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NIKOLAI GOGOL

DEAD SOULS

Introduction by Zoë Girling

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

DEAD SOULS

NIKOLAI V. GOGOL

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DEAD SOULS

NIKOLAI GOGOL

Introduction

Dead Souls, the paradoxical title of Nikolai Gogol's novel, immediately troubled the Russian censors of 1842, who felt it was probably blasphemous. But unlike Gogol's modern readers, they were not at a loss for an everyday meaning for the phrase. Live "souls" were negotiable property in Russia of the early nineteenth century, the scene of the novel. "Souls" meant serfs, and parcels of rural property were measured by the number of souls working on them: so a landowner short of capital might raise money by mortgaging his property, in terms of the number of souls on it, to the government. On each of these souls a poll tax was due; their number was established at the taking of a census. But if some souls died between two takings of the census, the tax was not diminished—to the annoyance, no doubt, of some landowners. This is how Tchitchikoff, Gogol's hero, had his brilliant idea.

"Dead souls" were no good to anyone and an enterprising traveler might buy them cheap. Landowners would be relieved of the taxes, the traveler would move too fast to be caught by nosy inquirers, and on paper he would appear to be a great landed proprietor. Then he might mortgage his imaginary property, and the "dead souls" would become ready cash. A smooth tongue, a fast carriage, and a cynical

view of miserly Russian landowners and corruptible officials were the necessary qualifications for success. Tchitchikoff had all three.

Both the idea and the title for his novel were credited by Gogol to Alexander Pushkin, that towering figure who is often regarded as the founder of Russian literature. Pushkin was ten years Gogol's senior, and quick to recognize the genius of the younger man. The period of Gogol's writing, when the old feudal-agricultural system was giving way to a bourgeois-capitalist system in Russia, coincided with the emerging recognition of literature as itself a possible force in the national life. It was not yet a period of reform—serfdom was not abolished until 1861—but the new voice of the critics was urgent for change, and eager to acclaim writing that seemed to advance the cause of "enlightenment" and modernity. Belinsky, foremost among the critics, was fervent in his praise of Gogol, who, he wrote, was "the first to look boldly and directly upon Russian reality." *Dead Souls* was the climax of Gogol's achievement.

Gogol, though gratified, was also somewhat uneasy about the terms in which he was praised, feeling that the stress on "realism" obscured understanding of his grander intentions. He hoped indeed to build his work into a sort of modern *Divine Comedy:* for ten years after the publication of Part One of the novel, he struggled to write Parts Two and Three, which would show the stages of punishment, repentance, and redemption (but of whom? surely not Tchitchikoff alone was in need of these!) following guilt, and would present images of goodness to offset the dominating images of venality in Part One. But he burned nearly all he had written shortly before his death in 1852, and the best of the surviving snatches of Part Two are those that are still irrepressibly in the vein of the comedy of Part One.

In the first part of *Dead Souls* the activities of the hero center around the provincial town of "N." Here Tchitchikoff ingratiates himself with the officials of the province; and he travels around, seeking out the landowners with whom his business must be transacted. He can scarcely be said to have adventures, such as befall the conventional *picaro;* but all his mushrooming relationships, and even the amazing digressions of the author, are held together by the brilliant comic

conception of the quest for dead souls. This at once provides the story and an ironic frame of reference within which Gogol's vision of life finds expression.

One may well be curious about the nature of this Tchitchikoff: is he anything more than a comic device, embodied for convenience's sake in the shape of a "gentleman . . . neither dashingly handsome nor yet unbearably ugly, neither too stout nor yet too thin"? We learn, from the life history supplied in the eleventh chapter, that he has bounced back despite having fallen into disgrace in two separate branches of the civil service, and is still steady in pursuit of his ambition to achieve "a well-equipped house, carriages, tasty dinners," and also, if possible, a wife and family. In other words, he is a complacent, fallible, ordinary kind of a man; so ordinary, as Gogol once or twice points out in a direct address to the reader that might be compared to some of Thackeray's asides in *Vanity Fair,* that he might be you or me. Or to put another interpretation upon it, as Vladimir Nabokov has done in a fascinating critique of the book, so ordinary, so banal, so ungraced, that he may be the Devil himself!

His shady business at first astonishes and then disquietens each landowner whom he visits, and each one in turn exhibits his own special configuration of motives and attitudes. We assemble a remarkable collection of partial portraits. There is Maniloff who substitutes a habit of fond daydreaming for genuine activity; poor suspicious Korobotchka, trapped between superstition and greed; Sobakevitch of gargantuan appetite and power of contempt; the capricious and mischievous Nozdreff whose reckless gambling is matched by his breath-takingly reckless lying; and Pliushkin, pitifully hoarding rubbish while his genuine wealth ebbs away. It is as if Tchitchikoff's request maps out the "dead" areas of all these souls; one senses the reason for the apocryphal remark of Pushkin when he read a first draft of the book, "I did not know how sad our Russia was!"

