

Slipping into Gogol's "Overcoat"

A Winter's Tale

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Fyodor Dostoevsky famously said that all Russian literature stepped out of Nikolai Gogol's overcoat – out of "The Overcoat" – Gogol's best-known tale, his greatest, often regarded as *the* greatest Russian short story. "The Overcoat" is my personal favorite, the first Gogol I ever read, the last addition to his *Petersburg Tales*, worked over intermittently between 1839–1841, and eventually published in 1842 in the third volume of his collected works.

The wind howls in "The Overcoat"; the northern frost bites, the mortal enemy of the poor. "Between eight and nine in the morning," writes Gogol,

just when the streets are crowded with civil servants on their way to the office, it starts dealing out indiscriminately such sharp nips to noses of every description that the poor clerks just do not know where to put them...the humbler titular counselors are sometimes quite defenseless. Their only salvation lies in running the length of five or six streets in their thin, wretched little overcoats and then having a really good stamp in the lobby until their facilities and capacity for office work have thawed out.¹

"The Overcoat" makes you *feel* that northern chill, clawing at your exposed flesh; you hear it whistle its vicious onslaught. Yet, amazingly, Gogol's rendering of deep Russian winter was penned in Via Sistina, with its top floor apartment window open to Roman sunshine and warmth. It is a testimony to Gogol's creative imagination: "contained in my very nature," he said, "is the ability to imagine a world graphically only when I have moved far away from it. That is why I can write about Russia only in Rome...in front of an open window fanned by salubrious air."²

Still, it isn't all about the imagination. Gogol knew about the cold, had felt it himself as a young man. He also knew about penury, of how there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. On January 3, 1829, from Petersburg, he wrote his mother of his hardship and the brutal cold he could never stand: "eighty rubles went for the repair of

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my overcoat,” he says, “and the purchase of a new collar.” It is the same sum his protagonist, Akaky Akakievich, has to fork out for his new coat, a sum that Akaky saves, “after two or three months of mild starvation.” “He trained himself to go without any food at all in the evenings, for his nourishment was *spiritual*, his thoughts always full of that overcoat which one day was to be his.”

Akaky, it might be said, isn’t one of life’s winners. If James Joyce conceived Leopold Bloom as a sort of “everyman,” Gogol creates Akaky in a similar vein, as one of life’s ordinary people, maybe even a bit less than ordinary, a veritable nobody in the bigger scheme of things, a person of absolutely no consequence – like most people the world over. Though perhaps the only difference why Akaky is different from the norm, from other pen-pushing titular counsellors in the Tsarist civil service, is that he had no desire for promotion, no ambition, no friends or family, and no interests other than “sitting in exactly the same position, doing exactly the same work – just routine copying, pure and simple.”

Akaky is the least respected in the office. When he walks by no one even so much pays him a glance, “as though a common housefly had just flown across the waiting room.” Short, pockmarked, balding with tufts of reddish hair and wrinkled cheeks, weak eyes, and a complexion “you might call hemorrhoidal,” other clerks laugh at him. They would pillory him, play tricks on him, and make jokes at his expense. He would take it all silently, up to a point, sometimes crying “leave me alone, why do you have to torment me?” And, “in piercing words,” would often add: “I’m your brother.”

Gogol makes it clear that, in reality, there is something special about Akaky, separating him from others: “To say he worked with zeal would be an understatement: no, he worked with *love*.” He is a man who never indulged in life’s pleasures, neither drank nor overate; no one ever remembers him at a café or restaurant or seeing him out at night. Moreover, he has an uncanny knack of passing underneath windows just as some rubbish is being emptied, explaining “why he was perpetually carrying around scraps of melon and similar refuse on his hat.” “So passed the uneventful life of a man,” Gogol writes, “who, on a salary of four-hundred rubles a year, was perfectly happy with his lot.”

That apart from his overcoat. Indeed, “for some time now,” says Gogol, “Akaky had been feeling that his back and shoulders have become subject to really savage blasts. No more did he have the protection of a coat; more his garment resembled a coarse cheesecloth so worn it was almost transparent.” In the firm words of the tailor Petrovich, “it’s too far gone, sir, I can’t repair it, it’s in a terrible state.” “You’ll have to have a *new* one, sir.”

