

The Problem of Evil and The Importance of Movement on the Road to Salvation in Gogol : Musing on Dante's 『*Inferno*』

Jung-Ah Kim*

When I had journeyed half of our life's way,
I found myself within a shadowed forest,
for I had lost the path that does not stray.
Dante, 『*Inferno*』 (Canto I, 1-3)

So begins Dante's epic as the traveler, Dante, exits a forest and begins climbing a hill, but he ceases his ascent when he spots a leopard blocking his way. Then a lion and she-wolf appear, and he retreats back down the mountain. At this point Virgil shows up and asks, "Why not climb up the mountain of delight, / the origin and cause of every joy?"¹⁾ Dante responds that he fears the vicious. And so Virgil leads him down an alternate path, around the rings of Hell.

The "way" or "path" that he mentions is of course meant not only literally but also allegorically. He is, for plot purposes, a traveler who has wandered from the road, but he is also a man, a subject of God, who has

* University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Ph.D.

1) Alighieri, Dante(1982) 『*Inferno*』. Trans. Allen Mandelbaum. New York: Bantam, 77-8

sinned and thus veered from the course that leads to heaven because of the obstacles, sin or the devil as symbolized by the animals, that block his salvation. He has been deflected back into what Virgil calls "wretchedness," or a life of sin. With Virgil as his sponsor, Dante embarks on his own private twelve-step program for sinners. He takes a personal tour of Hell so that he may see whither leads iniquity, i.e.. Hades, a place where the act of signing the guestbook finds you a cozy spot in the ultimate catalogue of moral transgressions.

Dante's poem²⁾ clearly inspired and influenced the theme and structure of Nikolai Gogol's <Dead Souls>.³⁾ Gogol's novel is subtitled *poema* to acknowledge its debt to 『*Inferno*』. It opens: "A fairly smart, medium-sized chaise on springs rolled through the gates of an inn of the provincial town of N." He goes on to describe his hero Chichikov as a non-descript individual, an amorphous median of mankind. His arrival is witnessed by two peasant men who initiate a conversation about the carriage and its capabilities. Chichikov begins traveling around the countryside, visiting various landowners, buying up "dead soul" i. e. the deeds to dead serfs, so

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- 2) The influence of Dante's *Divine Comedy* on Slavic Literature is great. Not to mention in Russia, in Poland, it also has had enormous influence on various literary movements. Good examples are Juliusz Slowacki's <*Anhelli*>, and Zygmunt Krasinski's <*Undivine Comedy*>.
- 3) There are several articles which are devoted to formal similarity between *Dead Souls* and *Divine Comedy*: Alexander Veselovsk, who is probably the first seriously took up the suggestion that the plan of *Dead Souls* parallels *Divine Comedy* of Dante. Veselovsk, Alexandr(1891) "<*Mertvye dushi*>: Glava iz etiuda o Gogole", 『*Vestnik Evropy*』, 3, 69-74. More bald attempt has been done by James B. Woodward, in *Gogol's Dead Souls* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), here he tried to draw strict parallels between Gogol and Dante. But it should be mentioned here that Woodward's book placed him among the (unsuccessful) "allegorists." S. Shambinago, S.(1911) 『*Trilogiia romantizma: N.V. Gogol*』, Moscow: V. Antik. realized that the comprehensive, exhortative aspect of *Dead Souls* intent in Dantean terms. Jesse Zeldin also put stress on the planned tripartite of *Dead Souls* in imitating the structure of *Divine Comedy*., *Nikolai Gogol's Quest for Beauty: an Explanation into His Works* (Lawrence: The Regents P, 1978), 89-91

that he can gain status as a landowner and mortgage them before the next census. When found out, he makes a quick retreat from town.

The narrator relates the story of a traveling con-man who, like Dante, witnesses an Homeric catalogue of human corruption, this time in provincial Russia and ending with the spiritual awakening of Chichikov and the promise of a new future for both himself and Russia as his chaise exits town post-haste.

『*Inferno*』 is not Gogol's sole source⁴⁾: however, the latter work can be seen as an extension or response to Dante. The primary concern here, however, is the nature of evil in some of Gogol's characters. Some critics take the stance that Chichikov is the Devil, or at least one of his associates. Critics also point out that Gogol seems incapable of creating normal or positive characters, which, whether correct or not, is not what is truly important. The most important quality in Gogol's characters, in regards to their degree of goodness or evil, is movement. The evil they exhibit is merely part of their nature, not the manifestation of the Devil forcing them from to do bad.

