

Extra-narrative voices and character agency in dead souls



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However much of its text might be preoccupied with ‘realist’ visuals, Nikolai Gogol’s ‘poem of Russia,’ *Dead Souls* is still rife with extra-narrative commentary and digressions, in keeping with Gogol’s established style and his stated intentions for the novel as a morally-edifying work. Within the main plot, this manifests mostly in short satirical asides and runaway similes (up to a few paragraphs in length) conveyed by the author/narrator of Chichikov’s journey. In later sections of the novel, however, the non-diegetic language expands to include entire passages in alternate voices or stylistic registers. Rhapsodic though they may appear, these non-plot points share a set of narrative strategies that build up to the last chapters’ direct addresses from the author. When Gogol shifts from speaking for Chichikov to letting characters speak for themselves, or letting himself speak for the reader, he primes his audience for his ultimate conclusions on the relationships between each speaker.

The turning point for extra-narrative concerns supplanting plot matters is the shift in narrative focus from Chichikov’s schemes to the townsfolk and their gossip. The first scene of this sort is the “certain conversation which took place between a certain two ladies” in Chapter Nine (174). As in Chichikov’s introduction in the first chapter, the characters’ names are not revealed until they come into diegetic focus. They are first ‘heard’ in dialogue, while Chichikov’s name and rank are not known to the reader until they can be ‘seen’ in writing (178, 4). More pronounced in this later section, however, is the narrator’s rationale for distancing himself from his subjects. He prefaces this section with an acknowledgment that “the author is very hard put to name both ladies in such a way as not to make them angry at him, as they

used to be angry in the old days” (175). Here, the skaz-like mock verisimilitude that has inflected the plot narration from time to time is taken up a notch to suggest that elements of this anecdote could be construed as non-fictional.

Echoing the opening of “The Overcoat,” the authorial narrator hyperbolically explains that he wishes to avoid inadvertently defaming anybody with the same names as his fictional characters (175-6). Ironically, the author’s wishes are not honored by his own pen: the characters do not stay unnamed. But it is not the narrator’s voice that names them, it is their own. Gogol thereby creates a crucial distinction between his narrator’s concerns and those of his characters. Prior to this chapter, with Chichikov cast as both subject and object of narration, these had been one and the same. The distinction can therefore seem somewhat arbitrary, but its importance becomes apparent as the novel’s thematic scope expands farther beyond its linear plot. Having control over their own fictional identity gives these characters the sort of ‘ridiculous agency’ that becomes a hallmark of extra-narrative speakers in *Dead Souls*. The qualities of self-determination, as expressed in relative freedom from narrative control, diminish rather than elevate these characters’ moral standing.

In this first example, the narrow focus of the plot-driven narration gives way to a deeper view of very shallow people. The ladies’ elaborate dialogue begins with a long disagreement over clothes, progresses through gossip about Chichikov’s intrigues, and includes a particularly divisive argument about the countenance of a third woman (177-8, 180-4, 182). All throughout, the ladies’ cattiness is on display in their own voices. What starts as a simple

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disagreement over one's complexion ends in such exaggerated venom as "I'm ready, right here and now, to lose my children, my husband, all our estate, if she has even one tiny drip, even one little particle, even a shadow of red in her cheeks!" (182). An earlier argument concludes with one of the ladies reasoning, with high society faux-politesse, "it looks as if you actually want to insult me . . . Evidently you've already tired of me, evidently you want to break off your whole friendship with me" (178). It is important to note that this patently ridiculous form of speech is directly quoted, without paraphrasing or commentary by the narrator, to remove any doubt that the insane jealousy and contentiousness on display is a personal failing of these two souls. The verbal depth with which Gogol imbues them only makes them fit closer to type.

