

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Gogol

Janko Lavrin



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This book, first published in 1926, aimed to introduce English readers to a great and complex foreign writer in as simple terms as possible. As this was the first extensive study of Gogol in English, the author chiefly considered the general characteristics of the man and his work. This book will be of interest to students of literature.

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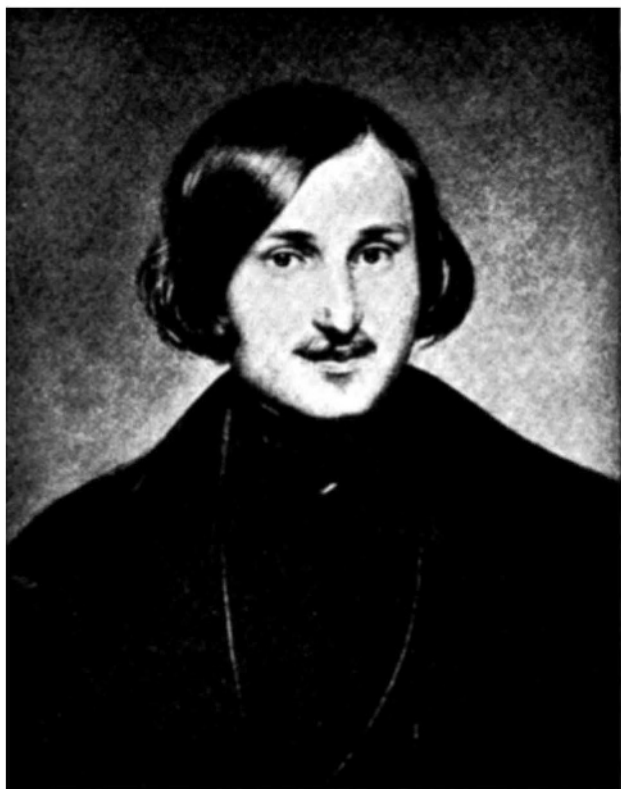
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From a painting by Moller

GOGOL

GOGOL

By
Janko Lavrin

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NOTE

The object of the present book is to introduce to English readers a great and complex foreign writer in as simple terms as possible. As this is the first extensive study of Gogol in English, I had to consider chiefly the general characteristics of the man and his work, avoiding those issues which are of more special interest.

Quotations referred to in this book are taken from the following English versions :

The Overcoat and Other Stories, and *The Dead Souls*, translated by Mrs. Constance Garnett (*Chatto & Windus*) ; *Taras Bulba and Other Stories* (Everyman's Library) ; *Stories from Russian Authors*, translated by R. S. Townsend (Everyman's Library) ; *The Inspector-General*, translated by A. Sykes (W. Scott). Extracts from the letters, as well as from several stories, have been translated by myself.

November, 1925.

J.L.

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G O G O L

Chapter One

GOGOL AND RUSSIAN LITERATURE

I

THE hero of an old Russian saga, Ilya of Murom, was lame until he was thirty. But by a miracle he suddenly recovered and showed so much strength that he soon defeated the mightiest *bogatyrs* (heroes) and, in spite of his humble origin, attained to the highest honours at the court of Prince Vladimir.

This saga is in a way symbolic of Russian literature. Owing chiefly to Tartar invasion and its consequences, the literary genius of Russia remained for centuries inactive and as it were paralyzed. There flourished an astoundingly rich folk-lore among the peasants, yet the development of a literature in the European sense was stopped, in spite of its splendid beginnings in the twelfth century which produced such works as

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the Chronicle of the monk Nestor* and the *Song of Igor's Raid*.** From the Tartar invasion to the end of the seventeenth century Russia was practically severed from the rest of Europe. Having no direct contact either with its politics or its culture, she seemed to be lying under a thick crust of eternal snow which would not melt and give way to a new spring. And the Russian literature of those ages of suffering, chaos and stagnation is almost as barren as the Russian steppes. Its most notable production was written in the second half of the seventeenth century and bears the title, *The Life of the Archpriest Avvakum Written by Himself*. Apart from being a unique document of its times, this autobiography reveals by its style and verve a powerful though narrow-minded personality.*** While France, Italy and England could already boast of a great literary past, the literature of Russia was negligible. Moreover, the very language used by it was a rather artificial mixture of the spoken Russian and of that dead old-Slavonic tongue which plays the same part in the Russian Church as Latin does among the Roman Catholics.

* He was born in 1056 and died c. 1117.

** *Slovo o polku Igorevie*, c. 1186.

*** The Archpriest Avvakum, a fanatic "old-believer" and opponent of Patriarch Nikon's innovations, was burnt "for his great offence of the Tsar's house" in 1681.