Would Tchitchikoff and these others be morally better, less culpable, if he were dealing in live souls? This question, which is ironically implied, may bring out the fascinating ambiguity felt throughout the book about the nature of reality, and of human destiny. Sobakevitch is unique among

the landlords in his active interest in his peasants. As he recalls his dead souls—the wheelwright, the carpenter, the bricklayer, the shoemaker—their felt *life* moves him to unprecedented eloquence, which Tchitchikoff at last interrupts:

> . . . "Why do you enumerate all these men's qualities? . . . They are all dead. . . ."
>
> "Yes, certainly, they are dead," said Sobakevitch, as though considering the subject . . . and then he added, "Well, what's the use of talking about these men, although they are still reckoned as alive? What sort of men are those who are still alive? Flies, and not men at all!"

Whatever the flaws in his logic, we can follow Sobakevitch's feeling. Tchitchikoff of course is left cold; but oddly enough (or *is* it odd?) he comes to speculate on the lives of his own newly acquired dead souls, now his "dear hearts," his "doves," when he has a nice long list of them in his hand; and he invents such convincing histories for them, with violent endings, that he laments, " 'Ah, you Russian folk! You don't like dying in your beds!' " quite as if fact, not fantasy, had led him to this conclusion!

Thus the living more often than not inhabit a world of fantasy. Some are gullible, most are self-deluded; hardly any make any but the most fleeting contact with reality. Tchitchikoff's downfall in the town of N. reaches an empyrean of nonsense: he is suddenly suspected, by the officials and "friends" who had precipitately lionized him before, of being a spy—a forger—Napoleon himself in disguise! And he is at last run out of town, not for anything to do with the dead souls, but for a wildly improbable plot to abduct the Governor's daughter. No wonder he exclaims "from the depths of his soul," as his carriage is held up by the funeral of the prosecutor,

> "So that's the procurator! He has lived, and now he has died, and now they will print in the newspapers that he died regretted by his subordinates, and by all man-

> kind . . . a wonderful father . . . a model husband . . . but when one comes to examine the matter thoroughly, all one will find in confirmation of these statements is that he had wonderfully thick eyebrows!"

If beneath this cynicism there is a genuine despair at the meaninglessness of human existence, it is amply offset by the zest with which Gogol evokes the comical, occasionally beautiful, inexhaustibly various world. Gogol is like Dickens in his energy of observation and invention; it seems he has never missed noticing the differences between two bowls of cabbage soup, or between two Russians eating it. The slightest gesture of a man is pounced on and displayed to reveal a whole life style: for example, the "lieutenant from Ryazan" admiring his boot, or the tutor's effort of concentration when his charge, Maniloff's son, is being quizzed: he "looked as though he would jump right into [the child's] eyes; but he settled back again quietly and nodded his head" (when the child gave the right answer). The lieutenant and the tutor are only two of a host of "extras" added momentarily to the cast of main characters. They appear from all quarters, quite unpredictably, enriching the book by the glimpses they provide of regions and experiences beyond those we are so vividly conscious of sharing with Tchitchikoff. So from the barking of the dogs in Korobotchka's yard we are transported to listen to

> . . . a contrabasso in a church choir, when the concert is in full swing.

Even in translation—and one senses in a passage like this why experts feel that Gogol more than most novelists suffers greatly in translation—the excitement and vitality of his prose turn digression into the very stuff of literature. Another poetic, witty transition links "the lady agreeable in all respects," whose featherbrained gossip leads to the undoing of Tchitchikoff, to a hunter on "the restless, snowy steppe." The examples can be multiplied almost indefinitely.

No wonder it felt to Gogol's first readers as if a whole

spread of Russian life were in his pages. Fielding had comparably conveyed England to English readers a few generations earlier, in his novel *Tom Jones*. The roads and villages, even the animals and vegetation, are so vividly present in *Dead Souls* that it is astonishing to learn that Gogol had hardly visited the region of the country where Tchitchikoff is mainly seen to travel. But the apparently loose, episodic structure is misleading. Gogol is closer in spirit to his own literary contemporaries, Balzac in France and Dickens in England (not that his work seems to reflect their influence). The "human comedy" may almost be said to have preyed on the imaginations of all three, who all have intimations of mystery and darkness behind the pretensions and pretenses which govern people's lives. Gogol's novel entertainingly presents a version of humdrum daily existence which opens, if not the whole, at least an aspect of Russia to our view; the faraway scene becomes intelligible and even familiar, and the book provides an admirable introduction to the life —and the literature—of a still formidably distant land. But this is by the way. While we read, the abundant and memorable detail accumulates less to paint a scene or a panorama than to proclaim the multiform folly of the way we all live. Gogol creates in joy and mockery and recklessness, as if driven by a force that may be represented, perhaps, by his own powerful image of the galloping troika:

