his beliefs in a number of passages concerning the ladies of the village of N.

In one passage, the ladies of N. are careful to speak as "properly" and "stylishly" as possible: "It must also be said that the ladies of the town of N. were distinguished, like many Petersburg ladies, by an extraordinary prudence and propriety in their words and expressions" (160). While this was considered a commendable trait for ladies in Gogol's day, their imitated propriety is false and becomes out-

landish and humorous: “Never would they say: ‘I blew my nose,’ ‘I sweated,’ ‘I spat,’ but rather: ‘I relieved my nose’ or ‘I resorted to my handkerchief’” (160). The women’s gentility, in addition to making them sound asinine, botches the subjects of their conversation because it is imprecise: “It was in no case possible to say: ‘This glass or this plate stinks.’ And it was even impossible to say anything at it, but instead they would say: ‘This glass is being naughty,’ or something of that sort” (160). While the women are trying to create artful metaphors, they are constructing odd sentences and silly phrases and thereby decreasing the simple directness of the Russian language: “Gogol contrasts the characters’ use of natural and artificial, constructed speech. He uses similes and metaphors that awkwardly portray some natural thing as an artifact or vice versa” (Lahti 144).

In addition to distorting Russian with their silly phrases, the ladies of N., like their St. Petersburg counterparts, also regularly speak French: “To ennoble the Russian language still more, almost half of its words were banished from conversation altogether, and therefore it was quite often necessary to have recourse to the French language, although there, in French, it was a different matter: there such words were allowed as were much coarser than those aforementioned” (160). Thus, the ladies are shown to be hypocritical and dishonest because they say things in French they will not say in Russian. Yet Gogol believed the language one spoke was not a matter of manners, but of understanding one’s culture, country, and self. For him, a misuse of language led to misunderstandings of a much larger scope.

These types of misunderstandings are illustrated in a conversation between two women of N. Their exchange highlights how their “elegant” speech gets Chichikov and everyone else in trouble. The women begin conversing about the news that Korobochka has brought to one of them about Chichikov. Although the women do not realize how ridiculous their conversation sounds, Gogol uses their dialogue to satirize the salons where the aristocrats spoke French. One woman begins with a mispronunciation which the other does not catch: “‘It’s a whole story, do you understand, a story, *sconapel istwar*,’ the visitor said with an expression almost of despair and in an utterly imploring voice” (184). The speaker had thought she was saying “*ce qu’on appelle histoire* (‘What’s known as a story, or scandal’)” (399). Gogol’s readers, who knew French themselves, should have caught the ladies’ mispronunciation. While they were laughing at the ignorance of the provincial speakers, they were also effectively laughing at themselves for speaking French in the first place. Gogol uses humor to attack the upper-class custom of speaking foreign languages because he feels they are detrimental to the Russian language

and in turn to Russia as a whole, but he knows the Russian elite would not be interested in a confrontational or serious critique.

In *Dead Souls*, much of the conversation surrounds the misunderstanding of Chichikov's identity and actions. In addition to the other grammatical *faux pas* the ladies make, they also say "orerre" instead of *horreur* and "scandaleusities" instead of scandals (399). More importantly, their French complicates and confuses the news Korobochka has related about Chichikov buying dead souls: "'But, as you will, only it's not dead souls here, there's something else hidden in it.' 'I confess, I think so, too,' the simply agreeable lady said, not without surprise" (186). The women are so absorbed in the style of their conversation that they do not consider the import of it.

According to Russian scholar V.V. Vinogradov, the women's speech also contains many Gallicisms in addition to their botched French. As these provincial women copy their urban counterparts, they prove their ignorance of fashion by using outdated phrases and "emotional hyperbolism" ridiculed by the St. Petersburg elite that the women of N. so admire. Moreover, Gogol included "new emotional phraseological devices to depict, in a comic light, the 'poetry of fancy'" (221). In effect, Gogol proved the Russian language was adequate for Russian writers, readers, and speakers; they had no need for foreign languages.