"The word 'new' made Akaky's eyes cloud over," says Gogol, "and everything in the room began to swim around." Petrovich lives somewhere on the third floor up backstairs full of running water and slops on the floor; and "in spite of being blind in one eye and having pockmarks on his face, carried on quite a nice little business repairing civil servants' and other gentlemen's trousers and frockcoats."

Tailors occasionally crop up in great literature – Henry Miller admirably describes his father's Brooklyn tailor's shop in *Black Spring*. Another appearance of a tailor is the great cameo at the beginning of Karl Marx's *Capital*. For a dozen or so pages, the tailor and his trusty product, the coat – together with its counterpart, the linen – comprise some of the weirdest and most brilliantly ironic sections of Marx's magnum opus. (The overcoat and its cloth actually figure in "The Overcoat," when Petrovich and Akaky go shopping for material, buying linen and calico, comparing prices to get the best deal.)

Marx notes that for centuries humans have made coats without a single person ever becoming a tailor. It is only with the growth of market economies that tailoring became a specialized trade, "an independent branch of the social division of labor." Since then, tailors' wares have become "value-creating abstract labor"; the coat an objectification, the incarnation of "socially necessary labor-time." As Marx explains: "Human labor has therefore been accumulated in the coat. From this point of view, the coat is a 'bearer of value,' although this property never shows through, even when the coat is at its most threadbare. In its value-relation with the linen, the coat counts only under this aspect, counts therefore as embodied value, as the body of value. Despite its buttoned-up appearance, the linen recognizes in it a splendid kindred soul, the soul of value."

Marx's own overcoat was probably even more beat up than Akaky's. If anything, Marx was poorer than Akaky, because he, unlike the titular counsellor, couldn't afford a new overcoat at any price. Marx wore his shabby overcoat to brave London's winter, to ward off its dampness and chill, shuffling between his crummy abode and the British Museum, where he worked on *Capital*. Sometimes Marx couldn't leave the house because he had already taken his coat to the pawnbroker. He was so broke that he was often forced to sell what little he had in the pawnshop, buying it back when his economic fortunes improved. Throughout the 1850s and '60s, Marx's overcoat was in and out of the pawnshop.

It is as if the political significance of Marx's overcoat emanated from its personal significance. As a use value, his overcoat kept him warm in winter and brought him the *appearance* of a respectable gent, able to access the bourgeois Reading Room of the British Museum. But this coat, as an

exchange value, evacuates its use value; then its physical existence, Marx says, in true Gogolesque fashion, becomes something “phantom-like.”

It's hard to imagine how “The Overcoat” had escaped Marx's grasp—Marx, the great dialectician of overcoats, Marx the poor, outsider émi-gré. In the 1840s, Marx had encountered and corresponded with Gogol's close friend Pavel Annenkov; one suspects Annenkov would have recommended to Marx Gogol's phantom-like tale, which was already famous in Marx's day. The more so given Marx was an amateur linguist, studied Russian in his spare time, and took a lively interest in Russia, reading abundantly its socioeconomic and journalistic reviews, pouring over them in Russian. He read Alexander Pushkin, too, as well as Ivan Turgenev and Nikolay Chernyshevsky, and apparently enjoyed reading Gogol and Mikhail Lermontov in their native tongue.

In *The Extraordinary Decade*, Annenkov gives us insights into the psychology of both Gogol and Marx, two diversely different creative thinkers he knew close up. Annenkov first met Marx in Brussels in April 1846, along with Marx's longtime intellectual companion and frequent benefactor, Frederick Engels. “Marx himself,” Annenkov wrote, “was a man of the type made up of energy, willpower, and invincible conviction—a type of man extremely remarkable also in outward appearance, with a thick mop of black hair, his hairy hands, dressed in a coat buttoned diagonally across his chest.”³

Annenkov met Marx again in Paris, in 1848, where both he and Engels had come after the (failed) February Revolution, intending to study the French socialist movement. Their work would morph into *The Communist Manifesto*, joint-authored by Marx and Engels, despite Marx actually writing it. In the *Manifesto*, written six years after Gogol's tale, Marx says the chill breeze of market expansion tears away all veils and protective clothing of the laboring classes, overcoats included.