> . . . It is as though an unknown power had taken you upon its wings; that you were flying on and on while everything else was flying back. The verst-stones fly back; the merchants, on the boxes of their britchkas, fly to meet you; the forest flies off on both sides of the road, with its dark bands of pines and firs . . . the whole road flits away into the dim distance. And there is something terrible bound up with this swift flashing, amid which one can only distinguish the sky overhead, flecked with light clouds; and where the moon, as it pierces them, seems to be the only thing which is immovable.

For a moment, the rhythm of the troika has held the changing world in the stillness of Gogol's vision. Close the book,

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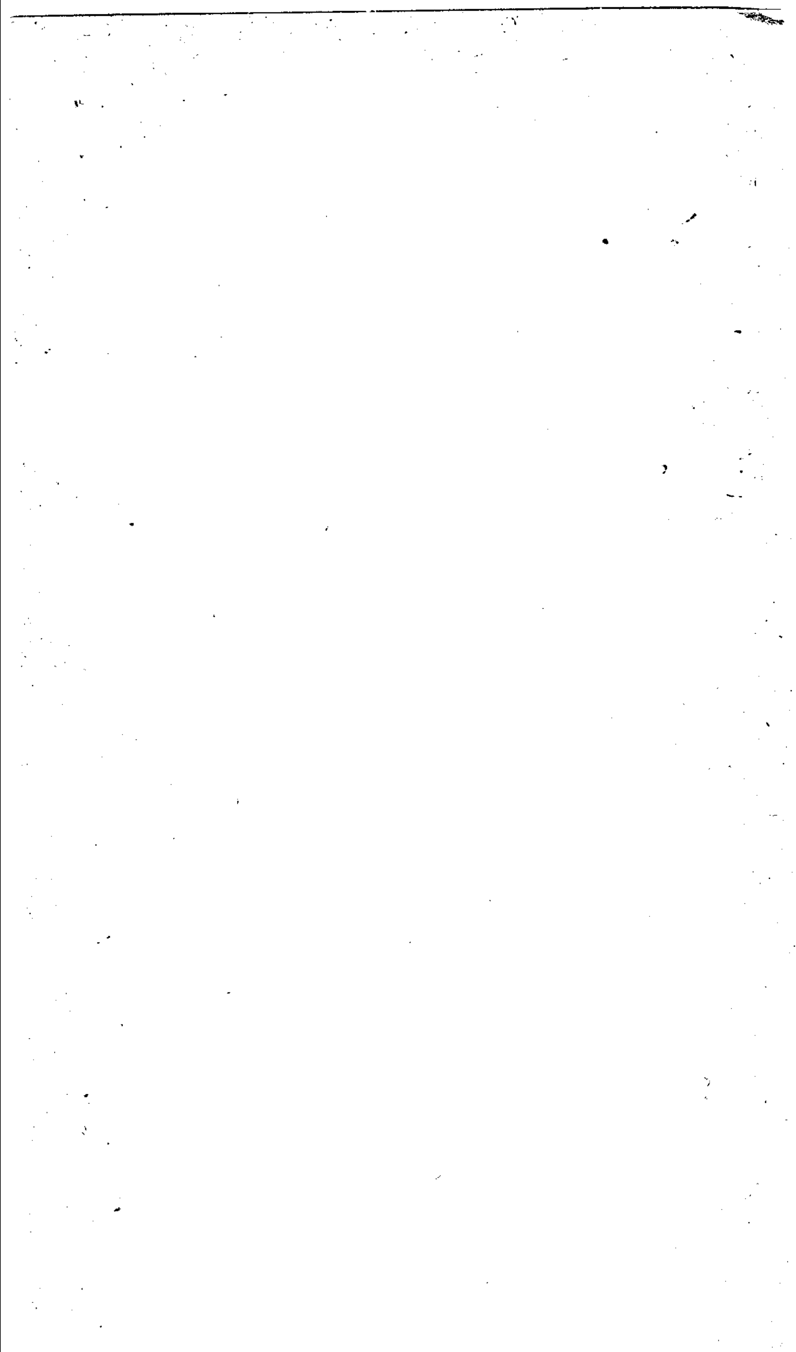
stop the troika, and the world will move again; but no reader of *Dead Souls* will shake off a haunting impression that our globe turns upon an axis of absurdity.

