THE MYTH OF PETERSBURG
AS PROMULGATED BY GOGOL'S
PETERSBURG TALES

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The city of St. Petersburg has been described as, one of the strangest, loveliest, most terrible, and most dramatic of the world's great urban centers... Cleaving the city down the center, the cold waters of the Neva move silently and swiftly, like a slab of smooth grey metal... bringing with them the tang of the lonely wastes of forests and swamp from which they have emerged. At every hand one feels the proximity of the great wilderness of the Russian north--somber, silent, infinitely patient.

In such a city the attention of a man is focused inward upon himself... Human relationships attain a strange vividness and intensity with a touch of premonition...

The city is, and always has been, a tragic city, artificially created... geographically misplaced, yet endowed with a haunting beauty, as though some ironic deity had meant to provide some redemption for all the cruelties and all the mistakes.1

This then was Petersburg as seen through the eyes of a foreigner, little more than two centuries after Tsar Peter had built this new capital in the Baltic swamps, which had previously been used by the Finns and Swedes for forts and fisheries. Built in arrogant defiance of nature, at an exorbitant cost of money and human life, this city was to be Peter's "window on the West"; a vantage point from which he might expeditiously rebuff any European
aggression on one hand, and encourage the now more easily accessible flow of European culture into Russia, on the other. It was rather like an exotic bloom transplanted into a dark, northern forest, and as such, it acquired a distinct soul of its own. This soul was to figure prominently in the newly emerging literature of the day.

Petersburg was to be the new administrative capital of the nation as well as the cultural. Therefore, it came to be inhabited not only with architects and artisans, but with a new and peculiar breed of men called чиновники, or petty civil service workers. They owe their existence to Peter's Table of Ranks, which was established in 1722 for the purpose of revising the administrative structure of Russia.

The Table of Ranks introduced a new classification of men of service with new ranks, which, with very few exceptions, were given foreign names, generally Latin or German. These ranks were arranged in the Table in three parallel columns, civil, military and court, each divided into fourteen ranks or classes. The Table of Ranks in the reformed Russia substituted a bureaucratic hierarchy based on ability, for the aristocratic hierarchy based on birth and genealogy.²

This figure of the чиновник, which came to be a phenomenon primarily associated with Petersburg, and upon whose overworked back the dreary and ponderous burden of Russian bureaucracy rested, was also to figure prominently in the literature of the nation.
NOTES


CHAPTER II
LITERARY BACKGROUND

In the early 1830's, both Dickens and Balzac were writing perceptively and evocatively about their respective cities, London and Paris. In Russia,

Translations of the early Balzac—the Balzac of Ferragus—strengthened the vogue that the translations of Jouy had enjoyed, together with the flood of physiological sketches of Petersburg and Moscow he had inspired. ... They showed how the city might be explored with the eye of a realist and evoked with the tools of a romantic; but in the matter of stylization of the city, there were examples to be found closer at hand, examples that reflected the historical uniqueness of the Russian capital.¹

There already existed a body of literature singing the praises of Petersburg since its founding, "but this celebration consisted mainly of hymns or odes ... exalting alike the abstract imperial idea and the concrete classical symmetry of the imperial capital ... thus within the limits of the neoclassic canon, Lomonosov, Derzhavin and a host of their inferiors."²

Therefore, in 1818 Prince Vyazemsky was writing, "I see the city of Peter, wondrous and majestic / By the mania of the czar erected from the marshes / The inherited
monument of his mighty glory / Already a hundred-fold embellished by his descendants / Art here everywhere wages a battle with nature / And everywhere blazoned its triumph."³

Puškin followed suit in 1833, with his Bronze Horseman, where he describes the city in similar terms: "I love thee masterpiece of Peter--I love thine aspect graceful and severe, Neva's mighty stream, her granite banks, stiff lace of iron fences."⁴ But he elaborates upon Vyazemsky's theme of art struggling with nature in the form of a narrative about a poor činovnik called Evgeny, who loses everything important and dear to him to this titanic struggle between art and nature. Puškin revealed the very essence of the tragedy in the work:

The grandeur of the city, as idea and as reality is upheld, but in its very origin a hubris is recognized, whose price, paid once by the thousands of workmen who perished in its first construction, continues to devolve on the succeeding generations. Against the abstract grandeur is posed the concrete loss of humble lives; against the public achievement, the private sacrifice. Thus the image of the city is doubled; no longer passively heroic, it has become active and an antagonist as well.⁵

In the Bronze Horseman Puškin established the basis for what was to become the myth of Petersburg, but in the Queen of Spades he gave it a "coloring or tonality."⁶ It is the tale of a young, Russified German named Hermann who is obsessed with Napoleonic ambitions. This story "enriches the myth of Petersburg through its atmosphere--a
constant equivocal mixing of the soberly realistic with the apparently fantastic."\(^7\)

Therefore, the fantastic atmosphere of the city had become an accomplished fact.

The shiftings between the prosaic and the fantastic in *Queen of Spades* had ... been in consonance with the setting. It remained only to make explicit what Pushkin had left implicit, to evoke the city directly, projecting onto the various levels of its life this same interpretation of the real and the phantom, the probable and the improbable.\(^8\)

Essentially, this is what Nikolaj Gogol' accomplishes in his cycle of Petersburg tales. Whereas Pushkin had presented a broad, all-encompassing panorama of Petersburg, from palaces and broad, geometrical avenues to the squalid drinking dens, Gogol' chooses to concentrate upon one particular level of existence--that of the činovnik. Action in his Petersburg tales never ventures beyond the humble sections of the city inhabited by the poor. Encounters with the rich and mighty usually occur briefly, in passing, on Nevsky Prospekt. Gogol' adds to the exalted and tragic quality with which Pushkin had endowed the city, his own elements of the comic and the mundane.
NOTES

2 Ibid., 104.
3 Ibid.
5 Fanger, op. cit., 114.
6 Ibid., 115.
7 Ibid., 115.
CHAPTER III

GOGOL'

In December of 1828, Nikolaj Gogol' finally realized the long cherished dream which had dominated his adolescent fantasies for years when he came to Petersburg. The result was disillusioning. All his vaunting hopes and dreams disintegrated upon contact with the severe, wintry visage of the capital. His first impressions of Petersburg were colored by the fact that he caught a bad cold, failed to find a job, and felt extremely lonely. "Oh how revolting was reality! What was it compared to the dream?"¹ are the words of the idealistic and romantic young artist, hero of Gogol's "Nevsky Prospekt", but they may well describe Gogol's own personal reaction to the capital.

