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CHICHIKOV DIS-COURSED: DISCURSIVE DOMINANCE AND NARRATIVE MOMENTUM IN GOGOL'S DEAD SOULS

Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, protagonist of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, is also on a certain level the novel's author: the plot hinges, after all, upon his quest, from whose object the novel takes its title. It is Chichikov who determines the itinerary of this quest, and thus of the narrative; consequently, he is also the only character to be fully apprised of the motivation behind this itinerary. Chichikov's efforts to steer his own narrative course are, however, not allowed completely free reign. His planned trajectory is often frustrated by other characters, who by a variety of means contrive to divert, hijack, or even overturn his carriage, literally and figuratively.

These diversions, in which Chichikov is temporarily dislodged, as it were, from the narrative saddle, serve to draw the reader's attention to the strikingly linguistic character of his adventures. The very object of his quest is to collect signifiers whose referents no longer exist: ownership papers for the erstwhile serfs of the novel's title. By accumulating these empty signifiers in sufficient quantity, Chichikov hopes to obtain a further document of ownership, this one *with* a physical referent: an estate of his own, a place for his dead souls to live. In order to acquire his symbolic fortune, and eventually to give it literal extension, Chichikov must deal with an assortment of landowners and officials, each of whom is characterized by a peculiar and distinctive mode of discourse. The success of his mission is contingent upon his rapid mastery of these idiolects. Some of them cause him negligible difficulty; others, however, elude his grasp, confronting him with the hurdles that form the subject of this paper.

Of the landowners, the two who cause Chichikov the most difficulty are those he visits unintentionally: Korobochka and Nozdrev. These two are characterized by linguistic "disorders" of opposite types: Nozdrev seems to ascribe no referentiality to language at all,

whereas Korobochka affords it too much. Nozdrev is an apparently inexhaustible generator of empty signifiers, Korobochka, an incorrigible "filler" of them.

Thus, in her negotiations with Chichikov, Korobochka is unable to grasp that the "dead souls" stand for nothing at all. She is, in fact, unable even to parse the paradoxical phrase "dead soul," and seems capable of apprehending only one of its mutually exclusive terms at a time. The idea of a purchase that takes place entirely on paper is equally alien to her, for in her literal world, a purchase must entail the physical exchange of goods. As a result, she transacts for her dead serfs as if they were still alive, periodically running aground on the recollection that they are not. Her ruminations on their possible utility (and consequent market value) are punctuated, to Chichikov's even greater exasperation, by the objection: "The only thing that makes me hesitate is that they are, you know, dead" (52).[1] She is deeply shocked, moreover, by Chichikov's language – "What fearful things you utter!" – and seems afraid that his mere mention of the devil will cause the latter to materialize: "Oh, don't bring him into it, let him go!" (54). Simply put, Korobochka takes words seriously – too seriously. Chichikov eventually stumbles on the words – "government contracts" – that transform her contrariness into cooperation, but unfortunately for him their effect does not stop there. By invoking the authority of "government contracts," he has at last established the fungibility of "dead souls" as a legitimate concept. This, however, has the undesirable consequence of bringing the credulous Korobochka to town three days later, eager to learn the going rate for this (she now imagines) standard form of merchandise. In making her inquiries, she alerts the townspeople to the unorthodox nature of Chichikov's purchases, setting in motion the train of events that will culminate in his flight from the town.

If Korobochka's trouble is an exaggerated sense of signification, Nozdrev's is that he imputes no signification to words at all; he appears not to acknowledge a hard-and-fast bond between *verba* and *res*. He is constantly generating language with no apparent foundation in

1. Except where noted, quotations from *Dead Souls* are taken from N. V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 6 (Moscow and Leningrad: Ak. Nauk SSSR, 1951). Page numbers are given in parentheses in the text. All translations from the Russian are my own.

reality. He lies continually and "without any need" (71). He affixes labels to bottles that in no way correspond to their contents, he fails to observe the standard forms of address, he falsifies people's names and particulars, he communicates in "noises" ("ni-ni," "ba-ba"). Of all the landowners Chichikov meets, Nozdrev is the only one he cannot manipulate at all. The linguistic principles by which Chichikov normally operates so skillfully do not seem to obtain in the Nozdrev universe.

