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## Gogol's Petersburg

This most eccentric of Russian writers was not even Russian. Gogol came from the Ukraine, of a family of provincial Cossack gentry. He was born on April Fool's Day, and as it happens, he wasn't even named Gogol. His real name was Nikolai Ivanovskii; he chose the pseudonym "Gogol" because of the similarity of his nose to the beak of the golden-eyed duck known as a "gogol." In childhood, he used to sign his juvenile scribbles with a pen-name consisting of four zeros, "0000."

This Ukrainian country bumpkin arrived in St. Petersburg in 1828 at the tender age of eighteen. The new capital was just over a century old and its population had already reached 450,000. Built on forty-four islands in the Neva River delta, crisscrossed by dozens of channels, straddled by hundreds of bridges, it dazzled everyone with its remarkable architecture and sculpture. The city was (and still is) the most un-Russian of Russian cities. Through the proverbial window which Peter the Great hacked into the West, in flooded everything European: costumes, manners, languages, religions, toys, food, art, architecture, sculpture, music. On his way to this miraculous city, Gogol intentionally bypassed Moscow, "so as not to ruin the first impression of his triumphant advent to Petersburg." However, the country bumpkin was initially unimpressed by this Russian "Venice of the North." "I imagined it much more beautiful, more magnificent," he wrote to his mother on April 30, 1829, "and the rumors which some spread about it are false." Gogol claimed that "Petersburg does not resemble any other European metropolis, including Moscow,"\* but these were cities he had never seen. It wasn't until three years later, in 1832, that he visited Moscow. Something in Petersburg reminded him of a colonial American town, too, though Gogol had never set foot in America either:

In general each capital is characterized by its people, who press their stamp of nationality on it; but Petersburg has no such character stamp: the foreigners who settled here have made themselves at home and in no way look like foreigners, while the Russians have picked up a foreign tinge and are neither one thing nor the other.

Gogol found it difficult to grasp the dynamics of the city and its inhabitants. Compared with the rowdy and colorful Ukrainian Cossacks whom he knew so well,

\*Quotations from Gogol's letters are the author's translations; quotations from the stories are based on David Magarshack's translation of *The Overcoat and Other Tales of Gogol and Esyl* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965).

Petersburgers seemed bleak and soulless. "An extraordinary silence reigns here," he observes, "no spirit shines in the people, there are nothing but government servants and functionaries, all discussing their departments and committees . . ." The house in which Gogol lived for eighty rubles a month did not give him much consolation either. It contained "two tailors, one *marchandise de modes*, a cobbler, a stocking manufacturer, a mender of broken china, a shrinker and dyer, a confectioner, a grocer, a place for the storage of winter clothes, a tobacconist, and, for good measure, a licensed midwife." Gogol was especially impressed by the gilded signboards which he dutifully described to his mother. Indeed, a few of them migrated into the opening scenes of *Dead Souls* and into the tale "The Nose." (Pushkin had introduced a similar device in "The Coffinmaker.")

The city that Gogol immortalized in his *Petersburg Tales* ultimately came out conspicuously void of its typical landmarks, such as the architecture, the river, canals, bridges, statues. Not a single park or tree was mentioned by Gogol, nor were the proverbial white nights, thapsodized by every Russian writer. In contrast to Pushkin's depiction of the place, Gogol's cityscape lacked geometry, absent were the horizontal and vertical aspects, and there was no tension between the chaos of waters and the cosmos of the stone, as in Pushkin's "The Bronze Horseman," which succeeded in canonizing "The Petersburg Myth." Gogol's Petersburg was made neither of stone nor water. Perhaps made of fog, it was immaterial and often ominous.

This author's first rendering of Petersburg was sinister and hyperbolic. The provincial blacksmith Yakula, riding the devil, descends upon the city at night:

. . . buildings kept growing from the earth; bridges trembled; carriages flew; cabbies and outriders shouted; snow swished from under the myriad wheels, flying from all directions; pedestrians huddled, pushing against the buildings; their huge shadows scaled the walls, the roofs, the chimneys. ("The Night Before Christmas," 1832)

In general, though, the everyday prosaic Petersburg was for Gogol predominantly the fiefdom of the state bureaucracy. He himself worked here briefly as a government clerk, "copying out the stale fantasies of department heads." The emergence of the low-level civil servant (soon to become the stock protagonist of Russian literature) was a direct consequence of Peter the Great's administrative reforms. Unattractive and utterly un-Romantic, the notorious Russian clerk was one of the thousands climbing the civil service ladder of fourteen ranks to earn a higher title and the rank of nobility. He was not a very pleasant creature: either a petty dictator toward his underlings who was simultaneously sycophantic toward his superiors, or alternately a down-trodden, meek, miserable, inarticulate, subhuman creature, the quinescentual underdog who incited in Gogol's reader pity and laughter, though it was "laughter through tears."

