Foreword

On October 31, 2016, in the final stages of Hillary Clinton's electoral campaign, the German *Huffington Post* printed an article that unfortunately remained entirely unread in America. "Obama and Clinton," its author wrote, "should insist that Trump … finally presents his birth certificate":

> Then everyone would see what so far no one has noticed: Trump is from top to toe a Russian invention. He was not born in 1946 in Queens but in 1842 in a Russian novel: in Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*. There, where he first saw the light of day, he was not called Trump but Nozdrev and instead of an iconic forelock he had iconic side whiskers. This Nozdrev, Gogol tells us, "in a certain respect, was a man of affairs: there was nary a gathering at which he was present where things got along without an affair." Either "his own cronies would be compelled to heave him out," or "he would lie such a blue streak that he himself would become conscience-stricken. And he would tell a pack of lies utterly without any need for it." Nozdrev is a notorious troublemaker. At the Governor's ball he sits down on the dance floor and grabs at the dancers "by their skirts and coat flaps." To disrupt a benefit dinner at the Waldorf Astoria would be a small matter for such a man. And he lies so habitually that he doesn't even notice it. If he's caught out he turns the point round and cries reflexively "You lie, you lie"—or in Donaldese "Wrong! Wrong!" Language, for Nozdrev, has only one purpose: to defeat—to trump—his opponent. Words do not simply "crumble in his mouth like moldy fungi": far worse, they turn into their opposite. "There's the boundary!" he says, gesturing across his land. "Everything that you see on this side is all mine," and continues blithely "and even on the other side … it's all mine, too." Does Trump, when he speaks of Mexican border walls, perhaps mean the same thing? That the Donald is a comic figure has not halted his progress. But to become president of the USA he must prove that he really comes from

> Duckburg, Calisota and not from the pen of a Russian satirist.
> That could be difficult.[1]

Could Donald Trump's election have been stopped if Hillary Clinton had read *Dead Souls*? Did Nikolai Gogol see Donald coming? Was he gifted with prophetic foresight? Absurd questions! Yet there is something uncanny in the precision with which Gogol depicts the literary type of the liar and winner-at-all-costs, as we know him from recent history. Nor is this a one-off occurrence: again and again fiction and fact coincide with such force that the very mention of an author's name, a literary scene, a character from a novel is enough to illuminate a current situation perfectly. When reality seems like a scene from Shakespeare or Dickens, when it is "Orwellian" or "Kafkaesque," when we find ourselves in the "Heart of Darkness" or on a "Ship of Fools," when we encounter a Don Quixote or a Tartuffe, we recognize the power of literature to capture reality so roundly, so succinctly that our own tongues fall mute in comparison. The masters of world literature, and not just they, the artists, the film directors … a Goya … a Hitchcock … mold our perceptions, embodying complex experience in a few strokes of pen or brush, the compass of a lens. Bearing their personal imprint, these images are sent out into the world, a rich coinage of experience that in the most telling cases may remain in circulation for centuries. Yes, we may well find on an old Russian ruble the head of a grotesque American president. This has nothing to do with prophecy.

For what region, then, may the author of *Dead Souls* claim rights of coinage? Opinions on this point have changed markedly in the 180 years of the novel's currency, nor is there today any general agreement. Gogol's immediate contemporaries disputed as to whether *Dead Souls* was a calumnious Little Russian (that is, Ukrainian) assault on the Motherland for which the author should be sent to Siberia—the view of his conservative opponents[2]—or, on the contrary, a Great Russian rewriting of the Homeric epics, as his Slavophile friends in the circle of Sergei and Konstantin Aksakov maintained. Or was the work not rather an anatomically faithful image of the pathological system of serfdom, as the left-leaning critic Vissarion Belinsky proposed and Alexander Herzen seconded?

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1 Urs Heftrich, "The Donald: Russe oder Entenhausener?" (The Donald: Russian or Duckburger?), *Huffington Post: The Blog*, posted October 31, 2016.

2 See Edyta M. Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol. Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 237, who quotes Sergei Aksakov's recollection that a certain Count Tolstoy (not to be mistaken for the famous writer) "voiced a widely circulating opinion by calling Gogol an 'enemy of Russia' who deserved to be sent to Siberia in shackles."

