

THE PROBLEM OF LIFE IN THE RUSSIAN NOVEL

LECTURE I

THE RUSSIAN SOIL AND NIKOLAI GOGOL

RUSSIA'S greatest glory is her literature. One may wonder how a people so ignorant as the Russian people are proverbially supposed to be could produce such a literature. Yet the mass of Englishmen are certainly better educated to-day than they were during the age which produced Shakespeare; nor was Shakespeare himself an erudite scholar. Russian literature is great, not because Russia is learned, but because her literature is the tragic utterance of one hundred million people aching to be born into real humanity.

To the Russian, literature is a serious business. The Czar's bureaucracy blocked all the avenues which the social consciousness of man usually follows in actualizing its ideals. Economic and religious reform, political and educational reorganization, public assembly, free speech,—all these have been closed to the Russian. A society in which the individual is denied these obvious ways of self-expression will be a society in which the mass will be mute, stolid, bovine,—even as the Russian *mujik*.

But what of the tortured spirit, the genius, the prophet,—what of him who must unburden his soul or perish? In Russia until yesterday he could not make a speech in parliament, because there was no parliament; he could not address a mass-meeting, since mass-meetings were not allowed; it

were useless to write a newspaper article or a fiery pamphlet, as these would never leave the printer. In any of these cases the futile attempt itself might send him to prison or to Siberia. One avenue alone has been open. The Russian soul has uttered itself in song and story. And thus in an odd sense it may be said that the bureaucracy, which has ground under its heel the Russian millions and has kept them brutalized, has, in leaving only the literary road open, virtually compelled Russian genius to follow that road, and has thus made Russian literature great. This peculiar nature of Russian literature explains in a measure its distinguishing features: its profound seriousness, its penetration and realism, and above all, its social character. The drama and the novel are not the recreations of Russia's esthetic leisure hours, nor poetry an idle pastime: in them we can see Russia's spirit groping toward the light of freedom and culture. The Russian writer, great or near-great, feels himself the spokesman of one hundred millions, and this social sense, dominating his work, lends it gravity, earnestness, and dignity, makes mere wit, clever pretense, and shallow optimism inadmissible, and compels sincerity. This social sense may lead to crude realism, but to sham and frivolity, never. The literature of no other modern nation can be characterized so truly as a criticism of life. And life is vast and various in the Russian land, a land of contrasts, of bright lights and black shadows, of beauty and of squalor, of glory as great as her shame, a land in which can be heard, not only the middle octave of mediocrity, but also the highest notes of human attainment and the lowest depths of human despair.

Hence the significance of Russian literature to the student of Russia, for the history of Russian letters is the history of the Russian people. The characters which move through the pages of Russian novels are living sons and daughters of

million-voiced Russia. The message of Russia's literary masterpieces is a message of gloom, of Slavic disenchantment and of what the Pole Sienkiewicz called Slavic unproductivity,—the message of the pitifully inadequate Russia that *is*. But the compelling truth and the matchless artistry of that message give us a vision of the glorious Russia yet unborn. And the absence of frivolity, the sincere, genuine realism of Russian literature, while making it truly national, at the same time save it from provinciality. The heroes of Turgenev and Tolstoy are true Russians, of course, but their struggles are human struggles and their appeal is indeed universal. Unless one digs deep enough, one cannot reach genuine Russian nature; and when one has dug deep enough to reach genuine Russian nature, behold! he is face to face with human nature.

In speaking thus of Russian literature, it is not of course intended that all Russian writers are sincere, serious realists. Russia is plentifully supplied with all sorts and conditions of writers and typewriters. Besides, Russia takes up the literary fads of France and Germany as readily as America apes Parisian millinery. But when we think of genuine Russian literature, we think of the real masters, of those whom Russians themselves regard as their prophets, and who alone have a claim to our attention,—those few men whose life work is a consistent attempt to portray truly Russia's men and women, to analyze the ethical problems of Russian life, to face honestly the question of Russia's national destiny. To four of these masters—the four greatest—I would invite your attention: Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy.

Nikolai Gogol made realism a tradition in Russian literature. He enjoys the double distinction of being not only the first great analyst of the Russian soul, but also Russia's greatest humorist. It is something to have written the first

master-comedy in a language, which, after a century, is still the master-comedy, and also with a humorous novel to have inaugurated a movement in literature which must of necessity lead to heroic pessimism so long as Russia is what she is. Gogol did both, and the greatness of the man is but poorly appreciated outside his native land.

