Dead Souls

nikolai gogol

Translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerney

Revised, edited, and with an introduction by Susanne Fusso

"An extraordinarily fine piece of work."--Vladimir Nabokov

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Editorial Note

In revising Bernard Guilbert Guerney's translation of *Dead Souls,* I have relied on the following works:

Dal', Vladimir. *Tolkovyi slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka.* 4 vols. 4th ed. Edited by J. A. Baudouin de Courtenay. St. Petersburg: M. O. Vol'f, 1904.

Gogol', N. V. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii.* 14 vols. Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1937–52.

Gogol', N. V. *Sobranie sochinenii.* 7 vols. Edited by S. I. Mashinskii and M. B. Khrapchenko. Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1978.

Kirsanova, R. M. *Rozovaia ksandreika i dradedamovyi platok: Kostium—veshch' i obraz v russkoi literature XIX veka.* Moscow: Kniga, 1989.

Molokhovets, Elena. *Podarok molodym khoziaikam, ili Sredstvo k umen'sheniiu raskhodov v domashnem khoziaistve.* Reprint. Moscow: Priboi, 1992.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Nikolai Gogol.* New York: New Directions, 1944.

Ozhegov, S. I. *Slovar' russkogo iazyka.* 10th ed. Edited by N. Iu. Shvedova. Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1973.

I have used both Guerney's original 1942 translation and his revised fourth edition of 1948. All names have been brought into conformity with the Library of Congress system of transliteration; soft signs are used in bibliographic citations, but not in the text. To avoid confusion, the name *Semen* has been transliterated as *Semion.* Footnotes signed "B.G.G." are Guerney's; all others are mine. Ellipses are Gogol's unless they appear in brackets.

Introduction

In order to read Nikolai Gogol's 1842 masterpiece, one must first get past the title page. From the very beginning, the title *Dead Souls* has been both a stumbling block and a touchstone: an enigma whose solution reveals more about the solver than about itself. There is of course a clear, seemingly mundane referent for the phrase "dead souls": before 1861, Russia was a serf-owning society; these serfs were sometimes referred to as "souls," especially when being counted for tax purposes. Serfs who died after one of the periodic censuses were, until the next census, still considered taxable property despite their nonexistence. The hero of *Dead Souls,* Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, makes a series of visits to the landowners in an unnamed provincial town, offering to buy these "dead souls" at a cut-rate price, thus relieving their owners of a tax burden and obtaining for himself property that can later be mortgaged fraudulently.

The mundane explanation, however, has never exorcised the title *Dead Souls* of its disturbing, haunting mystery. One of the earliest readers of the novel, the chairman of the Moscow Censorship Committee, reacted violently to the mocking challenge of Gogol's title, as Gogol himself recounted in a letter of January 1842:

As soon as the chairman heard the title *Dead Souls,* he began to shout in the voice of an ancient Roman: "No, this I will never permit: the soul is immortal; there cannot be such a thing as a dead soul, the author is taking a stand against immortality!"[1]

When it was explained to him that the title referred not to the immortal soul but to the bureaucratically designated chattel, the censor was not mollified in the least; he expressed the view that the very mention of the word *soul* in this context would constitute a statement against the system of serfdom. The novel eventually appeared under the softened title *The Adventures of Chichikov; or, Dead Souls.* (Gogol got his revenge by designing a title page on which the unwanted phrase "The Adventures of Chichikov" appeared in tiny print.)

Gogol ridiculed the censor's reaction to his title, but he must have secretly known that the censor had a point, not only about the title but also about the work that it so beautifully fits. In passages like the following,

1. N. V. Gogol', *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii,* 14 vols. (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1937–52), 12:28. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Gogol does seem to call into question the worth and even the existence of the human soul:

Sobakevich kept on listening . . . and if but something, in the least resembling an expression, would appear on his face! It seemed as if there were no soul at all in his body, or, if it were there, it was not at all in the place it should be, but, as with Koshchei the Deathless in the fairy tale, somewhere beyond many hills and dales and sheathed in such a thick shell that everything which stirred at the bottom of his soul created absolutely no commotion on the surface. (p. 96)

Only [when he died] did they find out, with regret, that the Public Prosecutor had had a soul, although out of modesty he had never flaunted it. (p. 209)

On the mundane level, Chichikov's day-to-day activity, his obsessive bargaining for "dead souls," is a constant reminder of the hideous moral ulcer that a society founded on slavery can never hide or heal.