The chill breeze whips up off the Neva, striking passersby with a distinctive class bias, unevenly, dependent on the quality of their protective garment. Petrovich spends two weeks of labor time making Akaky's overcoat. There was so much quilting to do, he says, that it was impossible to have it ready sooner. The value embodied in the coat would have been so much more expensive, Petrovich hints, had Akaky gone to a fancier tailor along the Nevsky Prospect, since, with higher rents to pay, the labor time socially necessary would cost seventy-five rubles alone.

Petrovich “used silk thread everywhere,” says Gogol, demonstrating the writer's considerable knowledge of fashion and clothes production, “with double seams and had gone over them with his teeth afterward to make different patterns. The delivery of the overcoat, made by the tailor himself, was the most triumphant day of Akaky's life.” It couldn't have

come at a more opportune moment. The severe frost had just arrived and was set to get worse. But now he is warm, and the day of its inaugural wearing is like a great festive holiday for Akaky. He walks taller down the streets, "and several times he even smiles from inward pleasure."

His work colleagues, instead of teasing him now admire him, congratulate him decked out in his majestic new garb. They organize a drinks party in his honor. At first, he is reluctant and tries to talk himself out of the invitation, but everyone is so enthusiastic that refusal is out of the question. The high-ranking civil servant hosting Akaky's party lived in the best part of town, far away from Akaky's dive. It is a different world, wealthier and more gilded, and Akaky "surveys this scene as though he had never witnessed anything like it in his life. For some years now he had not ventured out at all in the evenings."

At the party, Akaky hangs up his overcoat himself, carefully, and soon stands awkwardly in the middle of the room, "looking around and trying to think what to do." He's not used to these occasions; he's out of his depth, his comfort zone. He tries to take leave of his host, but everybody insists he drinks two glasses of champagne, "after which everything seemed a lot merrier, although he still couldn't forget that it was already midnight and that he should have left ages ago." After a while he manages to creep away silently, finding his overcoat in the hall, lying on the floor, much to his dismay. Shaking it to remove every trace of fluff, putting it over his shoulders, he descends the stairs into the street.

A bit tipsy, he walks along, warm, in high spirits, "amazed at himself for sometimes breaking into an inexplicable trot." But a little further on, he notices everywhere is shuttered up, and before him lie poorly lit empty streets. Suddenly, as Akaky enters a darkened square, a pair of burly shapes with mustaches dodge out of the shadows and grab his collar. Punching him in the face, they pull off his overcoat, kneeling him in the groin. He knows the overcoat has gone because he immediately feels the freezing chill. He yells for help – to no avail. The nightwatchman has seen nothing, hadn't been watching the night. At a sentry box, a policeman didn't see anything either, and advises Akaky to go the very next day to see the local inspector. After which Akaky dashes home, "in the most shocking state," says Gogol.

Next day, he goes to the police inspector, but at the station nobody can be bothered. Complain to a superior, they sneer, to an *Important Person*. (Gogol uses uppercase italics to denote certain *Important Persons* in the bureaucracy.) At any rate, *Important Persons* aren't terribly interested in hearing the grumbles of underlings about stolen overcoats. "If I may be so bold as to trouble you, Your Excellency," stammers Akaky, trying to explain his plight

to one *Important Person*. (“What exactly this *Important Person* did,” Gogol adds, parenthetically, “and what position he held remains a mystery. All we need to say is that this *Important Person* had become important only a short while before and that until then he had been an *unimportant person*.”)

“Do you realize who you’re talking to?” the *Important Person* admonishes. “Do you know who’s standing before you? Do you understand?” “Where did you pick up such ideas?” says the *Important Person* to Akaky. “What is this rebelliousness spreading among the young against their chiefs and higher-ups?” “*The Important Person* seemed not to notice,” Gogol says, “that Akaky was already pushing fifty, and so, even if he might be called a young man, it was only relatively speaking; that is, if you compared him to someone seventy.” The *Important Person*’s method is very imposing and impressive, but, nonetheless, simple: “The whole basis of his system was strict discipline. ‘Strictness, strictness...and strictness,’ he used to say, usually looking very solemnly into the face he was addressing when he had repeated this word for the third time.”