Nature endowed him well for his great work. He came from what is known as Ukraina, or Little Russia. It is now a province in Southern Russia, but once it was a free land of blossoms and battles, when the ancestors of the saddle-born Cossacks, who to-day form the stormy heart of the Czar's army, were roving knights of adventure, unvanquished spirits roaming the vast stretches of the Russian steppes. Gogol was born in the very heart of it. A son of the soil, himself of Cossack descent, lulled to sleep from infancy with the luring tales of the long-vanished days, he longed for his native steppe from the clerk's desk which he occupied in St. Petersburg. In poetic homesickness he wrote and at the age of twenty startled Russia with his beautiful sketches of Little Russian and Cossack life. Is one to believe that geniuses come in showers? The year of his birth, 1809, gave to the world Tennyson, Poe, Darwin, and Abraham Lincoln. To Russia it surely gave a master, free not only from the mock classicism which Pushkin and Lermontov had cast away, but free also from the morbid, self-engrossed manner which Byron had made a fad in Europe and, for a time at least, a literary fashion in Russia.

Gogol had been collecting materials for a nine-volume history of the Middle Ages; he actually wrote and published a prose epic of the Dnieper Cossacks, a comedy of Russia's corrupt officialdom, and a novel in which Russian life is revealed as the spirit of the Middle Ages is revealed in Dante and knight-errantry in "Don Quixote."

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Gogol's humor is Homeric; there is indubitable Homeric influence in his work, and there is no Russian book which possesses such a Homeric sweep of elemental nature as "Taras Bulba," his story of the Dnieper Cossacks. A prose epic is "Taras Bulba," an epic of Cossack heroes, brave rather than beautiful, more hardy than cultured, intensely patriotic and martially Christian, but neither broad-visioned nor wise; an epic of braggarts who make good their boasts, of half-brutal, half-divine horsemen of the Russian plains, resistless, irrepressible, outwitting Tartar and Pole in battle, yet veritable children in the primitive naïveté of their minds. In old Taras Bulba Gogol has pictured a masterly Cossack, a truly gigantic figure, one half Ulysses, one half Sir Toby.

These restless riders of the endless steppes were a constant check to Mongol invasion. They saved Western Europe from the Tartar, and helped to save Northern Europe from the Turk. This was no regular standing army of soldiers who knew only how to fight, and knew naught else. "There was no craft the Cossack did not know; he could make wine, build a cart, grind powder, do a farrier's or a gunsmith's work, and, last but not least, riot and drink and feast as only a Russian can; it all came natural to him."

But these were, after all, avocations, and the least danger of invasion was enough to let the Cossack show his real business in life. "A captain had but to enter the squares and market-places of a Cossack settlement or village, stand up on a cart, and cry out: 'Hark ye, ye beer-swillers and brewers! Enough of this ale-brewing, yea, and wallowing on stoves, yea, feeding the flies with your greasy bodies! Come to, and win knightly fame and honor! And ye plowmen and mowers, sheep-tenders and women-lovers! Enough of following the plow, yea, shoving your greasy boots in the earth, yea, dangling after women and wasting knightly

strength! . . .’ And these words were ever as sparks falling on dry wood. The plowman broke his plow, the brewers and beer-venders left their vats and smashed their barrels, the craftsman and trader sent their craft and shop to the devil, broke all the pots in the house, and sprang into the saddle. . . . When the campaign was over the warrior returned to his meadows and pastures by the Dnieper river fords,—went a-fishing, bought and sold, brewed beer, and was, in short, an independent Cossack.”

The story opens with the arrival of Bulba’s two sons from the Academy of Kiev, where their father has compelled them to stay and finish their classical education, in order that, having acquired learning, they can afford to despise it as Cossacks should. Instead of welcoming his sons with a kindly word, Bulba compels the elder to quarrel with him, and after a warm fist fight has assured him that his first-born is no milksop he embraces and kisses him. “Let no man mock at you, son! Drub everybody as you have drubbed me!” And he orders the feast of welcome. “Put everything upon the table! We want no cakes, nor gingers, nor poppy-pasties nor other fangles! Drag us a whole sheep or a goat, yea, hundred-year-old honey, yea, plenty of brandy, not faked with raisins and rubbish, but clear, sparkling brandy that can pinch and sparkle like mad!”