Readers of *Dead Souls* in the decades following its appearance in 1842 tended to choose one of these two aspects of the work to focus on: its portrait of the human soul, especially in the context of Russian Orthodox theology, or its savagely satirical excoriation of the evils of nineteenth-century Russian society. Appropriately enough, the reading of *Dead Souls* as social commentary predominated in the years immediately following the novel's publication. The most influential nineteenth-century reader of Gogol, the radical critic Vissarion Belinskii, saw *Dead Souls* as a work of unflinching realism and social criticism "that mercilessly rips the coverings from reality."[2] A like-minded reader, Alexander Herzen, called the work "a practical course for studying Russia," a "series of pathological sketches taken from nature."[3] For these critics, Gogol's examination of the underside of Russian life—what the narrator of *Dead Souls* calls "all that fearsome, overwhelming slimy morass of minutiae that have bogged down our life"—was the act of a civic-minded patriot as much as of an artist.

The reading of *Dead Souls* as a ruthlessly realistic depiction of Russian society held sway through much of the nineteenth century (and returned in the mid-twentieth century to become the orthodox Soviet

2. V. G. Belinskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii,* 13 vols. (Moscow: Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1953–59), 6:217.

3. A. I. Gertsen [Alexander Herzen], "Iz dnevnikov, memuarov i statei," in *Gogol' v vospominaniiakh sovremennikov,* ed. N. L. Brodskii, et al. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1952), 394.

reading, a way of making Gogol acceptable to the Marxist-Leninist canon). But at the beginning of the twentieth century, a new generation of readers created a new Gogol for itself; they chose to read *Dead Souls* not as realistic social protest but as a brilliant phantasmagoria. This reading stresses the incorporeality of the novel's "souls"—Gogol's creation of a world whose existence is purely linguistic, purely artistic. As realism lost its preeminence in Russian literature, Gogol's qualifications to be a realistic writer were called into question: he had spent very little time in the milieu described in *Dead Souls,* and the novel was written mostly in Rome, where Russia appeared to him as part dream, part memory, part mirage.

In the seminal essays of V. V. Rozanov, Gogol emerged not as a civic-minded writer seeking to improve Russia but as a creator of monsters that corrupted the souls of Russian readers, distorting the spiritual face of Russian society. According to Rozanov, Gogol's power lies not in realism but in an almost diabolical capacity to create a parallel world of non-humans who, despite their unreality, nevertheless rob his readers of their ability to respect their fellow men:

[All the characters in *Dead Souls*] came into being through some special means having nothing to do with natural birth: they are made out of a kind of waxen mass of words, and only Gogol knew the secret of this artistic fabrication. . . . [Everyone understood] his eternal corpses and along with them the truth that man can only despise man. . . . Gogol's unforgettable figures divided people from one another with an insurmountable barrier, forcing them not to strive toward one another but to run from one another.[4]

Not all the writers of the period shared this negative reaction; some regarded Gogol as a figure of liberation from the psychologically realistic mode of narration that had dominated Russian literature from 1850 on. In retrospect, writers of a nonrealistic bent saw *Dead Souls* as a verbal performance, a delirious, nearly surrealistic fantasy that anticipated twentieth-century experimental prose. The symbolist writer Andrei Belyi treasured Gogol's linguistic experiments—sound metaphors, synesthesia, poetic prose—all the features that, according to Belyi, drew the modernists to Verlaine, Rimbaud, and the prose of Nietzsche. And in the first decades of the twentieth century, a school of critics—later known as the formalists—who wished to make "literariness," rather than history, psychology, sociology, or biography, the center of literary study, seized upon

4. V. V. Rozanov, *O Gogole* (1906; reprint, Letchworth: Prideaux Press, 1970), 13–14, 15.

Gogol as one of their most important test cases. These critics pointed out that, if judged by the criteria of well-crafted plot, psychologically nuanced characters, and verisimilitude, a novel like *Dead Souls* fall short. It is only by attending to the work's rich verbal texture and power of poetic invention that one can truly "read" Gogol's epic.