Belinsky read Gogol's novel as a realistic representation of Russian provincial life, including some of its basest aspects, and did not hesitate to dub Gogol the founder of a new epoch, the "Natural School" of Russian literature.[3] The image of Gogol as a satirist was reinforced in the minds of his readers by Alexander Agin's hundred illustrations to *Dead Souls* (1846–1847) in the spirit of Honoré Daumier caricatures. These became particularly popular in Soviet editions of the work, although Gogol himself had rejected outright the offer of using them.[4] For the utilitarian materialist group around Nikolai Chernyshevsky, Nikolai Dobrolyubov, and Dmitrii Pisarev, Gogol remained a firm realist, a view sanctified into Soviet doctrine by Lenin: a socially critical Gogol ridiculing the institution of serfdom was the only one the Communist Kremlin might tolerate.[5] That for Gogol serfdom was as sacred as tsardom and the Church—such sobering truths were whisked away by the wand of Marxist dialectic, and if that did not help, then by the rod of censorship.

The Symbolists and Russian Formalists, for their part, rejected simple-minded sociological readings of this kind and elevated Gogol into the apotheosis of their respective concepts of literature. Their aims, however, were different: the Symbolist group, following Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, sought to rehabilitate Gogol as a religious thinker, while the Formalists, with Boris Eikhenbaum,

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3 For an excellent account of the polarized debate about *Dead Souls* see ibid., 236–253; for a brief survey see Sergei A. Goncharov, ed., *N. V. Gogol': pro et contra*, compiled and introduction by S. A. Goncharov, comments by N. N. Akimova and K. G. Isupov (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii, 2009), 27–31, and the documents collected in his volume (see also John Schillinger's entry on the Natural School in Victor Terras, ed., *Handbook of Russian Literature* [New Haven and London: Yale University Press 1985], 293–295). The longevity of Belinsky's highly biased account of Gogol's intentions is proven even by fairly recent, serious publications on Russian culture. As if it were an accomplished fact, Rosalind Gray, for instance, states in her—otherwise very illuminating—book that "The 'Natural School' was noted for its critical analysis of Russian 'low-life'—the downtrodden, 'little man' of the town and of the country—as well as of polite society, and Gogol in particular portrayed with ruthless perspicacity the idiosyncrasies of a variety of social classes" (Rosalind P. Gray, *Russian Genre Painting in the Nineteenth Century* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000], 55). The quasi-sociological gaze attributed to Gogol here was typical for some of his leftist admirers, but it was not his way of seeing things at all.

4 See Gogol's letter to Pletnev of March 20, 1846 (XIII, 45). Rosalind Gray comments: "Gogol's churlish response suggests that the admiration which the illustrators had for his satire was not reciprocated" (Gray, *Russian Genre Painting*, 132). What Gogol did not appreciate was more likely that they only understood his multilayered prose on a satirical level.

5 For a critical survey of international scholarship on Gogol see Birgit Seidel-Dreffke, *Die Haupttendenzen der internationalen Gogol'forschung in der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts (deutschsprachiges Gebiet, USA, Großbritannien, Sowjetunion)* (Frankfurt/M.: Haag und Herchen, 1992).

shunned ideology and concentrated on unraveling the author's literary workmanship.[6] One thing they all shared, however, was a fascination for the hidden structures in Gogol's work, and it was in analyzing these that they began to appreciate his *artistic* achievement. The pioneering study by the Symbolist Andrei Bely bears its program in its title: he set out to show exactly where *Masterstvo Gogolia* (Gogol's Mastery) lay.[7] Himself a master of the music of language, of grotesque hyperbole and the architectonics of novel structure, Bely provides from the perspective of a fellow writer an inner view of the mechanisms on which Gogol's prose relies. With his book, published in the year of his death (1934), genuinely critical research into *Dead Souls* began—the analysis of *form* in the quest for *meaning*, in the clear realization that the one can never be had without the other.

In that same year Stalin decreed the founding of the Union of Soviet Writers, under whose aegis Russian literature was nailed down to the socialist-realist dogma known as *sotsrealism*. As a result, any facets of *Dead Souls* beyond the sociocritical line sketched out by Belinsky and repeated *ad nauseam* by Soviet critics were, in the following decades, mostly explored outside Russia, often by the Revolution's exiles. A puzzling new dimension was opened up by psychoanalysis, much to the discomfiture of Soviet orthodoxy, which found two good reasons to oppose it. In the first place, a Gogol who plumbs the subconscious depths is willy-nilly closer to Romanticism than to Realism; and, secondly, dabbling of this kind brings to light, in coded form, aspects that were as taboo in the nineteenth century as they were in the USSR—namely the author's supposed (or suspected) homosexuality (Simon Karlinsky).[8] With time, psychoanalytic and Marxist interpretations began in one respect to converge: their predictability—the hermeneutic trick of conjuring from the text whatever their doctrine had induced them to place in it. As far as *Dead Souls* is concerned, a far richer source of insight was provided by the exiled writer Andrei Sinyavsky with his psychology of creativity (*In Gogol's Shadow*, 1975/2021).[9]

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6 See Dimitrij Mereschkowskij, *Gogol und der Teufel*, trans. Alexander Eliasberg (Hamburg and Munich: Ellermann, 1963); and Boris Eichenbaum, "Wie Gogols 'Mantel' gemacht ist," in his *Aufsätze zur Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur*, selected and trans. Alexander Kaempfe (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1965), 119–142.

