

Gogol as a Religious Personality



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N. V. Gogol, one of the great geniuses of Russian and world literature, also had a tremendous significance in the history of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Gogol, Ivan Kireyevsky, Alexey Khomiakov, Konstantin Leontiev—the greatest of Russia’s Orthodox religious thinkers—are at the same time bright historical personalities in their own right, who profoundly understood the significance of the Russian Orthodox Church in the history of Russian spiritual culture and who gave all their God-given talents to the service of that Church.

The aim of this biographical description is to attempt to understand and characterize Gogol as a deeply idiosyncratic, religious man. The religious aspect of this great Russian writer was hidden for a very long time, both from his contemporaries and from subsequent generations.

To properly understand any historical personage, it is worth delving into a special “historical-intellectual emotion,” or mindset, which allows us to see the characteristic details of a given personality and the complete whole

of that person at the same time. It is extremely difficult to understand the contradictory and complex nature of Gogol's personality: his taciturnity, coupled inexplicably with extroverted dynamism and a unique flair for the dramatic. It seems hard to find another writer who has inspired such wildly divergent opinions and assessments.

We would like to soften these extremes and find the proper "focus" of a spiritually minded exploration of the "inner" Gogol. The key to understanding this soul (like any other human soul), according to this writer's opinion, is in his religious personality.

The formation of Gogol's personality was organically influenced by many factors. In looking at the chronological flow of Gogol's biography, we will especially stop to note and analyze the strong and profound influence on Gogol's life of several people.

Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol was born March 20, 1809. He was a sickly infant and from his earliest childhood impressionable and prone to irritation. As the years passed, he developed certain psychopathological traits (a difficult and intractable character with unexplained idiosyncrasies and an inclination to hysteria), but avoided an emotional breakdown. Usually such inadequacies in character are explained away as unfortunate genetic predispositions.

Gogol's father, Vasilii Afanasievich, descended from an ancient Ukrainian noble family. He was a talented author in his own right, having written two one-act comedies and several humorous poems. He also worked for a

time as a director and principal actor in an amateur theater troupe in the estate of his rich and well-connected relative, the former Ekaterinburg magnate and patron of the arts, D. P. Troshchinsky. Vasilii Afanasievich was exceptionally cheerful in his manner and humor, but was also an excessively sensitive dreamer and a hypochondriac. He dabbled equally in folk poetry and the sentimental Romantic poetry typical of the age of Karamzin. He was a fantastic storyteller, loved to declaim in front of crowds, loved to make poses and theatrical gestures, and in general was a performer in everyday life. He also loved the Church, especially its rituals and singing, appreciating Orthodoxy mainly in its strictly aesthetic aspect.

It is worth mentioning that for several generations the family of Gogol had been very well educated, mostly thanks to priestly roots on his father's side. Gogol's great-grandfather was a priest, and both his grandfather and father were educated in the Kiev Spiritual Academy, but did not follow the priestly line. Gogol's mother, Maria Ivanovna Kosiarovskaia, in her "Notes" (a memoir written after the death of her husband, characterized by great sincerity and simplicity, and not lacking in literary quality), comes across as a personality impressionable to a fault and inclined to exalted feelings. She believed in mysterious premonitions, omens, and prophetic dreams. She was especially sensitive in her "mystical experiences" of the dark powers: she shuddered before evil spirits and was deathly afraid of them. She was often afraid and

suspicious, and tended to hypochondria. Gogol's father was also a hypochondriac, but this common character trait was perhaps the only one the two shared.

Gogol inherited from his parents a heightened sensitivity, a love for the aesthetic, literary talent, humor, artistic capabilities, an easily disturbed character with strange prejudices and fears, and an inclination towards religious mysticism. From a rather early period, he would fall into periodic bouts of depression, which were always followed by periods of manic excitement. He would often react hysterically and invent fantastically ridiculous lies. He inclined to pseudo-reminiscence, showing off, philosophizing, bathos, and hyperbole in his expression of emotional distress, and he generally showed indications of a personality given to all forms of affectation.

But while he developed these obviously psychopathological traits from his early years, Gogol was prone to intense moral self-criticism, even self-condemnation, and had an unusually sensitive religious conscience. In his twenties, in one of his letters to his mother (1829), Gogol gives a remarkably sincere and genuine self-appraisal: "I often think to myself, why did God, who created a unique (or at least a very rare), pure, fiery soul that longs for all that is exalted and beautiful, why did he dress all of it in such a frightful mess of contradictions, stubbornness, obnoxious self-will and shameful self-abasement?"

Gogol was born in a place called Bol'shyye Sorochintsy, in the Mirgorodsk uyezd of the Poltava gubernia, where he

spent his childhood until age 12. This place was a beautiful and captivating corner of the Ukrainian countryside and a peaceful setting for his friendly and hospitable family of the minor nobility. The family kept a living memory of the former glory of Little Russia, of the feats of the Cossacks, creating a poetic atmosphere of love for folk songs, fairy tales, legends, and sayings—all of which idiosyncratically were interwoven with a love for the ritual beauties of the Orthodox Church. This religio-poetic attitude was the glue that held together all the aspects of manorial estate life, which at that time in the Ukraine was still very connected to the daily life of the serfs, something Russia had by then lost.

The Gogol family was well versed in both the sacred and secular culture of the time, and in addition to Gogol's especially gentle love for his native, softly musical Ukrainian (which he spoke fluently¹), he was proficient in the literary Russian of the day, in which he wrote his great works and letters. Though a "Little Russian" by blood, Gogol was raised in the great "pan-Russian" spiritual culture, with her "great, mighty, free, and truthful" language.

The influences on Gogol's spiritual development are many: nature, folk poetry, sentimental Romantic literature, and especially the theater, which the impressionable youth first encountered in the village of Kibintsy at D. P. Troshchinsky's. Here, on the stage of the Kibintsy

¹ See Prof. O. Mandelstam's essay "On the Character of the Gogol Style."

serf theater, Gogol's father staged his comedies. The theater made a resounding impression on the young Gogol, profoundly damaging his sensitive soul and in many ways determining the character of his future creative work.

If every artist, according to Belinsky, "thinks in images," then it would be safe to say about Gogol that, under the influence of the theater, he began "thinking in scenes." This "scenic imagination" becomes a psychological key to understanding not only all his creative oeuvre, which so easily and naturally inhabits the stage as well as the page, but his entire work as a zealot of the word.

If Tiutchev was right when he said "any thought spoken out loud is a lie," then this truth in Gogol's context is inevitably tragic. The tortures of the creative word were to him only too well known. And the more subjective and emotional his ideas were, the more agonizing was the search for the words adequate to express their meaning. The brilliant artist of the word was not able to express his feelings with words!