Like 『*Inferno*』, *Dead Souls* opens, as previously stated, with the

4) There is another more direct source or incentive for this work: Pushkin. Pushkin's influence is enormous not only on *Dead Souls* but also throughout his oeuvre. When Gogol heard the news of Pushkin's death, he wrote:

"I could not possibly have received any worse new from Russia. All the delights of my life, all my sublime delight, has vanished along with him. I never undertook anything without his advice. I never wrote a single line without imagining him standing before me.[...] my present work [*Dead Souls*] is his [Pushkin's] creation."

A letter to Pyotr Alexandrovich Pletniev (1792-1862), March 30, 1837. Pletniev was a Professor of Russian Literature at St. Petersburg University, Critic, and one of Gogol's constant correspondent. 『*Letters of Nicolai Gogol*』, trans. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1967), 68-69.

Vassily Gippius also points out Pushkin's impact on Gogol's works. See "<*Inspector General*>: Structure and Problems," in 『*Gogol from the Twentieth Century*』(will be abbreviated as GTC), ed. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 215-66.

appearance of a traveler, Chichikov. Chichikov journeys around provincial Russia in a way that Bely likens to Dante's circular trip around Hell. Bely points to the spinning wheels of Chichikov's carriage as the symbol for the concentric rings of Hell in 『*Inferno*』⁵⁾. It is the connective tissue linking the two works thematically and structurally. Chichikov's journey, then, is both a geographical and a spiritual one. His journey is the one that everyone takes—that of life.⁶⁾

Merezhkovsky also discusses the image of the Devil in Gogol's fictive world. He calls Chichikov a demon and goes on to say that "[...] the Devil is a mystical essence and a real being, in which eternal evil, a denial of God, has been concentrated..."⁷⁾ Merezhkovsky quotes Gogol: "How to present the Devil as a fool!... My sole concern has long been that after my work people should have a good hearty laugh at the Devil," stating that this was "the central idea of all of Gogol's life and thought."⁸⁾ To qualify as the Devil in Gogol's works, then a character should be foolish, laughable. But Merezhkovsky also notices "Gogol's laughter is man's struggle with the Devil."⁹⁾ This implies that the laughter is not at the devil himself but rather at man in the process of struggling with the Devil—that it is the situation and not the person, or Devil, which is laughable.

Merezhkovsky describes Gogol's vision of the Devil thus:

God is the infinite, the beginning and end of all being. The Devil is the denial of God and consequently the denial of the infinite as well, the denial of all beginnings and ends. The Devil is something that is begun

5) Andrei Bely, "The Figure of Fiction in *Dead Souls*," in 『*Dead Souls: Essays and Criticism*』, ed. George Gibian (New York: Norton Company, 1985), 517-31

6) The Universality of the theme and setting of Gogol's works has been discussed by Vyacheslave Ivanov. "Gogol's *Inspector General and the Comedy of Aristophanes*," in 『GTC』, 200-14

7) Dmitry Merezhkovsky, "Gogol and the Devil", 『GTC』, 57

8) *Ibid.*, 57.

9) *Ibid.*, 58.

and is left unfinished, but purports to be without beginning or end. The Devil is the noumenal median of being, the denial of all heights and depths—eternal planarity, eternal banality. The sole subject of Gogol's art is the Devil in just this sense, that is, the Devil as the manifestation of "man's immortal banality," as seen beneath the specifics of place and time—historical, national, governmental, social: the manifestation of absolute, eternal universal evil...¹⁰⁾

Merezhkovsky condemns Chichikov because he is a hypostasis of eternal and universal evil, of man's immortal banality. So one more characteristic of the Devil is this banality, which comes from being a creature of the middle, an average being instead of exceptional.

He is not alone in his interpretation of Chichikov as negative figure. Vladimir Nabokov wrote that "Chichikov himself is merely the ill-paid representative of the Devil, a traveling salesman from Hades."¹¹⁾ He adds, "The poshlost' that Chichikov personifies is one of the main attributes of the Devil, in whose existence [...] Gogol believed far more seriously than he did in that of God."¹²⁾ Poshlost', as Nabokov defined it, "is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive."¹³⁾ This view of Chichikov as something tawdry, someone lacking in exceptionally, coincides with Merezhkovsky's accusation that Chichikov is the "offspring of the Russian *middle* (his italics) class the Russian nineteenth century, the most average and bourgeois of all centuries" whose essential nature is "the eternal median, 'neither this nor that,' utter banality."¹⁴⁾

Merezhkovsky also claims that the Devil is "the self of our eternal alter ego, who shows us our reflection in himself, as in a mirror."¹⁵⁾ Further

10) Ibid., 57-58.

11) Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 17.

12) Ibid., 17-8.

13) Nabokov, Vladimir (1981) *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 535

14) Merezhkovsky, "Gogol and the Devil," 76.

attributes that he associates with the Devil are madness and lies. The latter of these also includes gossip—or unintentional lies—and false faces—or the masks behind which people hide their true selves. Thus to be a Devil, according to Merezhkovsky, in Gogol's world, one must be eternally evil, a denial of God, laughable, a mirror of man and might suffer from madness or be a liar.

