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Integrality of Gogol's Works and «Screaming Contradictions» in Understanding Him

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The article raises the problem of stereotypic understanding of Nickolay Gogol's works in traditional literature studies, suggests a new approach to the works of the great Russian classic writer in philosophical, cultural and stylistic aspects.

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Since times of Gogol's contemporaries discussion of contradictions in his works and life has become, on the one hand, anthological and, on the other hand, extremely theorized. There is a well-known story told by Pushkin about type-setters dropping and mixing the type while they were setting up a play of Gogol's. The more we read Gogol's works nowadays the more we feel that like the type-setters literary critics of the XX century dropped and mixed all Gogol's texts together.

N.V. Gogol was, without a shadow of doubt, put on the list of revolutionary liberal-western intelligencia and V.G. Bellinsky thought him to be one of the founders of realism and 'natural school'. Thus Gogol is presented in anthologies as a satirist and a critic of autocracy and regime.

Unfoundedness of this approach to Gogol's works was vividly revealed by Dostoevsky, Rosanov, Merezhkovsky, Brussov. However, the voice of revolutionary democracy sounded much

louder in Soviet Russia than the voices of those who considered Gogol a philosopher or a great fantast-mystic. At present there appear works of modern Russian scientists such as I. Ilyin, I. Vinogradov, I. Zolotussky, M. Menshikov and others who are discovering an unknown Gogol for us.

After his second publication in 1831-32 – a short story collection «Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka» – Gogol was recognized as a leading literary man in Russia. The Russian public was struck by the inimitableness and originality of «Evenings» due to which the book gained its reputation of a bright literary phenomenon having no analogies. But in the letter of April 20, 1829 Gogol lamented to the mother «Everyone here is amused by anything Malorossian...» Thus Gogol himself defined the first error of his contemporaries – treating Gogol's works as popular ethnographical stories. However, Gogol's Ukrainophilism was not «a thing never heard

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of». Actually it developed the world's tradition of romanticism, so, not for nothing Ukraine was called Ancient Rome of Slavonic Peoples in N. Nadezhdin's review.

On discussing «Evenings» the second error was articulated – a stereotypic idea of Gogol's early works uniting Russian and Ukrainian culture together and his late works belonging purely to Russian culture. This stereotype considerably distorts the cultural background of Gogol's epoch and completely ignores the question of so-called «Pan-Russian» culture.

New universal imperial culture of Russia was built up by the authorities as state culture on the analogy of Byzantine and ancient Roman cultures. In the second half of the XVII century Ukrainian (in other words, Ukrainian-Byelorussian, or south-western Russian) culture was chosen the basis of the new culture. Its priority recognized by the official authorities was explained by two facts – firstly, it was highly developed and, secondly, up to 1686 the Ukrainian Orthodox Church was under jurisdiction of Patriarch of Constantinople, thus the Moscow kingdom was symbolically connected to historical Byzantium through Ukraine. One can come across a great number of images of «Pan-Russian» political conscience in Gogol's works: «Russian land» for which Kazaks die, «Russ – a bird-troika» in «Dead Souls» and «Russia» in «Selected Passages». Cultural-philosophical significance of these images is not in the description of matters of everyday life or the usage of folklore but in Gogol's attempt to build up the great national «Pan-Russian» utopia.

The author of «Evenings» was undoubtedly attributed to the few with a comical talent. The success of the literary work was explained by the author's joviality and the brightness of the national colouring, whereas such definitely romantic features as tensivity, dramatic effects, conflict, a sense of concealed tension that make

the work adequate to the high standards of the world's romantic literature were just mentioned, but, as a matter of fact, those were the features that defined Gogol's style and the dramatic colouring of his laughter. During all his creative period Gogol stuck to the style that could be defined as philosophical mythosymbolism sprinkled with logics of wonder and compatibility of mismatches, grotesque, hyperbole and paradoxes of values. Exactly here, in the third circle of misunderstandings lies the source of the three Gogols – the Gogol of «Evenings» (1832), the Gogol of «Dead Souls» (1842), the Gogol of «Selected Passages from Correspondence with his Friends» (1847).