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It was the epoch of reforms initiated by Peter the Great that made conscious efforts to adopt the living speech alone as the proper medium for literature. The first important figure and the father of modern literature is Lomonossov (1712-1765), a remarkable and many-sided personality, active as a poet, savant and publicist. Though far from being a poetical genius, he had an instinctive feeling for all the beauties and the potential strength of his native tongue which he commanded with greater ability and more understanding than any of his contemporaries or immediate followers.

"Charles V," he wrote "used to say that with God one ought to converse in Spanish, with a friend in French, with enemies in German, and with women in Italian. Had he known Russian he certainly would have added that in this language one could suitably talk to all of them. For he would find in it the majesty of Spanish, the liveliness of French, the strength of German, the tenderness of Italian, and together with all this the wealth, as well as the exact precision, of Latin and Greek."

Those who know Russian will hardly deny that Lomonossov's judgment was right. Yet it took more than a hundred years of toil before this powerful language was entirely freed from the bondage of its dead old-Slavonic parent, and

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produced a literature worthy of it. In the third decade of the nineteenth century the Russian literary tongue could already compete with most of her grown-up European sisters, and only a few years later the French author, Prosper Mérimée, who was more or less acquainted with Russian and translated from Pushkin and Gogol, wrote : " It is the richest of all European languages. It is endowed with a marvellous gift for clearness and concision. One single word is enough to connect several ideas which in another tongue would require whole phrases. It is only the French language, based as it is on Greek and Latin and strengthened by all its northern and southern dialects—in short, the language of Rabelais—that can give us a notion of its subtlety and force."

II

The period from Peter the Great to the end of Catherine II, that is, the whole of the eighteenth century, was chiefly a period of literary experiments, clumsy imitations, adaptations, and of all mortal sins that can be committed upon a living tongue. The wigged and powdered versifiers, graduates of the French pseudo-Classic school, swore by Boileau and wrote according to his rules—by the sweat of their brows. The Russian

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language often looked in their industrious hands like a sturdy, red-cheeked peasant girl who had been rouged, arrayed in second-hand stage robes, and ordered to move with pompous dignity. The young literary market of Russia was flooded with hollow-sounding odes, epics (various "Petriades" and "Rossiades"), and copies of French tragedies, most of which are now entirely forgotten. Some poems by the really gifted Derzhavin (1743-1816) and Denis Fon-Vizin's (1744-92) two comedies, *The Brigadier* and *Th: Minor*—this is all that has remained and probably will remain from that epoch which was heroic by its toil rather than by its creation.

This preparatory period was soon enlarged by new Western influences and fashions. Thus towards the end of the eighteenth century, Karamzin (1766-1826), the first significant prose-writer, introduced—through his *Poor Lizzie* (1792) and his *Letters of a Travelling Russian* (1791-92)—the so-called sentimental trend, under the strong influence of Rousseau and partly also that of Sterne. Yet this faithful pupil of Rousseau wrote, later on, a voluminous *History of the Russian Empire* in an entirely conservative vein: a kind of glorification of autocracy. He is important at present only in so far as he represents the transition between the artificial period of Catherine II and that of Alexander I which

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soon produced great and unexpected poetic achievements. It was the prose-writer Karamzin who gave the final sanction to the living Russian speech freed from church-Slavonic archaisms, and in this effort he was followed by the younger generation, the most notable representatives of which are Krylov (1768-1844) and Zhukovsky (1783-1852).

Krylov is the Russian La Fontaine. Although he has not the polished elegance of his French master, he filled the pseudo-Classic form of the fable with Russian style and spirit. He is impressive by his straightforward naturalness, his subdued humour and satire, and particularly by the laconic virility of his language, which he took direct from the treasury of the folk-speech, preserving all its flavour, all its plastic power. Together with Griboyedov (1795-1829), the author of the great comedy— *Gore ot Uma* (*The Misfortune of Being Clever*), Krylov is the most epigrammatic Russian poet. Zhukovsky, on the other hand, summed up all the technical and musical attainments of his predecessors with the skill of a supreme virtuoso. In his hands the Russian literary language became a symphonic orchestra. As its first able conductor, Zhukovsky showed its strength not so much in original works, as in his excellent translations from English and German poets, and later of Homer's

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Odyssey. His adaptability was so surprising that some of his translations read even better than the originals. And so Maurice Baring is hardly wrong in calling him "the first and the best translator in European literature."