The only position which the unhappy young man was finally able to obtain was that of a činovnik, "with the annual salary of a thousand roubles that would barely pay for the apartment and meals."²

"Petroburg razbil Gogolja i on uchepilsja za ironiju kak za sredstvo samozaščitu,"³ Andrey Bely wrote. And this self defense took on the form of several brilliant stories,
including "Nevsky Prospekt", "The Nose", "Diary of a Madman", and "The Overcoat".

In another letter to his mother, Gogol' describes his impressions of Petersburg, which is not at all like other European capitals or Moscow. In general, each capital is characterized by its people who throw their stamp of nationality on it. But Petersburg has no such character stamp; the foreigners who settled here have made themselves at home and aren't like foreigners at all, and the Russians in their turn have turned into foreigners—they aren't one thing or the other. Its quietness is extraordinary; no spirit glitters among the people; all the civil servants and functionaries constantly talk about their departments and colleges; everything is crushed; everyone is sunk in useless, insignificant tasks in which they fruitlessly expend their lives. A meeting with them on the boulevards or sidewalks is very amusing; they are so occupied by their thoughts that when you come up beside one of them, you hear how he curses and converses with himself, another spices this with gesticulation and waving of the arms. 4

In an article entitled "Petersburg Notes for 1836", published in Puskin's journal, "The Contemporary" (Sovremennik) Gogol' continues his description of the city, this time discussing its social stratification:

These societies are completely separate: aristocrats, working civil servants, artisans, Englishmen, Germans, merchants—all make up completely separate circles, which rarely merge, rather living and making merry unseen by the others.

And each of these classes, if one looks closer, is composed of a multitude of other little circles, also not amalgamated with each other. For example, take the civil servants. The young assistants of office chiefs make up their own circle, into which a department chief
will not sink for anything. . . . In a word, it is as if an enormous diligence arrived at an inn, in which each passenger had been sitting all the way, muffled up, and went into the common hall only because there was no other place.5

This then was the Petersburg which Gogol' encountered, and which he was to personalize and reshape, presenting to the world its mongrel population, vast spaces, isolation and alienation reflected through the peculiar prism of his personality.
NOTES


5Fanger, *op. cit.*, 108.
CHAPTER IV
"NEVSKY PROSPEKT"

The tragic tale of deception and disillusionment, "Nevsky Prospekt" sets the tone of this cycle of Petersburg tales. But before the story proper commences, the narrator produces a panorama of Petersburg society parading along the city's major thoroughfare. It is like a lurid, papier mache' backdrop for the melodrama which is to follow.

Mornings on Nevsky Prospekt are delegated to the poor folk of the city, as they hurry about their affairs. "Old women in tattered clothes" and beggars rub elbows with workmen and peasants in dirty boots. Dress to these people is of so little consequence that, Gogol' says, "you could wear a workman's cap instead of a hat, and even if your collar were to stick out, no one would notice it."¹ Then he dismisses the entire scene with a shrug. "Until twelve o'clock, Nevsky Prospekt does not serve as a goal for anyone, it is merely a means to an end, ... filled with people who have their own occupations, their own worries, their own disappointments."²

Between twelve and two o'clock, there is a brief
Suspected missing page 13
discussing the weather, and other banalities "with an air that is the acme of good breeding." 7

"But at the stroke of three the exhibition closes." 8 The carnival figures disappear, into thin air as it were, but only to reappear the following day, and the day after that, doomed to the repetition of their mechanical actions for an eternity.

Three o'clock is the hour of the циновников, those numerous little cogs within the giant machine of Russian bureaucracy. Myriad ranks scurry by: titular councillors, collegiate registrars, collegiate secretaries, etc. Instead of elegant trivialities, they ponder on "whole archives of business begun and still unfinished; instead of signboards they see for a long time a cardboard file with papers or the fat face of the head of their department." 9

Dusk is an all important hour on Nevsky Prospekt, when the street once again bustles with activity. Now it consists of primarily "bachelors in warm frock coats and overcoats." 10 Sensuality abounds in the air. "Everybody seems to be walking much faster, everybody seems to be strangely excited." 11 In store windows, engravings which are never seen in the light of day, mysteriously appear. And the few ladies who do stroll about the street have "full lips and cheeks plastered with rouge." 12
The purpose of this section is to satirize Petersburg society, as it appears in microcosm, on Nevsky Prospekt, in its various forms, within the duration of a day. Generally, a haughty display of status symbols and pseudo-impressive appearances rules by day, only to give way to the furtive and venal pleasure-seeking of merchants and cinovniks under lamp posts by night.

The street, Nevsky Prospekt, serves as the central motif about which the action in this particular story, and in those to follow, revolves. These then are the ruling symbols which constitute the essence of the city's spiritual life. Appearance, status and riches are one, and they represent the ruling faction of the city. Another is the inhumanity which characterizes the population as a whole—they are not people, but strutting epaulets and mustaches. They have no faces and no souls. Consequently they are unable to communicate with each other in any true sense. The third symbol then, is the great sense of loneliness and isolation that pervades this ostensibly bustling metropolis.

