

## The Origin of Pynchon's Tchitcherine

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His right knee hinged with threads of gold, Vaslav Tchitcherine limps through Gravity's Rainbow bearing a portfolio of a name. Terry Caesar (PN 5, 1981) rightly calls attention to its "multiple puns and arcane allusions," but he discloses no knowledge of what those references may be. Then David Seed (PN 5 again) tracks a red herring when he proposes that the fictional Vaslav and the historical Georgi Tchitcherine are secret sharers, despite Pynchon's warning that "He [Vaslav] is no relation at all to the [Georgi] Tchitcherine who dealt the Rapallo Treaty" (GR, 338). Well, why not take Pynchon at his word?

There are good reasons for doing so, particularly when a more appropriate and less "arcane" ancestor of Vaslav Tchitcherine lies before our noses, in the last work of the Russian satirist Nikolai Gogol. His trumpet-nosed character Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, a traveling-agent for Death in the unfinished prose epic, Dead Souls, is the true literary progenitor of Pynchon's character.

First a word about translations of Russian. The Cyrillic letter <sup>Ц</sup>, seventeenth in the alphabet, is generally rendered as tch by French or as ch by English translators, and Pynchon points out this equivalence in Gravity's Rainbow. In the novel's 34th episode, itself devoted to Tchitcherine's story, he explains how the phonetic Ц (in Trager-Smith symbols) is "pronounced with a sort of tch sound" (GR, 353). This is no idle detail in an episode where Pynchon's controlling idea is the essential ambiguity (openness) in any interpretation (translation) of printed signs. The important consideration here is that, spelled out in Cyrillic characters, Tchitcherine's name would reveal his etymological descent from Chichikov. The root forms of both names are alike: Gogol's ЧИЧИКОВ and Pynchon's ЧИЦЕРИН

Whatever alphabet one uses, these stand as entirely unique literary names. And Gogol, with whom Pynchon (like Nabokov) shares an obvious delight in onomastics, opens Chichikov's name to a variety of references.

Chichikov, great lover of florid speeches and "the open road," recalls for example the Russian noun chicherone, signifying one who guides, as well as the Latin-derived "cicerone," signifying one who is known for lavish outpourings of discourse. Gogol's portly Chichikov, ever the polite fellow, also recalls the Russian chichisbeo, from the Italian cicisbeo, meaning one who plays the gallant (perhaps an adulterer); but also and more ironically his name evokes the cici-bean, or garbanzo (Cicer arietenum), a concise simile for Chichikov's rotund physique.

Pynchon's Tchitcherine battens on all of these associations, and more. The "-ine" suffix signifies-- as in chemical nomenclature--Tchitcherine's "family" relation to Gogol's overweight character. For Pynchon's "stocky, Latin-eyed emissary from Moscow, this Soviet remittance man" (GR, 347) has a genetic make-up strikingly like Chichikov's. Not only are they both rotund; they also both walk with a halting gait. Chichikov's nose blares like a brass trumpet whenever he clears it, while Tchitcherine (an extrapolation of Gogol's character, with his skull plate, steel teeth, and gold wire-work knee) has literally become "more metal than anything else" (GR, 337). There are still other things about Gogol's Chichikov that readers of Gravity's Rainbow will find noteworthy: for example, the "rainbow colored scarf" he wears; his gargantuan diet (including a special delectation for whole roast suckling pig at dinner); and his several servants (two live dushi, or "souls") who attend Chichikov's needs much as Džaqyp Qulan and others wait upon Tchitcherine in Gravity's Rainbow.

In his study of Gogol, Nabokov describes Chichikov as a bureaucratic remittance-man, an "ill-paid representative of the Devil, a travelling salesman from Hades."<sup>1</sup> Chichikov's wobbling gait connects him to the underworld of Hephæstus or Vulcan (gods of fire and metalworking, as Pynchon might note). But most of all Chichikov is linked to Hades by his obsession for building a kingdom of dead "souls" or serfs (dushi means both) who exist only as names on paper, in tax rolls, years after their actual deaths. Indeed, this virtual abstraction of their being, as pure signs, when the rest of the novel bulges with savored detail, makes for the controlling irony of Chichikov's adven-

tures. Gogol says about Chichikov: "The passion that leads him on is not part of him," nevertheless, "in his cold existence there lies hidden that which will one day make a man fall on his knees in the dust before the wisdom of the heavens."<sup>2</sup>

The same may be said of Tchitcherine's cold-hearted paper chase, during which the Rocket and his fratricidal passion collapse into one mortal compulsion. Pynchon explains that, like Gogol's character's, Tchitcherine's "real mission in the Zone is private, obsessive. . . . The little State he is building in the German vacuum is founded on a compulsive need he has given up trying to understand" (GR, 337-38; my ellipsis). His role in Gravity's Rainbow--like Slothrop's, Enzian's, or Blicero's--is to become, without his ever fully knowing it, a functionary of the Rocket cartel, a Postwar kingdom of the dead. Gogol's "wisdom of the heavens" is precisely this groping, half-knowledge of mortality. Potentially, it is knowledge of how Death's "other kingdom" establishes properly staffed trading posts within our frontiers; and while Tchitcherine may be numb to this network, at least he achieves a moment's worth of that Heavenly "wisdom," In a flashback at the end of episode 34, he reaches "the Kirghiz Light," and as Gogol might have it, he even lies down "face up on the desert." Yet this vision does not sustain him. The moment is not a "birth" into new life, but the onset of a forgetting: with "millions after millions of souls gone behind him, he will hardly be able to remember It" (GR, 359; my emphasis). Like preterite Cain, Tchitcherine is doomed to wandering the open roads.

The reference to Dead Souls brings us to one of Pynchon's great themes. David Cowart especially has shown that in Pynchon's work the "literary allusions function like his musical allusions, contributing to a mythology of the Other Side."<sup>3</sup> Thus peace and war, organic and inorganic, life and death are states that maintain a commerce in his fictions and most of all in Gravity's Rainbow. Like the novel's main characters, we glimpse that network only in part, through synecdoche, not directly as with the Kirghiz Light, but indirectly as ambiguous glyphs on paper. So it is unfortunate that a masterwork of satire like Dead Souls has passed unnoticed in virtually every discus-

sion of Pynchon's literary allusions. Parts of Gravity's Rainbow have a compelling affinity with Gogol's unfinished prose epic, and Tchitcherine is the principal link between the two texts. In fact, when Pynchon exclaims, "How alphabetic is the nature of molecules" (GR, 355), he might as well have reversed his terms and said, "How molecular is the nature of the alphabet." For once we sort out the alphabetic variants, Tchitcherine--whom Pynchon calls "a giant supermolecule with so many open bonds available" (GR, 346)--reveals himself as an avatar or, if you will, a grandchild of Gogol's Chichikov.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1944), 73. Interestingly, the text of this short study is almost identical with the lectures that Nabokov used to deliver at Cornell, where Pynchon was his student. Compare the New Directions text with the chapter on Gogol in Nabokov's recently published Lectures on Russian Literature (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Nikolai Gogol, Dead Souls, trans. David Magarshack (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961), 254.

<sup>3</sup> David Cowart, Thomas Pynchon: The Art of Allusion (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), 98.