The meal is barely half over when old Bulba announces that the very next morning he will take his sons to Sietch-beyond-the-Rapids, the great stamping-ground and corral of the Dnieper Cossacks. He is eager to exhibit his sons, and the thought of once more meeting his old fighting comrades maddens him with joy. A sudden contempt for his established home takes hold of him; the nomad in his soul is in the saddle. “We will away in the morning. Why tarry here? What enemy is there to fight hereabouts? What

do we want with this hut? What do we want with it all? What are all these pots for?" And he begins to knock down the mugs and flasks and fling them about the room.

During all this scene, one person is a mute spectator—Bulba's wife. Gogol has painted her in all the crude tragedy of her life, sitting on the bench and sadly gazing at the children with whom she is doomed soon to part. We can see her mutely tending her warrior-husband as he orders his sons to be ready to start the first thing in the morning; we watch with her all through the night, as she bends over her boys' heads sleeping under the clear southern sky, combing their tangled locks and moistening them with her tears.

A man's epic is "Taras Bulba," for the Cossack's life was a man's life. "Her lot was a hard one, as was every woman's in those distant times. She had been loved but for an instant, in the first heat of youth and passion; then her stern charmer had cast her aside for his sword, his comrades, and his carousals. She would see him for three days in two years, and then probably not hear of him for years again. Aye, and when she did, and they lived together, what a life was hers! She suffered insults and even blows while she dreamed of caresses bestowed in the fullness of love. Hers was a strange existence among the crowd of wifeless knights on whom dissolute Sietch had thrown its stern mantle. Her joyless youth faded before her; her fair fresh cheeks and bosom lost their bloom for lack of tenderness, and became covered with premature wrinkles. All love, all sentiment, all that is tender and passionate in woman was turned into maternal instinct. She hovered over her children like some solitary lapwing of the steppes, full of pain and passion and tears."

The picture of this unloved old mother flinging herself on the younger of her sons early the next morning, grasping

his stirrup, clinging to his saddle, fighting madly with two burly Cossacks until she is twice torn away from her offspring and the horses gallop away, is, alike in its simplicity and its intensity, a very gem of elemental passion. The retrospect of it makes the scene doubly poignant, for the Cossack mother never again sees her boys.

But they are a-horse and away across the boundless steppes. I wish I might quote all of the remarkable description which Gogol gives of this vast Cossack-breeding soil. A brief passage must suffice: "The sun had long since come out in the once dull sky, and was bathing the steppe in its cheerful light. The farther the steppe reached, the more beautiful it became. . . . Nature has nothing fairer than these steppes with their surface like a green-gold ocean strewn with a million flowers. Posies, lilac, blue, and green, shimmered in the tall, slim grass; yellow gorse and white clover danced upon the surface. An ear of corn, brought God knows whence, had taken root, and partridges pecked here and there among its thick stalks. The songs of a thousand birds filled the air, and hawks, suspended therein with outstretched wings, gazed on the earth below them. A flock of wild geese, wheeling cloudwards, sent their piercing cry from some distant lake. A lapwing rose with measured stroke from the grass and bathed delightfully in the air's blue waves, now lost in the heights until one black spot alone was visible, now turning on the wing and soaring sunwards. . . . The devil take you, steppes, how beautiful you are!"

Brilliantly full of life the steppe is in the daytime; alluring in twilit even; at midnight it is mystic, infinite. "Ever and anon the night sky was lighted by the distant glare of dry rushes burning on the meads and river banks, and dark flights of swans, hastening northward, shimmered with a

pinkish hue till it seemed as though red kerchiefs were flapping against the sky."

At last they arrive at their destination, the stamping-ground Sietch. Bulba looks himself over, twists his long moustachios, and assumes an air of martial dignity. A martial place is Sietch-beyond-the-Rapids: it has everything that the soldier wants, and nothing else; wealth or poverty, parentage—respectable or otherwise—count for naught here. The initiation ceremony is simple: "Good day! Do you believe in Christ?" the commander would ask of a newcomer. "Do you believe in the Holy Trinity? Do you go to church? You do? Well, then, cross yourself. Very good! Now join whatever regiment you like."