The two young protagonists of this tale, "Nevsky Prospekt", Piskarev and Pirogov, share a similar quest, but with entirely divergent intentions, based on the fact that the two are very divergent personalities. Piskarev is an artist, "a phenomenon in a city where the inhabitants are either civil servants, shopkeepers or German artisans."
Gogol strongly feels that Petersburg has a disastrous effect upon artists. "An artist in the land of the Finns where everything is wet, flat, monotonous, grey and misty!" he exclaims. This is clearly a tragedy. "If they were breathing the air of Italy their talent would probably have opened up as freely, as widely and as splendidly as a plant that has been taken out into the open air after being kept indoors a long time." But as conditions are, the paintings which they do paint have a "greyish, muddy tint—the indelible imprint of the north." Petersburg is not conducive to any sort of sublimity, whether it be that of passion or art. The only keynotes here are a grey mediocrity of purpose and soul.

Piskarev, described as "a very inoffensive fellow who carried within his breast seeds that . . . might have one day blossomed" mistakes an attractive streetwalker for a divine apparition, by the deceptive lamplight of Nevsky Prospekt. She is as dazzling and remote as are most of Gogol's young heroines, and Piskarev impulsively dashes after her, thinking that at one point she turned and smiled at him. But as he lunges forward something cataclysmic occurs: "The pavement . . . was moving under him . . . the bridge stretched and was about to break in the center of its arch; the houses were upside down, a sentry box came reeling toward him." Unheeding, Piskarev still rushes
after the girl, only to find her destination a brothel.

He is filled with profound pity and horror for her plight. When he returns to his room he has a wonderful dream about her, but when he wakes up he berates reality: "Oh how disgusting reality was!" From that point on he resorts to opium and lives a life of dreams. As a last effort, he suddenly decides that the corruption of her beauty was not of her own doing, that he would rescue her. He rushes back to the brothel and makes an offer of marriage which is treated with derision and scorn. As a result of this, Piakarev kills himself.

It is evident that this artificially created city not only stifles artistic creativity, but destroys the beauty of the soul as well. The extent to which people are isolated is exemplified by the fact that Piskarev's body is not discovered till a week afterwards. And "no one shed any tears over him; there was no one to be seen by his dead body."19 He merely disappeared, like a tiny stone in a great ocean, leaving no trace--this man "who carried a spark of genius in his breast which might, with time, have blazed forth into a great, bright flame."20

His companion of that fateful night, Lieutenant Pirogov (the name being a play on the Russian word for pastry, "pirog") is a character of a very different sort. For him Petersburg is an ideal place and he fits in very
well with its milieu. Being possessed of some remarkable talents, which include blowing smoke rings from his pipe and telling amusing stories about a cannon being one thing and a unicorn another, his aspirations do not extend beyond enjoying himself now, and marrying a merchant's daughter with a large dowry, in the future.

The lamplight of Nevsky Prospekt also deceives him, and a very interesting little blond whom he follows, whispering to himself, "You'll be mine my pretty one", turns out to be the stupid, but eminently respectable wife of a German artisan named Schiller.

Schiller is one of that vast number of Germans who inhabit the city, and he is a parody of their miserly, methodical ways and their drunkenness. His life is so carefully planned that he never kisses his wife more than twice in twenty-four hours, "and to make sure he did not kiss her more, he put in one teaspoonful of pepper in his soup." When Pirogov first encounters him, Schiller is in the process of having his nose cut off by his equally drunken friend Hoffman, because he spends so much money for snuff. Pirogov keeps pestering the household on all sorts of pretexts, squeezing the blonde everytime her husband's back is turned, never dreaming his attentions are unwelcome. "It never occurred to him that any woman could resist him, particularly as his good manners and his brilliant
rank gave him the right to expect every possible consideration from the fair sex."22

Pirogov, finally alone with the damsel, makes his great coup, kissing her passionately as she screams and attempts to fight him off. Suddenly Schiller and a few stalwart friends burst in, totally drunk, and they trounce Pirogov most unceremoniously. In a passionate rage, Pirogov dreams of the most lurid forms of vengeance, but by the time he had eaten two pastries and spent the evening very agreeably dancing the mazurka, his fury has been assuaged and his battered honor forgotten.

Gogol' concludes his story with the passage, "Oh do not trust that Nevsky Prospekt! I always wrap myself up more closely in my cloak when I walk along it and do my best not to look at things I pass. For it is all deceit, all is a dream, all is not what it seems."23

The treacherous quality of fate is epitomized by Nevsky Prospekt. "We are now back where we started, but now that the pitfalls of metropolitan glamor have been so blatantly dramatized, the tone has shifted. It has become frankly more ominous, nocturnal, distraught."24

In Gogol' this dream, however fragile, remains the only thing of value. "Oh how wanton was reality! What was it then, compared to the dream?"25 This view of life as arbitrary and unpredictable is expressed by the narrator
himself at the end of the story: "How strangely, how unaccountably Fate plays with us! Everything goes contrary to what we expect." The contrast between the tragic end of Piskarev and the happy ending of Pirogov is therefore explained; the pure of heart are crushed by the unbearable discrepancy between their dreams and actuality. In this city, peopled by faceless, soul-less mustaches, where only riches and status constitute reality, vice replaces goodness, moral ugliness is accepted for true beauty, and the commonplace triumphs over the sublime. Gogol' expresses this sentiment in the last sentence of the story:

It lies all the time does Nevsky, but most of all when night hovers over it in a thick mass, picking out the white from the dun colored houses, and all the town thunders and blazes with lights, and thousands of carriages come driving from the bridges, the outriders jogging up and down on their horses, and when the devil himself lights all the street lamps to show everything in anything but its true colors.
NOTES

1 Gogol, Nikolai, The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil, New York, 1965, 163.

2 Ibid., 163.
3 Ibid., 164.
4 Ibid., 165.
5 Ibid., 165.
6 Ibid., 165.
7 Ibid., 165.
8 Ibid., 166.
9 Ibid., 166.
10 Ibid., 167.
11 Ibid., 167.
12 Ibid., 167.
13 Ibid., 167.
14 Ibid., 169.
15 Ibid., 170.
16 Ibid., 169.
17 Ibid., 170.
18 Ibid., 171-72.
19 Ibid., 188.
20 Ibid., 188.
21 Ibid., 197.
22 Ibid., 195.
23 Ibid., 201.
24 Erlich, op. cit., 80.
25 Gogol, The Overcoat, 184.
26 Ibid., 201.
27 Ibid., 201-202.
CHAPTER V
"THE NOSE"