ZOË GIRLING

RECOMMENDED READING:

Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol,* New Directions, 1944.
Henry Gifford, *The Novel in Russia,* Hutchinson, 1964.



Chapter 1. *The Capital of the Government*

A small and quite a pretty britchka on springs entered the gates of the hostelry in the provincial city of N. N.; it was of the sort used by retired colonels, staff-captains, landed gentry who own some two hundred souls of peasants, and, in a word, by all who are called gentlemen of the middle class. In the britchka sat a gentleman who was neither handsome nor yet very plain in his personal appearance, neither too stout nor too thin; it was impossible to say that he was old, nor could he be called very young. His arrival produced no commotion whatever in the town, and was not signalised by anything in particular; though two moujiks who were standing at the door of a pot-house opposite the inn, made some remarks, which had, however, more reference to the equipage than to the person seated in it. "Just look," said one of them to the other, "what a wheel that is! What do you think? Will that wheel last as far as Moscow, or not?"—"Oh! it will hold out," replied the other. "But it won't hold out as far as Kazan, I fancy?"—"It will not," returned the other. And here the conversation ended. However, as the britchka drove into the inn-yard, it was met by a young man in white duck trousers very narrow and very short, and a swallow-tailed coat with claims to fashion, beneath which was visible a shirt-front fastened with a Tula pin, in the shape of a bronze pistol. The young man turned round, surveyed the equipage, caught hold of his cap, which the wind was on the point of blowing off, and then went his way.

When the carriage had entered the courtyard, the gentleman was received by one of the servants of the inn—a *polovoi* as they are called in Russian hostelries—who was so lively and restless that it was even impossible to see what sort of a face he had. He ran out briskly, napkin in hand, his lanky figure clad in a long cotton surtout, with its waist almost at the nape of his neck, tossed back his hair, and quickly led the gentleman upstairs along the whole length of a wooden gallery, to show him the chamber sent him by God. The chamber was of the well-known sort, for the inn was also of the familiar species—that is to say, exactly like all taverns in provincial towns, where for two roubles a day, travellers obtain a sleeping-room full of beetles which peep out of every corner like plums, and having a door leading into an adjoining apartment, which door is always blocked up with a chest of drawers. In that room too a neighbour is always lodged, some silent and quiet, but very curious

man, who takes an interest in finding out every particular relating to the stranger. The frontage of the hostelry corresponded with its interior: it was very long, and two storeys high; the lower one was not stuccoed, but preserved the hue of its dark-red bricks, which were already of a muddy tint by nature, and had grown still darker through the severe weather of many years; the upper storey was painted the inevitable yellow. On the lower floor there were shops with horse-collars, ropes, and cracknels, &c., and in the corner shop, or rather at its window, sat a *sbiten** seller, with a samovar of red copper, and a face as red as his samovar. At a distance it might have even been supposed that two samovars were standing in the window, had not the man had a beard as black as pitch.

While the newly-arrived gentleman was inspecting his room, his luggage was brought in; first of all came a trunk of white leather, somewhat the worse for wear, and showing signs that this was not the first time it had travelled. The trunk was brought in by the coachman Selifan, an undersized man in a short *tulup*,† and the footman Petrushka, a young fellow of thirty, with a rather surly face, a very thick nose and lips, and wearing a plain, somewhat worn surtout, which had evidently come from his master's shoulders. After the trunk came a dressing-case of mahogany with inlaid decorations of veined birchwood, a boot-jack, and a roast chicken wrapped up in blue paper. When all this had been brought in, the coachman Selifan betook himself to the stable to see to the horses, and the footman Petrushka began to settle himself in the small ante-room, an extremely dark little hole, whither he had already contrived to transport his cloak, and with it some of his own peculiar odour, which had been communicated to, and was wafted after, the bag containing the articles pertaining to his toilet. In this tiny den he placed against the wall a narrow, three-legged bedstead, covered it with a small semblance of a mattress as flat as a pancake, and perhaps as greasy, which he had succeeded in procuring from the landlord of the inn.

While his servants were installing themselves and getting things to rights, the gentleman had betaken himself to the general parlour. Every traveller knows what these common parlours are like: the same walls painted in oil colours, darkened above by pipe-smoke, and covered below with the marks made by the backs of travellers and tradespeople, for merchants come here on market-days in sixes and sevens to drink their customary

* *Sbiten* is a beverage made of water, honey, and laurel-leaves, or salvia, and often drunk in Russia instead of tea, especially by the poorer classes.