Nozdrev's disregard for the meaning of words obliges him to impart and receive information by other means. Himself an inveterate liar, he is the only landowner to accuse Chichikov of lying. His mistrust of verbal narratives extends as well to his own. When he wants to command credulity from Chichikov, he relies not on words, but on physical evidence, making Chichikov (despite the latter's protests) look, touch, and smell things in order to believe them. Nozdrev's conclusive gambling losses at the fair are testified to by the pitiful quality of his hired horses, which Chichikov is physically compelled to observe:

> "Why, I came here on hired hacks! Here, go ahead and look out of the window!" Here he himself thrust Chichikov's head down so that that gentleman almost concussed himself against the window-frame. (64)

Thus satisfied that his new friend has witnessed the latest cloud on his financial horizon, Nozdrev next insists that he take stock of its silver lining: the happy-go-lucky landowner, it transpires, has lost his horses but gained a puppy, allegedly one of excellent breed. Despite Chichikov's assurances of his complete accord with Nozdrev on this point, he is forced to verify manually the tactile qualities of the dog's ears and the exemplary coldness of its nose:

> "Here, do look, Chichikov, look, what ears, just stroke them with your hand."
>
> "What for, indeed, I see it just as you do: a noble breed!" answered Chichikov.
>
> "No, do touch him properly, stroke his ears!"
>
> Chichikov, to oblige him, stroked the ears in question, adding; "Yes, he will be a good dog." (68)

Similarly, upon his arrival at Nozdrev's house, Chichikov is dragged over every inch of the estate, to see with his own two eyes "absolutely everything, so that nothing remained to be shown" (72). This is followed by an equally detailed tour of Nozdrev's "study," in which no books or papers are to be found, but only "swords and two firearms" (lest the reader harbor any lingering doubts, in Nozdrev's book the sword is mightier than the pen). Here, too, stands his schizophrenic barrel-organ, which Chichikov is obliged to hear in action not once but twice, for Nozdrev is not convinced that he has fully appreciated its merits:

> Here Nozdrev, seizing Chichikov by the hand, began to drag him into the other room, and no matter how Chichikov dug his heels into the floor and assured his host that he already knew what a barrel-organ it was, he was nonetheless obliged to hear again how Marlborough went into battle [the theme of the song played by the organ]. (80)

In short, Nozdrev's truths are tactile, not verbal – the wines he serves are potent, but mislabeled – and he neither offers nor accepts words as a viable surrogate for reality. He even accuses the police captain of lying, when the latter arrives to charge him with being "implicated in the story" (*zameshany v istoriiu*) of an assaulted landowner (87). So far as Nozdrev is concerned, "story" does not necessarily imply "event". His own tall tales bear ample witness to this. Stories, unlike events, are open to refutation, and he refutes this one energetically. Similarly, language codes can be manipulated. Nozdrev's breach of the linguistic code usually observed between law-enforcement officials and their suspects does little to endear him to the police captain. The discursive clash between Nozdrev and a third party allows Chichikov to make his escape, but he emerges somewhat the worse for wear: Nozdrev's personal code has flatly defeated him.

In Nozdrev's presence, Chichikov loses command of the narrative. Unable to exert his customary discursive control, Chichikov becomes subject to the vagaries of Nozdrev's will. Chichikov is compelled to alter his itinerary. He is subjected to all sorts of physical indignities: pushed and pulled this way and that, forced to inspect, handle, listen to and even ingest goodness-knows-what. He cannot make the slightest

headway towards his goal, because he cannot do business with Nozdrev. In financial matters, as in language, Nozdrev does not recognize stable laws of value, and either tries to sell him an assortment of items for which he has no use, or refuses to sell anything at all, on the grounds that "it wouldn't be friendly" (83).

It is this relish for instability that makes Nozdrev inscrutable to Chichikov, whose discursive adaptability is limited to "codes" in which the rules, though necessarily *arbitrary,* are at least somewhat *consistent,* and therefore predictable. The fundamental conflict between their two modes of linguistic operation comes to light when Nozdrev tries to make Chichikov play for his dead souls instead of purchasing them:

> "Well, to settle by a card game means exposing oneself to uncertainty," Chichikov began. . . .
>
> "What do you mean, uncertainty?" said Nozdrev. "No uncertainty at all! All you need is luck on your side, and you can win the devil's share. There it is! There's luck for you!" (81)

Chichikov, a fundamentally rational character, cannot tolerate chance, which he views as "uncertainty" (*neizvestnost'*). Conversely, Nozdrev, a fundamentally aleatoric character, *predicates* his affairs on chance, which he views as "luck" (*schastie*). It is only by proposing a game of skill, rather than one of chance, that Nozdrev eventually persuades Chichikov to play.