The theme of the city as half-inferno, half madhouse, was to be heard again. The absurdity of life, which in Mirgorod was mainly a matter of grotesque smallness of local pursuits, becomes in Arakhees a hopeless muddle, a cumulative effect of an orgy of "senseless rumors" circulating within the teeming, yet thoroughly atomized human labyrinth of the metropolis.¹

Kovalev, a spiritual twin of Pirogov, is a young collegiate assessor who prefers to call himself a major (his corresponding rank in the army). He is another one of those thousands of cinovniks who traverse Nevsky Prospekt at three o'clock when the fashionable world has fled. Kovalev wakes up one day time to discover that his nose has disappeared from his face, much to his astonishment. What perturbs the major most about this occurrence is not why or how, but the possible results, namely that "a tradeswoman selling peeled oranges on Voskresensky Bridge can sit there without a nose, but for a man like me who expects the post of governor, which without a doubt he will obtain and erases besides, being received in many houses by ladies of good position . . ."²

23
Clearly a man with such ambitions cannot be without a nose, and therefore Kovalev attempts to advertise the loss in the paper, lodges a complaint with the police and writes to a lady friend of his, whom he accuses of using black magic to trick him into marrying her daughter. This is the correct procedure to follow under normal circumstances, but the ressortion to bureaucratic processes is so ingrained that Kovalev cannot be deterred from them even under abnormal ones. His is a narrow, mechanical little soul, he is incapable of functioning any other way. A loss or theft must be reported to the police, and must be advertised in the papers.

The Nose has already been presented to the reader before Kovalev was, thereby, perhaps, indicating its greater importance. It pops up in a loaf of bread about to be eaten by the major's barber for breakfast. To add insult to injury, when Kovalev does encounter his nose in the Kazan Cathedral, not only has it acquired an independent existence of its own, but also the resplendent uniform of a Councillor of State. Furthermore, it is very brusque with the cringing Major. "There can be no question of any intimate relationship between us. I see sir from the buttons of your uniform that you are serving in a different department." it loftily informs him.
However, after many futile and comic attempts to retrieve it, the nose reappears on its owner's face as suddenly and inexplicably as it had vanished. And thereby Kovalev is restored to his battered self esteem. His meaningless social round, which includes accosting girls on the street ("Just you ask for Major Kovalev, darling"), seeking a post befitting his rank, and matrimony with a girl possessing "a fortune of two hundred thousand", may now blissfully continue.

This image of the nose might be interpreted as being very Freudian and covertly sexual. Fear of losing it might be equated with fear of being castrated. In "Nevsky Prospekt", the drunken artisan Schiller demands to have his nose cut off. In "Diary of a Madman", the motif of separate noses living on the moon appears in the ravings of the insane clerk. Gogol's obsession with noses likewise creeps into his personal correspondence. In a letter to a former pupil in which he rapturizes over the beauties of Rome, Gogol' expresses the wish to be transformed into one big nose. 4

But according to Erlich,

Seen against the background of Gogol's emerging view of man, "The Nose" seems a rather grotesque laugh at the absurd importance of appearances in a world of appearances. In the universe of the nose, status looms higher than sex. Thus, Kovalev's seems to be an acute case of status anxiety rather than castration anxiety. Preposterously enough, to Kovalev the nose is not
so much an important part of his body which can be symbolically substituted for a male organ, as another status symbol to be shown off on the Nevsky Prospekt vanity fair."

Although his nose is a necessary attribute of his manhood, it is an even more important matter in his marital aspirations. To the determined careerist a profitable marriage is a convenient stepping stone to an important position. Erlich goes on to say,

On Nevsky Prospect status is highly libidinized; in fact it seems to be the chief focus of a libidinal involvement. In this preposterously directed other context where all that matters is a good front, as the most conspicuous, exposed and protruding part of one's anatomy, as the most public or official facet of one's personality.  

The same theme of depersonalization which dominates Nevsky Prospekt and its crowd of animated synecdoches, is discernable here also, for none of the characters in this story have any true faces. Kovalev, when he looks at himself in the mirror that fateful morning, sees nothing but a "bare smooth surface" and it is with this visage that he rushes about Petersburg. The guilt ridden barber who tries to furtively rid himself of the nose by tossing it into the water is a phantom in a dirty coat ("that is to say it had been black originally but now it was studded with yellowish brown and grey spots."). The nose in a splendid uniform immediately compels respect and awe, even from its owner. The policeman who returns the recalcitrant nose to its
rightful owner has, instead of a face, "whiskers neither too light nor too dark and rather full cheeks." And when Kovalev goes to the doctor in a fruitless attempt to have his nose replaced, he "did not even notice his face, and in his profound insensibility saw only the cuffs of his white and snowy clean shirt peeping out of the sleeves of his black coat." This is no wonder, because the doctor, like everyone else, has no face.

Another theme common to Nevsky Prospekt is the insensitivity the people of the city display towards one another. Although Kovalev is a rather venal, ambitious fool, he is a human being in a severe predicament, but no one makes any great efforts to aid him. The employee at the newspaper refuses to print his advertisement ("A newspaper could lose its good name if everyone started advertising vagrant noses."). The Commissioner dismisses him with the remark: "They don't tear noses off decent citizens' faces," and the doctor cheerfully advises Kovalev to wash with cold water: "I assure you that you'll feel just as healthy without a nose as you felt with one." However, it is quite apparent that were the roles to be reversed, Kovalev would be equally as smug and unheeding, and there is no evidence that he profited in any way from this experience.

The contrast between the prosaic realism of the setting of the story, and the fantastic of the central motif
is rather interesting.