Zhukovsky did all he could to undermine the lingering remainders of pseudo-Classic taste and tradition. Anxious to widen the range of Russian poetry proper, he tried to find new sources of inspiration in the poetry of Germany and England. Sentimental and romantic, steeped in Western poetry as well as in the Russian folklore, he is one of the most important pioneers and representatives of that period which culminated in the genius of Alexander Pushkin.

III

The advent of Pushkin (1799-1837) coincided with the great uplift of Russia which took place after the French invasion of 1812. The war with Napoleon stirred up the whole country to its very marrow, whilst the final victory over him aroused national self-consciousness and all kinds of latent energies. The subsequent stay of the Russian army in Paris revealed, moreover, to many young officers those liberal principles which had formed the theoretic background of the French

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Revolution. This dangerous contraband of ideas was smuggled into Russia where it continued to spread after the conclusion of the so-called Holy Alliance.

The Emperor Alexander I was not great enough to perceive the real needs of his time. He began as a well-meaning liberal monarch and finished as an eastern despot. Yet all his reactionary measures could not weed out the new spirit which found its shelter in various secret societies and led to the abortive rising of December 14th, 1825. After a complete rout of those dreamers who claimed for Russia a constitution, abolition of serfdom, and some of them even a republic, the iron rule of Nicholas I plunged the country into a long political stagnation. The very word "freedom" was banished from the Russian vocabulary. The watchful bureaucracy raised once more a Chinese wall between Russia and Europe, a wall whose function was to bar out the slightest breeze of political fresh air from abroad. The years between 1825 and 1855 were those of a stifling nightmare, of corruption, of banishments, of persecutions, and executions. The young poet Ryleyev was executed, Dostoevsky was sent to Siberia for penal servitude, the Ukrainian poet Shevchenko was doomed to pine away as a simple soldier on the Asiatic frontier, while such a talented publicist as

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Alexander Herten was compelled to seek refuge abroad. Pushkin himself had to suffer both from the régime and the general atmosphere ; so had Lermontov, and the critic Bielinsky.

Fortunately, the spirit once awakened could not be exorcised even by the strictest orders and measures from above. Banished from the public life of Russia, it showed all the greater vitality in literature. It was under the reign of Nicholas I, that the Golden Age of Russian poetry (1820--1830) bore its finest fruits, and that the first great harvest of Russian prose took place. Literature was in fact the only domain left to the cultured Russian as a means of self-expression, and so he could not help taking it up seriously—not only as a pleasure, but also as a disguised weapon against the “dark forces” which were stifling his own country. Pushkin matured and wrote his best works after 1825. And apart from Pushkin and his circle we can point out—to mention only the best names—such a remarkable individuality as Lermontov (1814-41), the Russian Burns—Koltsov (1808-42), and the first great prose-writer, Nikolai Gogol (1809-52). Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Goncharov, Tolstoy—they all started their literary career under Nicholas I. However, these representatives of the “Golden Age” of Russian prose, which reached its highest pitch under the liberal rule of

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Alexander II, were already descendants and not actual founders : they developed, enlarged, modified and brought to perfection those elements which had been bequeathed to them first of all by Pushkin, by Lermontov's *Hero of our Times* (the first introspective novel in Russia), and by the works of Gogol.

Lermontov, the most romantic and self-centred of all Russian poets, died before he had time to mature and give all that one could expect from his rich and extravagant genius. And so the stress must be laid on Pushkin and Gogol as the two main pillars at the entrance to modern Russian literature. These two pillars are widely different in their material, their texture and colouring, yet they curiously complete each other. With all their differences, both of them are so great and at the same time so essentially "Russian" that for this very reason they are entitled to claim world-wide reputation.

IV

Both Pushkin and Gogol had numerous predecessors of minor importance. In addition to the names already mentioned, there were many other more or less talented poets whose fame was eclipsed by the appearance of Pushkin. Neither

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was prose neglected. Between Karamzin's *Poor Lizzie* and Gogol's literary achievements one can find a number of sentimental stories, didactic adventurous novels, and historical romances in the manner of Walter Scott. Naryezhny's *Russian Gil Blas* appeared in 1814. Bulgarin and Senkovsky—the two ex-Poles and notorious literary *canailles* of those days—became extremely prolific “best sellers”. Then there was the exuberant Bestuzhev—Marlinsky who had the courage not only to write romances but also to live them. Zagoskin, too, sprang into sudden fame by his historical novel, *Fury Miloslavsky* (1829); while Pogodin, Polevoy, Count Sollogub and others made several attempts at depicting life in its more realistic aspects. However, all this has little value nowadays when measured by that standard which we apply to the work of Pushkin or Gogol.

