

region" or of the circumlocutions in which the Soviet authors discuss an issue like intrabloc pricing of oil?

The tables of statistics on Soviet and East European trade in oil may be useful reference material for some, but anyone seriously interested in this matter will need to go to the Soviet foreign-trade statistical handbooks themselves, if only to obtain data outside the years the author has included—basically 1964–67.

This book would probably have been better if shorter, or if the author had pursued a more carefully thought-out and focused objective.

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GOGOL. By *Victor Erlich*. Yale Russian and East European Studies, 8. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969. xi, 230 pp. \$7.50.

Much attention has been focused recently on the concept of the grotesque and the grotesque artist. That such an analysis was to touch Gogol, the author of *The Nose*, was unavoidable: for years the epithet "grotesque" has been appended to his art. As such, the almost simultaneous publication of two independent studies (Hans Günther's *Das Groteske bei N. V. Gogol: Formen und Funktionen* [Munich, 1968] and Victor Erlich's *Gogol*) devoted to an examination of the grotesque in Gogol could be a welcome and a valuable addition to the already existing Gogoliana.

Erlich is fundamentally right in suggesting that "few masters of world literature epitomize the grotesque imagination more fully or boldly than Nikolaj Gogol" (p. 2). Moreover, his proposal to include under "grotesque imagination" not only the artist's idiosyncratic vision but also his style, structure, and motif is also legitimate. However, as interesting as his study may be, on the whole Erlich fails to prove his hypothesis—not because there is not enough of the "grotesque" in Gogol, but basically because of his own failure to establish a workable definition of the grotesque. His superficial generalizations—"Blurring the boundary between the animal and the human,' 'playing havoc with symmetry and the relative size of objects,' 'the demonic as trivial,' 'the ground slipping from under our feet,' 'a play with the absurd'" (p. 5)—are woefully inadequate for a serious examination of the texture of Gogol's art. Unlike Erlich, Günther avoids this pitfall by giving meaningful definitions and examples of grotesque style, grotesque structure, grotesque character.

Failure to arrive at a satisfactory definition of what is "grotesque" invariably leads to confusion in nomenclature (*Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, unlike *Vii*, does not portray a hybrid world); it also leads to failure to point out what is essentially grotesque in a given work, and sometimes even results in wrong illustrations, wrong conclusions. *Ivan Fedorovich Shponka and His Aunt* is a case in point. After a few general remarks about the story and its anxiety-ridden dream, Erlich proceeds then, by citing a passage from Shponka's letter to his aunt, to illustrate the latter's "proclivity for irrelevance," which we are to take as our first example of a verbal grotesque. "'As to your [*prezhnei* is omitted] commission in regard to wheat seed and Ukrainian [*sic*; *sibirskoi*] grain, I cannot carry it out; there is none in all the Mogilev province. As for pigs, they are mostly fed [*zdes'* is omitted] on brewer's grain as well as a little beer when it has grown flat.' Since the aunt's commission," says Erlich, "had nothing to do with pigs, there is no more logic in this sequence than in the aunt's dictum, which, to be fair, does occur in Shponka's

dream: 'Yes, you must sleep [*sic*] on one leg now, for you are a married man' (p. 44). Auntie's "dictum," as it stands above, is illogical; in reality, however (even in a dream), it is not, if one not only considers it in its original form but also within its proper context. When Shponka fails to escape the clutches of his ubiquitous wife and finds himself hopping on one leg, his aunt wisely observes: "Da, ty dolzhen prygat' potomu chto ty teper' uzhe zhenatyi chelovek": the translators invariably (not Günther) improve upon the original by adding after the word "hop" the phrase "on one leg." Metaphorically, *prygat'* can stand for *pliasat'*, and what married man *ne pliashet pod dudku svoei zheny*. Similarly—the mention of the feeding of pigs, as well as of the Siberian grain, to which Erlich curiously does not object, is also relevant and well motivated: from the context it is obvious that Shponka is answering his aunt's previous letter.

If anything were to be singled out in Shponka's letter as an indication of Gogol's mature style, it should have been his resignation, obviously the most important bit of information; but by its position in the letter—it follows after the mention of underwear—it is reduced to the level of trivia. And vice versa: the insignificant has become significant. And if Erlich must search for incongruities in a dream, then the most significant fact there for the continuity of Gogol's art is that a woman can become a woolen material out of which a coat could be made. Years later this theme was realized in *The Overcoat*, which in the life of Bashmachkin acquires the status of a life companion, capable of animating what was seemingly a lifeless automaton. In this respect, Shponka, like Bashmachkin, Afanasii Ivanovich, and Poprishchin, is potentially a grotesque figure, for the puppet suddenly acquires human characteristics: it is capable of feeling, of emotion.