Madness overcomes many of Gogol's characters.¹⁶⁾ Poprishchin, in <The Diary of a Madman> and the artist, Chartkov, of <The Portrait> both lapse into madness. The end of the first story fades out with the image of a mentally diseased Poprishchin ranting in an asylum, locked in a cell and suffering from the delusion that he is the rightful King of Spain. He pleads for "a carriage with horses swift as the wind" and cries out, "Drive on, coachman, let the harness bells ring! Soar upward, my horses, carry me away from this world."¹⁷⁾ The latter, Chartkov, at the end of his life "understood nothing and felt nothing except his own frightful agonies, and only uttered blood-curdling screams or babbled incoherently."¹⁸⁾ And, as Merezhkovsky points out, Khlestakov posits, "If God wants to punish you, He takes away your reason first of all."¹⁹⁾

The most artful of Gogol's liars is Khlestakov from *The Inspector General*. But there are different kinds of lying. The first, and least malicious, type of a lie is gossip, which is not spread to deceive but

15) *Ibid.*, 59-60.

16) The theme of madness and ambition was a popular subject for literature and in newspaper reports in 1830'. For more information, see Trott, Liz(1989) "Diary of a Madman: The Hidden Absurd", 『*Nikolay Gogol: Text and Context*』, ed. Jane Grayson and Faith Wigzell. London: MacMillan P, 50-64

17) Nikolai Gogol(1960) "The Diary of a Madman", 『*The Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*』, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew, New York: Signet, 28

18) Nikolai Gogol(1965) "The Portrait", 『*The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil*』, ed. Isabel Hapgood, Toronto: General P. 136. For the translations of Gogol's text, I have consulted a number of published translation comparing with Russian version, relying mainly on the quoted here, with occasional changes.

19) Merezhkovsky, "Gogol and the Devil," 71.

which, none-the-less, is passed on without regard to its veracity or the damage it might do. Gogol himself once wrote:

I am fully convinced it is the Devil and not man who weaves the web of gossip. From carelessness and often from stupidity someone will blurt out a meaningless word, a word which he might not even have intended to say [...] and little by little a tale weaves itself, without anyone's being aware of it. It's senseless to try to find it's real author, because you can't find him? Don't accuse anyone? Remember that everything in the world is deception, everything appears to us to be something other than it really is...²⁰⁾

Upon Khlestakov's arrival, gossip spreads through the town that he is the visiting inspector general. This gossip, false but not intentionally malicious, leads to a sequence of deception, cover-ups, abuse, betrayal and corruption. Though not meant to bring about evil, it does. But as Gogol says, no one is to blame for it. However, it is a banal act that Gogol associates with the Devil, and so participating in gossip, mans one has been lead astray by the Devil. Thus, although one should not be blamed for the gossip, a gossipier is culpable for engaging in the act itself.

Also, those who inspire gossip seem to be almost as guilty for the act of gossiping as those who spread it. Khlestakov, of course is partly to blame for the gossip because he does nothing to stop it from spreading. He and his servant Osip are, after all, the only ones who know the truth. And Chichikov, who becomes the victim of gossip, can also be held somewhat responsible for it because he behaves so mysteriously and because he is foolish enough to do business with a man like Nozdryev. One would think a man in Chichikov's line of work would be more careful with whom he does business. It is almost as if he wants to get caught, trusting the pathological liar Nozdryev not to expose and even embellish

20) Letter to A. O. Smirnova, December 6, 1849. A. Smirnova was a beautiful intelligent woman, who became the friend of many Russian writers including Gogol. Letters of Nikolai Gogol, 201.

what Chichikov has done. He is also rumored by some to be Napoleon or Captain Kopeykin.

Gogol's many other stories involve gossip as well. In <The Tale of How the Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich> Ivan Nikiforovich is rumored to have been married and born with a tail. The narrator asserts that he definitely was never married. But he refrains from refuting whether or not Ivan had a tail because he considers it unnecessary to do so, not, however, because the idea of a tail is ridiculous but because he claims that only witches, who tend to be female, have tails. Thus, since Ivan is not a woman and therefore not a witch, he must not have a tail. So the narrator himself refutes gossip with more gossip. The end of <The Overcoat> is itself a rumor about the ghost of Akakii. People claim that his ghost haunts the town square, stealing the coats off of people's backs when it is quite likely the same thief who stole his. This twists Akakii's victimization around and makes him the culprit rather than the victim.

A second subset of lying is the common lie, which is meant to deceive. Obviously subversion of the truth is sinful. And thus the snowballing avalanche of lies that builds upon itself comes crashing down on the town once Khlestakov leaves and the real inspector general arrives. The citizens lie throughout the entire play, putting up false fronts, pretending things are better than they are, hiding the truth from Khlestakov and when they cannot do so, bribing him.