This helps to explain the particularities of Gogol's creativity. He had superlative abilities in the dramatic arts, especially in comedy. Furthermore he was a talented storyteller in the heroic style, and all that was comical or grotesque he could describe very vividly, like a sculpture. (It is interesting to note that in his own way Gogol appreciated, understood, and loved sculpture and architecture.) The hardest for him was any kind of lyrical writing. By and large his lyrical passages seem false, affected, and

oratorical. He had a much easier time describing types than individuals.

His early exposure to sentimental Romantic literature—in which there was no less falsity, posing, declamation, and oratory as in so-called false Classicism—had a profound and lasting impact on Gogol. Even his early letters have the stamp of this influence. Even after his father's death, the sixteen-year-old Gogol wrote about his perfectly natural suffering in a deliberately affected, declamational style that was full of bathos.

The gorgeous natural beauty of Little Russia, the poetic atmosphere of folk poetry, Romantic literature, and theater developed and encouraged only the aesthetic tastes of Gogol. The moral development of the sickly and impressionable youth was deeply inadequate. His parents, especially his mother, spoiled him and idolized him (he was the only boy in a family of four girls). They nurtured within his naturally sickly soul the tares of self-conceit, vanity, pride, and egotistical self-centeredness. His religious upbringing, although largely external and formalistic, nevertheless sowed many good seeds in his soul. From these (thanks especially to his inborn religious and mystical inclinations) he developed deeply religious feelings and thoughts. The child Gogol was taken to services, forced to fast, and made to listen to readings of the lives of the saints. And while no one explained the spiritual meaning of what he saw and heard, it could not but settle deep into the soul of the sensitive child.

Gogol himself, severely critical of the exclusively formal religious instruction he received from his family (“I crossed myself because I saw that everyone else was doing the same”), in one of his letters to his mother, movingly recalls one religious moment that impressed his youthful soul. “Once in my childhood you told me, so well, so touchingly, about those good things that await people of a righteous life, and so vividly, so frighteningly described the eternal torments of the sinful, that my entire sensitive nature was shaken and woken up. You planted and later produced the most exalted thoughts in me.”

Gogol’s mother apparently told the story in a state of special compunction and trepidation, typical of her usual attitude towards the Final Judgment. Gogol’s “scenic imagination” filled out his mother’s story with the colors of his brilliantly creative imagination, so that he would remember it for his entire life.

At age twelve Gogol entered the Nezhinskii Lyceum, or the so-called Gymnasium of Higher Learning, where he studied from 1821 until 1828, boarding at the school. This Lyceum education widened his intellectual horizons and taught him the “scientific method.” In school he “learned how to learn.” Among his teachers was the notable German professor Zenger, who succeeded in making the study of German authors the favorite class of most of the students. He encouraged them to explore the exalted poetry of Schiller, whom Gogol started to study “with greatest pleasure.” Even more influential was the

professor of the history of philosophy and juridical sciences, N. G. Belousov, who laid deep foundations of moral and civil duty in the young soul of the future moralist.

Gogol's numerous friends—among whom were such talented youths like Kukolnik, Grebenka, Danilevky, Vysotskii, Redkin, and the brothers Prokopovich—also had a good moral influence on his developing character. However, his schooling could not fully undo the damage done by his early upbringing. It only intensified Gogol's inner battle with himself, making more intense his natural tendency to moral self-criticism. By the time he finished the Lyceum, this battle was only complicated by the awakening of sexual passions, which Gogol described as a "sting in his body," and of which he was deathly afraid throughout his life, fearing that "their flame can turn me into ash in one second." Only his highly developed moral and analytical self-criticism, a sense of responsibility before his creative talent, and an unusually subtle religious conscience, saved the passionate Gogol from this deadly flame of physical lust. Gogol, as is well known, lived his entire life without ever partaking of the pleasures of the flesh.

When Gogol was sixteen, he lost his father. His mother, on the other hand, outlived Gogol, and was during his entire life a correspondent and friend with whom he shared all his joys and sorrows. After the death of his father, the young Gogol immediately grew up in a spiritual sense. He crossed a clear spiritual threshold—the

depravity surrounding him, which up to this point had given him only a reason to laugh, appeared now a terrible, inevitable aspect of life, deeply affecting his mind and conscience.

In one of his letters to his friend G. N. Vysotskii (who finished the Lyceum a year earlier), Gogol calls the people surrounding him “survivors, who have stifled the high calling of mankind with the punishment of their earthliness and their worthless complacency.” At the same time he began to feel an impulse to break out of his “wretched anonymity” and do something important “to give meaning to his existence in the world.” In a letter to P. P. Kosiarovsky in 1827, Gogol wrote that he was “afire with an undying zeal to make his life necessary for the good of the government.” Here we see the influence of his Lyceum professor N. G. Belousov.

After much deliberation and hesitation, Gogol decided to dedicate himself to the law, because in his opinion “injustice is the greatest misfortune in the world.”

It is interesting to note that in the face of many social and political injustices, Gogol never for a moment considered the revolutionary solution, but rather intended to uproot these imperfections by his personal involvement in the social and civic life of his county. In this inclination it is impossible not to see the enormous positive influence of his Lyceum education.

Gogol’s favorite subjects in the Lyceum were history and the history of literature. The rather large Lyceum

library proved insufficient to satisfy the inquisitiveness of Gogol and his friends, and they decided to supplement it with their own library. Gogol, who read a great deal in his school years and afterwards, was in charge of this library. The works of Pushkin and Zhukovsky, the *Northern Flowers* of Delvig, the *Moscow Telegraph*, *News of Europe*, Pogodin's *Moscow News*—these were some of the books in their student library.

While speaking of Gogol's school years, it is impossible to omit the importance of student dramatic productions. In such productions, Gogol first displayed a wonderful talent for acting. According to eyewitnesses, he was especially good in comic roles. In Fonvizin's *Nedorosl* he played Prostakova, and in Krylov's *A Lesson for Daughters* he had the role of Vasilievna. These student productions greatly increased his love for the theater. He became fascinated with dramatic literature and tried to write his own plays. The Lyceum theater was undoubtedly the birthplace of Gogol's dramatic talent, so brilliantly on display in his eternal comedies *The Inspector General* and *The Wedding*.

After finishing the Lyceum, Gogol moved to St Petersburg. He brought with him a manuscript of his first creative work: an idyll in verse titled *Hans Kuhelgarten* (finished in 1828, when Gogol was nineteen). During this period, Gogol was a young dreamer, full of the most contradictory desires and plans, with a mix of idealized and self-promoting inclinations, a desire to serve Russia

selflessly yet simultaneously to become famous in the process. St Petersburg seemed to him the center, where he would be able to bring all his plans to fruition and make all his dreams come true.