Belyi perhaps came closest to the mark when he wrote that "Gogol, being a laboratory for linguistic experiments, cannot be closed by a canon."[5] Certainly *Dead Souls* embodies what the critic Mikhail Bakhtin called "potential," the capacity for a work of art to change its meaning over time, in fruitful dialogue with its readers. And this is where the phrase "dead souls" acquires a new, radiant significance: the empty space provided by the dead, unknowable peasants inspires creative imaginative play even in the soulless Chichikov, who in Chapter 7, when imagining the lives and deaths of the serfs he has bought, becomes a poet and a teller of tales, if only for a moment. Gogol's reader is invited to join him—and many do.

To return to the problematic title: When Bernard Guilbert Guerney's brilliant translation of *Dead Souls* was first published in 1942, the book club that offered it to its readers repeated the action of the Russian censors exactly 100 years before, changing the title to *Chichikov's Journeys; or, Home Life in Old Russia.* They were not concerned with upholding the immortality of the soul or defending the institution of serfdom, but with preventing their readers from forming a creepy, forbidding impression of the work. In Vladimir Nabokov's immortal phrase, they feared "suggesting gloomy ideas to rosy-cheeked comic strip fans."[6] Here again the censors have a point. Neither the title nor most critics' readings give an accurate idea of the work's magnificent humor, the bizarre and original wit that shines through virtually every phrase. (In insisting on the work's high seriousness, Belinskii went so far as to claim that there was not a single funny word in the book, an assertion that should have immediately disqualified him from reviewing any more books.) It is here that Guerney's translation is superior to all other English versions: it comes closest to reproducing the ineffable, immortal *funniness* of the book. We are impoverished if we do not see that *Dead Souls* is not just about serfdom or the emptiness of some human souls but also about the power of language, memory, art, and laughter to transform the bleakest and most monstrous of worlds.

5. Andrei Belyi, *Masterstvo Gogolia* (Moscow: Ogiz, 1934), 291.

6. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1944), 62. The subtitle *Home Life in Old Russia* was taken from an 1854 English translation of *Dead Souls.*

VLADIMIR NABOKOV's favorite pastime was ridiculing English translations of Russian literature, so when he called Guerney's translation of *Dead Souls* an "extraordinarily fine piece of work" in his 1944 book on Gogol, the reading public took notice.[7] Since then, Guerney's version has been in and out of print but has always kept a fiercely loyal band of readers, especially among those who can read Gogol in the original and thus can appreciate the magnitude of Guerney's achievement. Guerney himself believed that even the best translation needs to be revised after about half a century, so now, 53 years after the original publication of his classic translation of *Dead Souls,* he might well agree that it is time for it to be published in this new, edited version.

Bernard Guilbert Guerney (1894–1979) was born Bernard Abramovich Bronshtein in the Russian town of Nikolaev, north of Odessa; he moved with his family to New York City in 1905.[8] (Guerney may have been related to Leon Trotsky, born Lev Davidovich Bronshtein.) When he embarked on his remarkable career as a fiction writer and translator of Russian literature, he legally changed his name to Bernard Guilbert Guerney.[9] Guerney was not an academic but a self-taught man of letters and the owner of the Blue Faun Bookshop in New York City from 1922 into the 1970s. His vast body of translations extends from the twelfth-century *Lay of the Host of Igor,* through the nineteenth-century classics of Gogol, Turgenev, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, the symbolists Blok and Merezhkovskii, and into the twentieth century with Bunin, Babel, Pasternak, and many others. His great masterpiece, however, remains his loving rendition of *Dead Souls.* In this translation Guerney more than lives up to his own characteristically pithy description of the translator's art:

A translator ought to be able to write in his own right; an ability to parody (or mimic . . .) is, outside of enormous vocabularies in at least two languages, the prime requisite for the high art. In other words, a translator must know what his author is up to, what his vocabulary is, what his mannerisms are, and carry over his spirit into another tongue. His spirit, for the letter killeth. (The reader will get the letter too, never fear.) A sort

7. Ibid., 61.

8. Charlotte de Lissovoy, "Bernard Guilbert Guerney (1894–1979): A Description of the Bernard Guilbert Guerney Collection of Papers, Manuscripts, Correspondence and Memorabilia Which Resides in the Slavic Archives of the Fred Lewis Pattee Library, The Pennsylvania State University" (M.A. thesis, Pennsylvania State University, 1980), 13.