7 See Andrei Belyi, *Masterstvo Gogolia*, ed. D. Chizhevskii (Munich: Fink, 1969).

8 See Simon Karlinsky, "Portrait of Gogol as a Word Glutton, with Rabelais, Sterne, and Gertrude Stein as Background Figures," *California Slavic Studies* 5 (1970): 169–186.

9 See Andrej Sinjawskij, *Im Schatten Gogols*, trans. S. Geier (Berlin, Frankfurt, and Vienna: Propyläen, 1979).

It was to a great extent thanks to emigrés such as Dmitrii Chizhevsky that Russian Formalism began to bear fruit in Gogol research in the West. Chizhevsky's Gogol is a much-traveled literary and theological Romantic seeking with his symbolically charged textual constructs a firm hold in the antinomies of faith and of his own soul.[10] That a work of art like *Dead Souls* is more a dialogue with world literature than a slice of Russian reality (which Gogol in any case preferred to view, while working on the novel, over a dish of maccaroni in an Italian café),[11] has been amply demonstrated by Carl Proffer (on Gogol's Homeric tracks), Gavriel Shapiro (on his Baroque leanings), Richard Peace (on his mockery of Sentimentalism), and Mikhail Vaiskopf (with a seemingly inexhaustible reservoir of conceivable sources).[12] After the 1960s some nonconformist spirits in the Soviet Union dared to broach more fundamental issues of Gogol's poetics: Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, albeit only sketchily, in an essay on "Rabelais and Gogol"; Iury Lotman, more substantially, on Gogol's concept of space; and finally Iury Mann *in extenso* in his *Poetika Gogolia* (Gogol's Poetics) and Igor Zolotussky in a biography audacious enough to take Gogol's religious sentiments seriously.[13] Western research since that time has left scarcely a stone of literary theory unturned with respect to Gogol: Hans Günther on his technique of the grotesque, Jurij Striedter on the picaresque, Donald Fanger and Anne Lounsbery on the text-reader relation, Robert Maguire on the poetic word, Susanne Fusso on disruptive disorder, Susi Frank on the sublime, Árpád Kovács on metapoetic elements, and Christian von Tschilschke, Frederick Griffiths, and Stanley Rabinowitz on Gogol's confusing classification of *Dead Souls* as a "poem."

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10 See Dmitrij Tschižewskij, "Gogol' Studien," in Gogol'—Turgenev—Dostoevskij—Tolstoj. Zur russischen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts, edited by Ulrich Busch et al. (Munich: Fink, 1966), 57–126.

11 Vladimir Nabokov reports on Gogol's gargantuan appetite: "none had sucked in such a number of macaroni or eaten so many cherry pies as this thin little man" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolay Gogol'* [London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973], 3).

12 See Carl R. Proffer, *The Simile and Gogol's "Dead Souls"* (The Hague and Paris: Mouton, 1967); Gavriel Shapiro, *Nikolaj Gogol and the Baroque Cultural Heritage* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Richard Peace, *The Enigma of Gogol. An Examination of the Writings of N. V. Gogol and Their Place in the Russian Literary Tradition* (Cambridge, London, New York, et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Siuzhet Gogolia. Morfologiia. Ideologiia. Kontekst* (Moscow: Radiks, 1993).

13 See Michail Bachtin, "Rabelais und Gogol'. Die Wortkunst und die Lachkultur des Volkes," in his *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*, ed. Rainer Grübel (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1979), 338–348; Iurii Lotman, *Khudozhestvennoe prostranstvo v proze Gogolia*, in his *V shkole poeticheskogo slova. Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol'* (Moscow: Proveshchenie, 1988), 251–293; Iurii V. Mann, *Poetika Gogolia* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978); and Igor' P. Zolotusskii, *Gogol'*, 2nd rev. ed. (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1984).

All this, and much more that cannot be noted here has been researched[14]—an abundance that has turned attention away from a simple mimetic understanding of Gogol's art to its genuinely *literary* qualities. And what more could a literary scholar want?