But Petersburg did not justify the rosy-hued hopes of the vain and self-assured dreamer. The cold Northern capital gave him a chilly reception, and for a long time he could find neither an appropriate job nor a decent apartment. His first experience in print was also unsuccessful: the idyll in verse “Hans Kuhelgarten,” published under the pseudonym V. Aloy, was lambasted by the critics, and Gogol, having taken back nearly all the printed copies from booksellers, burned them.

Suffering a heavy shock close to despair, Gogol suddenly, without any definite goal, traveled abroad to Lubek and Hamburg. After returning from his pointless and thoughtless travels (which can only be explained by his psychologically depressed state, as does Prof. V. Chizh in his work “The Sickness of Gogol”) and after yet another unsuccessful search for work, Gogol once again turned to literature, but in a new form. He wrote *Evenings in the Village near Dikanka*. Disillusioned both by Petersburg’s nature and its way of life, he fondly remembered his first childhood memories of beautiful Little Russia and her folk poetry. After *Evenings* (1831–1832), he wrote *Ara-besques* and *Mirgorod* (1835).

With these works, Gogol entered the annals of Russian literature and was welcomed joyfully and sympathetically

by critics and the reading public alike, as well as by fellow writers. Gogol made many new literary acquaintances and connections, as well as many new friends. One of the first was Delvig, and through him, Zhukovsky.

In May 1831, Pletnev introduced Gogol to Pushkin. This was the single most important moment in Gogol's literary life. Under the influence of Pushkin's brilliant genius, Gogol realized both the ultimate goal of art and the meaning of his own work. Service to art took on the character of a moral duty and that great service to mankind that Gogol had dreamed of even in the Lyceum, under the influence of Prof. Belousov.

Pushkin revealed the true meaning of art to Gogol, especially as it refers to poetry in particular. Pushkin's beliefs—"Genius and evil are incompatible," "The beautiful must be majestic," "Service to the muses cannot bear distractions," "Poets are born for inspiration, for sweet sounds and prayer"—were deep revelations for Gogol. He understood that aesthetics without ethics is nothing; that Beauty without Good is not Beauty at all, but only prettiness; that to be a great poet one must first become a good man. And then service to art will become a high moral calling: loving one's neighbor. Before his acquaintance with Pushkin, the aesthetic and moral aspects of Gogol developed separately. Now the service of Beauty and Good became intertwined in him.

When Pushkin died (1837), Gogol wrote: "My life, my greatest enjoyment died with him. . . . When I created,

I saw Pushkin before me. All purposes, all goals were as nothing . . . all I treasured was his eternal and inviolable word. I did nothing, I wrote nothing without his counsel. All the good that is in me is thanks to him. . . .”

No less important (though less evident) was the influence of the personality and opinions of Zhukovsky. Slowly, gently, kindly, and subtly, Zhukovsky continued and deepened those good seeds that Pushkin sowed in Gogol’s heart. Zhukovsky’s beliefs—“Poetry is God in the holy dreams of the earth,” “Everything in life is a means toward the Ultimate,” “In life there are many more wonderful things than just happiness,”—revealed to Gogol’s spiritual eyes that religious truth, moral good, and the beauty of art are a trinity, a triune image of perfection, thanks to which it is possible to align a life of service to art with service to God and one’s neighbor. Zhukovsky, the friend of Pushkin, became also the friend of Gogol.

But such a simultaneous service to religion, morality and art, so easily attainable for the harmonious soul of Pushkin and even more perfectly realized in the harmony of Zhukovsky’s soul, turned out to be tragically difficult for the discordant and sickly soul of Gogol.

The uniqueness of Pushkin and Zhukovsky’s theory of art was that it simultaneously denounced the theory of “art for art’s sake” and the so-called utilitarian theory of art. The main idea of this theory of Pushkin and Zhukovsky (never formally systematized, but scrupulously followed in both the life and work of these great poets)

is the following: the poet must be completely free during the process of his creation. Not a single social, moral, nor even religious expectation may be demanded of him. But the poet, as a person, must forever grow spiritually; in other words, perfect himself in the religious and moral sense, keeping in mind the ideal of Christian morality: "Be ye perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect." And if he will grow himself, his creation will grow with him.

The foundation for this new theory of art was laid in Gogol's soul by his entire previous life and work. His soul at its core was deeply religious, moral questions of his youth always clamored for answers, while his aesthetic development moved ever onward, untrammled by any other force. The tremendous gift of creativity was given Gogol from Above—on the one hand, as the proverbial talent that must be increased to be fully realized; on the other, as an exclusive treasure, an obstacle to gaining the kingdom of heaven.

Even before coming into contact with Pushkin and Zhukovsky's theory of art, Gogol created in complete freedom, not giving himself any utilitarian goals, not requiring anything specific of himself, rather giving himself up to inspiration. He lived and breathed art and quickly improved his artistry. But while continuously tending to his aesthetic needs, he was abandoning his religious and moral "spiritual housekeeping." His personal acquaintance with Pushkin and Zhukovsky forced Gogol to think deeply about himself, especially after he

saw, understood, and appreciated their moral outlook and heard from them a new meaning for art. Even more clearly and vividly he noticed in himself that “frightening mixture of contradictions” that had tortured him since his youth.

In a letter to Pogodin (1833), Gogol wrote: “Do you understand the horrible feeling of being unsatisfied with yourself? Oh, may you never know it! The person in whom this hell-feeling inhabits turns completely into anger. . . . The feeling of personal incompleteness, together with humility and repentance, calls down the Grace of God. But in the presence of pride, it brings a person to self-pity and anger. . . .” This “hell-feeling” that turned Gogol into pure “anger” obviously shows how far he was from true humility and what a terrible contradiction reigned in his soul.

The year 1836 Gogol himself called a “great threshold,” a “great epoch” in his life. In his *Author’s Confession* (1847), he divides his life into two periods: the first, when he “created, not worrying at all why I did, never considering who or what would benefit from my work,” and the second, when “Pushkin forced me to look at the matter seriously.”

As is well known, Pushkin inspired Gogol with the stories of both *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*. In a letter to Zhukovsky (1847), Gogol wrote, remembering this period of his writing: “I decided to collect all the bad that I knew, and in one fell swoop to laugh at it

all—that was the genesis of *The Inspector General*! It was my first work written specifically for the improvement of society.”

The first performance of *The Inspector General*, attended by Emperor Nicholas I, inspired a mixed response from society; on the one hand, a storm of accolades, but on the other, of protests. But Gogol himself was deeply disillusioned. According to his own words, no one (neither the admirers nor the detractors) understood the meaning that Gogol intended for the comedy. He expressed these intentions in his essays “Theatrical Journey” and “Untangling the Inspector General.”