But Khlestakov, the chief liar of all Gogol's creations, seems to lie for the sheer art of confabulation. Merezhkovsky says, "Least of all has he any practical goals or advantages in mind. His is a disinterested lie: lying for lying sake, art for art's sake."²¹ Yet Merezhkovsky still places Khlestakov alongside Chichikov as a hypostasis of eternal and universal evil. Whatever his reasons are for lying, they result in personal, material gain. He receives bribes, food, even a potential wife.

21) Merezhkovsky, "Gogol and the Devil," 64.

There is one lie which is even worse than obscuring the truth from others— that is to delude oneself, to deny your true self. Khlestakov's lies and fabrications about his life, his relations with Pushkin, his past as a head clerk, his present role as an inspector, all sustain his self-denial, ignoring the fact that he is really a nobody, only a nobleman because of Peter the Great's reforms and creation of the table of ranks. He is merely a cad, a spoiled son living on his father's money, not working or living any kind of worthwhile life.

Poprishchin slowly escalates his delusions until he believes himself to be the King of Spain. Chartkov uses the magical portrait to gain reputation and money, to become known as a great artist. But he is not. His achievements are arrived at only through the power of the portrait. Akakii works hard and scrapes together money so that he can buy a fashionable coat, quite a respectable piece of clothing that even his tailor takes pride in having created. Akakii's identity becomes wrapped up in his coat, and it begins to identify him, thus lying to himself about his own importance. In <The Nose> the subject of the title, a minor body part, masquerades as a whole person instead of remaining satisfied with being a small part. In the end its false world comes tumbling down as it is literally put back in its place. The young man of <Nevsky Prospect> builds up an illusion around the young beauty whom he follows home. He was caught up in the madness of passion that made him physically ill over this disillusion. He is crushed when he discovers that she does not live up to his idealization of her.

Chichikov travels around buying up property so that he can gain status as a landowner and to create a new life for himself as a new aristocrat, a personality falsely fashioned. He hides his motives from everyone, pretending to be someone who he is not. He morphs his own personality to better suit working with each prospective seller. He has no personality of his own. And when he is rooted out by Nozdryev (himself a pathological liar and clearly a brute), others speculate about his true identity. Is he Captain Kopeykin or perhaps even Napoleon? Not only are

these identities which Chichikov is not, but by his deception and secretive behavior, he has lead other to believer he is someone more than he really is, some "larger-than-life" bandit or world leader—a great man—when he is merely a simple rogue, a boring swindler who really isn't even swindling anyone he deals with in the story. He pays them for goods they no longer use. He is actually helping them out. There is nothing extraordinary about him personally, except perhaps for his lack o true self.

Merezhkovsky sums it up nicely: "Man tries to be something other than what he is, because he does not wish to be, he cannot be, he should not be—nothing."²²⁾ These men are all men of the middle—they are clerks, workers, or new aristocrats, ones without any real land, money or even a real claim to their status. They are early representatives of the bourgeoisie.²³⁾

The identities of these men of the middle are tied up with their desire not only to be more than they are, but also to have more than they have. The artist Chartkov wants wealth and success along with fame and reputation. Instead of pursuing art because it was in his blood, instead of using it to edify others, he used it for personal gain, to become a hack. Poprishchin wants to marry his Director's daughter, someone of a higher social rank. Khlestakov willingly plays along with his mistaken identity. He jumps head first into his role, playing at being someone bigger than himself. But even before he is mistaken for an Inspector General, he imagines arriving to some landowner's estate and that everyone would get excited when they see his stylish carriage and would ask each other "'Who's that, what's that?'"²⁴⁾ And he is offended when he suspects that the tavern keeper might think him merely a merchant or a worker. He

22) Ibid., 62.

23) A brief discussion of the theme of emptiness and worthlessness of bourgeoisies life in Gogol in relation with Daniil Kharms may be found in Druskin, Iakov(1991) "On Daniil Kharms." 『Daniil Kharms and the Poetics of the Absurd』. Ed. Neil Cornwell. New York: St. Matin's P, 22-25

24) Nikolai Gogol, (1961) 『The Inspector General. An Anthology of Russian Plays』, Ed. and trans. F.D. Reeve. Vol. 1. New York: Random House, 255

seeks a life without personal responsibility for anything, including his own actions. He wants to dine, drink and gamble without concern.

