

## THE PRESENTATION OF THE DEMONIC IN GOGOL'S TALES

VID SNOJ (LJUBLJANA)

The article deals with the demonic and the divine in the cycle „Petersburgian Tales“ by N. V. Gogol, especially in the short story Portrait.

**Keywords:** N. V. Gogol, the demonic, the divine, Portrait.

The 19th century is a period not only of realistic but also of fantastic literature. Fantastic fiction, most often taking the form of a short story or tale, came to the fore in the period of romanticism and was maintained, even after the emergence of the realistic novel, throughout the 19th century as a marginal companion to that great genre. The fantastic was written by many important realistic and even naturalistic 19th century writers: not only at the beginning of their literary careers, as was the case with Balzac or Dostoevsky, but even later, as in the case of de Maupassant.

Gogol, the author of *Dead Souls*, which is considered the first great Russian prose novel, wrote the fantastic from the beginning to the very end of his literary writing career. In 1831 he published the first volume of a collection of his Ukrainian tales entitled *Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka*, which established his reputation, and the year 1842 produced, in addition to his *Overcoat* and *Dead Souls*, the second version of *The Portrait*, a tale from the Petersburg cycle, which had appeared in its first version in the *Arabesques* of 1835. Thereafter he published no more literature till his death in 1852. Yet what sets *The Portrait* apart from Gogol's other works is not merely that it was reworked and published for a second time by the author himself, before his withdrawal into literary silence. According to Ann Marie Basom, this tale, existing as it does in two versions, belongs to Gogol's both early and late, both to his „Ukrainian“ and „Petersbur-

gian“ periods, and is thus „critical to an understanding“<sup>1</sup> of his fantastic fiction. It was this special status of *The Portrait* in Gogol’s oeuvre, which is, as I will attempt to demonstrate, committed to portraying the demonic even in its non-fantastic, „realistic“<sup>2</sup> part, as well as the thematization of the question whether art can be a medium of such portrayal, that led me to focus on this tale.

The name for the fantastic as a literary genre is based on the Greek verb *phantázo*, „make visible, present to the eye.“ The fantastic is thus a work of *phantasia*, of „imagination,“ but certainly not in the sense which was acquired by this human faculty in, let us say, Kant’s seminal Modern Age theory of knowledge. Not in the sense of *Einbildungskraft*, „the faculty of image making“, which performs its task on the materials supplied by our senses under the control of our understanding as a „faculty of concepts.“ On the contrary: the very name for the fantastic as a work of *unrestrained* imagination has a negative connotation of the *phántasma*, that is, of *appearance, which is at the same time a mere apparition or phantom*. The „fantastic“ contains in its very name a judgment, a sentence even, on itself. This sentence is pronounced by the common sense, that sense which is by nature common to all, establishing sensible intuition as a basis for grasping and knowing reality. The only reality is the world perceived with our own eyes outside the mode of a pre-existing idea, a secularised world with no unshowable beyond. From the common sense perspective, the „other“ which invades this world is seen as fantastic, as merely apparent, as a deception of the senses. Any sensible intuition out of keeping with the natural propensity of the common sense is only a matter of auto-affection, either by religious faith (or dogmatic belief), or by a psychogenic disorder. It is a form of what the soul suffers apart from this propensity, a form of psychopathology – something that is evident in advance in its semblance, indeed, in its falsity.

This established, even popular understanding of the fantastic was plumbed to the greatest depth in literary criticism by Tzvetan Todorov in the beginning of 1970s. His fundamental observation is that the constitutive element of the modern literary fantastic as formed in the 19th century is an event which disrupts an accustomed, intelligible course of events in such a way that it admits no final explanation, either supernatural or natural, in the narrative. This event arouses uncertainty at the ontological level and hesitation at the epistemological level for protagonist and reader alike. The fantastic is no phantom, no distortion of the

---

<sup>1</sup> BASOM, A. M.: The Fantastic in Gogol’s Two Versions of *Portret*, The Slavic and East European Journal, 1994, No. 3, p. 421.