After providing cues for how to understand the boundaries of the Russian language, Gogol turns his attention to the cobblestone streets that represent the perimeter of the village of N. and are given particular attention in several passages. As the border between town and country, the cobblestones supposedly demarcate the line between the cultured and the uncultured. In the text, the pavement is first mentioned by Chichikov to the governor as a compliment: "He hinted, somehow in passing, that one drove into his province as into paradise, that the roads everywhere were like velvet, and of great praise" (9). Although the compliment seems a little too complimentary, its excess is not apparent until Chichikov's first journey out of the village of N.; then, the real state of the town streets becomes apparent: "The britzka went bouncing over the cobbles. Not without joy was the striped tollgate beheld in the distance, letting it be known that the pavement, like any other torment, would soon come to an end; and after a few more good hard bumps of his head against the sides, Chichikov was at last racing over soft ground" (18). Chichikov was lying to the governor and playing on his pride that the streets were a modern improvement over the country roads. Although Chichikov sees himself as a city gentleman, he finds the "soft ground" of the country roads to be superior in comfort. In addition to the cobblestones, the tollgate is an important physical and rhetorical device: it signals a gate, a price to be paid, a governing

power, and the official enclosure of the village of N. As a scoundrel, Chichikov is eager to leave authority behind him so he may go about his business of buying dead souls; as a traveler, Chichikov is where he feels most comfortable back on the road.

Even while Chichikov is in the countryside, Gogol subtly manages to slip in allusions to St. Petersburg. In particular, he critiques the Russian educational system when Chichikov visits Manilov. To prove his eldest son's cultured education, Manilov asks him to name the best city in France. After the boy answers "Paris" (27), Manilov turns his attention to Russia: "And what is our best city?" Manilov asks again. The tutor again turned up his attention. 'Petersburg,' replied Themistoclus. 'And besides that?' 'Moscow,' replied Themistoclus" (27). Gogol has purposefully ordered these "best cities" in a hierarchy. With Manilov's pretensions to culture, especially French culture, he is first concerned that his son knows about "Paris." It is only after the boy names St. Petersburg—the Russian city closest to a European prototype—that Manilov considers Moscow.

As Manilov hoped, Chichikov is duly impressed with the boy: "The smarty! The sweetie!" Chichikov said to that. 'No, really...', he continued, turning to Manilov with a look of some amazement, 'such knowledge, at such an age! I must tell you, this child will have great abilities'" (27). For a child of eight, these answers are no great accomplishment, but, as in every compliment, Chichikov flatters. Manilov, however, is even more unaware of the boy's abilities: "I intend him for the diplomatic line. Themistoclus,' he went on, again addressing the boy, 'want to be an ambassador?' 'Yes,' replied Themistoclus, chewing his bread and wagging his head right and left" (28). Themistoclus *does* prove his diplomacy by supplying Manilov and Chichikov with the answers they desire to hear. Yet he is not very smart, as evidenced by shaking his head "no" while he is saying "yes." He is a miniature incarnation of his father in many respects and proves how artificiality engenders artificiality—how the falseness of a surrounding like St. Petersburg or its fantasy can shape people's lives. It is only after Chichikov's return to the village of N. that the artificiality pervasive throughout the work begins to have consequences for the characters.

When Chichikov reenters the village after a successful buying spree of dead souls, the tollgate is enshrouded as if the hero's return has suspect import: "It was thick dusk by the time they drove up to the town. Shadow and light were thoroughly mingled, and objects themselves also seemed to mingle. The particolored tollgate took on some indefinite hue; the mustache of the soldier standing sentry seemed to be on his forehead, way above his eyes, and his nose was as if not there at all" (131). The imagery pairs the village of N. with the demonic and deceitfully

beautiful quality of St. Petersburg and the Enlightenment: the village of N. (represented by the tollgate and sentry) and Chichikov are not what they seem. The narrator does not tell us what they are; instead, he leaves the reader with an image of absence—something “not there at all”—like the dead souls and the spiritual emptiness of the villagers.

The shadow and light images when Chichikov reenters the village of N. recall the last scene of “Nevsky Prospect,” when the devil is lighting the lamps during “that mysterious time when lamps endow everything with some enticing and wondrous light” (250). The story concludes with a description of Nevsky Prospect counter to the one in the beginning: “Strangest of all are the events that take place on Nevsky Prospect.... Everything is deception, everything is a dream, everything is not what it seems to be!” (277). According to the narrator, this deceitfulness is attributable to the devil himself: “Along with the street lamp, everything breathes deceit. It lies all the time, this Nevsky Prospect, but most of all at the time when night heaves its dense mass upon it ... and the devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really looks” (278). Thus, “Nevsky Prospect” serves as a type of foreshadowing for *Dead Souls*. Once again St. Petersburg and the village of N. are shown to be parallel in their deceitfulness and artificiality. Furthermore, the reader realizes that Chichikov’s demise is imminent because he not only does not recognize this artificiality but also practices it.