9. The name was based on *Gilbert Gurney,* the title character in an 1834 novel by Theodore Hook (De Lissovoy, "Bernard Guilbert Guerney," 3, 4).

of ouija board affair. One lends one's knowledge of English, say, to the original author.[10]

Guerney's *Dead Souls* comes closest to giving the English reader a feeling for the spirit of Gogol—the variegated lexicon, alternately folksy and high-flown; the baroque, sometimes clumsy syntax; and the narrator's voice—the representation of an oral performance that ranges from the persona of a hilariously deadpan standup comedian to that of a visionary, prophetlike orator.

IN THIS EDITION I have preserved as much of Guerney's original translation as possible. Very few of the changes introduced here are corrections of outright errors; no matter how obscure Gogol's vocabulary, Guerney's translation is remarkably accurate and precise. Most of my revisions fall into one of the following categories: (1) updating outmoded slang; (2) removing names of mythological figures and fictional characters when they do not appear in Gogol's original; (3) restoring a more literal translation when it is important to Gogol's artistic scheme. In the case of technical and dialect terms for which Gogol recorded definitions in his notebooks, I have given preference to Gogol's definitions even when they differ from those given in standard dictionaries. The most important change I have made is in bringing the text into conformity with the standard version published in modern Russian editions of *Dead Souls*—in other words, the text as published in 1842, with typographical errors corrected and some censored passages restored. Guerney adopted a cavalier attitude toward Gogol's published text, inserting passages from earlier drafts of *Dead Souls* that caught his eye. In the most extreme case, he removed the end of Chapter 9 and created a new Chapter 10 out of draft sketches found among Gogol's papers after his death. Thus Guerney's *Dead Souls* has twelve chapters where Gogol had eleven. (See Appendix B for Guerney's Chapter 10 and his version of the end of the "Tale of Captain Kopeikin.")

Perhaps the most important editorial decision I have made is to omit what is known as Part Two of *Dead Souls*. Gogol spent the last ten years of his life trying to write a continuation to *Dead Souls,* which he sometimes envisioned as a Purgatory and Paradise to accompany the Inferno of the 1842 novel. But none of what he produced was published during his lifetime, and he died thinking that he had burned all the existing

10. Letter to Professor William Lamont, 26 August 1952, quoted in de Lissovoy, "Bernard Guilbert Guerney," 10.

drafts. He was mistaken; many pages, written at various times, did survive. Some translations of *Dead Souls,* Guerney's among them, include a Part Two that represents an editor's cobbling together of the surviving fragments. These pages offer much that is of interest, especially to scholars, but they do not constitute a finished work. Publishing the patchwork known as Part Two side by side with the polished masterwork that Gogol himself saw through publication in 1842, as if they were of equal status, is a disservice to both Gogol and the reader. (Excerpts from Guerney's translation of Part Two are included in Appendix A.)

Gogol uses a number of expressions in which miserliness and dishonesty in business dealings are associated with Jews. Guerney consistently replaced these expressions with neutral ones, and I have preserved his choices.

Appendix C includes excerpts from letters written by Gogol that pertain to the writing and publication of *Dead Souls,* as well as an excerpt from P. V. Annenkov's memoirs that describes Gogol's dictation of parts of the novel to him.

Contents

Chapter One

A rather handsome, light traveling carriage on springs rolled into the gates of an inn in a certain provincial capital, the kind of carriage that is favored by bachelors: retired lieutenant colonels, second captains, landowners possessing a hundred souls or so of serfs—in a word, all those who are called the fair-to-middlin' sort. The gentleman seated in this carriage was not handsome, but he wasn't bad to look at either; he was neither too stout nor too thin; you couldn't say he was old, but still he wasn't what you might call any too young either. His arrival created no stir whatever in the town of N—— and was not coupled with any remarkable event; all the comments it called forth came from two Russian muzhiks standing in the doorway of a tavern across the way from the inn, comments which, however, had more to do with the carriage itself than with the man sitting in it.