The young Pushkin had been influenced for a time by Byron's works, but he soon turned from individual heroes as such to their actual background: to the *byt*,* the spirit and the traditions of real Russia. His great novel in verse, *Eugen Onyegin* (finished in 1831), is rather typical of this transition. At the same time, such pieces as

* An untranslatable Russian word which corresponds to the French *mœurs*, yet is broader.

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The Negro of Peter the Great and particularly *The Captain's Daughter* are the first examples of prose-works every bit of which is Russian in the best sense of this word ; works in which classicism and realism meet, blending the truth of life with the truth of art in a harmonious and synthetic whole. Pushkin is always simple, always lucid, and full of that naturalness which excludes *a priori* anything that sounds false, didactic, stilted, or pompous.

If we now turn to Gogol, we find in him an artist utterly unlike Pushkin—that bright, affirmative genius of Russian literature. Contrary to him, Gogol sees above all the negative side of life. While Pushkin creates through expansion in the world he loves, Gogol can create only through reaction against that reality which makes him hate and suffer. Pushkin is the eternal youth, brimming with vitality, laughter and life. There is affirmation of life in his very sadness. In Gogol, however, we feel something enigmatic and disturbing even when he laughs—particularly when he laughs. His genius differs from that of Pushkin in the same way in which the beauty of the moon differs from the beauty of the sun. Pushkin is always divinely obvious, Gogol nearly always mysterious—even under the veil of extreme obviousness. Being organically simple, Pushkin transmutes reality by simplifying

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it : by toning down all its loud and exaggerated features. Gogol again lights up everything by a kind of nocturnal magic which grotesquely increases and distorts certain qualities at the expense of others. Pushkin creates his characters straightway—out of one piece as it were. Gogol, however, “makes” them first, almost as one makes puppets : he seems to construct them out of many pieces, and once they are ready in his vision, he fills them with life and with such intense reality of their own that they often pursue the reader like hallucinations.

Pushkin's strength is in his sense of proportion, that of Gogol very often in the absence of all measure and proportion. However much Pushkin might have been carried away by his themes, esthetically he was always detached enough to create with that higher objectivity which is the result of complete artistic freedom. The intensity of Gogol, however, is due above all to the fact that he is never a free and detached artist, but always struggling—struggling with himself, with life, and finally with his own art. He is the most egocentric of all Russian prose-writers. His vision of reality itself is entirely subjective, that is, regulated by his own inner needs and tendencies. And so is his language with all its immense variety of rhythm, of musical cadences, of ornament and colour. He revels in endless

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periods, in glowing descriptions, in metaphors and superlatives to such an extent as to be in danger of losing himself. Especially in his early stories he is always in the superlatives, and not seldom on the borderline between prose and poetry ; sometimes he even approaches the rhetorical oleograph. Yet his innate genius always saves him from esthetic pitfalls. The ebb and flow of his prose remind one of the sea-waves which can engulf sand, stones, and even mud, without losing a bit of their primeval majesty and beauty. Having an astounding sense for the musical value of words as such, Gogol struck upon many a new orchestral possibility of the Russian language.

To put it briefly, Pushkin's genius is Apollonian, and that of Gogol is Dionysian. Pushkin's art is always objective, while the art of Gogol is profoundly personal even in its apparent objectivity. Contrary to Pushkin's wholeness, Gogol is the first of those self-divided Russian writers in whom "all contradictions exist side by side". His creative urge itself may have been due to his need of coping with such contradictions. He is also the first *seeker* (on a big and tragic scale) in Russian literature. In this respect Gogol is the psychological prototype of both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, while Turgenev and Goncharov, for example, are more akin to the objective Pushkin,

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at least in so far as they never mix their art with any ethical struggle, with metaphysics or religion.

The divergence that existed between Gogol and Pushkin is in a way characteristic of the whole of Russian literature, including the modernists proper, as well as the "decadents".

V

Gogol was, in essence, a diseased and too introspective genius. As such, he was always glad to lean on someone in order to be stimulated and feel confident of himself. And who could attract and fascinate him more than his opposite : the virile and all-sided Pushkin, who was brimming over with higher sanity ? Gogol felt in fact curiously drawn towards him, collaborated for a while in his *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*), listened to his useful advice in matters of art, and even received from him the themes for his own masterpieces, *The Revizor* and *The Dead Souls*. Pushkin again appreciated Gogol's talent from the very beginning. He encouraged him, revealed to him the value of the great foreign writers, especially that of Cervantes and Molière, probably influenced his taste, and helped him along in some practical matters as well. But it is significant that the