Well, there is one thing, perhaps—the naïve pleasure in recognizing the features of an all-too-familiar reality enjoyed by the Russian public of 1842—and then, too, the delicious shudder of comparing a novelistic figure with an election candidate of 2016 soon to become an all-too-real president. Where have such reactions gone? Even those like Jochen-Ulrich Peters or Edyta Bojanowska,[15] who still today read *Dead Souls* primarily as satire, no longer do so in the unreflected manner of a Belinsky, but in full awareness of the more than a century-and-a-half

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14 See Hans Günther, *Das Groteske bei N. V. Gogol' (Formen und Funktionen)* (Munich: Sagner, 1968); Jurij Striedter, *Der Schelmenroman in Rußland. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des russischen Romans vor Gogol'* (Berlin: Harrassowitz, 1961); Donald Fanger, *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979); Robert A. Maguire, *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Susanne Fusso, *Designing Dead Souls. An Anatomy of Disorder in Gogol* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); Susi K. Frank, *Der Diskurs des Erhabenen bei Gogol' und die longinische Tradition* (Munich: Fink, 1999); Christian von Tschilschke, *Epen des Trivialen. N. V. Gogols "Die toten Seelen" und G. Flauberts "Bouvard und Pécuchet". Ein struktureller und thematischer Vergleich* (Heidelberg: Winter, 1996); Frederick T. Griffiths and Stanley J. Rabinowitz, *Epic and the Russian Novel from Gogol to Pasternak* (Boston: Academic Studies Press), 2011; Árpád Kovács, "K voprosam metapoetiki Gogolja (Smyslovoj masshtab 'Mertvykh dush' i 'Revizora')," *Slavica Tergestina* 23 (2019): 64–128; and Anne Lounsbery, *Thin Culture, High Art. Gogol, Hawthorne, and Authorship in Nineteenth-Century Russia and America* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

15 See Jochen Ulrich Peters, "Die Transformation des Schelmenromans: N. V. Gogol': Mertvye duši," in his *Tendenz und Verfremdung. Studien zum Funktionswandel des russischen satirischen Romans im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Bern et al.: Lang, 2000), 65–100. and Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol*. Bojanowska sees Gogol's post-factum explanation that the characters in *Dead Souls* were a mirror of his own soul—parallel to his (equally post-factum) interpretation of *The Government Inspector*—as an "effort … to diffuse the politics of his play by transforming it into a staging of a spiritual battle between good and evil" (Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol*, 252, see also ibid., 240). This shows only too well the fundamental difference between these latest approaches to a political reading of *Dead Souls* and the interpretation proposed in the present study, where the spiritual battle between good and evil is taken to be Gogol's main concern—not just a pretext to soften the blow of satire. Bojanowska (ibid., 249–250) goes on to demonstrate convincingly that Gogol's foreword to the second edition of *Dead Souls* (1846) reveals patterns of thought "typical of medieval prefaces, most typically in saints' lives that he was reading at the time, in which monk-scribes proclaimed their own sinfulness." This she sees as "[p]laying the fool … a defensive strategy not uncommon to Ukrainian writers" (ibid., 250). One might, however, conclude, on the contrary, that Gogol was serious in both respects: in his interest in the lives of the saints *and* in his foreword—or, to draw a further conclusion from Bojanowska's perceptive remark, that Gogol's thought was in fact a good deal more medieval than his contemporaries could, or we moderns might like to, believe.

of debate around this predicate. Gogol's epic has become an arena where exegetes and schools compete for the interpretive prize.

Is *Dead Souls*, then, a sort of "literature squared," a playground of genres and discourses, a cemeterial dialogue between Gogol' and the great spirits of the past, from Homer and Dante to Schiller and his own mentor, Pushkin, who gave him the idea for the book but died before it was finished? The answer to both parts of this question must be: "Yes, absolutely." Gogol's novel is all these things, and Gogol, steeped in world literature, knew it to be so. But his ambition could not be stilled by the mere role of a writer's writer.[16] In essence Gogol's *Dead Souls* undoubtedly follows the intention attributed to it by Belinsky & Co: to capture in a precisely polished mirror the distorted reality of his day, so that all would see its faults. But Gogol's mirror was polished very differently from anything the critics could imagine: he had a different picture of reality, and evil, for him, had a different root. *His* mirror had more of Hieronymus Bosch in it than of his contemporary Honoré Daumier, like the looking glass in the wayside inn where his hero re-encounters Nozdrev: "a mirror that reflected instead of two eyes twice that number and, instead of the face, some sort of wafer or other."[17]

Rather than any large-scale "physiological sketch" of Russian reality, *Dead Souls* pens the chiaroscuro of a Hoffmannesque "landscape of the soul." But—and there lies the innovatory quality of Gogol's presentation—it is a pattern of light and darkness that fades before the reader's eyes into ever finer shades of gray. Gogol saw evil not in the social conditions of reality but in the human soul, his own included. Chichikov, the hero of his novel, travels only superficially through the Russia of his day; in reality, his journey is inward—and, at the same time (as will become evident), backward and down.