On Chichikov’s return to the village, the cobblestones again prove to be uncomfortable for the road-weary traveler: “A rumbling and jolting made it known that the britzka had come to the pavement” (131). Although Chichikov does not know it yet, the cobblestones will not be the only way the little village jolts him; the village of N. is beginning to change: “The streetlamps were not yet burning, only here and there the windows of the houses were beginning to light up, and in nooks and crooks there occurred scenes and conversations inseparable from the time of day in all towns where there are many soldiers, coachmen, workers” (131). The narrator’s observation that these are typical people and scenes for the daytime hours seems entirely correct until he continues to describe “beings of a special kind, in the form of ladies in red shawls and shoes without stockings, who flit about like bats at the streetcorners” (131). These “beings of a special kind” are the village’s counterparts to the Nevsky Prospect prostitutes. They prey on “the slim clerks with canes, who were probably returning home after a stroll out of town” (131). While the women are undoubtedly guilty, the clerks’ culpability is in question by the words “probably returning.” Either way, night is coming with its reversals and boding of darker things for Chichikov similar to the fate of the protagonist of “Nevsky Prospect.”

The hero of *Dead Souls* is oblivious to the dusk and his impending fate: “Chichikov paid them no notice” (131). He finally became aware of his surroundings when loud yells broke into his reverie: “From time to time there reached his ears certain, apparently feminine exclamations: ‘Lies, you drunkard! I never allowed him no such rudeness!’ or ‘Don’t fight, you boor, go to the police, I’ll prove it to you there!’” (131). The traveler, Chichikov, is unexpectedly thrust back into real life: “In short, words which suddenly pour like boiling pitch over some dreamy twenty-year-old youth, when he is returning from the theater.... He is in heaven ... and suddenly over him there resound, like thunder, the fatal words, and he sees that he is back on earth, and even on Haymarket Square ... workaday life again goes strutting before him” (132). Chichikov, just returning from Plyushkin’s, where he gained many dead souls, has been in a dream world. But even St. Petersburg, maybe especially St. Petersburg in the famous Haymarket Square, has its plethora of common people and life. This scene foreshadows Chichikov’s “fall from grace” with the villagers of N.

When Chichikov enters the village, it is dusk. Darkness falls completely by the time the landowner Korobochka enters the town, and she depicts the devil coming to change everything and “light the streetlamps” as happened in “Nevsky Prospect.” The village of N. is compared to St. Petersburg where everything becomes reversed and not as they seem: “The horses kept falling on their knees, because they were not shod and, besides, evidently had little familiarity with the comforts of town cobblestones” (178). Korobochka’s arrival in the village of N. is a reversal of Chichikov’s departure in several ways: the horses are leaving the comfort of the soft roads; a country woman is entering a town; and Korobochka is bringing the news of Chichikov’s dealings that will figuratively bring him to his knees. While Chichikov brought lies to the countryside, Korobochka is bringing truth to the town—though she is not aware nor could understand her role.

At the end of *Dead Souls*, the reader sees the cobblestones one last time as Chichikov leaves the village of N. in a great hurry. By returning to the country road, Chichikov is removing himself to a place of safety and comfort: “The carriage again started its jiggling and jolting, owing to the pavement, which, as we know, possessed a bouncing force. With a sort of indefinite feeling he gazed at the houses, wall, fences, and streets, which, also as if hopping for their own part, were slowly moving backwards” (224). Chichikov was “bounced” out of town by the gossip that he was going to steal the governor’s daughter; like the cobblestones that are artificial and unsatisfactory, the motive for Chichikov’s exile is not the real reason he should be banished. For his part, Chichikov does not really know what happened; his “indefinite feeling” reflects the amorphous role he has played

all along. While the villagers are moving backwards in their understanding of him, Chichikov is moving forward out of their lives.

Overall, Gogol's disillusionment with St. Petersburg and its inhabitants is shown through his covert portrayal of them in *Dead Souls*. By linking the village of N. to the capital through the types of homes the villagers built, the business district of foreigners, and the town garden, Gogol critiques the splendor of St. Petersburg that he sees as a false imitation of foreign cities. The villagers, themselves, are both a parody and a mirror of the upper classes that lived in St. Petersburg during Gogol's time. The women's dress, excessive manners, and conversations in French, as well as the men's eating habits speak to the spiritual deficiencies that Gogol perceived of his fellow countrymen. Chichikov, specifically, "travels" between the roles of hero and villain without fulfilling either of them. He both mimics the esteemed gentleman of St. Petersburg and becomes a satirical distortion of the values they hold. Through these various angles in *Dead Souls*, Gogol extends the critique of St. Petersburg he began in "Nevsky Prospect" and weaves it into a complex and multifaceted metaphor. ✨

Notes

¹ Quotations from Gogol's letters have been taken from the authoritative edition of *Letters of Nikolai Gogol* translated by Carl R. Proffer. All other Russian texts are referred to in translation in order to make this paper as accessible as possible to a broad audience.

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