Belittled by the *Important Person*, on his way home, frozen in a raging Petersburg blizzard, Akaky catches a fever. The malady progresses violently. Akaky breathes his last a day later. “And so disappeared forever,” Gogol concludes, poignantly, “a human being whom no one ever thought of protecting, who was dear to no one, in whom no one was in the least interested...a being who endured the mockery of his colleagues without protesting, who went to his grave without achieving anything in his life, but to whom, nonetheless (just before the end of his life) a shining visitor in the form of an overcoat suddenly appeared, brightening his wretched life for one fleeting moment.”

And yet, as so often with Gogol, the end is never quite the end. Comedy lurks somewhere around the corner of tragedy. Akaky disappears, until, until...he comes back to life, haunting the city. “But who would have imagined,” as maybe only Gogol could imagine, “that this wasn’t the last of Akaky Akakievich...as though he were trying to make up for a life spent being ignored by everybody.” Rumors start circulating around St. Petersburg “that a ghost in the form of a government clerk had been seen,” a phantom intent on revenge, nocturnally ripping off the overcoats of others, with no regard to rank or title.

Before long, this phantom tracks down the *Important Person* himself, the real reason for its spectral return, “for the fantastic turn this otherwise authentic story has taken.” Suddenly, the *Important Person* felt a violent tug at his collar and, with horror, recognized the dead clerk, seeing his mouth twist and with horrible breath utter the following words: “Ah, at last I’ve found you! Now I’ve, er, hm, collared you! It’s your overcoat I’m

after! You didn't care a toss about mine and you couldn't resist giving me a good ticking off into the bargain! Now hand over your overcoat!"

The Important Person, terrified out of his wits, face as white as snow, arrives home without his overcoat, staggering into his room and to bed. His sleep is very restless that night. Next morning, over breakfast, his daughter remarks, "You look very pale today, Papa!" "The incident left a deep impression upon the *Important Person*," Gogol writes. "It was not so frequently now that his subordinates heard him say, 'How dare you, sir!' 'Do you realize who you're talking to?' And if he did say it, it was only after he had heard what it was all about."



Vladimir Nabokov calls Akaky's ordeal here a "disrobing," suggesting it represents a "gradual reversion to the stark nakedness of his own ghost." Now compare this with Marx: "the bourgeoisie has left no other bond between man and man than naked interest, than callous cash payment... in place of exploitation veiled by religious and political illusions, it has put open, shameless, direct, naked exploitation." This may have been what Marx meant when he said that losing your overcoat was sobering, that you would be compelled to face, "with sober senses," your "real conditions of life and relations with your fellow humans." Thus the dialectics of the *Manifesto*: you get your coat ripped off, stripped away, and you are left naked with others. Then, phantom-like, you strike back in unison, ripping off the overcoats of *Important Persons*. This is Marx's rescripting of "The Overcoat," the political implications of his sartorial value-analysis in *Capital*.

Marx would have loved the imagery of disrobing, of the naked underdog haunting the fully clothed overdog, comfy in their privilege. Marx relished the idea of "specters" haunting Europe, specters haunting the bourgeois order, the specter of a new social contract, an affinity between people based on a common belonging to a class, a "naked" solidarity that brings justice and peace, has a happy ending. A phantom thought! A ghostly presence ready to tear the overcoats off the backs of *Important Persons* everywhere. That's why "The Overcoat" has often, and plausibly, been subjected to Marxist scrutiny and analysis.

But there are caveats to projecting Akaky into the ranks of a proletarian hero, an underdog posthumously gaining class revenge. For one thing, he wasn't any disgruntled worker. Akaky was genuinely happy with his little lot, didn't want to change it, and showed no interest in collective worker solidarity—apart from when he responds to taunts and jokes made against him by his fellow workers. Remember: he says, "we are brothers."