In plotting Chichikov's progress Gogol made what was probably his most original discovery as a writer: he created a literary model of the banality of

16 Gogol was extraordinarily keen on being widely circulated in print; as Lounsbery, *Thin Culture*, 127, points out, he himself "declared his hope that eventually his audience would comprise 'half of literate Russia.'" On the other hand, he was well aware of the risks involved in being read by an uneducated public with its "potentially fatal power over the artist" (ibid., 144).

17 Such is the mirror that Gogol describes in the fourth chapter of *Dead Souls*: "зеркало, показывавшее вместо двух четыре глаза, а вместо лица какую-то лепешку" (VI, 62). For Gogol and Bosch, see the instructive comparison in Alexander P. Obolensky, "Gogol and Hieronymus Bosch," *Zapiski akademicheskoi gruppy v SShA* 17 (1984): 115–132. Daumier's caricatures influenced the "Natural school" (see Gray, *Russian Genre Painting*, 55; and see note 3 above). Both artists depicted mirrors in their work; compare, for example, the figure of Vanity looking into a mirror in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503/04) with Daumier's lithographic caricature of a woman in front of a mirror (in the cycle *Les bas bleus*, January 30, 1844).

evil. In *Dead Souls* he claimed the trivial—that depressingly inescapable but unfortunately all too real province of human activity—as his sovereign domain. Hardly by chance, it took another writer of global standing to congratulate him adequately on his discovery: Vladimir Nabokov, an entire sub-section of whose 1944 book on Gogol is dedicated to the phenomenon of *poshlost'*.[18] The depiction of *poshlost'* in *Dead Souls*—of this we can be sure—would have struck Nabokov as one of those moments in literature noted above, replete with the fascinated horror of unmasked reality. At the same time he would have recognized the immense challenge facing an author who sought to present evil in its unspectacular, trivial guise. Hegel had already remarked on this in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*: "That which is purely negative is in itself dull and flat. … Cruelty and misfortune … can perhaps be … borne, if they are … elevated by an appropriate greatness of character and purpose; but evil as such, envy, cowardice, meanness, is invariably repulsive. That is why the devil is such a poor, aesthetically useless figure."[19] And Hegel's pupil Rosenkranz, who wrote an entire *Aesthetics of the Ugly*, could only conceive of "the evil and ugly as dwindling to nothing within the great, God-given order of the world. Removed from this context it is aesthetically worthless."[20] Even Hannah Arendt, who coined the phrase "the banality of evil," was convinced that in the face of such manifestations "words fail and … thought dissolves."[21]

After Gogol, the difficult—indeed seemingly paradoxical—task of portraying evil in its everyday triviality was taken up with great persistence by the Russian prose writers of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries: Goncharov, Dostoevsky, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Chekhov, and Sologub. Walter Rehm, through his reading of the great Russians, became convinced that no genre was better fitted to meet this challenge than the novel:

> Even when, as if imbibing some slowly working nutrient, it seeks to absorb the negative, the dangerous, the counter-epical, it has

18 Chapter 3 ("Our Mr. Chichikov"), 2, in Nabokov, *Nikolay Gogol*, 63–74. See also below, 12–16.

19 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Werke* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), vol. 13, 288. Hegel's statement is indebted on the one hand to the traditional conception of evil as *privatio boni*, on the other to the Hegelian dialectic. "In Hegel's dialectic, the negative is an element which can be, and is, resolved in a process within whose entirety the positive qualities of truth and wholeness are restored" (Christoph Schulte, *Radikal böse. Die Karriere des Bösen von Kant bis Nietzsche*, 2nd ed. [Munich: Fink, 1991], 247).

20 Karl Rosenkranz, *Ästhetik des Häßlichen*, edited and afterword by Dieter Kliche (Leipzig: Reclam, 1990), 39; specifically for his critique of Hegel's dictum cited above, see ibid., 287f.

21 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* (Munich: Piper, 1964), 300.