It takes small provocation to rouse this many-hued assembly of daredevils into a campaign. They start for Poland to avenge the insults heaped upon the Orthodox Christ by Catholic unbelievers and unchristian Jews. And if individually they are free-lances, collectively they are a well-organized army. They lead stern lives, and stern is their morality while the campaign lasts. Their picturesque spirits demand vivid manifestation of the austerity of law. A thief is tied ignobly to a post; a club is placed beside him, with which every passer-by must hit him as long as he remains alive. For a murderer a deep hole is dug and he is put in it alive, a coffin with his victim's corpse is lowered over the offender, and living and dead are then covered together.

It is a bloody story that follows, a Homeric recital of battle and iron courage and fierce revenge. Of Bulba's two sons, the younger falls victim to the charms of a Polish daughter and proves traitor to the Cossack cause. Old Taras kills him with his own hands. And when the battle goes against the Cossacks and his brave elder son is cap-

tured, taken away to far-distant Poland, imprisoned, and tortured to death; when his long-tested fortitude at last gives way and the young soul cries out in agony: "Father, where art thou? Do you not hear all this?" a cry rings through the Polish crowd: "Aye, I hear it!" For it is Bulba himself, daring the whole might of Poland in order to see his son once more before avenging his death.

And most terribly does he avenge it. True enough, he is burned at the stake in the end. But what boots it? Cossackdom lives and grows in might after him. Gogol writes: "The land of the Russ has an army founded upon religion, than which no foundation is more powerful. Hard and stern it is as the rock in the midst of a strong ocean. It rears its unbreakable walls from the sea's deep bed and gazes long and sternly at the waves which break over it. Woe betide the ship that strikes it, for her rigging shall float in broken pieces and her sides be ground to powder, whilst her drowning crew's despairing cry fills the air. . . . Think ye there is aught in the world can frighten a Cossack? What force or flame can overcome Russia's strength?"

Taras Bulba is a barbaric story. There is no point in trying to disguise what indeed Gogol himself freely brings out: the blood-thirstiness, the coarse, crude spirituality, the wifeless, roughshod manner, the bigotry and superstition, the brutal religiosity and racial savagery of these Cossack knights. Taras is a hero in the sense in which a magnificent bulldog or a bellicose ram is a hero when fighting with beasts of low degree. Estimate him as generously as you will, he remains a diamond in the rough—very rough—and, judged by any standard save the martial, doubt might arise as to whether he is a diamond at all. Gogol has portrayed a semi-savage life in which the very austerities of existence produce virtues as fierce as vices. Taras Bulba and his comrades

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are demigods in battle, but we seek in vain for any expression of Christlike sweetness and charity in Cossack Sietch. These fierce riders of the steppes style themselves defenders of the Christian faith, but their true ideal of sublimity approximates Attila the Scourge of God more nearly than it does Jesus the Saviour of Man.

Gogol had painted with giant strokes, with a titanic brush, and the Homeric canvas caught the imagination of Russia. But the artist in Gogol could not have overlooked a fatal circumstance. A Taras Bulba could be the hero of a barbaric, martial Russia; where was the heroism of modern, westernized, peaceful Russia to be sought? On religious zeal and savage valor a martial autocracy had surely rested supreme in Russia, and still does rest. But what were to be Russia's bulwarks in her climb upward to genuine modern culture? Gogol was fast turning a realist. "Taras Bulba" had been an occasionally realistic treatment of an essentially romantic theme. But life in the Russian capital, close contact with the somber Russian actualities led Gogol to realistic themes. From the epic songs of the past he turned to the analysis of a prosaic present, which in Russia had retained the ancient brutality after it had lost the ancient glamour, and was pettily, unheroically grasping and cruel. Gradually we see tears mixing with the laughter of Gogol, bitterness and pathos behind the humor, until in the comedy "Revizor" an unspeakably farcical situation serves only to point out a state of social and political corruption, the tragic realization of which sobered laughing Russia and made her shudder guiltily.

The theme of "Revizor," or, as it is usually translated into English, "The Inspector-General," is perfectly simple. The situation is announced in the first twenty words of the play. News has reached the governor of a provincial town

that an inspector-general, sent secretly from St. Petersburg to investigate local administration and report to the central government, is about to arrive incognito in their midst. A friend of the governor has apprised him of the fact and warned him to put his administrative house hurriedly in order. And he needs the warning, as the governor himself informs his various colleagues.