If one is to appreciate Gogol’s strange disillusionment, one must keep in mind Gogol’s own interpretation of the play. The town where all the events take place is a symbol for the human soul, the town officials are symbols of human passions, Khlestakov is the symbol of a vacillating conscience, while the actual Inspector General represents the imminent questioning of the human soul by God Himself. If one is to firmly stick to these images while watching or reading the play, then the comedy inevitably turns into an utterly unique tragedy, probably the only one of its kind in all of world literature.

An interesting attempt to stage the comedy in this way is mentioned in the book *Ascetic of the Word: New Research on Gogol* by I. Scheglov (1909), published for the centennial celebration of Gogol’s birth. In the chapter “Midnight Inspector,” the author describes a production

of the comedy performed at night for the monks of a certain monastery in the deep country. The abbot, as he was blessing the director Blazhevich after the end of this unusual production, said, "Remember, my son, in your heart the 'midnight inspector,' and take care of the town of your soul, for no one knows when He will come to inspect what you have done."

Another director who attempted to perform *The Inspector General* in the "Gogol interpretation" was Meyerholdt, who in his time presented a "mystical" version of the comedy. But the production was not a successful one.

The Inspector General is brilliant in nearly every respect. Its general composition, its vivid scenes, its language, its uninhibited humor, the deep psychological truth of the types he describes, especially the type of Khlestakov, is remarkable. The play was doubtless written by the author completely freely, with no ulterior motives of a social, moral, or religious nature. But Gogol was right to give it an especially religious undertone later, as any ideological thinker or critic is right to interpret even the most realistic literature in a symbolic way. One can here recall similar interpretations of Pushkin's "Bronze Horseman," Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Ostrovsky's *The Woods*, Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, and many others. The only unreasonable aspect of Gogol's interpretation was that he insisted that his own, highly subjective, personal, and deeply idiosyncratic interpretation

was the only correct one, especially considering that this interpretation came to Gogol after he finished writing his play.

Gogol's extremely sharp, personal, and lengthy reaction to the "failure" of *The Inspector General* (a dubious event in itself) explains the beginning of a serious mental crisis. Shortly after the opening of *The Inspector General*, a shaken Gogol traveled abroad, to "walk off his sorrow."

Having traveled through Switzerland, Germany, and Italy, Gogol calmed down and came to the conclusion that he was himself to blame for everything because he was listless, lazy, thoughtless, not serious towards his writer's calling, careless in his use of humor, and generally not attentive enough toward his God-given talent.

Thus he continued, with great spiritual energy and artistic inspiration, a work already begun in St Petersburg: *Dead Souls*. Gogol had already found time to read the first chapter of his "poem" to Pushkin in St Petersburg. Although he was laughing at the beginning, Pushkin gradually got quieter, and by the end of the reading he exclaimed in a sorrowful voice, "Oh, God! How sad is our Russia!" This exclamation of Pushkin was the most truthful response to Gogol's "poem." In our own day we can only deepen and strengthen Pushkin's thought: "Oh, God! How frightening, how tragically deprived is the whole world of men."

In his *Author's Confession*, Gogol described his initial intentions in continuing his work on *Dead Souls* abroad:

“I wanted my book to bring forward primarily those highest qualities of human nature that are not yet appreciated by everyone, and primarily those lowest qualities that are not yet sufficiently laughed at and reviled. . . . I thought that my overflowing lyrical ability would help me describe these honorable qualities in such a way that a Russian person would be inflamed with love for them, while my ability to make someone laugh, which I also have in excess, would help me so vividly present those human failings that the reader would despise them, even if he were to find them within himself. But at the same time I felt that I would be able to do all this only if I came to understand fully that our human nature has both honorable qualities and failings. . . . I must not raise up sins to the level of virtues, or instead destroy with laughter those virtuous qualities together with the sins. . . .” As these quotes show, Gogol’s intentions were in the highest degree serious, deeply and honestly thought out, and very beneficial to the Russian society of “Belinsky’s era.”

In March 1837, Gogol ended up in Rome, his self-professed “Altar of Beauty.” Gogol’s inborn, endless, and insatiable aesthetic searching was fed plentifully, giving him exalted and pure enjoyment. For a short time this calmed him, because secular art in its purest form is the steppingstone for heavenly religion.

In the atmosphere of Italian Beauty, Gogol wrote of his own beloved, distant Russia. He was content with his work on *Dead Souls*. In a letter to Zhukovsky (October

1837), he informs his friend: "I am happy. My soul is full of light. I work and I hurry with all my strength to finish my work."

"Heaven and Paradise are in my soul," he wrote to Danilevsky in February 1838.

In 1839, Gogol returned to Russia and read the finished chapters of his "poem" to a select group of close friends. In June 1840, he once again left for Europe. At the end of 1841, he returned once again to Russia to publish his work. In 1842, the first volume of *Dead Souls* was published in Moscow.

During this time (1839–1842), Gogol's mood changed drastically several times; either he was taken up by an ecstasy of inspiration, impressing everyone with his work ethic, or he was plunged into "a disease of sorrow, which has no description."

His friends in Russia noticed a dramatic difference in him. "On the surface, he became thin, pale, and a quiet resignation to the will of God was obvious in his every word," said his friend S. T. Aksakov.

However, this quiet peacefulness lasted only a short time. Annoyed by difficulties in publishing his book during the summer of 1842, he left Russia in a huff, only to return in 1847. "The terrible mix of contradictions" in Gogol's soul, of which he wrote even in his youth (1829), only became more pronounced with the passing years.

The summer of 1842 he spent in Germany; in the fall he moved in with N. M. Yazykov in Rome. Gogol's

Roman friends (Yazykov, the artist Ivanov, F. V. Chizhov, and others), like his friends in Russia, also noticed the dramatic difference in him. He had become pensive, silent, introspective, pointedly religious. But at times all this disappeared, and he would become animated, talkative, and (according to Chizhov) he would tell stories that amused everyone.

In 1843, Gogol's visitor A. O. Smirnova noticed his intensely religious mood. "He would separate himself usually from the others and was so absorbed in prayer, that it seemed he noticed no one near him." When he visited Smirnova's apartment, Gogol brought a thick notebook full of excerpts from the Holy Fathers.

Although previously Gogol did not bother with philosophy and theology, now he began to supplement his knowledge greedily and to study like a schoolboy. Gradually spiritual books replaced the worldly. Gogol began to order books from Russia and read the works of the Holy Fathers, the *Philokalia*, the works of St Dmitry of Rostov, Bishop Innocent, Lazar Baranovich, Stefan Yavorsky, "Christian Teachings," and other spiritual journals. Simultaneously with Orthodox literature, he read *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis and even recommended reading one chapter of this book a day in a letter to S. T. Aksakov.