The proliferation of homely trivia and the matter of fact narrative tone tend to domesticate the absurd, to absorb it almost imperceptibly into the texture of everyday life. At the same time the narrator's relative "lack of astonishment" subtly undermines one's trust in the reality of the sensible, the dependability of the predictability of the world around us.14

The narrator is trying to have it both ways. On one hand the strangeness of Kovalyev's predicament is strenuously insisted upon. The opening sentence of the story announces: "An incredible thing happened in Petersburg on March 25,"15 and the finale says: "So this is the strange event that occurred in the northern capital of our spacious empire!" Ultimately the occurrence is found possible if not plausible. The narrator says, somewhat bewildered:

Only now, on thinking it all over, we perceive there is a great deal that is improbable in it. Apart from the fact that it is certainly strange for a nose to supernaturally leave its place and to appear in various places in the guise of a Civil councillor—how was it that Kovalyev did not grasp that he could not advertise about his nose in a newspaper office? And yet, when you think it over, there really is something in it. Despite what anyone might say, such things do happen in the world—seldom to be sure, but they do happen!16

This then is the mentality of the typical Petersburg dweller, a continually befogged philistine who cannot distinguish between the plausible and the implausible, between a wild rumor and an ascertainable fact.

Gogol's, or the narrator's chatter, implicitly calls into question the underlying assumption
of realistic fiction that social reality "makes sense", that human behavior yields a discernible pattern, a stable structure of causation. This intent is made explicit in "philosophical" asides. "All kinds of nonsense happen in this world. Sometimes there is no plausibility whatsoever."

... here lies a clue to that astonishing "lack of astonishment" which Gogol's narrator exhibits. The tendency to treat the intrusion of the irrational as "part of the game" is predicated upon the view that the game itself lacks any definable rules, that every day living is absurdly chaotic—a web of incongruities, a series of interlocking anxiety dreams.17

The entire occurrence might easily be a dream, despite the fact that Kovalev disclaims it by pinching himself to make sure he is awake. "For it is only in a dream that compactness and vividness of imagery can be visualized as existing side by side with, or perhaps achieved at the cost of, logical and ontological incompatibility. It is precisely in a dream that a thing can be both part and whole. And only in a dream situation can such an incongruity be viewed with so slight a sense of shock."18

Erlich says that in an earlier, 1831 variant of "The Nose", there appeared the sentence, "Incidentally, all that was described here appeared to the major in a dream."19 Another variant merely toyed with the possibility: "This was so fantastically improbable that no one could call it a dream vision had it actually not happened." In the final version there is no such dream clause.
"Collegiate Assessor Kovalev had awakened rather early that morning . . . he wanted to look at a pimple which had appeared on his nose the previous evening, but to his great astonishment there was a completely flat space where his nose should have been.\(^{20}\) "One is tempted to speak of a false awakening, of an uneasy anxiety dream extended into the waking hours.\(^{21}\) But the story does belie any attempts toward nonrealistic explanation. Kovalev's preposterous readiness to blame his woes on the evil schemes of Mrs. Podtochina, the mother of the marriageable girl, epitomize the futility of all attempts to explain the inexplicable, to find a tangible clue to the absurd things that sometimes happen in this senseless world.

Once again the symbol of Nevsky Prospekt is echoed. The parading mustaches have been replaced by an arrogant, high ranking nose who looks down upon its lowly owner—a part separated from the whole because of the artificial device of rank. This rank is an all important element here which drives the hero, Kovalev, to imminent tragedy. The entire structure of the society here is one based on rank and social strata, and in such a manner are people identified and described. No one has a real face, or a real personality—only an external manifestation. And as such, people do not communicate; they ignore each other's
tragedies, intent upon the revolution of their own personal little spheres.
NOTES

1 Erlich, op. cit., 82.
3 Ibid., 211.
4 Ibid., op. cit., 84.
5 Ibid., 84.
6 Ibid., 86-87.
7 Gogol, The Overcoat, 207.
8 Ibid., 205.
9 Ibid., 222.
10 Ibid., 226.
11 Ibid., 216.
12 Ibid., 219.
13 Ibid., 225.
14 Erlich, op. cit., 88.
15 Gogol, The Overcoat, 203.
16 Ibid., 231.
17 Erlich, op. cit., 87.
18 Ibid., 89.
19 Ibid., 89.
20 Ibid., 89.
21 Ibid., 90.
CHAPTER VI
"DIARY OF A MADMAN"

If in "The Nose" Gogol bypasses the opportunity to legitimate his plot, and offers as an explanation, the notion that the world is a madhouse, in the "Diary of a Madman", the still stranger proceedings bear further evidence of this. A lively exchange of letters between two society dogs is allegedly motivated by the mounting insanity of the diarist, Poprishchin (possibly a play on the Russian word for pimple, "prishch").

The central character of this story is a lowly, miserable little clerk, hopelessly infatuated with his superior's daughter. A spiritual brother of Pirogov and Kovalov, but a much more ineffectual, pathetic one, he is just another insignificant little chinovnik, for whom a schizophrenic delusion of grandeur becomes an escape from crushing anonymity.

The first sentence of "Diary" bears a considerable similarity to the opening phrase of "The Nose". "Today an extraordinary event occurred." This event which the diarist finds so startling is overhearing a lively
conversation between two dogs, Madgie and Fido. Poprishchin's view of reality is not yet discernibly distorted, and he is taken somewhat aback. "I was very much surprised to hear Madgie speaking like a human being."\(^1\) But shortly afterwards his astonishment subsides.

After a while, when I thought it all over, I was no longer surprised. A number of similar instances have, indeed, occurred. They say that in England, a fish popped up and uttered two words in such a strange language that learned men have been for three years trying to interpret them and have not succeeded yet. But I must admit that I was much more surprised when Madgie said, "I did write to you Fido. Polkan probably didn't bring you the letter." Damn it all, I never in my life heard of a dog being able to write. No one but a nobleman by birth can write correctly.\(^2\)

Taken in this context, the passage would cast serious doubts upon the diarist's sanity. However, it is very little different from the babbling inanity of the narrator in the concluding sections of "The Nose".