<sup>2</sup> I refrain from discussing Gogol’s realism, which was addressed as early as the 19th century in Rozanov’s critical observations on the lack of life in Gogol’s literary characters.

normal sensible intuition; rather, it engenders a suspension of certainty, maintaining the appearance of something different from what is generally considered real. It is not lacking in depth, but this depth is entirely obscure, hidden in the appearance itself. The fantastic is destroyed if and when it steps out of its uncertain appearance, that is, when it allows itself to be recognised either as the manifestation of a background supernatural entity or as a psychical projection. The moment of uncertainty must last throughout the narrative, or else the fantastic will change either to the marvelous or to the uncanny (in that case, the pure fantastic will develop the subgenres of the fantastic-marvelous or the fantastic-uncanny). The fantastic is a delicate, ephemeral genre, „a vanishing genre,“ but since it calls in question the nature of reality, it is at the same time the very „quintessence of literature.“<sup>3</sup>

The development into a subgenre and – in the second version – the preservation of the narrative at a pure fantastic level are arguably evident in Gogol's *Portrait*. According to Ann Marie Basom, the presentation of events in the first version of the tale draws on Gogol's early, Ukrainian fantastic; in Todorov's terms, this version belongs to the marvelous or fantastic-marvelous (sub)genre. The mode, however, changes in the second version, which thus comes to represent the fantastic in its pure form.

How, then, is Gogol's *Portrait* made?

The framework of the story, the events with their links and sequencing, is the same in both versions. Both consist of two parts. The first part describes the encounter of a young painter, Chertkov, with the portrait of an unknown person, which is made arresting and disturbing especially by the sitter's eyes, and the evil influence of the portrait on the young man's subsequent career. The second part reaches back, giving the preliminary story of how the portrait of the unknown man, a moneylender, first came into existence, of its troubling influence on the artist both during the painting and later, and, indeed, of its fatal influence on all who ever came in contact with it, comparable to that exercised by the moneylender himself. In both versions, the first part is told by the authorial narrator and the second part by the painter's son, who largely summarises his father's confession. The theme remains unchanged as well: the visitation of the demonic and the question of its portrayal in art.

---

<sup>3</sup> TODOROV, T.: Introduction à la littérature fantastique, Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1970, pp. 47 and 176. The claim that the fantastic is the quintessence of literature implies that literature essentially reexamines reality. Its underlying assumption, however, is that realistic, mimetic literature leaves reality untouched in the unquestionability of our accustomed comprehension—an assumption which is certainly questionable itself in its turn.

But in contrast to the first version, the play on the marvelous element is restricted in the second. To cite an example: the first version has the portrait, after its discovery by Chertkov in an antique dealer's shop, mysteriously appear in his apartment, whereas the second version has Chartkov<sup>4</sup> negotiate its price with the dealer and carry it home himself. Another example: the first version has Chertkov's reputation as a portrait painter spread immediately on his acquiring the portrait by virtue of the acquisition alone, while the second version has Chartkov use part of the money stashed in the portrait frame to pay for a newspaper article which begins to spread his fame. The decisive means, however, by which the marvelous element is restricted in the second version of the tale is the *modality of perception*. As noted by Ann Marie Basom, Chartkov's encounter with the portrait is rendered with an emphasis on this very modality:

The portrait, it appeared (*kazalos'*), was not finished; yet the power of the painter's brush was amazing. The most striking feature was the eyes: it appeared (*kazalos'*) that the artist had spent on them all the power of his paintbrush and all his diligent industry. They simply glared, glared out of the portrait itself, as if [*kak budto*] their strange liveliness destroyed its harmony.<sup>5</sup>

The play of the narrative on the modality of perception, indicated by *kazalos'* and *kak budto*, permits the possibility of seeming. But only as a possibility, for the possibility of the marvelous is balanced by a possibility of the uncanny. In other words, the possibility of a supernatural explanation is balanced by the possibility of a natural explanation of the events, so that the tale is left open-ended: Is the portrait indeed an embodiment of evil? Or is its evil action merely a psychological projection? What follows from this undecidability is that „events presented as marvelous or fantastic-marvelous in the Petersburg edition are transformed into the fantastic in the Rome edition.”<sup>6</sup>

According to Ann Marie Basom, the marvelous and the uncanny (as defined in Todorov's general theory of the modern literary fantastic) match the direct and the indirect or veiled fantastic which are distinguished in Gogol by Yurii Mann, one of Russia's central contemporary Gogol scholars. This distinction is based on the observation that Gogol's fantastic figures, such as the devil, the witch and

---

<sup>4</sup> Chertkov, whose name in Russian evidently suggests both *chert*, „devil“, and *cherta*, „line“ or „boundary“, was changed by Gogol to Chartkov.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. BASOM, A. M.: *The Fantastic in Gogol's Two Versions of „Portret“*, p. 423; for Gogol's text, see *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, Vol. 3: *Povesti*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo „Khudozhestvennaya literatura“, 1966, p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. BASOM, A. M.: *The Fantastic in Gogol's Two Versions of „Portret“*, p. 428.

others, never „appear on the contemporary but only on the past temporal plane.“<sup>7</sup> From this, Mann concludes that it is only in the veiled fantastic that the fantastic action reaches into the present; in the direct fantastic, on the other hand, where the devil appears in his own figure, it is always set in the past.