† A sheepskin coat.

two glasses of tea. There was the usual smoke-begrimed ceiling, the same smoky chandelier with its multitude of pendant glass drops, which leaped and jingled every time the waiter ran across the worn oil-cloth, boldly flourishing his tray, upon which stood well-nigh as many tea-cups as there are birds on the seashore. Moreover, there were the usual oil paintings on the walls; in a word, everything was exactly the same as what is found everywhere, the only difference being that one of the pictures represented a nymph with such an enormous bosom as the reader has, in all probability, never beheld. Such freaks of nature, however, occur in various historical pictures, whence, at what time, and by whom brought to us in Russia, is unknown, but sometimes by our grandees and art-lovers, who have purchased them in Italy on the advice of the couriers who conducted them.

The gentleman threw off his cap and unwound from his neck a rainbow-hued woollen scarf, such as a wife prepares for her husband with her own hands, giving it to him with suitable instructions how to wrap himself up. Who makes these things for bachelors no one can tell. God knows! For myself, although a celibatarian, I have never worn such a scarf. Having unwound his scarf, the gentleman ordered dinner. While they served him with the various dishes usual at an inn, such as cabbage soup with tarts, purposely kept for several weeks, calf's brains with peas, small sausages with cabbage, roast capon, pickled cucumbers, and the eternal sweet puff-paste tarts which are always ready at one's service—while he was being served with all these either warm or cold, he made the waiter tell him all sorts of nonsense about who had formerly kept the inn, and who kept it now, whether there was much profit derived from it, and whether the landlord was a great rogue, to which the waiter answered according to custom, "Oh, a very great one, sir! a perfect rascal!" For there are a great many people nowadays in civilized Russia who cannot eat a mouthful in a tavern without talking to the servant, and even sometimes jesting in an amusing way at his expense.

However, the new arrival's questions were not all foolish ones. He inquired with great minuteness who was the governor of the town, who was president of the court, who was procurator; in short, he did not omit a single individual of importance; but he interrogated him with still greater minuteness concerning all the prominent landowners: how many souls (serfs) such a one had, how far he lived from town, what his character was, even, and how often he came into the city; he inquired, too, attentively concerning the condition of that region—were there no diseases in the government, epidemic complaints, deadly fevers, small-pox, and the like; and he put other questions of the same sort, and in a manner which gave

proof of something more than mere curiosity. There was something respectable about the gentleman's manners, and he blew his nose very loudly. It is impossible to say how he managed it, but his nose resounded like a trumpet. This won him much respect from the servant, who every time he heard the noise shook back his hair, straightened himself up into a more respectful attitude, and then bending down his head from his full height, inquired, "Is there anything you would like, sir?" After dinner the gentleman sipped a small cup of coffee, and seated himself on the sofa, placing behind his back the cushion, which in Russian taverns is stuffed with something very much resembling bricks and pebbles instead of wool.

Then he began to yawn, and ordered them to show him to his room, where he lay down and slept for two hours. Having rested himself, he wrote upon a scrap of paper, at the request of the servant, his title, Christian name, and surname, so that they might be communicated to the police, according to regulation. The waiter, as he descended the stairs, spelt out on the bit of paper the following words: "Collegiate Councillor Pavel Ivanovitch Tchitchikoff, landed proprietor, travelling on his own private business."

While the waiter was still engaged in deciphering this, letter by letter, Pavel Ivanovitch Tchitchikoff set out to take a look at the town, which seemed to be satisfactory, for he found that it was not a whit behind other provincial cities; the yellow paint on the stone buildings struck the eye forcibly, and the wooden structures were of a modest dark grey. The houses were one and two storeys high, or a storey and a half, including the inevitable "entresol," which is so very beautiful, in the opinion of provincial architects. In some places, these houses seemed lost in the middle of a street which was as broad as a field, with interminable wooden fences; in other places they were collected in a cluster; and here more activity on the part of the people and more life was perceptible. Signboards met the eye, with representations of cracknels and boots, nearly obliterated by the rain; and here and there was a painting of a pair of blue breeches, and the name of some Warsaw tailor. Here, moreover, was a shop full of caps—leather caps with peaks, and military ones; over there a billiard-table was depicted with two players wearing swallow-tailed coats, such as visitors to the theatres put on when they intend to go behind the scenes after the last act. The players were painted with their cues in position, with their arms somewhat drawn back, and with crooked legs which had just executed a flourish in the air. Beneath all this was written, "Here's the Establishment." Here and there tables stood in the street, bearing nuts, and soap, and gingerbread which looked like soap; in other places there were eating-

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