> a salvific function—even when … as in Gogol's *Dead Souls*, it is bent on depicting the unseemly morass of the nugatory, the abysmal cold of those broken everyday characters with their rigid, unfeeling, inwardly impoverished spectral semblance of being; when it paints in rich colors the meanness and boredom, the vacuous inactivity of disjointed human life and, finding its archetype in the idleness of a provincial Russian town, extends the image with demonic energy to the entire world—even then the novel remains true to its task.[22]

Rehm's thesis goes far beyond the immediate question whether the portrayal of the triviality of evil can be of aesthetic value. What is at stake here is nothing less than the relation between epic form and ethical content—an issue treated most effectively to date by medievalists. Medieval epics tend to revolve around an ethical pattern as their central organizing principle. The sequence of the main hero's adventures is determined by a moral code whose validity manifests itself through a dialectical process in which this moral is alternately breached and re-established. The order of the literary form and the ethical core of what is represented by this form are thus mutually dependent.[23]

To ask about "the moral of the story" was long taboo in modern literary criticism—for good reason. Literature worthy of its name is not Sunday-school reading. Not accidentally, the one thing about Mark Twain's Sunday school that really stuck in his memory was not the teacher's lessons, but his "thumb nail which remained permanently twisted and distorted and curved and pointed, like a parrot's beak."[24] The twisted, the distorted, the curved, the pointed—this is what makes literature so much more exciting than any sermon; and who among the Russian writers of the nineteenth century better illustrates this than Nikolai Gogol? Yet, just as Mark Twain admitted to being a moralist, albeit in

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22 Walter Rehm, "Gontscharow und die Langeweile" (Goncharov on boredom), in his *Experimentum Medietatis. Studien zur Geistes- und Literaturgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Rinn, 1947), 96–183 (here: 115–116). Rehm counts *Dead Souls*, of course, as a novel. Gogol himself used several different terms, referring to it within the work itself as *poema*—which in Russian usage can also mean a lengthy poem or epic—but also sometimes as a story: *povest'*; in his letters, on the other hand, he called it a novel: *roman* (see Tschilschke, *Epen des Trivialen*, 19). So long as technical issues of genre are not explicitly involved, the present study does not require a strict distinction between epic and novel either; in that respect Gogol's practice can be followed and the term "epic" can be used where applicable, for example, to highlight Gogol's intention of linking up with the Homeric tradition.

23 See below, note 29.

24 Mark Twain, *Chapters from My Autobiography*, chap. 26.

disguise, so Gogol, too, had a propensity for teaching us *mores*—a trait that well fitted his taste for the ludicrous, the grotesque, the absurd. We may or may not value his moral lessons, but we should acknowledge that the author of *The Nose* was a bluenose author. Gogol was a moralist-writer in an emphatic sense—the epithet inseparable from the noun. Ethics is part and parcel not only of his openly religious (and accordingly tedious) texts, it is woven into the fabric of his most daring prose, his funniest play.

The plea for an ethical reading of Gogol's writings should not be mistaken for a naïve return to Plato's equation of the Beautiful and the Good, or to the Sunday-school question: What do the scriptures teach us? Virtually all of Gogol's teachings are anathema to the author of this study. There is another way of putting the question though: What did the author *want* to teach us, for what reasons, and with what artistic means? We should acknowledge the fact that literature has always been a tool of indoctrination, whether we like its message or not. This is where we leave Sunday school and enter a debate that has gained traction under the label of "ethical criticism" since the mid-1980s.[25]

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25 For the renewed interest in the relationship between aesthetics and ethics see among others (in chronological order): Horst-Jürgen Gerigk, *Entwurf einer Theorie des literarischen Gebildes* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1975); *New Literary History* 15, no. 1 (Autumn 1983): *Literature and/as Moral Philosophy*; Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* (Paris: Édition du Seuil, 1983–1985); Joseph Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987); Wayne C. Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Tobin Siebers, *The Ethics of Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988); Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1990); Peter Baker, *Deconstruction and the Ethical Turn* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995); Martha C. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice. The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Robert Eaglestone, *Ethical Criticism. Reading after Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997); Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, eds., *Mapping the Ethical Turn. A Reader in Ethics, Culture, and Literary Theory* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); Mark W. Roche, *Die Moral der Kunst. Über Literatur und Ethik* (Munich: Beck, 2002); Jerrold Levinson, ed., *Aesthetics and Ethics. Essays at the Intersection* (Cambridge, UK, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Mark W. Roche, *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Jutta Zimmermann and Britta Salheiser, eds., *Ethik und Moral als Problem der Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2006); Thomas Claviez, *Aesthetics & Ethics. Otherness and Moral Imagination from Aristotle to Levinas and from "Uncle Tom's Cabin" to "House Made of Dawn"* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2008); Christine Lubkoll and Oda Wischmeyer, *"Ethical Turn"? Geisteswissenschaften in neuer Verantwortung* (Munich and Paderborn: Fink, 2009); Dorothea Scholl, "Ethik und Ästhetik zwischen Humanismus und Posthumanismus: Überlegungen zur ethischen Literaturanalyse in der Langzeitperspektive," *Interlitteraria* 14, no. 1 (2009): 7–28; Volker Kapp and Dorothea Scholl, eds., *Literatur und Moral* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2011); Nora Hämäläinen, *Literature and Moral Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