All tales from the collection *Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka* thus take place in the past. They are removed to the distant or near past by the narrative of the authorial or personal narrator, the beekeeper Panko – in the introduction or at least in the conclusion. The only exceptions are the tales *Sorochintsi Fair*, where the fantastic events are conveyed in the „form of rumours“ serving to remove the action to the near past, and *May Night, or The Drowned Maiden*, which uses neither a narrative frame nor a rumour embedded in the narrative to effect this removal. The only one of the Petersburg tales which is made similarly to the Ukrainian tales is the first version of *The Portrait*, except that it is not both bearers of the fantastic action who pass to the temporal plane of the present – that is, the moneylender as well – but the portrait alone.

In a shorter, later text on the two versions of the tale, Mann, like Ann Marie Basom, observes that the fantastic (or, in Todorov's terms, marvelous) element in the second version is mitigated while the „psychologisation of the action“ is strengthened, although it does not decisively prevail at the end.<sup>8</sup> As for the mitigation of the marvelous, both authors stress the view sounded at the end of the painter's confession: „I know that the world rejects the existence of the devil [*d'javola*], so I will not speak of him.“<sup>9</sup> For my own part, however, I wish to stress something else: the voice of the world, of „the implied reader,“ to use the term of Ann Marie Basom,<sup>10</sup> is a voice which has no bearer in the narrative and is allowed to speak only indirectly, within the painter's confession. Its appearance means a concession, an act of yielding, of making room for the view of the modern secularised world – indeed, it means a dialogical opening of the painter's confession itself. But in the dialogical situation which opens within his confession, the painter's voice at the same time unyieldingly advocates a view contrary to the voice of the world. The painter's confession about the portrait, embedded in the narrative of his son, which adds to it the rumours of the moneylender's evil

<sup>7</sup> MANN, Y.: Poetika Gogolya, in: idem, *Tvorchestvo Gogolya. Smisl i forma*, St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Sankt-Peterburskogo univerziteta, 2007, p. 71. The text was first published as a monograph in 1978.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. MANN, Y.: *Khudozhnik i „uzhasnaya deistvitel'nost.“ O dvukh redakciyakh povesti „Portret,“* in: idem, *Tvorchestvo Gogolya. Smisl i forma*, p. 368. The text dates from 1990.

<sup>9</sup> GOGOL', N. V.: *Povesti*, p. 133.

<sup>10</sup> BASOM, A. M.: *The Fantastic in Gogol's Two Versions of „Portret,“* p. 429. Cf. also MANN, Y. *Khudozhnik i „uzhasnaya deistvitel'nost,“* p. 368.

influence, is a testimony to the actual existence of the demonic. Gogol's tale is open-ended, but the weight of the testimony inclines towards the truly demonic rather than towards a psychical projection.

Raising our eyes from how *The Portrait* is made, we perceive the emergence of a deep problem which plagued Gogol increasingly with regard to his own art. In my opinion, Gogol's problem was not so much how to adapt the fantastic to the mentality of a contemporary Westernised Russian, such as Belinski;<sup>11</sup> rather, it was how to *balance or outweigh the demonic, which was, in some way or other, presented in his literature, by the divine.*

The problem, however, is exacerbated through the way in which *The Portrait* addresses the question of art as a medium for presenting the demonic. The answer to the question is negative: the first version shows Chertkov wondering whether the portrait is art or sorcery, and the second version has the painter of the portrait expressly deny that it might be art.<sup>12</sup> True, Gogol may have put into *The Portrait* „more of himself than into any other of his works,”<sup>13</sup> so that there is an indisputable analogy between the portrait of the tale and his art. It was in *The Portrait*, if anywhere, that he rejected his own art through the painter's character. In other respects, however, the analogy limps: his art, which lies precisely in the presentation of the demonic, is never denounced as non-art with the authorial voice. Rather, he sought for the polar opposite of the demonic, by which it might be counterbalanced.