The characters in "Old World Landowners" content themselves with comfortable lives, something like Oblomovism—they are concerned only with food and the physical pleasures of life. When confronted by the return of their housecat, who had run off with wild tomcats, there is a great deal of tension because the cat embodies passion, wildness foreign to the old couple, which scares them. To have passion would require them to live and not merely exist.²⁵⁾

Chichikov travels around merely out of a desire to acquire. His own corpulence demonstrates his hunger for worldly gain. His little box magically can hold anything he acquires—he even carries his souls around in it. His desire for possession leads him to the devaluation of human life. He buys people, albeit dead ones, which is somehow more base than buying living beings. He buys up their bodies without taking along their identities, and when anyone tries to tell him about the people he's buying, he shows disdain and lack of concern. To Korobochka he even reveals that he thinks rags are worth more than these dead souls— for a rag can be sold as scrap. Merezhkovsky refers to Gogol's observation that "[I]t would be most accurate [...] to call Chichikov a proprietor, an acquirer. Acquisitiveness was to blame for everything."²⁶⁾ Chichikov's father's advice is also noteworthy: "Above all keep and save every kopeck; it is the most reliable thing in the world. [...] The kopeck won't betray you? You can do and acquire anything in the world with the kopeck."²⁷⁾

Chichikov negated himself by ignoring the value of the human soul, by

25) Gogol saw and feared the mechanization in life, which is considered no life. Gogol thought and claimed that automatism of any kind of life deprives thinking, feeling, and even living of human being. Gogol's realization and fear for the ossified life and his revelation of it through laughter left an enormous impact on Daniil Kharmis. An account of their common thematic and artistic approach is given by Druskin, Iakov(1991) "On Daniil Kharmis", 22-25

26) Merezhkovsky, "Gogol and the Devil," 77.

27) Gogol, <Dead Souls>, 57.

denying his soul, his true self. He was a man who could adapt himself to anyone, who could talk to anyone about anything. Like Chekhov's "The Darling" he found himself only in the reflection of others. Gogol's initial description of him in *Dead Souls* permits this view of him as a non-entity. Immediately we are told that he is "neither dashingly handsome nor yet unbearably ugly, neither too stout nor yet too thin; it could not be claimed that he was old, but he was no stripling either."²⁸⁾ Gogol describes him by telling us what is not and by using the negation word "not." Not only is he a "no one," but the town where he conducts his business is a "nowhere land." The town is given a generic name, a tradition in Russian literature that makes the town anonymous. Gogol calls it "N." The letter "N" is roughly halfway through the Russian alphabet, which negatively associates it with the median, or the "eternally banal" as discussed earlier. "N" is also the letter of negation in Russian. It could easily stand for *nigde*, the Russian word for "nowhere."

Like most of Gogol's characters, Chichikov seems to be at his worst not when he consciously does something he knows to be wrong but when he exists unaware of his insensitivity and banality. He is unconscious of his own identity, of his self, of his soul and the souls of others. He seeks only to nurture his physical existence. Thus, like the Old World Landowners, his chief crime is that he "exists" and "not "lives." This is the worst kind of lie—to deny your soul, to ignore your true self and the selves of others. This is the denial of God of which Merezhkovsky spoke.

The same is true of Akakii Akakievich. He is a non-entity from birth. His name is arrived at misadventure—only after exhausting the supply of names in a calendar does his mother finally concede to naming him after his father. He even wept at his own christening. As an adult he fares no better. When he goes to the tailor Petrovich, he passes "through the kitchen unperceived, even by the housewife."²⁹⁾ The people around him generally show no signs that in him they recognize a human being:

28) *Ibid.*, 1.

29) Gogol, <The Overcoat>, 84.

No respect was shown him in the department [...] Some assistant chief would thrust a paper under his nose without saying so much a "Copy," or "Here's a nice, interesting matter," or anything else agreeable, as is customary in well-bred service. And he took it, looking only at the paper, and not observing who handed it to him, or whether he had the right to do so: he simply took it, and set about copying it. The young officials laughed at and made fun of him, so far as official wit permitted; recounted there in his presence various stories concocted about him?and strewed bits of paper over his head, calling them snow. But Akakii Akakievich answered not a word, as though there had been no one there before him.³⁰⁾

He only stands up for himself when they jostle him and actually physically disturb his work. Not only do they not respect him, but also he does not respect himself.

Akakii neither pays heed to his own humanity, nor notices the world around him: "Outside the copying it appeared nothing existed for him," "Never once in his life did he give heed to what was going on every day in the street," "Moreover, he had a peculiar knack, as he walked in the street, of arriving beneath a window when all sorts of rubbish were being flung out of it," and he ate soup and beef, "never noticing their taste, ate it all with flies and anything else which the Lord sent at the moment."³¹⁾ At his job he is merely content to copy and is distressed if he has to do so much as change a word from the original. When he is robbed of his coat, the watch guard does not see him. After he goes to visit the captain about the theft of his coat, he is left waiting to be seen—utterly forgotten while the official smokes a cigar. When he dies it is four days before anyone with whom he works even know about it. And after his death he becomes even more ethereal—nothing but the rumor of a ghost.