The indiscriminate reading of spiritual literature, without prior preparation or guidance, brought the vacillating and easily swayed Gogol more harm than good. Often, having attended Church services and fulfilled all

the ritual requirements, he demanded the same from those around him and quarreled with them. Having frequent recourse to the mysteries of Confession and Communion, he demanded the same from others, sharply and angrily condemning them if they didn't listen to him. Having taken on ascetic feats of prayer, he began to think that he had already reached a high spiritual state, and even hinted that his prayer could heal the sick and convince the skeptics. He began to create other "rules" of behavior for himself, including mandatory daily readings and ascetic labors.

While battling his own sinfulness, he would ask his friends and acquaintances to help him uncover his weaknesses. The Gogol who always gave himself completely to every new impression began to revel in his own "repentant feelings," underneath which was forming a self-abasement worse than pride. "The more you find and expose my limitations and sins," he wrote to Shevyrev (1842), "the more I will be grateful to you. Perhaps there is not another person in all of Russia who thirsts to know all of his sins and limitations."

"My soul now desires and thirsts for sins, for the uncovering of sins," he wrote in an exalted state to Zhukovsky. "If you only knew what kind of a feast is happening inside me when I uncover a sin in myself that I didn't notice before!"

All the psychopathological traits of Gogol—reactionaryism, emotional brittleness, an uncontrolled

inclination to affectation, pathos, theatrical posing, hyperbole—got mixed in with his new religious mood. Like the proverbial tares, they prevented true, genuine, gentle spiritual feelings from taking deep root in his tortured heart.

This new and extreme “frightening combination of contradictions,” where humility and pride, sincerity and affectation, chastity and cynicism, openness and theatrical posing were all mixed together, negatively affected his friends and loved ones. In such a heavy moral state, Gogol wrote the second volume of *Dead Souls*.

Keeping in mind Pushkin and Zhukovsky’s theory of art, Gogol tried to emulate them in his behavior and his writing. He insisted that a true artist must also be a highly moral person, his life must be perfect, because the service of art is a religious and moral labor. The logical conclusion of all these thoughts was obvious: in order to worthily complete *Dead Souls*, the author needed to become a saint.

In 1843, Gogol wrote to Shevyrev: “I can now work with more confidence, firmness, deliberation, thanks to those ascetic feats that I undertook for my training.” In a letter to Pletnev (1844), Gogol wrote: “I know that I need purity of soul and a better inner disposition and almost a heavenly beauty in my behavior. Without that, one can defend neither art itself, nor anything holy to which it may lead.”

Often in the correspondence of this period one can find truly and profoundly ascetic thoughts and feelings, but

the pedantic tone of these letters only reveals the author's pride, the passionate nature of his enthusiasm, and sometimes his outright posing. His sickly, extroverted, psychopathological nature, like a crooked mirror, often twisted beyond recognition any beauty and truth he touched.

When he fell prostrate in repentance, his distorted self-consciousness told him, almost from the side: "How beautifully you fell!" Humility was unnoticeably turning into a feeling of pride in his own humility and compunction, even into a compunctionate feeling towards his own compunction. Love for his neighbor was expressed in cold, pedantic preaching, often accompanied by irritability and frustration; ascetic labors were accompanied by self-satisfaction.

But behind all the excesses, in the deepest parts of Gogol's unhappy soul smoldered a true and unwavering love for Christ, and many hidden, pure tears of genuine repentance fell to the ground, unseen by the world.

In 1844, the battle with himself entered a new phase and was exhibited in new forms. More and more clearly Gogol began to realize the extent of evil in the world and his own helplessness in the face of that evil, but simultaneously he began to feel the power of God's Grace. The joyful moments of interaction with this grace were, however, followed by long periods of death-like sorrow and depression. In such a state, with torturous effort that left the author deeply unsatisfied, work continued on the second volume of *Dead Souls*. This sorrowful time

was for Gogol a training in prayer. In one of his letters to Yazykov (1844), one can find a moving passage where Gogol described a special method of praying that he had learned in his most sorrowful moments:

There is a tool for those difficult moments when the suffering of soul or body become unbearably painful; I found it through terrible spiritual shock, but I will tell you about it. If such a state comes upon you, throw yourself into tears and weeping. Pray through weeping and crying. Pray not like the man who sits in his room, but like the man who is drowning in the waves, holding on to the last piece of driftwood.

During such a prayer, self-satisfaction, pride, coldness, stony insensibility, doubt, despair, lack of faith are all impossible, for the whole soul of the man who prays thus turns into a wail to God for salvation!

In 1845, Gogol suffered through an especially painful attack of depression, accompanied simultaneously by insistent thoughts of suicide and a fear of death. He weakened physically, fell ill, and completely lost his ability to work. No doctor was able to determine the cause of his illness. Gogol himself called it a “demonic hindrance.” His letters are full of trepidation and despair: “My sickness is very serious. Only a miracle of God can save me. All my strength is spent,” he wrote to Yazykov. “My powers are fading: I don’t expect any help from the doctors or

their art, for it is physically impossible,” he wrote during the same period to Sheremetieva.

“Come to give me Communion. I am dying,” he wrote to Archpriest I. I. Bazarov.

During the summer of the same year, Gogol burned the recent chapters of the second volume of *Dead Souls*. We know of this only from the words of Gogol himself.

When the torturous and lengthy period of sorrow and depression began to lessen, as it often happened with Gogol, he once again began to write, uplifted in spirit, full of energy and creative inspiration. This positive period was preceded or, perhaps, even determined by humbly coming to terms with his own disease of soul and body. In a letter to Smirnova, Gogol wrote: “Crossing our arms over our chests and lifting up our eyes to heaven, let us every moment say, ‘May Thy will be done!’ and thus we will accept all, blessing even sorrow and loneliness and serious illnesses. . . .”

The heavy experience of sorrow, sickness, and most importantly a heightened fear of death became the inspiration and the source for a new creative work. Gogol became inspired by the idea of publishing *Selections from Correspondence with Friends*. This book grew out of the experience of overcoming his suffering and the tortured remembrances of his own sufferings.

In a letter to Yazikov (1846), he wrote: “When I looked through all that I wrote to different people in recent times, especially those people who needed and required

spiritual help from me, I saw that from this I could make a book that would be very useful to people who are suffering in various ways. The sufferings that I overcame were ultimately beneficial, and through their help I was able to help others.”

In a letter to Countess A. M. V’el’gorskaya (1846), he made a passionate request: “Pray to God that He will send me those bright moments that are necessary for me to relate all the reasons why I was sent the most heavy moments, and the sickness itself, for which I must ceaselessly thank God.”

In his *Author’s Confession*, Gogol informs his readers that he published this book “under the influence of fear for his own death,” which hounded him “for the duration of his sickness,” even when he “was already out of danger.”