The third-person narrator's contributions to this character judgment are limited to his assertions that the scene is not too grotesque or banal to realistically reflect Russian society. To deny the improbability of such viciously petty disagreements, he writes "let it not seem strange to the reader . . . there really are in this world many things which do have that very peculiarity" (183). On their incredible gullibility around rumors, he states "there is nothing unusual about the fact that the two ladies became at last utterly convinced of that which hitherto they had merely assumed and known to be a mere assumption. Our fraternity – we intelligent people, as we style ourselves – acts in almost the same way" (185). This latter statement fits a novel-wide rhetorical strategy of assuming the reader's disbelief and countering it with an example from a scene that is ostensibly drawn from the reader's own experience, or at least some form of common knowledge. The

same tactic is used in Chapter Ten to explain how the populace could possibly believe Chichikov might be Napoleon Bonaparte: “ Perhaps there are some readers who will call all this improbable . . . However, it must be remembered that all this took place only shortly after the glorious expulsion of the French. At that time all our landowners, officials . . . all our literate folk, as well as the illiterate, had become – at least for all of eight years – inveterate politicians” (205). Again, the narrator includes himself and the reader (with “ we” and “ our”) as members of a massive third party who can judge the townsfolk’s foibles as absurd yet believable.

There are two more prominent examples of characters whose agency increases with a shift in narrative voice, only to reveal their outlandish flaws. These are the gossip-mongers, Nozdrev and the Postmaster, who have the capacity to tell their own stories within the narrator’s text. Nozdrev repeatedly spins yarns throughout the novel, culminating in his own version of Chichikov’s rumored backstory. In this section, the narrative voice is not given over entirely to Nozdrev, but it does conform to his verbal style. It is said that “ Nozdrev was positively a man for whom there were absolutely no such things as doubts,” and what follows is a list of direct answers, delivered completely without equivocation or authorial comment. Each response fits the textual formula “ To the question: [townsfolk’s rumor about Chichikov]. Nozdrev’s answer: [Yes or no, tall tale ensues]” (207). As with the ladies, the author gives Nozdrev enhanced agency by putting his words before his own. Nozdrev’s independence from the narrator is perhaps not as complete because his dialogue is paraphrased rather than quoted and it fits a repetitive, and therefore more contrived, style. Nevertheless, this change in

textual form stands out enough to identify Nozdrev as an alternative voice to the narrator. As evidenced in Chapters Four and Eight, one of Nozdrev's primary character traits is his ability to construct alternative narratives to those presented by his peers (66, 168). This affords him some more depth than the archetypical landowners, whose quirks are revealed by the non-verbalized observations of Chichikov and the narrator. Yet, for all his mastery over story-telling, Nozdrev cannot begin to tell a word of substance or honesty: "Nozdrev with an instant's hesitation went off on such a blue streak of drivel that it bore no resemblance to either truth or anything else on earth" (208). Because his gift of wit is always used for lying, Nozdrev remains a tragicomic example of Russian vice, albeit a more fleshed-out one than the other caricatures. Nozdrev's agency is real enough to stop the narrator from subsuming his voice in his own, but his misuse of such freedom makes him an easier target for ridicule in extra-narrative commentary.

The Postmaster represents the most completely independent extra-narrative voice, because his anecdote includes an entirely separate narrative voice, not just a change in 3rd-person narrative style. His guess at Chichikov's backstory takes the form of the lengthy interpolation in Chapter Ten, "The Tale of Captain Kopeikin" (197-204). This segment is a full-on skaz story of a vengeful veteran, proposed to the gathered townsfolk as a solution to Chichikov's mysterious identity. The plot is less indicative of the Postmaster's agency than the language in which it is relayed. The Postmaster is introduced in Chapter Ten as one who peppers his speech with "a multiplicity of sundry tag-ends and oddments of phrases, such as ' my

dear sir,' ' some sort of a fellow,' ' you know,' ' you understand,' ' you can just imagine,' ' relatively speaking, so to say,' ' in a sort of a way,' and other such verbal small change" (153). In the narration of Kopeikin's tale, these exact verbal tics do indeed appear in nearly every sentence, and the extra-diegetic narrator comments on this practice: " After the campaign of 1812, my dear sir - (thus did the Postmaster begin, despite the fact that the room held not one sir but all of six sirs)" (197). This comedic assumption of a plural audience and a profusion of addresses to such a readership is shared with the authorial narrator's style, thus positioning the two voices as equally authoritative in this chapter.