The only thing he ever cares about is a coat. It becomes the object of his affection, obsession and the center of his life. He is cut off from the

30) Ibid., 80-81.

31) Ibid., 85.

world around him, from anything with any depth, caring only for a material item. His personal identity becomes so attached to the coat that when it is stolen, he dies from mourning it. He has negated the importance of anything in life, of others, of himself, of his humanity. And just like Chichikov, he has no concept of the eternal, no idea of God. God is not rebelled against, but simply has no place in these men's thoughts.

This inability either to see oneself or to relate with others lies at the heart of all these major sins. Lying is an intentional way of separating oneself from others, of obscuring the truth both to yourself and others. Madness is a disease, which prevents you from knowing yourself or anyone else, and aversion to reality. Poprishchin isolates himself from everyone around him, having deeper conversations with dogs than with anyone else. And acquisition is merely the rejection of real life and the substitution of material objects in place of both it and the soul. Being a collector like Chichikov, and obsessive like Akakii or appreciative only of life's simple, physical pleasures like the Old World Landowners is to lie still and die, to go astray from the journey of life.

What all of these "sins" boils down to is an unawareness of self and soul—not just of their social status or banality—and a resultant isolation from self and others. The characters are all unaware of anything deeper than the material surface of life, than physical pleasure. They are hollow, stagnant beings. Rozanov describes the populace of Gogol's fiction:

[...] there are emasculated characters such as Akakii Akakievich and others like him with their balding heads and wrinkled cheeks; but both these and the "radiant" characters are without life, without natural light themselves, without movement, without the capability of prolonged thought or of developing feeling.³²⁾

According to Rozanov, Gogol's characters lack souls precisely because

32) Rozanov, Vasily (1968) "How the Character Akakii Akakievich Originated", *Essays in Russian Literature: The Conservative View: Leontiev, Rozanov, Shestov*, Ed. Spenser E. Roberts. Athens: Ohio UP, 378-79

Gogol himself could not portray them:

What a lesson from our history we failed to understand! A brilliant artist portrayed man all his life and yet was unable to portray the soul. He told us that the soul does not exist, and in depicting his dead characters he did it with such skill that for several decades we actually believed in a generation of walking corpses.³³⁾

Rozanov says that is what sets him apart from other writers. But even if Gogol could depict the human soul, these people are all out of touch with theirs—that is the nature of Gogol's fictive world. As Merezhkovsky said, the Devil is "the self of our eternal alter ego, who shows us our reflection in himself, as in a mirror."³⁴⁾ Chichikov, Khlestakov, Akakii, and most of Gogol's characters are just that—mirrors reflecting the rest of us. They may not be, as many critics argue, true reflections of the Russian countryside at that time, but they are exaggerated reflections of humanity, which is the very reason they are not endowed with souls. A reflection can have no soul. It must only have a surface appearance.

Gogol's characters are deeply flawed people who let those flaws hold them down at the base of the mountain, who let the beasts deter them from climbing, who are so afraid of these monsters that they mentally block them out and forget that they are meant to ascend, or at least to try. They actually lack souls because of their very humanity.

To be human is to be flawed. If they are in fact mirrors of our selves, if the Devil is a mirror of humanity's "eternal alter ego," then everyone must be flawed in these ways, just to differing degrees. In <The Overcoat> sometimes the clerks pushed Akakii too far, the joking became utterly intolerable and he would blurt out, "Leave me alone! Why do you insult me?"³⁵⁾ In these moments Akakii's humanity would shine through

33) Vasily Rozanov, (1972) *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, Trans. Spencer E. Roberts. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 24

34) Merezhkovsky, "Gogol and the Devil," 59-60

35) Gogol, <The Overcoat>, 81.

and reveal the true nature of the people around him to themselves. The narrator of the story, whose voice is closer to Gogol's, writes about these instances:

And there was something strange in the words and the voice in which they were uttered. There was in it a something which moved to pity; so that one young man, lately entered, who, taking pattern by the others, had permitted himself to make sport of him, suddenly stopped short, as though all had undergone a transformation before him, and presented itself in a different aspect... And in these penetrating words, other words resounded—"I am thy brother." And the poor young man covered his face with his hand; and many a time afterwards, in the course of his life, he shuddered at seeing how much inhumanity there is in man, how much savage coarseness is concealed in delicate, refined worldliness and, O God! Even in that man whom the world acknowledges as honorable and noble.³⁶⁾

According to the narrator, then, there is inhumanity, or evil, in all of us—the best and the worst: and Merezhkovsky was right, when we look into the Devil, we see ourselves with our image exaggerated, refracted, as with a funhouse mirror, with caricaturish distortion of our worst traits. But just as there is inhumanity in the best of us, there is humanity in the worst.