Poprishchin's eavesdropping on society dogs is the beginning of his mute and hopeless courtship of Sophie, the inaccessible daughter of Poprishchin's boss. Since Madgie is Sophie's pet, the correspondence previously alluded to becomes of great interest to the poor little clerk because of the light it is likely to cast upon his standing with his beloved. Five weeks after the initial encounter with Madgie and Fido, Poprishchin takes bold, strategic action by plunging into a garbage can from which he pulls out
Madgie's letters. As he painstakingly deciphers the "doggy handwriting", the hopelessness of his predicament becomes painfully clear.

It is an interesting commentary on the nature of Gogol's literary strategy that this bit of Hoffmannesque whimsey should serve as the pivotal point in the story; that all the seemingly relevant factors of the situation—the bureaucratic ambitions of Sophie's self important director father, her frantic infatuation with the dashing young officer, and her amused disdain for her father's preposterous looking menial, Poprishchin—should have been reported by a dog! the status of the evidence is precarious. But it would be a simplification to suggest that the diarist's mounting derangement fully accounts for this new intrusion of the highly improbable.³

This fatal discovery serves as a turning point in the narrative. It is bad enough to be faced with conclusive proof that to one's beloved one is a ridiculous nobody. It is doubly humiliating to be found out and condescended to by a mere dog.

Poprishchin's inward reaction is as vehement as it is impotent. This moment of truth stirs a helpless rage at all the bureaucrats in positions so far above his, all those who "grab everything that's best in the world". He is plagued by an acute resentment of the utter nothingness to which a cinnovnik's lowly status has consigned him. To a deranged mind, whose hold on reality weakens daily, this rebellion against his predicament and his degrading identity leads to the questioning of its reality. Thus he asks
the indignant question: "Why should it have happened to
me? Why am I a mere titular councillor?", deciding then,
"perhaps I am not a titular councillor after all?" 4

The next phrase is a sudden preoccupation with inter-
national politics, more specifically, those of Spain.

Strange things are going on in Spain. They write
that the throne is vacant . . . It seems to me
that it is extremely peculiar. A kingdom cannot
exist without a king . . . I cannot get the af-
fairs of Spain out of my head. These events have
so overwhelmed and shaken me that I haven't been
able to do anything all day. 5

Thus the humiliated cinovnik who craves esteem uses
his schizophrenia to escape the unbearable truth. From
this it is but a short step to a delusion of grandeur, a
new identity as glamorous as the previous one was shabby
and commonplace. "There is a king in Spain! He has been
discovered! I am that king!" 6 Quite appropriately the
diarist announces his discovery in an entry which is a
galloping deterioration of mind, also marked by a disloca-
tion of sequence of time, "AD 2000, April 43", and inco-
herent ravings: "I do believe it all rose from believing
that the brain is in the head. It's not so bad at all; it
comes with the wind from the direction of the Caspian Sea." 7

The anti-feminine sentiment in this entry is no doubt
spurred on by his rejection from Sophie: "Woman is in love
with the devil . . . Scientific men write nonsense saying
this or that. She cares for nothing but the devil, she
does, and she will marry him, she will marry him."8

From this point on, events roll, quite inexorably, toward institutionalization. Yet typically, Gogol' plays games and the signals are either ignored or misinterpreted. He wrenches cruel comedy from Poprishchin's insanity by manipulating the incongruity between the actual event and the diarist's consistently mistaken perception of it. When Poprishchin announces to his servant and co-workers his newly found identity, that of the King of Spain in exile, he interprets their stunned silence as a sign of reverence and awe. When a few employees from an insane asylum come to his flat to cart him away, he construes this unannounced visit as an entreaty from his loyal friends to reoccupy the throne which he was forced to relinquish. But he is taken somewhat aback by their rudeness. One of the "grandees" hits him with a stick, but he is quite prepared to blame that on Spanish tradition.

In the last entry, however, dismal reality breaks through. The self styled King of Spain is forced to face the humiliating and brutalizing squalor of an insane asylum. His cry is one of great anguish:

No, I have not the strength to bear this any longer. God, the things they are doing to me! They pour cold water upon my head! They do not heed me, nor see me, nor listen to me. What have I done to them? What do they want of poor me? My strength is gone. I cannot endure all this torture. My head is aflame and everything
spins before my eyes. Save me someone, take me away! Give me three steeds, steeds as fast as the whirling wind. Seat yourself, driver, ring out the little harness bell, wing your way up steeds and wing me out of this world. On and on, so that nothing is seen of it -- nothing. Yonder the sky wheels its clouds; a tiny star glitters afar; a forest sweeps by with its dark trees and the moon comes in its wake; a silver grey mist swirls below, a musical string twangs in the mist; there is sea on one hand, there is Italy on the other, and now poor Russian peasant huts can be discerned. Is that my home looking blue in the distance? Is that my poor mother sitting there at her window? Mother dear, save your poor son! Shed a tear on his aching head. See how they torture him. Clasp the poor orphan to your heart! There is no place for him in the whole wide world! He is a haunted creature. Mother dear, take pity on your sick little child -- and by the way gentlemen, do you know that the Bey of Algiers has a wart growing right under his nose?  

"Once again," Erlich says, "the spell is abruptly, wantonly broken, and the reader is left in bewilderment. The shift is a double one. . . . pity peters into burlesque irrelevance. At the same time the recognition of reality yields once more to schizophrenic incoherence. The finale is truly Gogolian and more thoroughly grotesque than the ending of the Two Ivans."  

Again the same themes which are conspicuous in the other two stories reappear. Once more we are faced with a činovnik who has delusions of grandeur, little different from his more aggressive brothers, Kovalev and Pirogov. Profitable marriage and high rank are once again the big obsessions here. And there are no faces, no concrete
beings, only titles and names. The two dogs are more coherent, and play a greater role, than any of the people. And, above all, there is the same pervasive sense of loneliness and alienation.
NOTES

1Gogol, Nikolai, *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, 1960, 7.

2Ibid., 9.

3Erlich, *op. cit.*, 93.

4Gogol, *Diary*, 20.

5Ibid., 20-21.

6Ibid., 21.

7Ibid., 22.

8Ibid., 23.

9Erlich, *op. cit.*, 95-96.