The scene is decidedly different from the barbaric steppes of "Taras Bulba." We are introduced to "a Russian inland town, from which you may gallop for three years before you reach a foreign country." A pack of clumsy officials mismanage it most pitifully; every corner and crevice of it shrinks from the slightest inspection. The hospital is organized on the simple basis that if a man dies, he dies, and if he gets well—why, then, he gets well. The patients smoke strong tobacco, their nightcaps remind one of the mob in "Julius Cæsar," and they are as dirty as blacksmiths. The justice of the peace is a sportsman with a fondness for greyhound puppies, and his assistant reeks of spirits as if he has just come out of a distillery. The court attendants breed geese in the antechamber. The governor tells the postmaster kindly to open every letter and see that no complaint about the administration is sent out by some of the misgoverned citizens. The warning is superfluous; the postmaster informs him that as a matter of course he opens every letter that passes through the post-office!

Behold the setting! Only one thing is needed: an inspector. Two of the local male gossips rush into the room and announce that they have seen the inspector in the hotel. As a matter of fact, the supposed inspector is a penniless young spendthrift on his way home, who has lost all his money gambling and is on the verge of starvation, the landlord allowing him no further credit. The comical situations

which follow the mistaking of this penniless scapegrace for an inspector-general may well be imagined. The governor asks the young man to his house: in an excruciatingly ludicrous scene the young gambler thinks he is about to be arrested for evading his board bill, while the governor interprets his ill humor as a mark of official displeasure. One after another, the local officials take their turn at paying their respects, and from each the "inspector-general" borrows a few hundred rubles, the amount of the bribe varying with the trepidation of the guilty official. He makes silly love to the governor's wife, and in order to extricate himself from an embarrassing situation asks the governor for the hand of his daughter. Everything is working up to a climax, when finally the young rascal's servant, a lout possessing more real intelligence than the entire bureaucratic staff, persuades his master to tempt fate no longer and escape as quickly as he can. Just before leaving, however, he narrates all his experiences in a letter to a friend in St. Petersburg. In due course the postmaster opens this letter, and while it is being read to the consternated officials a policeman enters and announces that the real inspector-general, sent by imperial command, has arrived at the hotel and requests the governor's immediate attendance. Curtain.

"The Inspector-General" is, of course, Russia's greatest comedy; it would occupy a high place in any literature, so fully does it meet the requirements of dramatic art. Shamed Russia laughed, or else felt affronted and declared that there was not a single honest character in the play. Which is perfectly true, Gogol retorted, but there is honest ridicule throughout. Gogol did not intend that his audience should merely laugh. In later years he wrote: "In 'Revizor' I tried to collect in one heap all that was bad in Russia, as I then understood it; I wished to turn it into ridicule. The real

impression produced was that of fear. Through the laughter the spectator feels my bitterness and sorrow." Russia could not laugh gaily at this tragi-comic exhibition of her spiritual nakedness. At the end of the play the governor, chagrined at his ridiculous position, suddenly turns on the laughing audience and shouts words that Gogol was flinging at all Russia: "What are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!"

All the corrupt officialdom of Russia conspired to keep the play off the boards. But it had caught Czar Nikolai's fancy. He laughed imperially at its performance. Imperial sanction had been accorded that penetrating analysis of Russian life, which later was to turn Czar and government against literary realism—in vain. For while the comic exhibition of provincial corruption could count on the approval of imperial St. Petersburg, the new note which Gogol struck in "Revizor" was to be repeated in other less comic, more relentless revelations of Russian life, which made Russia cease laughing, which brought it to a sudden realization of its unspeakable misery, which potentially and actually incited to revolt, for they called forth the dangerous question which is already the title of two Russian books: "What Is To Be Done?"

In "Revizor" Gogol established realism as a tradition of the Russian drama. He performed a similar service for Russia's novel by writing the first capital work of Russian fiction, "Dead Souls," the first part of which, written in 1838, was published in 1846.

"Dead Souls" is the Russian "Divine Comedy." Dante's travel-notes through the world beyond were, as a matter of fact, a mirror of medieval life—a mirror with a thousand faces. "Dead Souls," similarly, is a succession of prose cantos in which the thousand and one sides of Russian life

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in town and country are subjected to the most searching scrutiny. Again we may compare it with "Don Quixote." Cervantes' masterpiece showed the pompous folly of cavalier Spain and made knight-errant heroics ridiculous. Gogol's novel turned the pitiless light of unqualified realism on Russia, revealed Russia so veraciously that after "Dead Souls" had been published Russian novelists could continue to write only in the spirit of "Dead Souls."

