

# Narrative Oscillation in Gogol's "Nevsky Prospect"

by Pierre R. Hart

As though dismayed by his own account, the narrator of "Nevsky Prospect" concludes with an attempt to distance himself from the reality that he has depicted so convincingly: "Oh, do not trust this Nevsky Prospect! I always wrap myself more tightly in my cloak when I walk along it and absolutely try not to look at the objects which meet me" (43).<sup>1</sup> Such a strategy for self-protection against a curiously dehumanized urban scene anticipates that of the main character in the most famous of Gogol's Petersburg tales, "The Overcoat" and suggests equal peril. At this early point in his encounter with the capital, the author expressed his fear of its pervasive effect upon body and soul. Yet there is an air of ambivalence about his perception of the city, a fascination with the environment that would prompt continued exploration of it.

Gogol's decision to place "Nevsky Prospect" first in the cycle of the urban tales as they appeared in the 1842 edition of his works suggests that he regarded the story as central to his apprehension of the capital. Critics have commented extensively on its thematic ties to the remaining stories without giving great attention to its stylistic complexity. How it is constructed has considerable importance for the remainder of the stories, its mixture of the sentimental and the satiric establishing a tone that would persist, culminating in "The Overcoat." As Vinogradov has observed, theme and style are linked through the distinctive image of the authorial "I": "an image of a constantly changing, fragile emotional structure, an image ceaselessly shifting from one thematic and expressive sphere to another" (97). Stepanov has defined this narrative oscillation more narrowly, the whole of the account being founded upon a "vibration of pathos and irony" (207). The resonance is generated both by the contrast in dominant tone between the story's several segments

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<sup>1</sup>All translations, which are mine, are from the Russian edition of Gogol cited, volume 3, containing "Nevsky Prospect," and volume 2, containing the essay "Woman." Those wishing to consult a published English translation of Gogol's fiction are referred to David Magarshak's *The Overcoat and Other Tales of Good and Evil*.

and by the narrator's changing attitude toward persons and events within a single segment. In its entirety, the work can be read as a commentary on the author's confrontation with reality and his various strategies for dealing with it. The apparent confidence with which the urban scene is initially depicted is, by degrees, surrendered. Rather than affording him the milieu for positive creation, the city impresses itself upon him with its implacable nature, forcing him into his final defensive posture.

The narrative frame for the individual accounts of Piskarev and Pirogov's adventures depends equally upon the lofty rhetoric of the panegyric and the prosaic manner of the feuilleton. In the first instance, the orator seeks, by the force of his delivery, to further enhance a subject inherently grand. Yet comparison of Gogol's work with the opening stanzas of Puškin's "Petersburg tale," *The Bronze Horseman*, reveals a very different effect, hyperbole being immediately shot through with dubious qualifications: "There is nothing better than the Nevsky Prospect, at least in Petersburg; for the city it is everything" (7). Instead of providing his reader with a sense of some coherent whole, the narrator anticipates his later vision of the city as a demonically shattered reflection, the fragments of people and objects on the avenue lacking any unity. As Hughes suggests, the full value of this introduction derives from the story's conclusion: "If we keep the tone of the epilogue in mind, the opening exalted description of Nevsky Avenue acquires a different meaning. The narrator only pretends to be naive for he knows the value of the beauty and the wealth exhibited on Nevsky Avenue . . ." (78). The particulars that he describes, more the focus of the *flâneur* than of the orator, detract from an elevated image and serve to remind the reader of the narrator's idiosyncratic vision. In his culminating pronouncement on the official city, he specifically invokes the edifying purpose of the solemn ode to completely opposite effect: "My God! What wonderful offices and services, how they elevate and satisfy the soul!" (10). The total absence of uplifting elements from the urban environment will prove of opposite consequence for the story's two major characters.

In describing the impoverished artist, Piskarev, the narrator refers to him as a "strange phenomenon" and, in a brief digression on the very notion of artistic function in Petersburg, makes clear the alien nature of the environment. As elsewhere in Gogol's fiction, sunny Italy, with its long cultural heritage, provides the true source for artistic inspiration, while those fated to exist in the cold and damp of Russia's capital are effectively denied the opportunity for healthy growth. Piskarev's plight is the narrator's own, and the sympathetic manner in which he describes his character's situation leads, at times, to a virtual fusion of his consciousness with that of Piskarev. The choice of a painter to exemplify the problems attending true creation may well have been deliberate for, as Peace suggests: "It is for the visual artist, above all, that the relationship between facade and content is most

crucial. The painter can only reproduce surfaces, can only put down on his canvases the exterior of things and people" (108). Although the writer is less restricted in his representation, he shares the painter's dilemma in some respects. Both are capable of seeing beyond the surface, yet reconciling the disparities between real and ideal proves difficult, if not impossible. The first indication of Piskarev's divided vision is offered as the narrator describes his gaze: "At one and the same time he sees both your features and the features of some plaster Hercules standing in his room, or his own picture, which he is planning to produce, would occur to him" (15). What ultimately differentiates narrator from character are their respective solutions to the problem. Having penetrated the Petersburg facade and being repelled by its underlying substance, Piskarev will retreat into drug-induced fantasy as an escape. The narrator, by contrast, maintains a necessary perspective on the perils of escapism. His is a cautionary tale, applicable to all fictions about the capital, including his own.