"Look at that, will you?" said one muzhik to the other. "What a wheel! What do you think, would that wheel make it to Moscow, if need be, or wouldn't it?"

"It would," answered the other.

"But it wouldn't make it to Kazan, I'm thinking—or would it?"

"Not to Kazan, it wouldn't," the other answered.

And with that the discussion ended.

Also, as the carriage drove up to the inn, it encountered a young man in white dimity trousers, quite narrow and short, and a swallow-tailed coat that made a brave attempt at being in the mode, revealing a dickey fastened with a stickpin of Tula bronze in the shape of a pistol. The young man turned back, looked the vehicle over while clutching at his cap, which had been almost carried away by the wind, and then went on his way again.

As the carriage drove into the yard, its occupant was met by one of the tavern help (or servers, as they are called), so very lively and spry that it was downright impossible to make out what sort of face he had. He dashed out nimbly, napkin in hand—a long figure himself and wearing a long twill frock coat with a back so high that it reached almost to the very nape of his neck—tossed back his hair, and nimbly led the gentleman up and along the entire wooden outside gallery to show him the chamber that God had provided for him. The chamber was of a familiar kind, inasmuch as the inn was also of a familiar kind—that is, *precisely*

like all inns in provincial capitals, where for two rubles a day the transients receive a restful bedroom with cockroaches peeking out of every corner like so many black plums and with a door, always barricaded with a bureau, leading to an adjoining apartment, which apartment is always taken by a fellow guest who is taciturn and placid yet exceedingly inquisitive, interested in knowing all the details about the latest transient. The outward facade of the inn corresponded to its interior: it was a very long building, of two stories; the lower one had not been stuccoed and exposed its small dark-red bricks, which, while they had grown still darker from the cruel changes of weather, were nevertheless rather grimy in their own right; the upper was painted that everlasting yellow; below were shops stocked with horse collars, ropes, and hard, brittle cookies. The corner shop—or, to put it better, its windows—was occupied by a vendor of hot mead, with a samovar of ruddy copper and a face as ruddy as his samovar, so that from afar one might think that there were two samovars standing in the window, if only one of them were not sporting a beard as black as pitch.

While the transient gentleman was inspecting his room, his belongings were carried in; first and foremost, a small trunk of white leather, somewhat scuffed, indicating that this was not the first time it had been out on the road. The small trunk was brought in by Selifan, the coachman, a squat little fellow in a short sheepskin coat, and by Petrushka, a flunky, a lad of about thirty in a loose, much-worn frock coat, evidently a hand-me-down from his master's shoulders, a lad somewhat austere at first glance, whose lips and nose were on a very large scale. After the trunk, they carried in a small chest of mahogany with marquetry of Karelian birch, a pair of shoe trees, and a roasted chicken wrapped up in blue paper. When all these had been carried in, Selifan the coachman set out for the stable to see to the horses, while Petrushka the flunky began settling himself in the tiny anteroom, a very dark cubbyhole, whither he had already brought his overcoat and, together with it, a certain odor all his own, which had been also imparted to the bag he brought in next, containing sundry flunkyish effects. In this cubbyhole he set up against the wall a small and narrow cot with only three legs, putting on top of it a skimpy simulacrum of a pallet, beat-up and as flat as a pancake (and, perhaps, just as greasy), which he had succeeded in wangling out of the owner of the inn.

While the servants were arranging things and fussing about, the gentleman went down into the common room. What these common rooms are like every transient knows well: there are always the same oil-painted walls, darkened at the top from chimney smoke and glossy below from

the backs of sundry transients, but still more from those of the indigenous traders, inasmuch as the merchants came here on market days in their sixes and their sevens to imbibe their well-known glass or two of tea; the same sooty ceiling; the same chandelier, dingy from smoke, with a multitude of pendent bits of glass that leapt and bounded and tinkled every time a waiter dashed across the worn-out oilcloth mattings, deftly swinging a tray on which was perched as great a host of teacups as you might find of birds on a shore; the same pictures, covering an entire wall and done in oils—in a word, everything the same as you would find everywhere; the sole difference was that one picture depicted a nymph with such enormous breasts as the reader, in all probability, has never beheld. Such a sport of nature, however, occurs in various historical pictures, although no one knows at what period, or whence, or by whom they were imported among us in Russia—now and then, perhaps, by our grandees, those lovers of the arts, who must have bought them up in Italy upon the advice of the couriers who had driven them about.