A complete outline of the plot of Gogol's masterpiece is impossible to give here, just as it is impossible to summarize in a few words the entire substance of the "Divine Comedy"; and yet a paragraph is sufficient to state what "Dead Souls" is about. In Gogol's day the Russian peasantry were still serfs of the rich landowners. They could be bought and sold like any other property. The government collected taxes, not from them, but on them. If a "soul" (serf) died, the landowner had to pay taxes on him for several years, just as if he were alive, until the taking of the next census should alter the statistics.

Now this is the animus of the novel. A nobleman, Pavel Ivanovitch Tchitchikov, who is in bad financial straits, concocts a bold scheme for restoring his credit. The plan is as simple as it is audacious. He would go from landowner to landowner and either obtain free of charge or buy at a nominal price the deed to those of their serfs who had died since the last census, thus ridding them of so many taxable burdens. When he had acquired in this way the legal ownership of a large number of "souls" whose non-existence was not likely to be discovered until the next census, he would "transport" them to a tract of land somewhere on the southern plains, where the Russian government was offering homesteads to colonizers. He would thus have the legal ownership of a supposedly large estate. Using these actu-

ally dead, but legally alive, souls as security, he planned to borrow a large sum of money from the Council of Guardians' Bank, and thus restore his shattered credit. The plan of the story is thus seen at a glance, and Gogol's idea in his long account of Tchitchikov's journeys was obvious: in chronicling the travels and adventures of this trafficker in dead souls, Gogol undertook the creation of a gallery of Russian portraits. As he himself expressed it, "I wished to show, at least from one point of view, all Russia."

And what a portrayal it is! As Tchitchikov's inebriate coachman Selifan drives his rickety *britchka* from estate to estate, all the thousand-charactered immensity of Russia reveals itself before us in a living panorama. The hero himself, too greedy of immediate opulence to follow the tedious path of slow-coming prosperity and too unstable in his moral sense to relish the path of virtue, is a very chameleon of obsequious adaptability and opportunism, alternating with a certain haughty touch-me-not dignity. A nobleman of obscure origin, he has shaped his entire life in accordance with his father's precept: "Friends and comrades will cheat you, but money will never betray you, no matter in what straits you may be."

Having inherited from that profound ancestor, in addition to the aforesaid wisdom, four badly worn waistcoats, two ancient surtouts lined with lambskin, and an insignificant sum of money, Tchitchikov enters the department of justice, determined to win in the race of official preferment over his colleagues, the faces of some of whom are described by Gogol as "looking exactly like badly baked bread." By intrigue, subterfuge, contemptible stooping and hypocrisy, Tchitchikov twice gets within sight of venal affluence, once by the road of a public building commission, another time by custom-house bribery. On both occasions,

however, he is caught in his own meshes and, while he avoids imprisonment, he is plucked of all his ill-gotten finery and is compelled to begin anew. He begins always in a different manner, it is true, but it is ever the same motive which incites him. From the losses of his inglorious past Tchitchikov learns caution and cunning, but cupidity he seems unable to unlearn. Yet there is something attractive and, one is ashamed to add, something almost lovable about the man, something making one wish that, even by trickery if necessary, he could somehow succeed in amassing the wealth which he demands as a prerequisite for settling down and realizing his lifelong dream of becoming a respected paterfamilias and a virtuous, useful citizen in the last chapter.

Gogol's genius has achieved a masterpiece of character delineation in the portrayal of Tchitchikov. It is not a stock-villain or picaresque intriguer that we have before us. Moving in a social medium which in turn amuses, repels, and disgusts the spectator, Tchitchikov is at least respectable and externally refined: the author himself is obviously impressed by the cleanliness of his hero's linen and his liberal use of perfumed soap and eau de Cologne. Occasionally his eyes seem to catch a gleam of the pure light of moral decency and one almost dares to hope that the man in his soul will master the vulture; but a new prey comes in sight and the old hunt continues. As in the case of the besotted miser Plushkin, there flashes "a ray of light which expresses, not feeling, but the pale reflection of a feeling: an apparition similar to the sudden appearance of a drowning man, which appearance elicits a joyous shout from the crowd assembled on the shore. But he is not seen again, and the calm surface of the unresponsive fluid seems still more terrible and more desolate than before."