11Erlich, *op. cit.*, 96-97.
CHAPTER VII
"THE OVERCOAT"

"A lowly ambition in lieu of a grand passion, a mundane fixation rather than a meaningful emotional involvement... such is the lot of the typical Gogolian homunculus."¹ This is characteristic of the majority of Gogol's heroes, but of none so much as of Akaky Akakievich, the hero of The Overcoat.

This slow witted, harassed činovník who is ignored by his peers, acquires at the cost of considerable privation, a new, made to order overcoat. Shortly after this event, which is the apogee of his bleak existence, the coveted object which clearly outshines and outranks its owner, is snatched from his shoulders by a husky robber. Shaken out of his usual timidity by this disaster, Akaky bursts into the office of a vainglorious dignitary, referred to as A Very Important Person, and demands action, only to be rebuked for not going through the proper channels. Shattered by it all, Akaky goes home and dies. Yet this is not the end of his ordeal. Suddenly a semi-comic, semi-pathetic tale with all sorts of realistic detail turns into a
fantastic ghost story. The ghost of Akaky Akakievich begins to haunt the city. At one point it confronts the Very Important Person and claims his overcoat, an experience which terrifies the overbearing official. "So fluid is the boundary between reality and delusion, so dense the fog of absurd rumors which thrive on the metropolitan muddle, that the ghostly clerk might well be a fragment of the bureaucrat's imagination, a phantom emerging from his bad conscience."  

The story begins: "In a certain department . . . but better not mention which department", and already this is rather nebulous. The description of Akaky is also vague, almost incongruous. "This clerk was nothing much to speak of; he was small, somewhat pockmarked, his hair was somewhat reddish and he even looked somewhat blind."  

The repeated use of the word "somewhat" (in Russian it is "neskol'ko") adds to the vagueness and incongruity. The incongruity increases in the scene where a name is being selected for the infant Akaky. His last name is already demeaning; "Bashmak" is the Russian word for shoe. And his first name and patronymic have vulgar connotations, "kakat'" meaning to defecate. Characteristically, the insult to the infant is construed by the author as the only logical, inexorable choice. At the time of his christening, the hapless mother was confronted by a list of names
so totally absurd and outlandish (including Strifilius, Dulius, Mochius, Hotzazat) that the naming of the child after his father would appear to be a highly desirable alternative. The implication is that he comes from a long line of Akakys and such is to be his ignominious fate.

A man with a name like that could by no means be dynamic; the fates obviously had marked him out for a life of inobtrusive servility. "He was always seen in the same place, in the same position at the very same duty, precisely the same copying clerk, so they used to declare that he must have been born a copying clerk, uniform, bald patch and all. No respect was shown to him in the department." 4

The vagueness and facelessness which characterizes Akaky is extended to all the other characters appearing in the story as well. The tailor whom Akaky timidly approaches in hopes of obtaining a coat is nothing more than a big toe with a "twisted nail, thick and hard like a tortoise shell." 5 The tailor's wife too is a nonentity: "Little is known of her, except . . . [she] wore a bonnet instead of a kerchief." 5 Even the lid of a snuff box, embellished with a miniature portrait of a general, has a piece of paper glued over the dent where the face used to be. The robbers who beat and rob Akaky are a group of mustaches, and the Very Important Person is nothing more than a title and a string of pompous phrases.
The souls of these people have no more individuality than do their bodies. "Not only are these people dominated by an idée fixe, they are caught in what might be an étrange fixée. They have no range, either of perception or expression. Akaky Akakievich ... is practically a speaking mute, an unparalleled and intranslatable triumph of the inarticulate put into words and yet left marvelously intact."

Out on the streets Akaky walked along as one in a dream. "What do you know," he says to himself, "I really didn't even think that it could turn out you know" ... And then, after a short silence, "So there you are! Look how it finally turned out, and really, I couldn't ever have supposed that's how it would be!" After this another long silence ensued; then he said out loud, "So that's how it is! There's a really absolutely unexpected one for you, I mean ... there's one you wouldn't have ..." What a situation!

The Very Important Person to whom Akaky appeals for help when his overcoat is stolen, is no less absurd in this regard. "His customary conversation with inferiors reeked of strictness and consisted of just three phrases, "How dare you! Do you know whom you're talking to? Do you understand who it is that's standing before you?" The narrator goes on to suggest that "at heart he was a kind man", but, "having received the rank of general he had somehow got mixed up." The scene in which he brutally chastizes Akaky is contrasted with the one immediately preceding it. Closeted with an old friend from childhood, he and his friend had already run out of things to say and now their
conversation consisted of patting each other on the leg and repeating, "So that's how it is Ivan Abramovich!--
That's how it is Stepan Varlamovich."\(^{10}\)

In Puškin's work *The Bronze Horseman*, the Neva floods over and sweeps away all of Evgeny's dreams, eventually claiming his life as well. In "The Overcoat", the narrator speaks of that "formidable enemy of all those who receive a salary in the neighborhood of four hundred roubles a year. The enemy is none other than our northern cold, although they say it's very healthy."\(^{11}\) This cold weather is the impetus which drives Akaky onward to the acquisition of a new coat, and it is also the cause of his death, as it fatally chills him after his disastrous interview with the Very Important Person. "And the wind," Gogol' comments, "according to Petersburg custom, blew at him from all four sides at once." The next day he was very ill, and "thanks to the generous assistance of the Petersburg climate the illness progressed beyond all expectations."\(^{12}\)

The theme of loneliness and isolation is likewise very strong here, as it is in the three preceding tales. Akaky is accustomed to living alone, without friends or family. And when he is confronted by a major tragedy, the theft of his coat, no one really cares. The clerks in his department make a token effort to reimburse him, but "the department employees had already had to donate money for a
portrait of the Director and to subscribe to some book or other... so the sum turned out to be the merest trifle."13

To mention the callous indifference of the Very Important Person would be redundant, and the doctor who attends upon Akaky during his illness is no less detached, calmly suggesting a pine coffin to be ordered as soon as possible. And thus Akaky dies, just as alone and unmourned for as Piskarev was, and as Poprishchkin doubtless soon would be.