Remember, too, how Gogol said Akaky labored *with love*: “one would be hard put to find a man anywhere who so adored his work.” He took work home with him, copying out documents “to his heart’s content.” “In that copying,” Gogol writes, “he glimpsed a whole varied and pleasant world of his own. One could see the enjoyment on his face.” As such, he was perfectly content with his lowly position and modest salary and wanted that life “to have continued to pass peacefully until ripe old age.” His sense of victimhood, if he had any, was hardly class conscious.

However, we could say that Akaky’s problem was a distinctively Marxist problematic. To begin with, he was utterly unequipped to deal with the absurdity of a material existence cold and indifferent to otherness. He is forced to wear a mask—his new overcoat—which is torn away. Yet, in a way, he had already been torn away from his true self, since he simply wanted his old overcoat repaired and for life as it was to carry on. He had no desire to get ahead of his station, no concern with the commercial trap-pings that modern life serves up for people. Everybody here is somehow compelled to comply. If you don’t, like Akaky, you’re deemed life’s loser.

Akaky is reluctantly sucked into it all, forced to, and that, alas, is his ultimate downfall. It was a Faustian bargain, an insuperable compact with the devil. When does an overcoat become more than an overcoat? When it becomes a piece of merchandise. Marx was making this point in those famous early lines of *Capital*; and in the *Manifesto*, he knew the world Akaky tried to avoid would willy-nilly come looking for him, would only be a matter of time before it would nestle somewhere close by, begin to tear into him, like the northern frost.

This logic, while tenable, might be somewhat distant from Gogol’s own, if we listen to what he had to say on the intent and purpose of his work. Between 1842 and 1847, after the publication of “The Overcoat” and part one of *Dead Souls*, Gogol was preoccupied with two major undertakings: first, completing further parts of his epic novel while assembling material—extracts from his letters, short essays, and articles—that would put the record straight on his convictions and beliefs. The latter labor would appear in late January 1847 under the rubric *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*. Here Gogol would repudiate all past writings, recanting on everything previously published, including the magnificent “The Nose,” “Government Inspector,” and “The Overcoat,” and even *Dead Souls*. “Assuming I have erred,” he said in *Selected Passages*, “and that all my ideas are false, but why should I be denied the right to err and why should people doubt the sincerity of my errors?”

Had he gone mad? How could anything in *Selected Passages* have been written by the same man who had given us masterpiece satirical indict-

ments of Russian society – maybe of all bureaucratized and autocratic societies, all institutionalized corruption? Was it religious fanaticism that possessed him, that led him astray, particularly his association with the zealot priest, Father Makarius (Matvey Alexandrovich Konstantinovskiy), whom Gogol had recently befriended? He first met the orthodox priest on a return visit to Moscow in January 1840: "Makarius has arrived here," Gogol wrote his mother (January 25, 1840), "a man well known for his holy life, extraordinary virtues, fiery zeal for the faith.... I have never heard a priest speak so deeply, with such conviction, with such sagacity and simplicity. Firmness, patience, and unshakable hope in God."⁴

Selected Passages caused outrage among Gogol's friends and admirers. Perplexed, they regarded him as a traitor to the liberal cause of decency and humanity. Annenkov claimed Gogol, "horrified at the success of his novel [*Dead Souls: Part 1*] among Westerners and people of unmediated feeling, was wholly engrossed in the idea of disclosing his real historical, moral, and religious views, something that, in his opinion, was now essential for an understanding of the second part of his epic, which was being prepared." Annenkov shook his head in disbelief at a work so "thoroughly permeated with a spirit of distrust and an outrageous contempt for the contemporary intellectual movement."

Only a few years earlier, Annenkov reminisced about those unforgettable evenings with Gogol in Rome, "chatting endlessly and conversing about anything and everything." Yet now, re-encountering Gogol in the late 1840s, after the appearance of *Selected Passages*, before him stood somebody else, no more "the kind-hearted, perceptive analyst of human life who understood everything and put everything in its proper place. I now found myself confronted by a completely different person – and not so much just a person, but a kind of preacher on the pulpit."