Even though his characters seem to lack souls, they are not condemned to being mere depthless reflections, or phantoms trapped in glass. They have flashes of humanity; they have the potential to become more.

36) Ibid., 81. The view on this passage is controversial. While the traditional viewpoint places the highest value on the "human passage," by stressing the poor destiny of Akakii, the other sees Akakii as a ridiculous character of interior human status, and which says that throughout the story Gogol stressed only the ridiculous insignificance of his hero. The latter sees this passage as a peak of Akakii's ridiculousness. Jan Van Der Eng, "Bashmachkin's character: A combination of Comic, Grotesque, tragicomic and Tragic Elements," in *Gogol's <Overcoat>: an Anthology of Critical Essays*, ed. Elizabeth Trahan (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1982), 73-85.

Merezhkovsky pointed out that the Devil is laughable in Gogol. And while most of his characters are laughable, there is the famous bitterness or sorrow behind the tears.

Akakii is heavily ridiculed, and despite his rejection of his own humanity, after his coat is stolen, "[t]he news of the robbery touched many; although there were officials present who never omitted an opportunity, even the present, to ridicule Akakii Akakievich."³⁷⁾ They take up a collection to help him, but the money gathered is a trifle. And one man is moved to pity, and tries to help by giving him advice.

The problem is that Akakii is still motivated by material concern. Though they pity him, they still can ridicule him. They can ridicule him because he is still identifying himself with something worldly and because they, being human, have within them something inhuman, something devilish. But were Akakii entirely negative, entirely lacking humanity, were he at one with the Devil, he would not inspire pity in the others. In him they see something of themselves or they would not want to help him.

Akakii's fatal flaw is that he quits moving. Just before the theft of his coat:

Akakii Akakievich went on in a happy frame of mind: he even started to run, without knowing why, after some lady, who flew past like a flash of lightning, and whose whole body was endowed with an extraordinary amount of movement. But then he stopped short, and went on very quietly as before, wondering whence he had got that gait. Soon there spread out before him those deserted streets, which are not cheerful in the daytime, not to mention the evening. Now they were more dim and lonely... Akakii Akakievich's cheerfulness diminished at this point in a marked degree. He entered the square, not without an involuntary sensation of fear, as though his heart warned him of some evil.³⁸⁾

Akakii has the chance to climb the mountain as Dante. But he stops when he senses the predators waiting for him. Even if the coat is a poor

37) *Ibid.*, 95.

38) *Ibid.*, 93.

reason for living, it has set him in motion, but fears stops him short. His coat, his reason for living, albeit a poor one, is taken away from him. No matter, obstacles are to be encountered, as the leopard and she-wolf in 『*Inferno*』, but what is important is one's reaction to them. Does one continue to move or lie stagnant? Akakii initially tries to do something about his coat—to show that he thinks something of himself, that he deserves justice just like anyone else. But when it is denied him, he remains fixated on the loss of the coat itself and forgets his own awakened strength. Never before did he attempt to defend himself, to assert himself, to live. And just as before, he slows his gait and goes on "quietly." He lapses into fever and remains in his bed. This is his downfall—lying in bed. It means certain death, both physically and spiritually. There is no more hope for him.

In essence, most of Gogol's characters are making their way through their own 『*Inferno*』. Most just quit trying, but some keep moving. Chichikov was meant to become the shining light in Gogol's "dull" fictive world with "monotonous rain; a tearful sky, without one gleam of light!"³⁹⁾

Merezhkovsky calls Chichikov the Devil, and Nabokov calls him a traveling salesman for the Devil. And though these are brilliant interpretations, to limit Chichikov to one of those two roles is to deny Gogol's overall intention in writing the planned trilogy of *Dead Souls*. He based his theme and structure on 『*Inferno*』. Chichikov is both Dante, the character led around the rings of Hell and, along with the narrator, is the reader's guide on the journey. Just as Dante is allowed to climb the heights to heaven, so was Chichikov also destined to do.

To deny Chichikov his humanity is to commit the same crime

39) Nikolai Gogol, "The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich," in 『*The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil*』, trans. Isabel Hapgood (Toronto: General Publishing Company, 1992), 57. Jesse Zeldin also points out the potential as a positive hero in Chichikov. See his 『*Nikolai Gogol's Quest for Beauty: an Explanation into His Works*』(Lawrence: The Regents P of Kansas, 1978), 89 and 91-113.

that he does to others. Chichikov is intentionally described vaguely not only to make him a "no man" in a "nowhere land" but also to make him an "everyman" in an "anywhere-land." He is not really salesman for the Devil, rather a consumer, a collector for him. He buys up souls for money. He constructs situations that allow people to either prove themselves worthy of life, of their mortal souls, or to reveal themselves as corrupted, flawed. He does not really sell anything but rather lets people give themselves away.