The gentleman threw off his cap and unwound from around his neck a woolen, tricornered neckerchief of all the hues of the rainbow, of the sort that is folded for married men by their wives, with their own fair hands, to the accompaniment of prudent counsels on how they ought to muffle themselves; as for who performs that office for bachelors I cannot say with any certainty—God knows what shifts they are put to!—I never having worn such neckerchiefs. Having unwound it, the gentleman ordered his dinner. While the various dishes usual to taverns were being served up to him, such as cabbage soup with small dumplings of puff paste (the latter purposely preserved for weeks at a stretch for the particular benefit of transients), brains with peas, sausages and sauerkraut, a roast fowl, dill pickles, and the eternal sweet pastry of layered dough, which is always at your service—while all this was being served to him, either warmed over or simply cold, he made the tavern waiter retail to him all sorts of small talk concerning such things as who had kept this tavern before and who was keeping it now, and whether it yielded much income, and whether the host were a great scoundrel, to which the waiter made the usual answer:

"Oh, he's a great hand at a swindle, sir!"

Even as in enlightened Europe, so in enlightened Russia as well there are at present many worthy persons who can never dine in a tavern without having a chat with the waiter and at times even having a bit of fun at his expense. However, not all the questions this transient gentleman put were idle ones; he inquired, with the utmost particularity, about the officials in the town: who was the Governor of the province, who was the

Chairman of the Administrative Offices, who was the Public Prosecutor—in short, he did not pass over a single bureaucrat of any importance; but with still greater particularity, if not downright concern, did he make inquiries about all the prominent landowners: how many souls of serfs each one owned, how far out of town he lived, even what his character was like and how often he drove into town; he inquired closely about the state of the region—whether certain diseases weren't prevalent in that province, such as epidemic fevers, deadly agues of one sort or another, smallpox and things of that sort, and all this he asked in such a way and with such particularity as to indicate that his interest was more than mere curiosity.

There was something substantial about the ways of this gentleman, and whenever he blew his nose he did so exceedingly loudly. No one knows just how he did it, but his nose resounded like a trumpet. This point of merit, apparently a perfectly innocent one, won, nevertheless, a great deal of respect for him on the part of the tavern server, so that every time he heard this sound he would toss back his hair, straighten up with greater deference, and, inclining his head from the heights, ask was the gentleman wishin' somethin'.

After dinner the gentleman partook of a cup of coffee and seated himself on a divan, resting his back on one of the cushions (which in Russian taverns are stuffed with broken bricks and cobblestones instead of resilient wool). At this point he took to yawning and asked to be shown up to his room, where, lying down for just forty winks, he fell asleep for a couple of hours. Having had his siesta, he wrote on a slip of paper, at the request of the tavern waiter, his rank as well as his first name and his last, for reference to the proper quarters: the police department. As the server went down the stairs, he spelled out the following on the slip of paper:

"Collegiate Councilor Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, landowner, traveling on private affairs."[1]

While the server was still spelling out the note, Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov himself set out to look the town over and, it would seem, was quite satisfied with it, since he found that it in no way yielded to other provincial towns—the paint on the stone houses was the usual yellow and just as hard on the eyes, while the paint on the wooden houses showed

1. Chichikov is a Collegiate Councilor, the sixth of fourteen civil ranks in the Russian table of ranks established by Peter the Great in 1722 (the first rank is the highest). Thus in addition to being neither too fat nor too thin, Chichikov is neither too high nor too low in rank. Other ranks mentioned in the novel include State Councilor (rank 5, i.e., higher than Chichikov) and Collegiate Secretary (rank 10, i.e., lower than Chichikov).