Early Russian criticism already observed that the only subject or the main protagonist of Gogol's works was the devil.<sup>14</sup> The tales from *Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka* introduce first the devil of the Ukrainian Christian subculture or folklore, reminiscent of the devil from the West European medieval religious drama, who was familiar to Gogol from the German romanticism. This „Ukrainian“ devil, taken over from Gogol by other authors of Russian literature as well,<sup>15</sup> is, above all, a tangible figure. His tangibility makes him both ridiculous and controllable: soul-hunting, he runs into difficulties and is, as his intrigues

---

<sup>11</sup> Cf. his review of the first version of *The Portrait* in a text entitled O russkoi povesti i povestiyakh g. Gogolya, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. 1, Moscow: Akademiya nauk, 1953, p. 303.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. GOGOL', N. V.: *Povesti*, pp. 255 (for the first version) and 133 (for the second version).

<sup>13</sup> ANNESKY, I. *Knigi otrazhenii*, Moscow: Nauka, 1979, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. MEREZHKOVSKY, D.: Gogol and the Devil, in: Robert A. MacGuire (ed.), *Gogol from the Twentieth Century. Eleven Essays*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974, pp. 57–58; Dmitry Chizevsky, *About Gogol's „Overcoat“* in: op. cit., p. 319.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. LEATHERBARROW, W. J.: *A Devil's Vaudeville. The Demonic in Dostoevsky's Major Fiction*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2005, p. 4.

come to nothing, finally disgraced. We need only think of the devil in the tale *Christmas Eve*. Here, he steals the moon in the sky to envelop the earth in solid darkness and confuse mankind, but before he succeeds in hiding the moon in his pocket, he burns himself; later, however, he is outwitted by Vakula the blacksmith and forced to fly the latter on his back to the Tsarina's court in St. Petersburg. The Petersburg tales, by contrast, no longer feature the devil as a hairy figure with horns and a tail. The demonic loses its figure, becomes de-figured. Without a figure, that is, without a shape or countenance, its action becomes more diffuse; it is dispersed but at the same time it moves, penetrates into and through man.<sup>16</sup> Both in its ridiculous, controllable manifestation as the devil and as something penetrating through the other figures, intangible and horrifying, the demonic is at the heart of Gogol's fantastic.<sup>17</sup> And not the fantastic alone.

The intangible demonic, which passes into the world through a human figure, is already portrayed at the end of Gogol's early tale, *Sorochintsi Fair*, in the form of dancing hags. The hags at the final wedding feast, not dancing but merely imitating dancing without any living feeling, „driven by the very power of drunkenness, like a dead automaton by its mechanism, to perform something human-like“<sup>18</sup>—these hags, dancing like marionettes, are prey to the demonic: an image of something no longer human but only „human-like,“ of the demonic destruction of man made in God's image. Therefore the chilling image of dancing hags is extremely important in Gogol's oeuvre. Automatically moving their feet while dead inside, the hags „foreshadow the many places in Gogol's later works“,<sup>19</sup> a number of characters displaying death-in-life, deadness as the unmaking of the human. They are the first among Gogol's typical „dead souls,“ which are not limited to the fantastic but found also in other works foregrounding the human *poshlost*, „banality“ or „pettiness.“ The dead heart of *poshlost* is demonic. It sours the laughter.

---

<sup>16</sup> Cf. CONNOLLY, J. W.: *The Intimate Stranger. Meetings with the Devil in Nineteenth-Century Literature*, New York etc.: Peter Lang, 2001, p. 45.

<sup>17</sup> The basis for the formation of the all-inclusive abstractum „demonic,“ which may appear in Gogol as a figure in its own right or act through the other characters, is of course the *daimon* in the New Testament sense of „the evil spirit.“

<sup>18</sup> GOGOL', N. V.: *Sorochinskaya yarmarka*, in: *Idem, Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, Vol. 1: *Vechera na khutore bliz Dikan'ki*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo „Khudozhestvennaya literatura“ 1966, p. 44.

<sup>19</sup> KOPPER, J.: *The „Thing-in-Itself“ in Gogol's Aesthetics: A Reading of the Dikanka Stories*, in: *Susanne Fusso and Priscilla Meyer (eds.), Essays on Gogol. Logos and the Russian Word*, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1992, p. 40.