As Piskarev impulsively pursues the young brunette, his reactions are described in a manner underscoring the narrator's sympathetic attitude toward him. Just as he does in contemplating subjects for his paintings, the artist immediately superimposes the ideal upon the real: "My God! What divine features! The dazzling whiteness of a most lovely brow was shaded by hair as beautiful as agate" (36). He will persist in his conception of her as a "goddess" until the overwhelming press of reality compels him to admit otherwise. The issue of self-deception, posed several times in the course of his pursuit, is phrased so that it is difficult to determine the degree of his own awareness: "He trembled all over and couldn't believe his eyes. No, it was the lamp's deceptive light which traced such smiles on her face; no, it was his own dreams mocking him" (16). Momentarily, at least, he appears to admit to the possibility of a deception which is the combined product of external illumination and his own imagination. Yet he scarcely hesitates, seemingly convinced that his initial impression was an accurate one and that the brunette is ideal beauty incarnate.

When he finally reaches the prostitute's apartment and his misperception is confirmed, the moral judgment is delivered in such manner as to reinforce the shared vision of narrator and character: "All of this convinced him that he had come into that disgusting refuge where wretched vice, born of the capital's tawdry education and awful overcrowding, had taken up residence" (18). The narrator's digression on woman as "the crown of creation," corrupted and transformed into an "ambiguous being" by the circumstances of earthly existence, repeats the argument of Gogol's 1831 essay "Woman." The short story provides a more pessimistic elaboration of its central theme as it pertains to artistic creativity.

Both essay and short story concern the translation of elevated vision into the concrete terms of the physical world. Setchkarev, who traces "Woman" to

the philosophy of the German idealists, notes that "An antithesis of special importance in Gogol turns up here: Beauty conceals dangers, evil lurks behind the godlike surface; if for a moment one takes his eyes off ideal beauty, the passions rage and pull everything around them to destruction" (123). In the essay, Gogol presents the problem as a female-male opposition: "While the picture is still in the artist's head, being created and shaped abstractly (*besplotno*) it is woman: when it becomes material and assumes palpable form, it is man" (10). The "coarse reality" inherent in the latter complicates the artistic enterprise from the outset, yet the objective of conveying some intimation of the divine in material form is compelling, the artist's obligation being "to make accessible to people at least a part of the infinite world of his soul, to incarnate woman in man" (10).

Piskarev's tragedy stems from his inability to reverse the process, to begin with corrupted physical beauty and, somehow, to restore moral perfection to it. The narrator's own anguish over the actual state of beauty in this world is every bit as intense as his character's: "In fact we are never so consumed with pity as at the sight of beauty, touched by the putrid breath of depravity" (19). His resolute moral stance is especially striking, given the attitude he will express toward physical beauty in the story's following segment (see below). When Piskarev finally admits to the primacy of this world, he abandons any effort to transform it through his art. Private fantasy rather than public expression becomes his only solace, and his search for opium to sustain that fantasy marks the final step in his abandonment of the artistic enterprise. The condition that he must satisfy to obtain the opium is noteworthy: the Persian drug dealer demands that he create a portrait of a "dark-browed beauty" in return for it.

Piskarev's final encounter with the unrepentant prostitute underscores the futility of his attempt to deny the reality of her being. Unable to reform her or to accept the status quo, he commits suicide. The narrator, having maintained so close and sympathetic a stance toward Piskarev, concludes this segment in an ambiguous manner, first mourning his death but then dispelling sentimental excess by an irreverent description of funeral processions. This shift in sentiment might be viewed as a means of reasserting the possibility of coping with, if not reshaping, the world that he has depicted.

The narrator's attitude toward this "victim of insane passion" resolves itself through juxtaposition with his assessment of the second character, Pirogov. Although both contain an element of ambiguity, they yield very different results. The young lieutenant survives the test of urban reality where the artist has perished, but his strategy of adaptation has little to recommend it. Zeldin, in discussing Gogol's attitude toward the beautiful, offers one explanation for the combination and the story's outcome:

. . . drawn by the aesthetic though he was, the beautiful remained indescribable, beyond the bounds of actual embodiment. He could do no more than indicate it by portraying its opposite, which contrasted with the language employed and with the form of the artistic work. . . . (148)

Accordingly, the change in tonality that attends the description of Piskarev's death signals a turning point in narrative posture. In portraying Pirogov, the narrator remarks on those attitudes and aspirations that place him in total opposition to the painter. Rather than openly displaying his antipathy, however, the narrator subtly subverts his characterization. As Peace observes:

The high opinion which the narrator holds of Pirogov is blatantly contradicted by the facts he chooses to present. But the reader is aware that the narrator's "idealised" view of the hero is merely a reflection of that high regard in which Pirogov holds himself. (103-04)

By contrast with the artist's "spark of talent," which goes unrealized, the narrator asserts that "it is somewhat difficult to recount all of the talents which fate had bestowed upon Pirogov" (34). Chief among these is his ability to string smoke rings together, a quality celebrated in the tone of the mock panegyric. His attitude toward feminine beauty and relations with the women of Petersburg is central to the definition of his character. In an extended description of Schiller's wife, the narrator ostensibly endorses his character's views: "For all of her appeal (*milovidnost*), she was very stupid. . . . All spiritual inadequacies in a beautiful woman, rather than producing revulsion, somehow become unusually attractive; vice itself lends them an appeal" (*dyšit v nix milovidnost'ju*; 39). The entire emphasis here is upon physical beauty. The confusing combination of stupidity, appealing appearance and vice stands in direct contradiction to the position taken by the narrator in his account of Piskarev, yet it is appropriate to a transcription of the lieutenant's thoughts.

In describing Pirogov's adventures, the narrator totally avoids the elevated descriptive manner used to characterize the artist's (mis)perception of the brunette. As he makes clear, the sole motivation for the lieutenant's pursuit is physical conquest and his character proceeds with single-minded determination: "Pleasure is always connected with overcoming obstacles and the blonde became more interesting to him with each day" (39). Nothing about the urban scene, as he views it, conveys the sense of emotional tumult that accompanies Piskarev's experience. The mere thought of the brunette makes the latter's world go topsy-turvey, but Pirogov's thoroughly prosaic world view remains completely unaffected by feminine beauty.

The malevolent building that "rises up" before Piskarev, its windows filled with flame and its railing barring his way, presages the catastrophe that will befall him. By contrast, the lieutenant traverses a cityscape devoid of any

threatening features. The two characters' entrances into the dwellings of the women they have pursued are rendered by the narrator in equally distinctive manners. For Piskarev, the shock of recognition is conveyed through the description of both furnishings and occupants: "An unpleasant untidiness, usually seen only in the neglected rooms of bachelors, was everywhere apparent. The furniture which was fairly good, was covered with dust. . . . Good God, where had he come!" (18). It is the "absence of a caring housewife" or, more generally, the dissociation from the truly feminine that narrator and character alike perceive in this interior. No such moral editorializing attends Pirogov's entrance into the apartment of the tinsmith Schiller. The clutter of the workshop is simply noted in passing and its contrast with the adjoining, "very pleasantly arranged" room elicits only the comment that it shows the owner to be a German.

It is with the description of Schiller and Hoffman that the narrator most deftly captures the pedestrian quality of Pirogov's world. Those qualities of the Schillerean hero embodied in Piskarev—and regretfully acknowledged by the narrator to be insufficient for survival—reverberate throughout the subsequent account of the lieutenant's adventures. The narrator's description of Pirogov's "passion for everything sublime" (*strast' k vsemu izjaščemy*) deliberately parodies the Schillerean devotion to the "beautiful and the sublime." As though to underscore the primacy of those values associated with the contemporary capital, the comparison is drawn between the author of *Wilhelm Tell* and "the famous [emphasis added] Schiller, the tinsmith in Meščanskij Street" (35). The drunken conversation that the two German craftsmen have concerning their respective noses might be construed as a further parodic repudiation of earthly pleasures.

Even the culminating account of Pirogov's thrashing at the hands of Schiller and his companions, presented in feigned indignation, sustains the illusion of the narrator's sympathy for his character. The "crude and inconsiderate" manner of their behavior leads him to conclude: "I simply cannot find the words to depict this sad event" (42). His loss for words invites comparison with that graphic description of the suicide scene that ends the story of Piskarev's life.

Indignation quickly yields to placid acceptance, the lieutenant consoling himself with two puff tarts and a glance at the local newspaper, prompting the narrator's laconic observation that the episode "ended somewhat strangely." The latter's transition to the framing conclusion is equally undramatic, as though he were not yet fully divested of the unreflecting character that is Pirogov's. Yet despite the inconsequential impact of demonic deception upon his character, the narrator ultimately confirms its pervasive negative effect in unambiguous terms.

The particular susceptibility of art to demonic perversion would be more

fully explored in another of the Petersburg tales, "The Portrait." In that work, the painter inadvertently insures the perpetuation of evil in the world through his all-too-successful effort to capture on canvas the essence of a darkly mysterious money lender. Read in combination with "Nevsky Prospect" it establishes a sense of aesthetic peril that would haunt Gogol throughout the whole of his career.

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