Yet it was Vissarion Belinsky, the famous critic and one-time staunch advocate of Gogol, who was the most indignant, and the most disappointed, with the writer. Belinsky's heart sank reading *Selected Passages* and soon felt compelled to respond. The progressive cause was at stake. Belinsky couldn't let the matter drop; Gogol was an influencer; Gogol had readers and followers. Annenkov was with Belinsky when the scandal of *Selected Passages* erupted. Annenkov was accompanying the consumptive Belinsky convalescing at a health spa in Salzbrunn in Silesia. Belinsky told Annenkov then: "Gogol doesn't understand why people are so angry with him – someone must spell it out to him – I shall answer him."

Belinsky's letter to Gogol, written in July 1847 in Salzbrunn, is generally regarded as one of the masterpieces of Russian social and literary criticism. (V. I. Lenin considered it "one of the finest works of the uncensored

democratic press, which has preserved its great and vital importance to this day.") Belinsky wrote to Gogol that "it wasn't a question of your or my personality; it concerns a matter that is of greater importance than myself or even you; it is a matter that concerns the truth, Russian society, Russia." "One cannot keep silent," added Belinsky, "when lies and immorality are preached as truth and virtue under the guise of religion."

Belinsky wrote that he loved Gogol, saw him as a man of passion, bound by ties of blood to his native land, that Gogol was one of the nation's great leaders "on the path toward consciousness, development, and progress" – and now he had published this vile book. "I find myself at a loss," said Belinsky, "to give you an adequate idea of the indignation your book has aroused in all noble hearts, and of the wild shouts of joy that were set up on its appearance by all your enemies – the Chichikovs, the Nozdrevs, and the mayors."

Distance hasn't treated you well, Belinsky maintained, the "*beautiful far-away*" from Russia you talk about, living in Rome and abroad; it isn't as fruitful a position as Gogol thought: "you failed to realize that Russia sees her salvation not in mysticism or asceticism or pietism, but in the successes of civilization, enlightenment, and humanity. What she needs is not sermons (she has had enough of them!) or prayers (she has repeated them too often!), but the awakening in the people of a sense of their human dignity lost for so many centuries amid dirt and refuse; she needs rights and laws conforming not to the preaching in the church but to common sense and justice." "You might admire 'the divine beauty of the autocracy' (it is both safe and profitable)," Belinsky wrote, "but continue to admire it judiciously from your *beautiful far-away*: at close quarters it is not so attractive, and not so safe."

Russia holds a special place for its enlightened writers, Belinsky reminded Gogol, for its genius creators and communicators. "It looks upon Russian writers as its only leaders, defenders, and saviors against Russian autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality, and, therefore, while always prepared to forgive a writer a bad book, will never forgive him a pernicious book. This shows how much fresh and healthy intuition, albeit still in embryo, is latent in our society, and this likewise proves that it has a future. If you love Russia, rejoice with me at the failure of your book!" Finally, Belinsky concluded: "if you have had the misfortune of disowning with proud humility your truly great works, you should now disown with sincere humility your last book and atone for the dire sin of its publication by new creations that would be reminiscent of your old ones."



Did Gogol sell out his old works? He didn't believe so himself. He said the ideas and ideals expressed in *Selected Passages* were the same he had

voiced in earlier comic masterworks – all the vice and corruption he pilloried in “The Government Inspector,” for instance, were vices and corruption harbored in ourselves; that we, too, were dead souls and we can do much better at improving ourselves and our common lot. Perhaps the most balanced commentary on Gogol’s apparent *volte-face* is, in fact, Jesse Zeldin’s introduction to his translation of *Selected Passages of Correspondence with Friends*, published in 1969 by Vanderbilt University Press.