Furthermore, the Protagonist frequently refers to his protagonist as " my Kopeikin," echoing the author's use " our hero" and " our friend Chichikov" (199, 222). Even more so than Nozdrev, the Postmaster shows his agency by taking possession of the narrative. Of course, the impossibly myopic conclusions the Postmaster reaches in his digression make his agency the most ridiculous. When it is pointed out that Kopeikin cannot be the same man as Chichikov because he's missing an arm, the Postmaster initially admits his error, but then attempts to fantastically rationalize his absurd conclusion (204). The most completely realized diegetic voice in the novel utterly fails to speak in a logically sound manner. This suggests that even the most seemingly self-possessed people in the Russia of Dead Souls fail at the crucial task of self-reflection.

For Gogol, this task is a wholly moral undertaking. This opinion is revealed in his second letter to the readers of Dead Souls, in which he explains that the moral weakness of the novel's characters matches the evil of contemporary

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Russians who seek fame or success “ without any appeal to reason, without any reflection” (101). The ultimate purpose of these extended extra-narrative episodes is to further convince the reader of the moral degradation of the Russian landowners’ society. After a tour through the sinful landscape in a conventional novelistic style (following a “ hero” as he pursues his goal), Gogol shifts tactics. The condemning gaze is momentarily removed from the exterior narrator’s visions of gross caricatures and provincial squalor.

Instead, it is given to whoever witnesses this incompetence firsthand in the words and views of such immoral people. It is only after the townsfolk have expressed enough personal agency to convincingly indict themselves in the eyes of the reader that the narrator can step back in with his diatribe in the last chapter against the scoundrels, Chichikov now included, pictured in the novel (243). The familiarity he has by now established with the reader makes his conclusion that Russia is ethically in dire straits more believable than if it had been presented immediately after the tour of flat caricatures.

Perhaps the most crucial function of the polyphonic structure of *Dead Soul’s* latter portion is that Gogol can now define Chichikov in relation to his contemporaries (the townsfolk, the narrator, and the reader). Only once representative voices have been heard or viewpoints shown from each of these perspectives, can Gogol definitively pass judgment on his hero. In the end it is seen that Chichikov shares the avaricious and paranoid nature of his targets, and none of the forward-thinking nationalism that Gogol attributes to his narrator and to the reader during the troika scene of Chapter Eleven (220). In this moment, the narrator turns to first- and even second-person modes to wax poetic about the uplifting philosophical effect of the Russian

landscape. Even Chichikov is said to fall “ under the spell of reveries that were not altogether prosaic” but these turn out to be reminiscences of his own life, not selfless reflections on the beauty and potential of Russia’s expanse (222).

In the end, Chichikov emerges from his moral grey zone as a fully negative example of Russia’s nascent capitalistic narcissism. The voice of the author concludes that “ acquisition is the root of all evil,” and berates his readership for trusting swindlers like Chichikov in day to day life, only suspecting them if they are juxtaposed with a known quantity of decency, such as an epic hero (242). In this sense, Gogol concludes that comparative analysis is the best way to settle a person’s moral accounts, thus vindicating his drawn-out progression through many voices and vices. The final word on the significance of fictional characters with ‘ ridiculous agency’ might be found in the author’s allegation that “ it’s all Chichikov’s fault; he is full master here, and wherever he may get a notion of going thither must we, too, drag ourselves” (242). So it is in Gogol’s novel that characters drive the plot, not vice versa, and the author slyly acknowledges the discomfort this brings to the reader, when the character’s concerns are banal. The novel, he reveals at last, is purposefully constructed this way, so that the reader can most clearly recognize the moral failings of those who waste their (god- or narrator-given) freedom on ignorant, greedy, or inane escapades.