The same could be said about *The Old-Fashioned Landowners*, whose tragedy, in comparison with Pushkin's *The Gypsies*, Erlich calls a "grotesque farce." There is indeed something grotesque about Erlich's reduction of the love-habit shared by the two Tovstogubs to the level of amorous adventures of tomcats. Sensing that he has gone too far, Erlich adds: "Obviously, 'The Old-Fashioned Landowners' lacks the blatantly grotesque quality of some other Gogolian narratives" (p. 62). This "now you see it, now you don't" generalization is also applied to *Taras Bulba*, who becomes "a freak," but "this is not to say that Gogol intended Taras as another moral monster" (p. 54). And *The Inspector General*, Erlich's "principal test case," is not a "grotesque pantomime [*sic*]" (p. 103). The mere fact that an author reduces his characters to puppets does not automatically result in "grotesque figures" (cf. Günther, p. 262).

Muddle also rules the formal aspect of this study. Nozdrev's name on three consecutive pages undergoes the following transformation: Nozdryov (p. 121), Nozdrjov (p. 122), and Nozdrëv (p. 123). Titles vary in similar fashion. Direct quotations somehow never quite appear as they are in the original. Moreover, sheer confusion reigns among the footnotes, as well as in the index, where Nabokov, for example, is credited with only half the page references that are due him. There is no bibliography, although Erlich does give credit in the preface to Tschizewskij, Eikhenbaum, Gippius, Bely, and Remizov, as well as to Setchkarev and Nabokov, who is most often cited.

There are numerous factual errors: Gogol used the pseudonym "0000," not "000" (p. 24). Poprishchin eavesdrops on a conversation between two fully grown female dogs, not two "pups," whose names are Medgie and Fidel', not Madgie and Fido (p. 92). Moreover, he snatches up Medgie's letters not from a garbage can but

from the dog's basket (p. 93). Ivan Nikiforovich has no aunt, but he does have a mistress who leads him by the nose (p. 84). The German Hoffmann does not wish to cut off Pirogov's nose, but that of his drinking buddy Schiller (p. 84), and Khlestakov's servant is called Osip, not Ostap (p. 102). Far more insidious are the numerous mistranslations, some of which, as has already been pointed out, generate verbal nonsense where none exists in the original (pp. 76-77, p. 40).

Lastly one must consider Erlich's purpose in writing another book on Gogol: it was meant to be something of a cross between Nabokov and Setchkarev, from which it was to distinguish itself by having a central point of view. It will, however, replace neither. Setchkarev will still be consulted for its meticulous compilation of all kinds of useful information, and Nabokov will still be read, if one wants a roller coaster ride in the topsy-turvy world of Gogol's universe. As far as the study of the grotesque in Gogol is concerned, Günther's book is still "the most thorough effort of this kind to date" (*Slavic Review*, March 1970, p. 152). This is not to say, however, that Erlich's effort is all black and Günther's all white. The latter study, unfortunately, is crudely one-sided: by conveniently omitting a discussion of *The Portrait*, *Nevsky Prospect*, *St. John's Eve*, and relevant passages from other works, Günther denies all ideological, metaphysical import to Gogol's works. Moreover, by defining *poshlost'* as the social evils of Gogol's generation, Günther, unlike Erlich, robs Gogol of his rightful place among the great Western satirists. As a matter of fact, the ideological, metaphysical dimension of Gogol's art comes off rather well in Erlich's study. The reader is then left in the predicament similar to that of Agafia Tikhonovna in *The Marriage*: if one could take Erlich's comprehensive view of Gogol's art, his style, and some of his interpretive skills and add a good deal of Günther's firsthand knowledge of the literature dealing with the grotesque, his attention to details, facts. . . .

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THE TWELVE AND OTHER POEMS. By *Alexander Blok*. Translated from the Russian by *Jon Stallworthy* and *Peter France*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1970. 181 pp. \$5.75.

The art and career of Alexander Blok seem more relevant today than at any time since his bitter death shortly after the revolution he welcomed. In his frantic travels through love, mysticism, depravity, and apocalyptic politics in a naïve and vain search for the meaning of life, Blok is no stranger to today's Western intelligentsia. In the past several years this unfortunate relevance has produced the first book-length studies in English and now this first book-length collection of poems in English translation. Besides *The Twelve* the collection includes *The Stranger*, *On the Field of Kulikovo*, *The Scythians*, and forty-six other works. An introduction summarizes Blok's literary career and offers some insights into the theory and practice of translation.

The translators profess to have taken the side of beauty in the traditional fidelity-versus-beauty conflict. They have nevertheless been remarkably faithful to the image. The book should serve as an excellent introduction to Blok's thought and imagery for the non-Russian reader. In dealing with Blok's "music" the collection seems less successful. The principal difficulty is that the translators felt that "to modern Western ears, his poems would sound ridiculously bombastic if we were to