He, like they, has been persuaded off the true path. In the beginning his carriage is lost and even tips and gets stuck in the mud because of a storm. He is the lost traveler, like Dante in the beginning of 『*Inferno*』. He puts others in the position to follow him off the road to salvation. But only by straying from the path can he find his way back, can he know the nature of evil and thus hope to become good. Only by having been unaware can he truly be aware.

And so at the end of *Dead Souls*, he must be allowed to escape capture and punishment. Were he caught, he would be punished by other humans. And since, like himself, all humans or at least all characters in Gogol's world, are flawed, they cannot save him. Their punishment would only doom him, not regenerate him. But, like Khlestakov at the end of *The Inspector General*, if there is to be any hope for him, he must keep moving and not lay down to die, trapped in some small room or bed like Poprishchin, Akakii, the Old World Landowners or Chartkov. If he is to have any chance at redeeming himself, which Gogol must have intended since he based his book on Dante's trilogy, Chichikov must be allowed to head forward, along with Russia itself, at a breakneck speed, "to rush under divine inspiration."⁴⁰

Who knows whether the path will lead, whether or not it will lead to redemption for Chichikov, for everyman, as it did for Dante. To rush forward without thought, like Akakii did, is dangerous; but it is more

40) Gogol, <*Dead Souls*>, 270.

dangerous in Gogol's to stop moving, like the landowners in *Dead Souls*, to stop trying, for to do that would mean giving in to despair and hopelessness, denying yourself, your soul and the souls of others. It would mean allowing the leopard, the Devil, to turn you away completely; it would mean forsaking the climbs to "the cause of every joy."⁴¹⁾

Gogol's characters may lead unexamined lives for the most part; however, they do this not because they are made to by the Devil or some demon, or because they are one themselves. Rather, being human, they are flawed and prone to wandering astray. They are offered choices, and they fail to make the right ones. The evil comes not from without, not forced on them, but rather from within themselves—they will it, even when they may not always be aware of it. It is simply a part of them. In Gogol's world, the only power the Devil has is to talk people into unlocking their darker sides. The demonic exists in each and every one, but they are not simply demons. And as long as they keep moving, keep living instead of merely existing, then there is hope for them. Perhaps Gogol was just incapable of showing someone who had reached that point, possibly because he never felt he had reached it himself. His life—just like the lives of his characters—was an exaggerated, tragically laughable struggle of the good and evil in him, one that led to his own madness, his own lies, his own denial of reality in the form of his made-up, fictive world where he could control everything. And just as he left Chichikov's life unfinished, unanswered, we cannot know if he found the top of the mountain for which he sought, either as a pilgrim to Africa or as an artist.

41) Dante, 『*Inferno*』, line 78.

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Резюме

Проблема зла и значение движения в пути спасения у Гоголя

Ким, Чжон-А

<Божественная Комедия> Данте оказала огромное влияние на мировую литературу. Особенно ценны рассуждения Данте о проблеме зла, Бога и спасения человека. *<Мёртвые Души>* считается продолжением или ответом на *Божественную Комедию* Данте, в частности *『Инферно』*. Гоголь хотел построить свою трилогию *<Мёртвые Души>* по форме Данте *<Божественной Комедии>*. Влияние Данте можно проследить не только в темах и характерах *<Мёртвых Душ>* но и в остальных произведениях Гоголя.

Эта статья рассматривает проблему зла в персонажах различных произведений Гоголя. Одним из величайших зол в произведениях Гоголя является ложь. Сюда входят разные виды лжи. Первый и менее злобный вид лжи это сплетня. Второй тип лжи это обыкновенная ложь, которая предназначена для обмана. Третьей тип лжи самый худший и опасный — обман самого себя. Эта ложь хуже чем сокрытие правды от других, потому что эта ложь — отрицание своего настоящего я.

Обман других и самого себя приводят героя к потере своего я (самоидентификации) и к сумасшедствию, которое Мережковский называет "наказанием божьим."

Несмотря на недостатки характера, персонажам Гоголя имеют возможность спасения. Самым важным качеством для спасения в характерах Гоголя является "движение." В *Божественной Комедии* на пути героев к горе Счастья (и источнику радости) возникают такие препятствия, как волчица и лев, которые являются

воплощение зла. Несмотря на эти препятствия, движение вперёд, желание не сдаваться в героях произведения Гоголя может рассматриваться как борьба за жизнь, а не существование. Персонаж Гоголя как путешественники (как все люди) которые всегда в движении. Для персонаж стоять на месте— это не жизнь, а существование, потому что стагнация равносильна смерти.