The publication of the *Selections* was dictated by Gogol’s constant spiritual need (from missionary motives) to share his experience of suffering and thereby enlighten others, so that he might “direct all of society to the Beautiful” and show society those paths of life that he considered to be correct. And this time he was completely convinced of the great benefit of his “only useful book.”

The epistolary form was the most comfortable literary form for Gogol to present his still nascent thoughts, which were, however, unified by a consistent inner religious, moral, and political worldview. Among the *Selections*, he

also included (in the form of letters) several specially written essays.

In the preface to his book, written with unique sincerity and spiritual collectedness, Gogol wrote: "My heart tells me that my book is needed and that it can be beneficial. I believe this not because I have a high opinion of myself or because I'm convinced in my ability to be beneficial, but because until this moment I have never had such a strong desire to be useful." Informing his countrymen of his intention to travel to the Holy Land, Gogol touchingly asked forgiveness of his readers.

The content and meaning of the *Selections* is so significant and complicated that a good commentary or a critical appraisal would require an entire book, which unfortunately has yet to be written. This is undoubtedly the most sincere book ever written in Russian literature.

The main theme of the book was "God and the Church." When Gogol was admonished for this, he answered simply and with conviction: "How can one be silent when the very stones are ready to sing about God?" Like Khomiakov and I. Kireevsky, Gogol called everyone to "a life in the Church." The pages dedicated to the Orthodox Church are the best pages of the book. No Russian writer had ever expressed such a genuine filial love for Mother Church, such piety and submissiveness, such a deep and complete understanding of Orthodoxy in general as well as the small details of church ritual.

“We own a treasure which has no price,” he thus characterized the Church. “This Church, which like a chaste virgin alone kept its original purity from the times of the Apostles, this Church, which was seemingly brought down straight from heaven for the Russian people with Her profound dogmas and the smallest of her rituals, She alone has the strength to untie all bonds of doubt and all our questions. . . . And this Church, created for life, has not yet been brought into our lives. . . .”

Other than the main theme (“On God and the Church”), Gogol touched on a remarkably wide swath of other topics in the *Selections*. In various “letters” he wrestled with questions of morality, art, literature, politics, and much more.

In the third letter on the subject of *Dead Souls*, we find a sincere and genuine confession:

I had inside me the entire swarm of all possible sins, a little bit of every single one, and in a multitude that I have never met in any other person. God gave me a multifaceted nature. He also put into my soul, even from birth, a few good qualities; but the best of these, for which I don't know how to thank him, was a desire to be the best. I never loved my many evil qualities, and if the heavenly love of God had not arranged it in such a way that I discovered them slowly and a little at a time, instead of opening them up to me immediately and suddenly when I still didn't have any idea of His immeasurable, endless mercy, I would have hanged myself. . . .

From that point on, I began to give my heroes bits of my own evils, in addition to their own sins. . . .

The main formal limitation of the *Selections* is its unfinished quality, its lack of wholeness, its mixing of letters from different times, written in different voices and styles, its juxtaposition of deeply thought out letters with underdeveloped ones. The *Selections* is a kind of rough draft—in the same pile one finds ideas that are clearly expressed and those that are confused; finished treatises and fragments of unfinished thoughts; matters of life and death and slight, useless, fleeting impressions. Gogol himself agreed, in his *Author's Confession*, that he made a mistake when he put together letters written during different phases of his spiritual development. The *Selections* are like mineral ore, where a good deal of impure metal was mixed together with purest gold. They were published in 1847, printed (according to Gogol's wish) by Pletnev.

The religious and political significance of the *Selections* was huge. This book appeared during an epoch when in the unseen depths of historical life the fate of Russia and of Russian Orthodox culture was being decided. Would Russia stand tall in its Orthodoxy, or would it be tempted by atheism and materialism? Would Russian Orthodox monarchy survive, or would socialism and communism prevail? These questions were connected with others even more deeply relevant to the fate of the entire world. What was to come? A flowering and progression of a

religious humanistic culture, or the beginning of the pre-Apocalyptic era of world history?

Gogol maintained loudly and with conviction that the Truth is in Orthodoxy and in Orthodox Russian monarchy, and that the “to be or not to be” of Orthodox Russian culture was being decided now, and that the fate of the entire world depended on the preservation of that culture. The world was near its death pangs and had entered into the pre-Apocalyptic phase of history.

The *Selections*, taken as a whole, were not understood by Gogol’s contemporaries and were subjected to criticism from his friends as well as his enemies (of course, both sides’ criticisms came from entirely different points of reference).

Especially hateful and irritating to Gogol’s enemies was his genuine and assured support of traditional foundations of social-political order that so-called enlightened people considered baseless and even dangerous. The most virulent and angry protest against the *Selections* was Belinsky’s famous “Letter to Gogol.” Disturbed by the fact that Gogol dared to see the salvation of Russia in a religious and mystical “inner work,” in ascetic labors and prayers, in missionary work, Belinsky wrote: “Russia requires salvation not in mysticism, not in asceticism, not in pietism, but in the success of civilization, enlightenment, and humanness. She needs not sermons (She has heard enough), not prayers (She has prayed enough), but the awakening in the people of a feeling of human dignity.”

His friends criticized the *Selections* for other reasons. S. T. Aksakov saw a “demonic pride” in the book, Sverbeev saw a “self-immolation worse than pride” and a “prideful humility,” and the wife of Sverbeev felt a “strange pride and a deceitful sheen of Christian humility.” Many spiritual figures also found fault with the book, including Archbishop Innocent, Father Brianchaninov, Father Matthew Konstantinovsky, and others.

The most serious and in many respects the fairest criticism came from Father Konstantinosky, whom Gogol asked for an honest appraisal of his book, although the two were not yet personally acquainted. Father Matthew judged many parts of the book very negatively, especially the chapter on the theater, and wrote to Gogol that he “will answer for that before God.” Gogol protested that his intentions were good. But Father Matthew counseled that Gogol shouldn’t justify himself to the critics, but instead he should “listen to the spirit residing in us, not to our earthly flesh . . . and to return into the inner life.”

The failure of the book affected Gogol very seriously. After some halfhearted rebuttals and attempts to resolve the “storm of misunderstandings,” still not recanting his main ideas, Gogol humbled himself and confessed that he had been wrong to dare to be a prophet and preacher of the Truth, not being personally worthy to serve that Truth. Even Belinsky’s strident and cruel letter was answered meekly and humbly: “God knows, maybe there is truth in your words. . . .”

Always inclining towards extremes, after a while Gogol judged himself perhaps too severely for writing his book. In a letter to Zhukovsky dated March 6, 1847, he wrote: "I became in my book such a Khlestakov, that I don't have the heart to even peek into it. My job is to speak in vivid images, not to philosophize." But while he blamed himself, he continued to justify his work: "It is true that my work is more useful and complete than many think."