Gogol's Petersburg was an atomistic collection of people locked into meaningless rituals, obsessed with rank and appearance, with souls deadier than the "dead souls." In contemplating the city's population, Gogol was struck by the utter lack of social interaction: "there are the aristocrats, the government employees, the tradesmen, the British, the Germans, the merchants—all form completely separate circles . . . Each of

these circles, if you look closer, consists of a multitude of smaller circles, which also keep apart from one another." ("The Petersburg Notes," 1836)

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The only place where this mysterious society displayed itself in full splendor was the "all-powerful" Nevsky Avenue:

I am sure that not one of her arcanic civil servants would exchange Nevsky Avenue for all the treasures of the world. Not only the young gallant of twenty-five, with the splendid moustache and the immaculate morning coat, but even the man with white hair sprouting on his chin and a head as smooth as a silver dish . . . The moment you set foot on Nevsky Avenue, you can almost inhale the carnival air . . . The avenue is the only place in town where you meet people not driven by mercantile pursuits. . . . where even a poor man can combine a stroll with entertainment. ("Nevsky Avenue")

The opening pages of "Nevsky Avenue" treat the reader to a panorama of people parading along the street at various hours of day or night. In the early morning on the Avenue we meet only old men and women begging at the church doors and pastry shops for alms and food. After that, the Avenue begins to fill with working people, and Gogol warns, "At this time it is not proper for ladies to take a walk, because the Russian workman and peasant love to express themselves in vigorous language that is not even heard on the stage." By noon Nevsky Avenue is invaded by tutors and governesses of all nationalities who explain to their fidgety charges that the "signboards over the shops are put there to tell people what they can find inside." From two to three o'clock everyone you meet on Nevsky Avenue "is a paragon of respectability." In a typical passage, Gogol observes:

You will meet here a most wonderful assortment of side-whiskers: a unique pair of whiskers, tucked with astonishing and extraordinary art under the cravat, velvety whiskers, satiny whiskers, and whiskers black as sable or coal—the latter, alas, the exclusive property of the gentlemen from the Foreign Office. Providence has denied black whiskers to those serving in any other ministry, and to their great mortification they have to wear red whiskers.

Whiskers are followed by a procession of dazzling mustaches, "upon which all the perfumes of Arabia have been lavished." Next follow ladies' hats and handkerchiefs, fluttering like a cloud of butterflies "above the black beetles of the male sex." In contrast to the notorious copulence of Muscovite women, in Petersburg "you meet waiats such as you have never seen in your dreams: slender, narrow waiats, waiats no thicker than the neck of a bottle, waiats which seize your heart with apprehension and terror lest these most delightful products of art and nature should be snapped in two at the merest breath from your lips." At three o'clock in the afternoon, Nevsky Avenue fills with the green uniforms of titular counselors, court counselors, collegiate registrars, provincial and collegiate secretaries, and other civil servants. After four o'clock the street is empty, but with the fall of the dusk:

Nevsky Avenue comes to life again and everything begins to stir: it is then that the mysterious time comes when the street lamps invest everything with an alluring, magic light. . . . There is a certain purposefulness. . . . in the air at this time. . . . everybody seems to be walking much faster, everybody seems to be strangely excited. . . . You meet here the same elderly gentlemen who at two o'clock in the afternoon were walking along Nevsky Avenue with such admirable decorum and dignity. Now you will see them vying with the young collegiate registrars in overtaking some lady to peep under her hat, a lady whose full lips and cheeks plastered with rouge many of the strollers find so irresistibly attractive, especially shop managers, handicraftsmen, and merchants in frock-coats of German cut, who walk in groups and usually arm in arm.

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The Marquis de Custine, who visited Petersburg during Gogol's time, was struck by "the never-ending mixture of two very disparate arts: architecture and stage decor. Peter the Great and his heirs perceived their capital as theater." Gogol stages his Petersburg for his implied spectators as an exquisite theatrical performance, yet he also ventures behind the stage's coulisses, into the unglamorous suburbs of Kolonna and Vasiliev Island. So far as the cast goes, Gogol populates his stage not so much with humans as with homunculi: these mechanical puppets are depicted not as integral entities but as a class of beings composed of fragmented costumes and anatomies. Gogol multiplies these fragments and situates them in a long procession of overcoats, collars, tail coats, cravats, hats, mustaches, side-whiskers, waiats, noses, eyes, feet, fingers. In the words of Donald Fanger, this is "fragmentation with a vengeance—and a new rationale for narrative deformation." Indeed, fragmentation and deformation are very much the hallmarks of Gogol's art. The protagonist of "Nevsky Avenue," the opium-smoking artist Piskarev, is not wide of the mark when he conjectures that "some demon had chopped up the whole world into thousands of pieces and then mixed them all together indiscriminately."