Chichikov's mistrust of chance is well justified, for it is the aleatoric basis of Nozdrev's code that places him beyond Chichikov's "authorial" control: he is simply impervious to verbal reasoning. His very presence in Chichikov's narrative space is a matter of chance. Their first meeting is "incidental," introduced by the phrase "By the way" (p. 17). The same air of happenstance governs all of Nozdrev's appearances, from his chance encounter with Chichikov on the road (chapter 4) to his unwelcome appearance in N. when Chichikov is being feted by the locals (chapters 8, 10). Like Korobochka, Nozdrev crops up in Chichikov's itinerary unsought. It is these two "accidental" landowners who threaten the success of Chichikov's plan. The others with whom he does business do not significantly disrupt the progress of the "narrative" he has plotted.

The responsibility for these two "accidents" in Chichikov's itinerary belongs to a third, as it were, referentially impaired character: the driver Selifan. Selifan, in a different sense from Korobochka, is Nozdrev's inverse. Like Nozdrev, he is an emptier of signifiers, but where Nozdrev specializes in generating empty signifiers, Selifan specializes in receiving them – that is, he "empties" perfectly ordinary "full" signifiers that come his way. This habit proves somewhat injurious to his performance as a servant, for among the utterances he divests of significance are reprimands and commands, both of which, in Selifan's case, fail to have the desired effect of altering the (undesired) status quo. Chichikov's unscheduled visit to Korobochka, and his subsequent meeting with Nozdrev, occur as a result of Selifan's blithe disregard of the directions he is given to Sobakevich's house. Called to task for his negligence, he simply concurs with the censure directed at him, elaborating on the merits of a well-deserved thrashing until Chichikov, the originator of the thrashing idea, is thoroughly confounded:

> "However it suits you, kind sir," answered Selifan, amenable to everything. "If thrashing is called for, then thrashing it shall be; I've nothing against it. Why not thrash, if there's a reason? That's what a master is for. There has to be thrashing, because a peasant loafs about. Order must be preserved. If there's a reason, then by all means thrash him. Why on earth not thrash him?"
>
> To such reasoning the master could find nary a reply. (43)

Selifan contrives to obstruct Chichikov in the opposite fashion from Nozdrev. Whereas Nozdrev frustrates Chichikov by imposing a code in which he cannot function, Selifan frustrates him by incapacitating Chichikov's own code. Both work by substituting discursive entropy for discursive order.

Between them, Selifan and Nozdrev pose a considerable challenge to Chichikov's narrative autonomy: they threaten, in fact, to usurp authorship of the narrative in which he is protagonist. As the novel approaches its conclusion, they appear almost to outflank him, closing in from opposite directions to manipulate the development of the plot. Nozdrev, described by the narrator as a "historical character" – that is, one who cannot show up anywhere "without [causing] some 'history'"

– makes things happen. Selifan stops them from happening. Nozdrev represents a sort of irresistible entropic force, appearing unexpectedly and "from no-one knew where" to dislodge Chichikov from his intended object (Sobakevich; the governor's daughter; a quiet cup of tea) and propel him in some unexpected direction (to Nozdrev's house; "home" to the inn; post-haste out of town). Selifan, on the other hand, represents his counterpart, the immovable object – a more or less constant presence acting to dissipate Chichikov's momentum and retard his movement toward the stated goal.

This push-me-pull-you relationship reaches a climax in the episode of Chichikov's final departure from the town of N. (chapters 10-11). Newly recovered from a debilitating head cold, Chichikov has not yet apprehended the dramatic decline of his local reputation, and is sitting "in some pointless rumination or other" (213) – a body at rest – when Nozdrev, the irresistible force, comes to act upon him. Nozdrev immediately sets about "rewriting" Chichikov's particulars in the most radical fashion yet, averring in quick succession that:

(1) he smokes a pipe
(2) his manservant is named not Petrushka, but Vakhramei
(3) he is learned and likes to read
(4) he is of a satirical turn of mind
(5) he is friends with an individual named Perependev.

This all-out assault on his narrative autonomy puts not only Chichikov on the defensive, but also Gogol's narrator, who is forced to intervene on his "hero"'s behalf by means of a series of somewhat acerbic parenthetical disclaimers:

> . . . (why on earth Nozdrev had concluded that our hero occupied himself with learned matters and liked to read, we admit, we cannot find any way to explain; much less Chichikov himself) . . . (why Chichikov was supposed to have a satirical mind is also unknown) . . . (meanwhile, Chichikov had never in his life known anyone by the name of Perependev). (213-14)

The narrator's point of view becomes increasingly aligned with Chichikov's as the novel nears its close, as if to close ranks with him against the two-pronged threat of Nozdrev and Selifan. By adopting this strategy to defend himself and his "hero" from Nozdrev's surpris-

ing allegations, the narrator reasserts his own authority, but simultaneously undermines it. He is able only to *refute* Nozdrev's claims, not to account for them. Nozdrev's "randomizing" discourse, it seems, confounds Chichikov's chronicler as thoroughly as it does Chichikov himself, winning him a measure of narrative autonomy comparable to Chichikov's own – and with it, the power to influence the trajectory of Chichikov's story.