The criticisms of the *Selections*, while they hurt Gogol deeply, ultimately brought him great benefit. In his letters dated after 1847, we no longer find even a hint of that pedantic and cold doctrinal tone that he sometimes used in his letter-sermons to Aksakov, Pogodin, his sisters, and mother. Gogol was beginning to learn that most difficult of virtues: humility.

To strengthen the humility just beginning to bud inside him, in 1848 he traveled to Palestine, to the tomb of the Saviour, suffering in the process great spiritual trepidation at the thought of his own sinfulness, fearing he would defile the holiness of the place he was to visit.

After his return from the Holy Land (where he spent February, March, and April of 1848), Gogol wrote to Father Matthew: "I will tell you that never before have I been so unsatisfied with the state of my own heart, as in Jerusalem and after Jerusalem." Later, in a letter to Zhukovsky, Gogol said: "My visit to Palestine was definitely made so that I could see with my own eyes the miserliness of my heart."

From this genuine, sincere, humble self-discovery, Gogol began a slow, gradual spiritual recuperation, which was accompanied by a temporary improvement of his physical health. Even in 1845, in one of his letters to Smirnova, Gogol wrote: "The greatest good that I have ever gained, I gained from my sorrowful and difficult moments, and not for any price would I want to give up those sorrowful and difficult moments of life." After his return from Palestine, Gogol became even more convinced of this truth.

Gogol owed a great deal of his religious rebirth after the difficult spiritual crisis that accompanied the failure of the *Selections* to Father Matthew Konstantinovsky. K. Mochulsky, in his book *The Spiritual Path of Gogol* (Paris, 1934), gives a withering critique to the baseless hypothesis of D. S. Merezhkovsky, who described Father Matthew as a dour fanatical ascetic who first killed the soul, then the body of Gogol. Mochulsky collected extremely compelling documentary evidence (the witnesses of N. Barsukov, the Optina monk Father E. V. and Archpriest F. I. Obratsov) proving the exact opposite. According to these authoritative and detailed witnesses, Father Matthew was not a fanatic, but a shy country priest who would often become inspired (so that his face would light up and shine) during sermons and after completing the Liturgy. He had a firm, unshakable faith. He was always joyful, his meek face was often decorated with a smile, and no one ever heard an angry word from him. He was

always even-keeled and calm, led a strict life of moderation, and loved the poor and the wanderers. Gogol deeply appreciated Father Matthew and received help from him in the most difficult and heavy moments of his life.

The religious and moral growth of the great writer after his trip to the Holy Land widened and deepened his creative talents and gave him the strength to finish his work of many years in the summer of 1851. Having returned from Palestine, Gogol once again began to write the second volume of *Dead Souls*.

The witness of such “exacting critics” and such artistically sensitive people as S. T. Aksakov, A. O. Smirnova, Arpoldi, Maximovich, Prince D.A. Obolensky, and Shevyrev cannot be denied—all these people, to whom Gogol gave the finished chapters of Volume Two of *Dead Souls* to read, were absolutely thrilled with the result. Smirnova said that the first volume completely paled in comparison with the second: “Here the humor was raised to the highest level of artistry and combined with such a pathos that it took my breath away.”

But especially valuable is the appraisal of Aksakov after hearing Gogol himself read:

Such an ability to reveal the hidden depths in sinful men cannot be found anywhere except in Homer. . . . Only now am I convinced fully that Gogol will be able to fulfill that goal that he rather brazenly and conceitedly announced in Volume One. . . . Yes, a great deal of dross

must be burned off in life, before the pure gold can pour out. . . .

In 1850 and 1851, Gogol traveled to the Optina Hermitage and spoke with the elders Moses, Anthony, and especially Makary. Undoubtedly these discussions, as well as the discussions with Father Matthew Konstantinovsky, had a good influence on the much-suffering soul of the writer.

At the end of 1851, Gogol finished and carefully revised *Meditations on the Divine Liturgy*, a “creative testament” that he wrote in 1845 and wished to publish in a cheap edition for the common people. This work of Gogol’s is one of his most inspired and profound writings, a simply, clearly, and accessibly written commentary on the Orthodox liturgy.

On January 26, 1852, A. S. Khomiakov’s wife died (the sister of Gogol’s friend, the poet Yazykov). This death deeply shook Gogol. During the memorial service, he suddenly said, “It is all finished for me.”

According to the witness of Dr. A. T. Tarasenkov, Gogol had some sort of vision during the night of February 8, 1852, where “he saw himself dead, heard some kind of voices,” and began to consider himself not long for this world. He received Unction, communed of the Holy Mysteries, and began to prepare for death.

Concerning these days, Pletnev wrote to Zhukovsky: “Allowing himself only a few drops of water with red

wine, he continued to stand on his knees and pray before a multitude of icons that he had placed before him. All questions were answered quietly and meekly: ‘Let me be, I am well.’” There are indications that his worried friends wrote to Metropolitan Philaret, who ordered Gogol to listen to the demands of his doctors. But Gogol, completely absorbed in his prayer, alone with God, did not heed these instructions.

During the night of February 11, 1852, Gogol burned his favorite brainchild, his completed work of many years, the second volume of *Dead Souls*. M. P. Pogodin describes this event thus:

From the evening Gogol prayed for a long time alone in his room. At three o'clock in the morning he called his servant boy and asked him if it was warm in the other half of his apartments. The boy answered, “It’s cold.” “Give me a shawl, let’s go. I need to take care of something.” And he went with a candle in his hands, crossing himself as he entered every room. As he walked in, he told his servant to open up the flue as quietly as possible, not to wake anyone, and then to give him a briefcase from the closet. When the briefcase was brought, he pulled out a bundle of notebooks tied together with a string, put them into the stove, and lit them with his candle. The boy, when he understood what was happening, fell down before him onto his knees and said, “Barin, what are you doing? Stop it!” “It doesn’t concern you,” he

answered, “just pray.” The boy started to cry and to beg him to stop. In the meantime the fire died out after only the corners of the notebooks were singed. Gogol noticed it, pulled out the bundle of notebooks, untied the string and laid them out in such a way that they would burn better, lit them again, and sat on a chair before the fire, waiting for it all to burn to ashes. Then, after crossing himself, he returned into the other room, kissed the boy, lay down on his couch and started to weep.

This description, full of precious and exact details, is beyond price. From it one can see that Gogol burned *Dead Souls* with a fully clear intention, in his right mind, not in some kind of nervous or psychopathological fit.