We find Tchitchikov in prison, almost on bended knees in

his repentant decision to accept the proffered help of the millionaire benefactor Murasov and turn a new leaf; but the kind gentleman has barely left the room when the rascally offer of a shyster to get him out of jail by foul means rouses the prisoner's hopes to the pitch of enthusiasm, and all his tears of repentance are wiped dry.

The society in which Tchitchikov plies his traffic in dead souls does not retain our moral approbation which he forfeits: more frequently the contrast is one between vice and vice than between vice and virtue. In many respects he is morally the equal of his victims and judges, and in point of personal qualities he is undoubtedly their superior. Gogol's portraiture of this society is at once humorous and tragic: irresistibly mirth-provoking as his manner is on the surface, there lurks beneath the laughter an ocean of infinite sorrow for the nation whose nakedness of soul he ridicules. The tragedy wells up through the humor, it is ever more in evidence, and the novel ends in increasing spiritual gloom. For sheer comedy, of course, one doubts if Russian genius has ever produced the peer of "Dead Souls," especially the early part of the novel. In the portraits of Russia's landowners with whom Tchitchikov deals, the ridiculous and the contemptible in human nature are chastised in a manner which manifests the infinite variety of Gogol's art.

The brainless sentimentalist Manilov, of agreeable features, but "rather too much permeated with sugar," dreams his life away in maudlin projects of the most utopian philanthropy, but he never gets beyond the fourteenth page of the book he is about to finish, and in his house there is forever something lacking. His heart would doubtless be in the right place, were it only in the vicinity of some backbone and not altogether removed from intelligence. As it is, he plans to make his estate a paradise of comfort for his serfs; yet when

Tchitchikov offers to buy his dead souls, neither he nor his overseer knows who is alive and who is dead on the estate. Tchitchikov's affable manner so melts his soft heart that he makes him a present of the dead peasants, and bidding his guest farewell, seats himself in a chair and dreams all afternoon of how delightful it would be to dwell with his friend on the bank of some river.

The hero's progress is not invariably as easy, however. The next landowner, the widow Korobotchkina, is a grasping bargainer, in mortal fear of being cheated. She has never sold dead souls before, she argues; she wants to wait awhile; "perhaps some merchants may come, and I can find out about the prices; . . . perhaps the dead souls may be needed some day on the estate!" Sophisticated, polished greed wrestles with greed in the rough throughout a magnificent chapter, and it is hard to make a moral choice between the two. Then there is Sobakevitch, too much concerned with his own interests to be at all inquisitive about the motives of the buyer of dead souls. He asks one hundred rubles apiece for the dead souls which Tchitchikov had offered to buy at the rate of eighty kopeks a name, and proceeds to read our hero a sublime catalogue of laudation in which the virtues of each dead serf are set forth: "Some other scoundrel will deceive you and sell you rubbish, and not real dead souls; but mine are as sound as nuts, picked articles; there is no better artisan than the healthy *mujik*. Just consider the matter: here's Mikhyev, the carriage-builder! Why, no better equipages are made than those he used to build. . . . And Maksim Telyatnikov, the cobbler; whatever he pricked with his awl became a boot at once. . . ." "But they are dead!" Tchitchikov protests and is finally compelled to pay three rubles a soul.

Pliushkin, the almost dehumanized miser, on the other

hand, welcomes Tchitchikov as a deliverer from so many taxable burdens and gives away not only his dead souls, but also all those who have absconded. But perhaps the most disgusting full-length portrait in the book is that of the suspicious tippler and gambler Nozdryov, who not only refuses to sell his deceased serfs, but, angered with Tchitchikov over a game of draughts, exposes his scheme at the very point when he is the object of the town's admiration. Dame Gossip makes a round of calls accompanied by Mistress Rumor, and "The Result is Our Hero's Flight," as Gogol entitles Chapter X.

He departs on fresh enterprises, and new scenes, new landowners appear on the stage, but the landscape is only a different copy of the same spiritual wilderness. Tentyotnikov is another Manilov—not as loving, perhaps, but certainly as useless: we know that he will never reach the end of his universal history of all Russia, but that his serfs will certainly make an end to that portion of Russia which he mismanages. Pyetukh is a prodigal son in the first chapter of festive gluttony, and Khlobuyov, whose mortgaged estate Tchitchikov buys, is a prodigal son in the last chapter, a wanton spendthrift in tatters. Nor is the bored Russian landowner absent, as witness the tedium-tortured Platonov. There is precisely one good man in the book, and only one possessing genuine efficiency. But the former is too old to inspire hope for the future, while the latter, Kostanzoghlo, is of foreign descent. And to match this portrayal of Russia's landowners, Russian officialdom is sketched in strokes, necessarily more cautious, but assuredly none the less telling. "It is impossible to convict you," the shyster jurisconsult tells Tchitchikov; "for before the trial is over, everybody in town will be implicated!"