To understand the essence of Gogol's position it is necessary to learn about the events taking place in 1832, when in Russia there were declared the principles of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and National character. The person who announced them was S.S. Uvarov. Gogol became one of his first employees. Gogol's «Curriculum of History of World's Civilizations» was published in the second issue of the journal. He wrote, «My aim is to educate the hearts of young students...so that... they couldn't betray their duty, their Belief, their noble honour and their oath to be devoted to the Motherland and the Sovereign» (*note: the quotation is translated by the author of the article*). The fourth misunderstanding of Gogol is the denial to admit that these words reveal not only the core of the educational activity of the writer but also the ideology of his works. «Taras Bulba» and later «The Inspector-General» and «Dead Souls» raised the question of fruit of Western debauchery flourishing on Russian ground, to fight which the Programme of Orthodoxy, Autocracy and National character was worked out. Gogol intended to make his comedy «The Inspector-General» a deep moral-philosophical work. The symbolic meaning of the play was revealed in «The Denouement of «The Inspector-

General»»: «Needless to say, the Inspector to fear mostly is awaiting us after death. Can't you guess who he is? Why pretend? The Inspector-General is our awakened conscience that will make us suddenly stare at ourselves» (*note: the quotation is translated by the author of the article*).

Since the autumn of 1835 Gogol is busy with writing of «Dead Souls». That was the only literary work that Gogol thought to be worthy of recognition by the world's literature. He considered the correlation between «Dead Souls» and the rest of his works to be the same as between «Don Quixote» and the other novels by the great Spaniard. The dramatic collision in «The Inspector-General» is replaced by the epic one in «Dead Souls». Later Gogol will say that the work is finished if there is not only a thing to laugh at. Gogol refused from the genre of novel that he first wanted to follow and switched over to the epic poem where he could feel free to practice dialectics of different approaches and create the peculiar uniqueness of the work. The poem, which presents a consequence of satirical characters and situations on the surface, was to show a way to raise the fallen soul.

At the beginning of June in 1842, right after the publication of the first volume of «Dead Souls», Gogol went abroad and took to reading religious books. In «The Author's Confession» Gogol wrote about that period of his life: «I put aside my studies of everything contemporary for a time, I concentrated on those eternal laws that Man and the humanity follow. Anything that dealt with the studies of people and the human soul drew my attention, and following this road without any sense, hardly knowing how, I managed to come to Christ, in Him seeing the key to the human soul» (*note: the quotation is translated by the author of the article*).

He cannot think of writing the continuation of the poem without preliminary upbringing of his own soul. In summer in 1845 he wrote a

testament that later was contributed to «Selected Passages from Correspondence with his Friends» and he burnt the second volume of the poem. The death-disease, the mystery of the burnt manuscript and Christian decease resulted in one more misunderstanding of Gogol and a number of paraliterary and even medical hypotheses. However, the key to the understanding – the religious core of his personality – is still closed to us, as I.A. Ilyin stated, the main reason of this being our absolute ignorance of the problems that were actual for Gogol. His creative activity is still interpreted in social terms only.

It is necessary to take into consideration that ascetic aspirations and monastic ideal of late Gogol are not completely religious by nature but civic as well. He considered the rank of monk the highest of all and dreamed of wearing a plain black chasuble and regretted that one couldn't do it without God's summons. Calling Russia a cloister, he urged everyone to put on an imaginary chasuble and, having done away with selves, to serve Motherland.

Today it is a great time to look right into the essence of misunderstandings of the writer's personality and his creativity. In particular, the grossest is the literary stereotype of Gogol being «the founder of Russian prose». If this be true, any poet of Gogol's time could be announced a founder of prose in Moliere's definition, i.e. anything that is not a poem.

Let's think what kind of prose is meant here. In the introduction to the poetic novel «Eugene Onegin» by Pushkin:

«My uncle – high ideals inspire him;
but when past joking he fell sick,
he really forced one to admire him –
and never played a shrewder trick.» (1)

there is more prose by far than in so-called prosaic lines of Gogol's:

«The farther they penetrated the steppe,
the more beautiful it became. Then all the