In the almost forty years since then, the distinct—though not impermeable—line drawn by Kant between ethics and aesthetics has become increasingly punctuated, and punctured.[26] With the "ethical turn" we have witnessed a growing interest in the question where exactly morals meets (or overlaps) with art. Wittgenstein's formula: "Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same" has become popular among scholars: "Goodness knows nothing of beauty" is no longer the only valid password for entering a discussion on moral and artistic values.[27] It would be hard to express the interdependence of ethics and aesthetics in the literary field more succinctly than in Paul Ricoeur's dictum: "There is no ethically neutral narrative."[28] This holds particularly true for the literary genre that has always been perceived as the ideal tool for teaching the value system of a society: the epic[29]—and Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls* is a case in point. Here the interface of epic and ethics is particularly intimate: even in the finely woven threads of the subplots that hold this extraordinarily tautly structured text together, the indissoluble discursive bond is immediately visible. It is as if the supreme aesthetic impact of Gogol's novel lies precisely in the stringency with which it pursues its central moral issue. In other words, *Dead Souls* is yet another example of what Edith Clowes has shown as a hallmark of Russian literature, it is "a creative internalization of philosophical discourse in the framework of fictional narrative."[30]

The present study has a clear aim: to lay bare the ethical ground-plan of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, a plan that underlies the entire work and determines its finest details. My approach has two steps: Part One, "Chichikov's Prehistory," seeks a solution—a recurrent theme in Slavonic studies since Andrei Bely—to

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26 In §59 of his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant calls Beauty "the symbol of morality", and further elaborates: "Now, I say, the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and only in this light … does it give us pleasure with an attendant claim to the agreement of every one else, whereupon the mind becomes conscious of a certain ennoblement and elevation above mere sensibility to pleasure from impressions of sense, and also appraises the worth of others on the score of a like maxim of their judgement" (transl. by James Creed Meredith).

27 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, 6.421. The second quote is from W. Gass, "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty: On the Distance between Morality and Art," *Harper's Magazine* 274 (1987): 37–44.

28 Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 115.

29 In the foregoing lines and above (see note 23) the author has used material from his prior article, "Epic as Ethics: Nikolay Gogol's *Dead Souls*," *Studia Slavica Savariensia* 1–2 (2008): 109–123.

30 Edith W. Clowes, *Fiction's Overcoat. Russian Literary Culture and the Question of Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 5. In the title of this magisterial book on the relationship between Russian literature and philosophy, Clowes alludes to Gogol through Dostoevsky's famous, though only alleged, dictum, "We all came out from Gogol's 'Overcoat.'"

the system of five estate owners visited by Chichikov, the novel's protagonist, on his travels in provincial Russia. It will be shown that Gogol furnished his work with a key to this sequence of characters in the form of a biographical sketch of his protagonist in Chapter Eleven. Dismissed by most critics as so much ballast,[31] Chichikov's prehistory not only dovetails perfectly with the series of estate owners but provides a key to a fuller understanding of the action and meaning of the novel.

The second step is devoted—in two movements: Part Two, "Chichikov's Crime," and Part Three, "Chichikov's Punishment"—to the systematic exposition of this meaning. It will be argued that the two polar forces sustaining the architecture of the novel are truth and untruth (or lie). Here Gogol echoes a long tradition of Western thought, which from Plato through Augustine to Kant set evil in close proximity to the lie. In that sense *Dead Souls* is infused with a veritable theology of truth: something that has not previously been appreciated in such explicit terms, but which can be distilled from Gogol's text as its main structural principle—albeit one that must then be related back to the characters and action of the novel, if one of Russian literature's most vivid works is not to wither into a skeletal abstraction. For while Chichikov moves within a field of forces that can be expressed in timeless concepts, the important thing is that he *moves*, and in so doing traces the story of a life lived concretely in space and time.