But the matter is not simple as to describe Akaky as merely a victim of bureaucracy and exploitation. For Akaky's most pathetic aspect is to derive satisfaction from meaningless and menial chores. He was once given the chance to do something more important than copying—he was instructed to tamper with a report from another department by altering the headings and occasionally changing the first person to the third. Yet this proved too taxing for Akaky. "He mopped his brow and said at last, 'No, I'd rather copy something.'"14

The smallness of his aspirations seems to be highlighted by his short-lived infatuation with an overcoat. Shortly after Akaky reluctantly realizes how much he needs a new overcoat, he is visibly changed. The strenuous program of hardship upon which he embarks to achieve his goal yields a new sense of purpose, a goal which Akaky can, at long last, call his own.
He even became accustomed to being hungry in the evening; on the other hand he had spiritual nourishment, for he carried ever in his thoughts the idea of the future overcoat. His whole existence had, in a sense, become fuller, as though he had got married, as though some other person were with him, as though he were no longer alone but with an agreeable companion who had consented to walk the path of life with him, hand in hand, and that companion was none other than the new overcoat with its thick padding and its strong, durable lining. He became, as it were, more alive, even more strong willed like a man who had set before himself a definite goal.15

The strongly sexual imagery in the passage strongly indicates that the coat has become a sort of wife or mistress to him. Erlich calls this phenomenon a "displacement of libido".16 It is strange and pathetic to note that when Akaky's libido does finally emerge, it is not directed toward any living thing, but toward an inanimate object.

As Akaky and his overcoat go to the party, the atmosphere on the streets of Petersburg is strongly evocative of "Nevsky Prospekt". People and carriages flash by quickly, and in store windows there are engravings of the sort that in "Nevsky Prospekt", "do not venture to show themselves in daylight."17 Akaky stops, for the first time in his life, to admire just such a one of "a pretty woman kicking off her shoe and thereby showing her whole leg, which was not bad at all; in the background some man or other with sidewhiskers and a handsome Spanish goatee was sticking his head through a door leading to another room. Akaky shook his head, smiled, snorted and walked on."18
After the party where he is regaled with champagne and admiration for his new coat, as he is trudging home, he feels so up to par that he "almost darted after a lady who flashed by him like a streak of lightning, every part of her body astir with independent, fascinating motion." in the manner of a Pirogov. But the bustling, night time streets of Petersburg are just as deceptive and dangerous in this tale as they are in "Nevsky Prospekt". This Akaky is to discover all too soon.

This last story also fits well within the framework of the Petersburg Tales. Once again the three basic themes are reiterated in full force—-the theme of pompous, overbearing status, manifested by such externals as rank and appearance; the theme of the lack of humanity and kindness in the inhabitants of the city; and the theme of extreme hostility and isolation exuded by the atmosphere of the city of Petersburg itself.
NOTES

1 Erlich, op. cit., 143.
2 Ibid., 145.
3 Gogol, Overcoat, 233.
4 Ibid., 235.
5 Ibid., 242.
6 Ibid., 241.
7 Fanger, op. cit., 241.
8 Gogol, The Overcoat, 246.
9 Ibid., 261.
10 Ibid., 262.
11 Ibid., 240.
12 Ibid., 264.
13 Ibid., 259.
14 Ibid., 237.
15 Ibid., 249.
16 Erlich, op. cit., 149.
17 Gogol, The Overcoat, 167.
18 Ibid., 254.
19 Ibid., 256.
CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSION

"Oh do not trust that Nevsky Prospekt! . . . All is
deceit, all is a dream, all is not what it seems . . ."¹
This is indeed the theme and the summation of this entire
cycle of stories. In various embodiments, all the themes
touched upon in the story "Nevsky Prospekt" will appear in
the following ones to create a pattern and form from it an
atmosphere that characterizes Gogol's Petersburg. "The
city . . . is the hero or the antihero of Gogol's cycle,
and . . . is less a geographical, political or aesthetic
unity than an atmosphere."²

The fantastic, relatively absent from the plot of
the first story, "Nevsky Prospekt", will appear with
greater frequency, dominating the events of "The Nose",
and appearing in "Diary of a Madman" and in the epilogue
of "The Overcoat". The devil who lights the lamps along
Nevsky Prospekt, although he is ostensibly absent from the
stories, promulgates his evil in the form of greed for
money and rank, which drives people to madness and hallu-
cination, as well as "pošlost'", that smug mediocrity which
dominates the majority of Petersburg's inhabitants.

Piskarev, the idealistic artist, perishes in the hostile pošlost' of the city, while his philistine counterpart, Pirogov, thrives on just exactly that. Kovalev, also a philistine, faces a potential tragedy when his aspirations for higher rank and successful marriage are almost thwarted by the disappearance of a vital external embellishment--his nose. Poprishchin cannot attain his beloved, and consequently, his happiness, because of his lowly rank. And Akaky transfers all his hopes and aspirations into an overcoat. The themes which the introductory section of the story, "Nevsky Prospekt", presented--the search for rank and riches, the facelessness and anonymity of the crowds, and above all, the incommunicable loneliness, are very strongly felt throughout the four tales.

Petersburg is essentially a tragic city, but its tragedy lacks the grandeur that Pushkin's work evokes. *The Bronze Horseman* characterizes a spectacular struggle between two titans, Peter the Great and Nature, who destroy everything in the wake of their efforts. Evgeny's great tragedy is a result of that struggle. Gogol', on the other hand, writes of the masses of činovniki, and other little, insignificant people who live out their drab, lonely, meaningless lives and die, in a very unspectacular way. Gogol's is not the city of grand palaces and monuments; his is a
city of faceless phantoms who drift along its boulevards, imprisoned by their narrow, appointed tasks and unable to escape them, till they "soon dissolve into the gloom of constant mist."³
NOTES

1 Gogol, *The Overcoat*, 201.

2 Fanger, *op. cit.*, 114.

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