South, all that region which now constitutes New Russia, even as far as the Black Sea, was a green, virgin wilderness. No plough had ever passed over the immeasurable waves of wild growth; horses alone, hidden in it as in a forest, trod it down. Nothing in nature could be finer. The whole surface resembled a golden-green ocean, upon which were sprinkled millions of different flowers. Through the tall, slender stems of the grass peeped light-blue, dark-blue, and lilac star-thistles; the yellow broom thrust up its pyramidal head; the parasol-shaped white flower of the false flax shimmered on high. A wheat-ear, brought God knows whence, was filling out to ripening. Amongst the roots of this luxuriant vegetation ran partridges with stretched necks. The air was filled with the notes of a thousand different birds. On high hovered the hawks, their wings outspread, and their eyes fixed intently on the grass. The cries of a flock of wild ducks, ascending from one side, were echoed from God knows what distant lake. From the grass arose, with measured sweep, a gull, and skimmed wantonly through blue waves of air. And now she has vanished on high, and appears only as a black dot: now she has turned her wings, and shines in the sunlight. Oh, steppes, how beautiful you are!» (2)

Is the plain, though pleasant, landscape of Malorossia is actually being described in this passage? What realistic prose do we come across in this fantastically romantic and utterly poetic description?

Gogol certainly worked much collecting material for his works. But his formidable pen transfigured the collected material so much that it became hard to recognize, one side being exaggerated to become «dazzlingly beautiful» or to present «the excess of meanness». As Rosanov said, reality changed in Gogol's works like the sorcerer starting his practice in «A Terrible Vengeance»: «The nose protruded and hung

over the lips, the mouth spread to the ears in no minute, out of the mouth a tooth sprang» (*note: the quotation is translated by the author of the article*).

Could Gogol know Russian people as much as Guilarovsky knew back streets, small shops and taverns of Moscow? Probably he didn't, but in his world of dreams and fantasy he managed to learn about us something that is still working to make a projection of Russian reality, today's reality, the reality of the third millennium, while the literary works of the «natural school» of the XIX century describing everyday life were sent to the cultural archives long ago.

The national character of Gogol's works is completely different from that one which was fought for by his revolutionary democratic contemporaries. Folklore provided Gogol's work's with the mytho-symbolical basis where the routine life is not separated from fantasies and dialectics of what is possible or impossible is not questioned. While writing of the national character Gogol consistently presents ideals of the people. Chichikov's travels in Hades of Russian life were more successfully described by Gogol than its Purgatory or hypothetical Paradise. Why so? Like Servantes Gogol vividly felt the difference between the norm, which is centered in cultures of most European countries, and the ideal. The denominator of the novel «Don Quixote» – the latter being very important for Gogol – was the great national ideal, through which a person looks at the world and with which he measures everything. Every minor thing depicted in the novel is to the ideal as the numerator is to the denominator. This fraction presents the great philosophical scale of the narration, provides the range necessary for grotesque, the ground and justification of mystical searches for God in the soul and the world. The relation between Gogol's and Servantes' creativity has not yet been studied, since the tradition to consider Gogol to

be a philosopher has not been established in the national literary school.

The middle-aged generation is still under the influence of ideological simplification, delusive easiness and understandability of Gogol's literary inheritance. Besides these clear stereotypes of readers there is one more course of «beating about Gogol» – the stereotypic public opinion tending to condemn something and to worship oppositions. We think the truth is being born in argument, when everybody argue themselves hoarse, but not as a result of a long spiritual way of doubt and discoveries.

When asked what he drew his inspiration from, Gogol answered: «From smoke. I write and burn.» The author's dissatisfaction with his work certainly proves his endless spiritual searches. N.V. Berg witnesses that Gogol once said, «Only after the eighth rewriting, obligatory with your own hand, the work becomes artistically finished». Perhaps thanks to this Gogol, the loneliest of all geniuses of the great epoch of romantic Solitude, was so fruitful in discoveries of style and genre, could survive Pushkin and

Lermontov in a sense of creativity, giving a push to Dostoevsky, Goncharov, Saltykov-Shchadrin, Nabokov, Bulgakov, Zoshchenko.

All things considered, one must admit that Gogol's contradictions were resulted from the public's misunderstandings of the writer's position and his works. Those were not Gogol's contradictions but contradictions in understanding him. He himself would highlight the integrity of his life and inner world. In «The Author's Confession» Gogol wrote: «I've never deviated from my way. I've been following the same way...and have come to Him Who Is The Source Of Life» (*note: the quotation is translated by the author of the article*). The same ideas are found in his letter to S.T. Aksakov (May 16, 1844) in which Gogol said that inwardly he had never changed his main grounds, always followed «the same road», «never hesitated or doubted his main ideas», «probably since the age of 12».

The writer's works that were written in tortures of creation and that have so many editions are worth reading and re-reading again.

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