Nozdrev makes immediate, and characteristic, use of this power by suddenly abandoning his outlandish fabrications in favor of the truth, imparting to Chichikov, in the guise of an afterthought, the vital and accurate intelligence that "In town everyone is against you" (214). This news catapults the formerly inert Chichikov into action, without leisure to reflect on the Cretan paradox with which Nozdrev subsequently confronts him by recounting the lies he has told to the town officials on Chichikov's behalf. Now decidedly a body in motion, Chichikov sets about packing furiously and orders Selifan to ready the carriage for departure.

His urgings, however, produce little observable effect on Selifan, who, true to his role as immovable object, promptly sets about dissipating the momentum imparted by Nozdrev. His only reaction to Chichikov's commands is to scratch the back of his neck – a nonverbal response whose meaning eludes the narrator as completely as Nozdrev's earlier unreliable assertions, further highlighting the erosion of the narrator's, and Chichikov's, discursive dominance. When Chichikov attempts to leave the next morning, the carriage is duly unprepared, and Selifan has an assortment of delaying tactics at the ready. The last of these accentuates again the functional opposition between himself and Nozdrev: mirroring the latter, who earlier tried to make Chichikov buy a horse he didn't want, Selifan now tries to make Chichikov sell a horse of which he has immediate and pressing need.

Despite the various hindrances Selifan is able to devise, Chichikov eventually makes good his escape. The manner of his departure, however, has been taken out of his hands. The urgency instilled by Nozdrev and thwarted by Selifan congeals into a tense atmosphere of frustration and suspense. Selifan's procrastination, moreover, ensures that Chichikov's carriage is subsequently further detained by the funeral procession of the public prosecutor – whose death has been brought about in the previous chapter by a surfeit of Nozdrev's empty signifi-

ers.[2] Foiled in his bid to regain control of the narrative trajectory, Chichikov recoups what narrative authority he can through the only recourse left to him: exegesis. As he sits in his carriage waiting for the funeral to pass, he *reinterprets* the hindrance set in his path by the combined depredations of his "irresistible" ex-host and "immovable" servant as a good omen.

As the novel draws to a close, its authorship has become a shared enterprise, in which competing authorial figures struggle for control of the plot. In this economy of competing discourses, as we have seen, the criterion for success is a kind of linguistic mastery: each "author" endeavors to "disencode" rival narratives and "encode" his own. The competitors are not, of course, all equal. Chichikov, as the incumbent – the deviser of the "original" plot from which the novel takes its title[3] – enjoys an advantage that Nozdrev and Selifan (much less Korobochka) cannot entirely erode, and the narrator, though not above entering the fray, ultimately withdraws to his original position of "bird's-eye" disengagement.

Even this position, however, has subtly changed. Whereas, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator withheld information (Chichikov's name, description, and purpose) in a traditional demonstration of authority, at its close he finds himself in a position of ignorance rivaling that of the reader. In the famous closing passage, in which Chichikov's troika is metaphorically transformed into the Russian state, the narrator has no answers, only questions:

> What is the meaning of this terrifying motion? And what mysterious force is hidden in these horses the like of which the world has never seen? Oh horses, horses – what horses! Are whirlwinds hidden in your manes? Is there some sensitive ear, alert to every

2. This sounds hyperbolic, but it is literally true, according to Gogol's narrator: "All these discussions, opinions and rumors [brought by Nozdrev] for some reason had their greatest effect on the poor public prosecutor. They had such an effect on him that on returning home he began to think and think and suddenly, without rhyme or reason, as they say, dropped dead."

3. As the narrator reminds us: "I don't know if my readers will be grateful to him for it, but . . . say what you like, if this idea [of acquiring dead serfs] had not occurred to Chichikov, this epic poem would not have seen the light of day" (230).

> sound, concealed in your veins? . . . Russia, where are you flying to? Answer! She gives no answer.[4]

As the narrator's perplexity implies, and Chichikov's experience illustrates, no authority in this text (or, as Gogol rather prophetically indicates, in Russia at large) is final. Ownership of the carriage does not guarantee exclusive authority over its itinerary; and while Gogol may be driving the narrative "carriage" of *Dead Souls,* the incorrigibly individualistic "horses" to which it is harnessed all have a stake in the itinerary.

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4. N. V. Gogol, *Dead Souls*, trans. David Magarshak (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 259.