The next day, Gogol said to Count A. N. Tolstoy: “Can you visualize how strong the evil one is? I wanted to burn some papers that I had long ago decided to destroy, but instead burned the chapters of *Dead Souls* that I wanted to leave for my friends after my death.”

However, taking into account all the circumstances determining Gogol’s state of soul, it is completely impossible to agree with the explanation given by Count Tolstoy. The tone in which this explanation was given also does not correspond with its content. Gogol’s tone was not tragic, but heroic, as if he didn’t even care about what he was saying. How can one explain this fact? What were the true motives behind burning the finished work, which Gogol himself valued, carefully arranged and lovingly

tied together with string? Why did Gogol burn a book that he himself was happy with and that was so highly regarded by an objective, very competent group of people with undisputed artistic taste? Let us try to make sense of this difficult question.

In his fourth letter on the subject of *Dead Souls*, marked “1846” and included in the *Selections*, Gogol gave a reason for his first burning of the completed chapters of part two of his “poem” in 1845:

Then I burned the second volume of *Dead Souls*, which was necessary. “He will not live, unless he first die,” said the Apostle. It’s necessary first to die to resurrect. It was not easy to burn the work of five years, which was written with such painful intensity, when every line was squeezed out with difficulty, where there was much good that reflected my brightest thoughts and occupied my soul. But it was all burned, and at that precise moment when, seeing my own death before me, I wanted very much to leave something behind that would remind others of me. I thank God that he gave me the strength to do this. As soon as the flame took away the last pages of my book, its contents suddenly resurrected in a cleansed and bright form, like a phoenix from the ashes, and I suddenly saw how messy was everything that I had imagined to be properly organized. If the second volume had appeared in the form that it was then, it would have resulted in more harm than good. . . .

I was not born to create a new movement in literature. My job is simpler and closer to home—my work is that which every person must think about, not only I alone. My work is the soul and the inner work of life. . . .

These were the reasons for the first burning of *Dead Souls*. These same motives, but on a much more profound level due to Gogol's spiritual growth, were the source of the second burning, this time of the completed work.

In the *Author's Confession*, written after the *Selections*, Gogol for the first time seriously mentioned the possibility of giving up the life of the writer for the sake of a greater labor. He wrote with shocking sincerity:

What would that cost me! It would be truly more difficult for me to give up writing than for anyone else, when it was the sole object of all my aspirations, when I had left everything else, all the best allurements of life and, like a monk, tore myself away from everything that is sweet for a person on this earth so that I would think of nothing but my work. It is not easy for me to reject writing. Some of the best moments of my life were those when I finally put to paper that which for a long time flew around in my thoughts. I am still convinced that there is hardly a higher pleasure than the pleasure of creating. But I repeat: as an honorable man, I have to put down the pen even when I feel a call to write.

I don't know if I would have enough honesty to do this, if the ability to write was not actually taken from me. Because, I say with all honesty, life would lose all value for me in that moment, and for me not to write would be the same as not to live. But there is never a dearth that is not afterwards filled with some replacement, in proof of the fact that not even for a little time does the Creator leave man. . . .

From that last thought, as from a small seed, and from the years of his spiritual growth, a decision grew inside Gogol to burn his last, finished work, and to fall silent. The burning of the second volume of *Dead Souls* before his death was Gogol's greatest podvig, which he wanted to hide not only from people, but from himself as well.

Three weeks before his death, Gogol wrote to his friend Zhukovsky: "Pray for me that my work be truly virtuous and that I be found worthy to sing the hymn to heavenly Beauty." Heavenly beauty is incomparable to earthly beauty and is unutterable in human language. This is why "silence is the mystery of the age to come."

Before his death, Gogol understood this completely; he burned what he wrote and fell silent, and then he died. This was on February 21, 1852. A few days before his death, he wrote with great difficulty: "If you will not be innocent as children, you will not enter the kingdom of

heaven. Have mercy on me a sinner, forgive me, Lord. Bind Satan once again through the mystical power of your unutterable Cross. . . .”

The last phrase clearly shows that Gogol believed Satan to be “untied”; in other words, he thought that the world was already experiencing the Last Days.

According to Shevyrev, some of the last words that Gogol uttered before death, while still lucid, were the following: “How sweet it is to die.” If we remember that “the fear of death” was one of the primary motivations in his life, then these words resonate with a special, deep, touching meaning.

According to Dr. A. T. Tarasenkov, a few hours before his death Gogol “mumbled something incoherent, as if he were dreaming, repeating several times: ‘Come on, come on. Now what?’ During the eleventh hour he cried loudly ‘A ladder, quickly get me a ladder!’ It seemed he wanted to get up.”

Any psychiatrist will tell you that delirium is not a completely meaningless phenomenon. It is often a manifestation of deep subconscious worries.

Gogol’s “scenic imagination,” his tendency to express his spiritual suffering symbolically, the intensity of his religious feeling just before death, his general lifelong inclination towards God—all these allow us to find significant meaning even in these last words. The meaning is simple yet profound. A ladder is necessary for climbing to a high place. Gogol’s last movement on earth was a desire

to rise higher (“It seemed he wanted to get up”) and his last earthly request was a request to help him rise up.

Thus, for his untiring, constant inclination upwards towards the heavens, to Christ, that he showed from the beginning of life until the last breath; for his unbending “desire to be better”; and for the patient carrying of the cross of his soul’s genius and his spiritual and bodily weakness and sickliness, the suffering writer was found worthy of a truly Christian end.

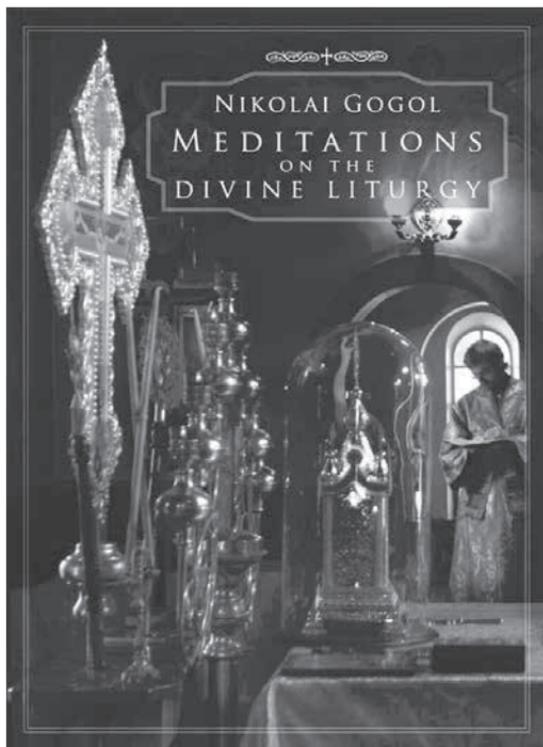
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