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St. Petersburg was Peter's brainchild. Unlike the ancient and centrally located Moscow which was the heart of Holy Russia, Peter's upstart city was an "eccentric" entity in both senses of the word. Located on the northern periphery of the country, it was the most artificial, outlandish, and ghostly of Russian cities. In Gogol's vision these features of "otherness" are multiplied and magnified. The result is the most anomalous and illusory city on the map of Russian literature. The infants here are born with faces of titular counselors and soon acquire what is described as a "hemorrhoidal" color. A runaway nose, belonging to a collegiate assessor, is found in a loaf of bread. Later, dressed in a uniform and sporting a plumed hat, the nose hires a carriage, rides to church, and prays. A civil servant with a cacophonous and fecalistic name falls madly in love with his new overcoat. When it is stolen from him, he dies, but his ghost develops a robust fist and takes to robbing people's overcoats. A one-eyed

tailor grows a torenail the size of a turtle's shell ("kak u cherepakhki cheryg"). Two dogs exchange letters. All this one can call an "inspired joke" (as Pushkin did), but there is a darker side to it all. First we laugh, then we "laugh through tears," but soon the metaphysically attuned reader begins to suspect that behind this hilarious façade lurks some uncanny power, a power that tempts, deceives, corrupts, and, ultimately, destroys. Gogol's tragicomedy is transcendental, moving from laughter to tears, from comic to cosmic, from titillation to trepidation in the blink of any eye. After all, the distance from laughter to slaughter is just one letter.

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Newsy Avenue was the libidinous center of St. Petersburg, full of sexual and olfactory stimuli. (Paying homage to the fact that for Gogol the nose was the most important part of the human anatomy, one is tempted to spell this word "libidinose.") The Avenue was the uncontested domain of a dark, uncanny power. The painter Piskarev glimpses a beautiful woman here—"a perfect Bianca of Peruggino"—and follows her to her house, only to find out that she is a common prostitute. When he chivalrously offers to marry her and to allow her a life of honest love and labor, the fallen angel replies, "How dare you! . . . I am not a laundress or a seamstress that I should take up work." His romantic ideal shattered, the painter goes mad and slits his throat. (In Gogol, the distance from laughter to slaughter is a single letter.) Piskarev's friend, the foppish Lieutenant Pyrogov, follows a blond German girl from Newsy Avenue all the way to her home in Kolonna. His libidinous pursuit ends in a lesser disaster: the girl's Schwabish husband and his two German buddies—all three of them busy and drunken—teach the Russian fop a rough lesson.

When night descends upon the erogenous zones of the city, risqué pictures, banned in daylight, creep up in the illuminated store windows. The titular councillor Akaky Akakievich, after falling platonically in love with his new overcoat, is mesmerized by a picture of a beautiful woman who was "taking off a shoe and showing a very shapely bare leg." A few hours later, emboldened by two glasses of champagne (no doubt the first in his life), the virginal clerk darts after a lady whose "every body part was animated with serpentine motion." Indulgence in libidinous pursuits brings doom to this most pathetic creature of Russian literature: he is robbed of his brand new overcoat and dies of grief, and his soul finds no peace. His vigorous ghost now haunts the night streets, seizing the overcoats of hapless Passersby.

As such examples would suggest, Gogol was an exacting moralist, meting out severe punishments to those who succumbed to the temptations of this perfidious city:

Oh, do not trust that Newsy Avenue! . . . All is deceit, all is a dream, all is not what it seems! . . . And may the Lord save you from peeping under the hems of the ladies! . . . Away, away from the street lamp, for heaven's sake! Pass it quickly, as quickly as you can! . . . It lies at all times, that Newsy Avenue, but most of all when night hovers over it in a thick lump, . . . when the whole city turns into thunder and glitter and myriads of carriages pour off the bridges, outriders shouting and bouncing on their horses, and when the Devil himself lights all the street lamps only to show everything in an unreal guise.

The self-anointed "patron saint" of the city, this ubiquitous devil, is the principal agent of the Petersburg tales. He is no doubt the urban cousin of the country demons that cheerfully roamed and caused mayhem in Gogol's folkloristic tales from the sunny Ukraine. This devil is of a northern variety; he breathes the chills of the Ninth Circle. Shrouded in stupefying and soporific fog, he illuminates and dims this new Babylon, tempts, deceives, and destroys its denizens, according to their particular obsessions and infatuations:

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Throughout his life Gogol tried—mostly unsuccessfully—to exorcise this demon: from his own soul and body through extreme asceticism, and from his art, by fire. Two bonfires mark Gogol's creative path. In the first he burned his first opus, the epic poem "Ganz Kirchelgarten"; in the second auto-da-fé he burned his last work, the conclusion of *Dead Souls*. On his deathbed, Gogol was still trying to rid himself of the demon by starving himself, literally, to death. He was afraid of falling into a "lethargic sleep" and being buried alive. When he died in 1852, leeches were still dangling from the nostrils of his prominent nose. His last words were "Give me the ladder, quickly!" Perhaps an ultimate attempt to escape? In 1929, during the Soviet era, when Gogol's body was exhumed from his grave, he was found lying in his coffin on his belly. According to another testimony, his skull was missing; and according to a third, his coffin was missing altogether. He might have escaped in the end. Be all that as it may, Gogol (or what was left of him) was reburied with pomp at another Moscow cemetery. His old gravestone, in the meantime, was stolen by his disciple Mikhail Bulgakov, author of *The Master and Margarita*—a novel in which the devil in person visits Moscow during Stalin's time. But that is a different city, and a different story.