

Notes on Shatsk as a Gogol Figure

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In his brief essay "The Origin of Pynchon's Tchitcherine," Steven Weisenburger catalogues many of the extensive similarities between that character and Pavel Chichikov, protagonist of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, even arguing that "[p]arts of *Gravity's Rainbow* have a compelling affinity with Gogol's unfinished prose epic, and Tchitcherine is the principal link between the two texts" (42). While the Chichikov-Tchitcherine correlation may well be the principal link, it is enriched and extended by the appearance in *Gravity's Rainbow* of a parody of Gogol himself in the person of Tchitcherine's colleague Shatsk, "the notorious Leningrad nose-fetishist, who carries a black satin handkerchief to Party congresses and yes, more than once has been unable to refrain from reaching out and actually *stroking* the noses of powerful officials" (352). The antecedent author's refraction into one of Pynchon's secondary characters deserves a gloss as well as a brief sketch of some possible connections to *Gravity's Rainbow's* larger themes.

Like Shatsk, Gogol lived in Petersburg, and is famous for the stories which codified that city as myth. He was also similarly obsessed with noses. Nabokov, whose lectures on *Dead Souls* Pynchon may have audited at Cornell, no doubt stressed the nasal element as strongly in the classroom as in his published study of Gogol, which devotes three full pages to the subject; for example:

We shall meet the nasal leitmotiv throughout his imaginative work and it is hard to find any other author who has described with such gusto smells, sneezes and snores. . . . Chichikov, in *Dead Souls*, is introduced to the remarkable trumpet blast he emits when using his handkerchief. Noses drip, noses twitch, noses are lovingly or roughly handled; one drunkard attempts to *saw off* the nose of another; the inhabitants of the moon (so a madman discovers) are Noses. (3-4)

As befits its inclusion in a section of *Gravity's Rainbow* occupied with individual letters as detached and mercenary written marks devoid of absolute value, which, like molecules, "can be modulated, broken, recoupled, redefined, co-polymerized one to the other in worldwide chains that will surface now and then over long molecular silences, like the seen parts of a tapestry" (355), the nose motif recurs throughout

Gravity's Rainbow. The most overtly Gogolian of these moments is the giant-Adenoid incident, whose language—"out of the fog ahead materialized a giant, organlike form" (14)—strongly recalls the misty, absurdist dreamscapes of the Russian author's St. Petersburg tales. Thematically, it resonates most strongly with "The Nose," whose main character, Kovalev (a civil servant and self-styled ladies' man), is deserted by that organ. In a state of despair at the loss, he chances to encounter the missing appendage praying in a cathedral—dressed in the uniform of a civil servant three ranks higher in the civil service and bristling with phallic decorations, such as a plume and sword. Kovalev himself is too overwhelmed by his nose's rank to take action, but later that day the nose is apprehended by a policeman and returned to its owner. The story is easily (and often) read as a castration tale, in which the lost nose implies a concomitant loss of masculinity.

But whereas for Kovalev the phallic appendage becomes detached from the rest of the body, in *Gravity's Rainbow* Lord Blatherard Osmo is "assimilated" by his own growing Adenoid, some horrible transformation of cell plasma it is quite beyond Edwardian medicine to explain" (15). This passage describes a hypertrophy rather than a loss, a fundamental change of structure rather than a simple split. As contextualized by Gogol's story, it can be read as implying an internal sexual drive becoming alien and possessing the whole body, something like the conditioned or implanted sexual reflex suspected of underlying and controlling Slothrop's actions. The Adenoid's assault on London is specifically compared to the Second World War (16), and the section devoted to it helps explain why Slothrop's nose-picking—like his sexual reflex—seems to occur in association with the V-2 rocket: "just as he was reaching to pick his nose, suddenly in the sky, miles behind his back and up the river *memento-mori* a sharp crack and a heavy explosion, rolling right behind, almost like a clap of thunder" (25). This idea of the nose as a sexual organ or fetish recurs most notably in the nasal-sex scene between Trudi and Slothrop (439). In this scene the nose's sexual function is dual, as it both becomes erect and is penetrated. Such duality of sexual identity wraps back to the Gogolian subtexts of the NTA episode through the agency of an ambiguous initial which functions as an indeterminate sex-marker.

Although Gogol's noses are often read as phalli, gender in *Dead Souls* is complicated by the issue of sexual indeterminacy as raised by a single, ambiguous letter—one also associated with Shatsk. Amidst Pynchon's satire on the Soviet penchant for acronyms and the barrage of sense-dissociated letters constituting the New Turkic Alphabet, we learn that the nose-fetishist serves on the Θ Committee. This letter had, ironically, already been removed from the Russian Cyrillic alphabet

during the Bolshevik regime's spelling reforms of the 1920s. It occurs prominently in *Dead Souls*, however, when one character insults another using the word "fetiuk" (Θετιοκ), which Gogol defines in a footnote as "a word offensive to men, deriving from Θ—a letter regarded by some as an obscene letter" (69). The theta was perceived in Russia as a female sex symbol, and in its Gogolian usage resonates with both sexual and semantic indeterminacy: the insult, while referring to femininity, is applicable only to men. It is an insult whose value stems from that of its initial letter and whose meaning becomes opposite as soon as it is applied. That is, it is a "female" insult which becomes meaningful only through being coupled with a male addressee—an alphabetical reflection of Pynchon's sexualized presentations of molecular and mechanical combination. Fittingly, it appears in *Gravity's Rainbow* as an exemplar of the inherent ambiguity and interchangeability of printed signs, the overarching idea of the NTA segment.

In addition to the possibility that the struggle between Tchitcherine and Blobodjian each for the primacy of his version of the letter G is itself an allusion to the Russian author, the other single letter for which Gogol is famous also enters *Gravity's Rainbow* through an association with Shatsk. Perhaps because of the theta's dual sexual referent, Shatsk constantly confuses the phonetic value of Θ in the New Turkic Alphabet with its value in the prerevolutionary Cyrillic alphabet; he longs to obtain a transfer to the N or N Committee. Besides the likelihood that the N Committee in this context stands for the Nose Committee, the abbreviation N. also denotes the town in or around which all the action in *Dead Souls* takes place. As the entry into "the town of N." opens the novel, the letter thus functions as the announcement of a novelistic space (practically a convention in the extremely intertextual world of Russian literature, which teems with towns of N.). Shatsk being a refraction of Gogol, his hankering to work on the N Committee is a desire for a shift of diegetic levels, the real author's withdrawal or desired withdrawal into a fictional text—a wish Pynchon has, in some sense, granted by including him in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

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