Throughout the novel one seems to hear, as in an under-

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tone, the groans of those millions of live souls whose dead brothers Tchitchikov is buying up from their masters. Yet "Dead Souls" is not a tract against serf-ownership or against anything else. In this utterly unconstrained chronicle, conceived in a sort of Rabelaisian humor, gigantic, embracing an entire race, yet minutely veracious to the least detail, a tragedy is revealed not in the telling but in the fact that such a story could be truthfully told of Holy Russia. Like the old cloak of the poor official in Gogol's story "Shinel," the Russian soul appears in "Dead Souls"—worn out, beyond repair; and, like the three-horse team, the bird-troika, Russia dashes onward, dashes resistlessly and yet without direction. The future of his native land overwhelmed the author: "Is it not thus, like the bold troika which cannot be overtaken, that thou art dashing along, O Russia, my country? . . . O Russia, whither art thou dashing? Reply! But she replies not! . . ." And so does Gogol despair of his country's pettiness, only to sink in awe before her inscrutable, immense inertia.

Russia read Gogol's "Dead Souls," and the story which the great novelist told was a story which every Russian could see and hear in his own midst: the characters, men and women, landed gentry and serf chattels, they were all about him, peopling every province. As the reader followed Tchitchikov on his rascally mission, the cumulative impression of his vast country brought laughter of kindly pity and laughter of contempt, brought smiles and sneers, but most of all it was spiritually depressing; it made men concerned, worried, anxious about the vast futility of their fatherland. And what Russian in all Russia could escape the question which Gogol was asking throughout the book: "Which of you, filled with Christian humility, will dive into the depths of his own soul, and not aloud, but in silence and solitude, in mo-

ments of isolated self-communion, will put to himself the weighty question: And is there not some taint of Tchitchikov in me also?"

Like "Don Quixote," "Dead Souls" is a satire on human vice, human pettiness and vanity; and, like "Don Quixote," it lacks artistic unity. Indeed, one should not say that the book lacks artistic unity; it does not attempt unity of any sort. Perhaps it is not a novel, strictly speaking; the telling of the story may have a beginning, but the story itself is without any artificial boundaries. Gogol never finished it, but what he did finish is not on that account radically affected. "Dead Souls" is a packet of leaves torn at random from the book of life; a collection of unforgettable etchings of human character, overwhelmingly true to nature.

Gogol possesses a Shakespearean, uncanny power of sketching a character full and complete with half a dozen strokes of the pen. One must read his works to appreciate this genius of his to the full. I shall quote only two examples, one of them from "Dead Souls." Tchitchikov's valet Petrushka "always carried about him a special atmosphere of his own, a peculiar smell which corresponded to some extent with that of a dwelling-room; so that it sufficed for him merely to install himself somewhere, to take off his cloak and belongings there, for people to think that the apartment had been inhabited for fully ten years." To match this passport of externals, behold a spiritual passport: "Ivan Ivanovitch was a man of the most accurate and systematic habits. When he had eaten a melon, he would wrap the seeds in a bit of paper and write on it: 'This melon was eaten on such and such a date'; and if there had been a friend at table he would add: 'in the presence of Mr. So-and-So.'" And in one moment you find yourselves completely acquainted with both gentlemen.

We cannot follow Gogol to the last days of his life: the mental depression which claimed him, as it has claimed so many Russian masters since his time; the fit of despondency in which he burned the manuscript of the second part of "Dead Souls"; the religious mysticism in which his last days flickered away. Of Russia's master-novelists, he was the first and the model of his successors. One sometimes wonders how realistic art could possibly surpass itself by surpassing Gogol; and yet, after Gogol, a writer came to Russia who combined Gogol's mastery of life-portrayal with a clearer philosophy of life and with a certain genius of artistic conception which made his novels not only true pictures of human character, but also artistic unities. These excellences were combined as they never had been combined before, in Russian or in any other fiction, in the art of Ivan Turgenev, the prince of novelists.