In *The Portrait*, on the other hand, the demonic does not penetrate into the world only through another – an alien, human – figure but also through the portrayal of this figure, namely through the eyes of the moneylender's portrait, whose glare is, as the first version puts it, „so vivid yet dead“<sup>20</sup> (and expressive of the inner man, according to ancient psychology). As Chertkov begins to muse on the action of the portrait, it occurs to him that its author had imitated his model too faithfully, especially in the minute rendition of the eyes. Thus he had overstepped the line – and run into „something uncreatable [*nesozdavaemoe*] by the labour of man,“ into „a horrible reality“ which must have opened for him like under the anatomist's knife.<sup>21</sup> In Chertkov's musings, it is thus precisely the painter's transgression into a horrifying, shapeless reality uncreatable by man – into a reality which finally turns out to be dead and thus an un-reality – that opens up the path for the entry of the demonic into the world. The demonic may likewise translate itself through the portrait, through the figure of a human figure, through the eyes in this figure of a figure, after the painter's brush has opened, like a scalpel, the dead insides behind the human eyes. The eyes in the moneylender's portrait vividly express the dead.

In its most horrifying form, the demonic in Gogol is parasitic. As that which is dead, it seeks for a human life in which it might take shape, it seeks a figure through which it might act, and it can pass into this life only by causing its death. The demonic parasitic *lives the human death*.

What, then, did Gogol see on looking back on his art? What could it have been but a terrible vision of Russia, a procession of the living dead winding its way into the future?

After 1842, which saw the publication of the second version of *The Portrait*, as well as of the tale *The Overcoat* and the novel *Dead Souls*, Gogol tried to continue his novel. True, he never referred to *The Overcoat* again, and he described his feelings while writing Part One of *Dead Souls* as revulsion<sup>22</sup> – like the painter of the portrait, who even denies its artistic quality in the second version of the tale. Nevertheless, as I have stated above, the analogy limps: in *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, published in 1847, Gogol does not call in question his art *as art*. With his gaze directed forward to Russia's

---

<sup>20</sup> GOGOL', N. V.: . Pověsti, p. 255.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. For the metaphor of dissection applied to the painter's procedure, see also the second version, p. 83, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. GOGOL', N. V.: , Avtorskaya ispoved', in: idem, Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh, Vol. 6: Stat'i, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo „Khudozhestvennaya literatura“ 1967, p. 443.

future, he merely reiterates its uselessness. Telling are the following words from his letters on *Dead Souls*:

No, there are times when it is not possible to turn society, or even one generation, towards the beautiful, so long as it is not shown the depths of its present abasement; there are times when one may not even speak of the sublime and beautiful, if the way and roads to it for everyone are not shown clear as day.<sup>23</sup>

In the statement cited above, Gogol's art seems to find a justification in seeking the polar opposite to the presentation of the demonic. This search makes his art a two-step project: one must first descend to the demonic and then soar to the divine, which should outweigh the former. Hence the notion of prophecy. The idea of poet-as-prophet in Russian literature had been introduced in the poems dedicated by Pushkin and Yazykov to each other, but it was Gogol who first expressed it in prose. In fact, it was Gogol who thought of associating this idea with the „Russian idea,“ the proclamation of Russia's Messianic mission among other nations, and founded it on the ideal of the Old Testament prophet.<sup>24</sup> In his relationship to Yazykov, he assumed the mentor's role despite being his junior (Pushkin was already dead by then). Although he had written no poetry save for his first and failed attempt, the long poem *Ganz Küchelgarten*, he thus took his place in the line of Russian poets-prophets stretching from Lomonosov through Derzhavin to Pushkin and Yazykov. This enabled later writers, especially Dostoevsky and Solovyov, to spread the idea of prophecy from poetry to all of Russian literature.<sup>25</sup>

But Gogol did not speak out with a prophetic voice. He did not receive divine inspiration. He did not speak like a prophet Ezekiel (37:5–7): „Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. [...] So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone.“ Gogol's dead never came to life. The change, transfiguration even, of the characters which he planned for Part Two, or even Part Three, of *Dead Souls*, and sought to provide with his asceticism, failed.

---

<sup>23</sup> GOGOL', N. V.: Four Letters to Diverse Persons apropos Dead Souls, in: idem, Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends, trans. Jesse Zeldin, Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969, p. 109.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. esp. the sections „On the Lyricism of Our Poets“ and „Subjects for the Lyric Poets of the Present Time,“ op. cit., pp. 48-64 and 85-89.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. DAVIDSON, P.: The Validation of the Writer's Prophetic Status in the Russian Literary Tradition: From Pushkin and Iazykov through Gogol to Dostoevsky, *Russian Review*, 2003, No. 4, pp. 508-536.

N. V. GOGOL: BYTÍ DÍLA V PROSTORU A ČASE  
(STUDIE O ŽIVÉM DĚDICTVÍ)

After he had burnt the first draft for Part Two of *Dead Souls*, the major part of the second draft, too, was consumed by fire immediately before his death.