Dictated by the text itself, the biographical element is, in fact, so central to the interpretation of *Dead Souls* in its received form (that is, the completed first part of the planned trilogy) that it can be read as a novel of development, an *entwicklungsroman*, in disguise—an idea first mooted by Dmitry Chizhevsky, who, however, considered that this classification was only really applicable in light of the fragments we have of the novel in its continuation.[32]

In terms of technique, nothing more is needed to demonstrate the interpenetration of plot and moral development in the first part of *Dead Souls* than traditional analytic procedures: setting recurrent motifs in relation to each other and observing the resultant symbolic construct. This method, first

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31 There was one exception though: in *Syn otechestva* 6 (1842), K. P. Masalsky began his review of *Dead Souls* with Chichikov's biography. Lounsbery, *Thin Culture*, 134, is certainly right to call this critic "obtuse," but I would like to add: even this blind rooster found a grain of corn!

32 See Dmitrij Tschižewskij, "The Unknown Gogol," *The Slavonic Review* 30 (1951): 482; see also Tschižewskij's study of Comenius's *Labyrinth of the World*, which mentions *Dead Souls* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* in the same breath (idem, "Das Labyrinth der Welt und Paradies des Herzens des Jan Amos Comenius. Die Thematik und die Quellen des Werkes," in his *Kleinere Schriften*, vol. 2: *Bohemica*, 92–139 [Munich: Fink, 1972], 103).

consistently applied to Gogol's novel by James Woodward,[33] will at the same time lay bare the novel's medieval and baroque roots.

To embark on a decoding of Gogol's complex weft of motifs in *Dead Souls* is to read the book with new eyes: no longer as social satire but on an abstract level as a covert theology[34] and on the level of its human players as a tale of transgression and retribution—not least, in this respect, the tale of Gogol's own sense of guilt and his desire for atonement, his crime and punishment as its author.

Heidelberg, May 2021

33 See James B. Woodward, *Gogol's "Dead Souls"* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).

34 See Peter Thiergen, whose inspiring reading of Gogol's *Overcoat* in light of the Sermon on the Mount vindicates his own statement that "19th-century Russian literature can in many cases be read as a hidden theology" (Peter Thiergen, "Gogol's 'Mantel' und die Bergpredigt," in *Gattungen in den slavischen Literaturen. Beiträge zu ihren Formen in der Geschichte. Festschrift für Alfred Rammelmeyer*, ed. Hans Bernd Harder and Hans Rothe [Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1998], 396). On "narrative theology" (H. Weinrich) in general see also D. Mieth, *Dichtung, Glaube und Moral. Studien zur Begründung einer narrativen Ethik* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald, 1976).

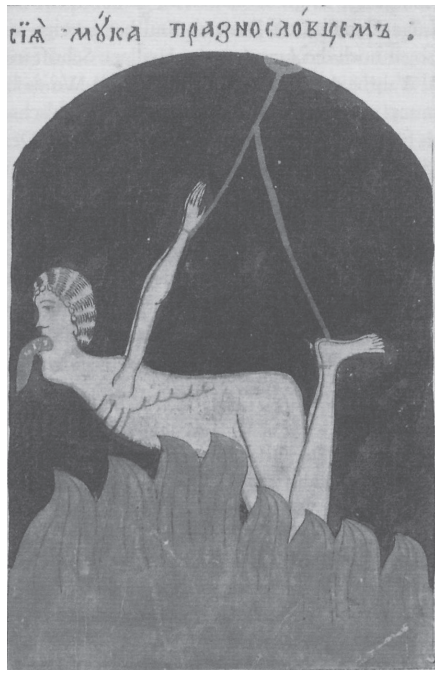

Figure 2. Hell's torments for gossips (nineteenth-century Russian image)

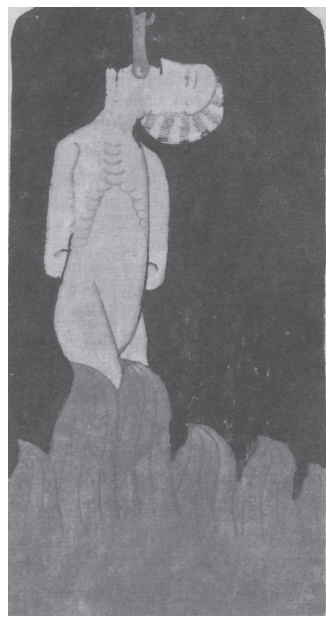

Figure 3. Hell's torments for liars and blasphemers (nineteenth-century Russian image)