Zeldin says that Belinsky objected because he thought Gogol had given up membership of the liberal camp; “modernity’s critics object because they think Gogol sold out art-for-art’s sake.” “But it is highly doubtful,” suggests Zeldin, intriguingly, “that Gogol himself ever took either position; certainly his writings indicate that he did not. He could hardly have betrayed what he did not believe in to begin with.” Zeldin reckons that the essays in *Selected Passages* “tell us that art’s excuse and reason lay within the larger context of spiritual purpose. Art, in other words, is a species of moral activity.” It seems Gogol never wavered from that belief, holding it dear throughout his career. Thus, says Zeldin, “it is entirely possible that *Selected Passages* in this sense constitutes a summation – in Gogol’s eyes – of what he was trying to do, of what his work was at least intended to be all about.”

Perhaps, when all is said and done, the problem is that Gogol simply took himself too seriously. “Perhaps,” Zeldin writes, “in spite of the humor in his works and in spite of his personal penchant for practical jokes, one subject eluded Gogol’s humor – himself.” “Perhaps,” Zeldin reckons, Gogol also “found discursive prose difficult, so that it often seems either flat (when he tries hard to be clear) or incoherent (when he tries hard to be poetic). This is true of many another creative writer – Dostoevsky comes to mind – who tries to explain what he is after. It is not that he is wrong – it is rather that his mode of expression fails.”

Maybe the instructive takeaway is that we should never listen to writers trying to explain themselves, telling rather than showing. *It’s not up to them*. Their work is out there, whatever they make of it themselves, out there for interpretation and reinterpretation, to be laughed at, to be enjoyed or dissed, dismissed or endorsed, admired or hated. A comic writer – a satirical writer like Gogol – arguably succeeds only if they make people laugh. They are fair game to be judged as any reader is wont to do, just as any writer has every right to judge himself.

In “The Overcoat,” there’s enough nourishment and content, enough pleasure and misery, enough ambiguity, to appeal to all tastes – to anybody with a sense of humor and sense of feeling. There is enough, in other words, for Marxists to grapple with class exploitation and for religious

types to appreciate the humility of a poor soul. We might also say that “The Overcoat” has enough for Groucho Marxists, too, for those who like a good satirical guffaw, yet who never want to belong to any club that welcomes them as a member. There is absurdity and ambiguity in Gogol’s unreliable narrative voice, yet there is equally something real, too, something identifiable to all people, at all times, to anybody who has been presented with a higher power, who has been made to feel small in their lives, who is, perhaps, unfree.

Gogol is funny and relevant, and likely always will be. Perhaps “creativity” is the operative word when we think of him. Again, we might invoke Nabokov, from his own creative little book on Gogol: “The superficial reader of ‘The Overcoat,’” Nabokov says, “will merely see in it the heavy frolics of an extravagant buffoon; the solemn reader will take it for granted that Gogol’s prime intention was to denounce the horrors of Russian bureaucracy. But neither the person who wants a good laugh, nor the person who craves for books ‘that make one think’ will understand what ‘The Overcoat’ is really about. Give me the creative reader; this is a tale for them.”⁵

Nabokov is outrageously outspoken when it comes to Gogol, full of as much nonsense as good sense. But he is right to suggest that we should never narrow down or pigeonhole Gogol – even if Nabokov is a tad overly judgmental and didactic for my tastes: why can people who want a good laugh likewise not think, just as people who think might equally want a good laugh? Why can laughter and thinking not coexist and be creative in themselves? Why draw absolute distinctions? Maybe, in the end, it is simply better to say that Dostoevsky, like Nabokov, is only partly accurate. Maybe it is better to say that rather than step out of, each of us can somehow *slip into* Gogol’s “Overcoat”: its cloth, after all, is woven loose enough to fit all sizes.

Notes

1. There are many versions of Gogol’s classic tale in print. I am citing from my preferred: Ronald Wilks’s translation in *Nikolay Gogol, The Diary of a Madman, Government Inspector and Selected Stories* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
2. Letter to P.A. Pletnev, March 17, 1842, in Carl Proffer, ed., *Letters of Nikolai Gogol* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 111.
3. Pavel Annenkov, *The Extraordinary Decade: Literary Memoirs*, ed. Arthur P. Mendel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968).
4. Gogol’s letter to his mother appears in Carl Proffer’s edited *Letters of Nikolai Gogol*, 89.
5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961 ed.), 140.