

GOGOL FROM THE TWENTIETH CENTURY: ELEVEN ESSAYS. Selected, edited, translated, and with an introduction by *Robert A. Maguire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974. xii, 415 pp. \$17.50, cloth. \$5.95, paper.

A century ago the average Russian reader found little to puzzle him in the works of Gogol. He had assimilated, probably in some predigested form, the pronouncements on Gogol by Belinskii and Chernyshevskii, pronouncements which he considered as unassailable as Divine Revelation (or rather, much more so), and he knew the answers. Though Gogol, especially in his later years, was subjectively a reactionary and an obscurantist, objectively his work had played a progressive role: socially, by opening Russian eyes to the evils of serfdom, autocracy, and bureaucratic corruption; and literarily, by extracting Russian literature from the romantic mire and placing it squarely on the highroad of realism. What more was there to say?

Thirty-odd years later, in 1909, Andrei Belyi—who had, as it turned out, a great deal more to say—made another, much less confident pronouncement: “We do not yet know what Gogol is.” Even then the effort to discover “what Gogol is” had engaged some of the best Russian critical minds of our century, and it has continued to occupy them ever since, despite official Soviet attempts to reassert the civic dogmas of the past. Beginning with their precursor and fellow traveler, Vasilii Rozanov in 1893, the Russian Symbolists—including Merezhkovsky, Briusov, Viacheslav Ivanov, and Belyi himself—carried out a great deal of pioneering work in reopening the “Gogol question,” forcing revision of those comfortable Belinskian clichés. The path they opened up was further explored by Freudians, Formalists, and *their* fellow travelers; and the Marxists too, before stultifying Stalinist orthodoxy set in, discovered much about Gogol that their nineteenth-century forebears had missed. Before half of the twentieth century was out, a whole new Gogol had been revealed: a fantastic Gogol, devil-obsessed (if not possessed), a visionary, an infantile primitivist—able to unearth, from his unconscious, specters which most of us keep safely buried there, a surrealist, a necromancer of words. Not only have Russian critics of the twentieth century created for us a much fuller and more interesting Gogol, but their efforts have sometimes generated ideas useful both for general literary theory and for interpreting other writers as well.

Hitherto, these achievements of Russian Gogol criticism have been accessible to English-speaking readers only as refracted through the well-known handbooks of Nabokov, Setchkarev, Erlich, and others. Now, through the labor of Robert Maguire, they will have the opportunity to experience this work directly. Although there are inevitable “regrettable omissions” (for instance, Bakhtin on the Rabelaisian “carnival” tradition in Gogol), Maguire has chosen an excellent representative sampling, and a dazzling array it is.

The collection leads off with Merezhkovsky’s “Gogol and the Devil,” a brilliant display both of psycholiterary insight—all the more remarkable at that time—and of sheer expressive power by a writer who, elsewhere, so often irritates with his bombast and arbitrary generalizations. On the other hand, Briusov’s essay, “Reduced to Ashes,” which aroused so much indignation in its day, now seems rather tame and obvious, perhaps because we have so thoroughly assimilated its basic message—that Gogol was *not* a realist. The chapter from Valerian Pereverzev’s Marxist (later officially labeled “vulgar sociologist”) study also seems dated now, naïve and schematic, although its basic insight—Gogol’s deep, forma-

tive connection with the lower provincial gentry—has proved fruitful. The specimen of Russian Freudianism is, of course, Ivan Ermakov, apparently martyred during the 1930s and still unrehabilitated. Ermakov's chapter on "The Nose" is full of imaginative *aperçus*, despite his humorless solemnity, his penchant for ponderous *obiter dicta*, and his literary naïveté. Viacheslav Ivanov's study is a relatively minor, but nevertheless, seminal treatment of *The Inspector General* in terms derived from the study of ancient Greek comedy.

The second half of the collection belongs mostly to the Formalists, though not to their most strident and doctrinaire spokesmen. The fringe-Formalist Vasilii Gippius, perhaps the greatest of the Russian Gogolians, is represented not by an extract from his 1924 book (probably the best single monograph on Gogol in existence), but by a 1936 essay on *The Inspector General*. Though more concise than the book, it manages—as successfully as anyone ever has—to create an integrated interpretation of the play in combining formal-aesthetic, social-historical, and literary-historical categories. After Gippius comes Boris Eikhenbaum's "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," undoubtedly the most celebrated single essay on Gogol ever written. It too now seems a bit dated in its Formalist overstatements and polemic spirit, but it is still enormously stimulating. Eikhenbaum's essay is followed by Dmitry Čiževsky's equally brilliant, and more judicious, dismantling of that much dismantled "Overcoat," an interpretation that, among other things, gives Gogol's devil his due (Maguire has rescued the German version of Čiževsky's article the devilish parts suppressed in the Parisian Russian one). There follows a complete translation of Alexander Slonimsky's wonderful booklet, "The Technique of the Comic in Gogol" (1923), as valuable in its concrete observations as it is in its theoretical speculations. Finally, it is both appropriate and gratifying that the book should conclude with translations of two fine Russian essays by Leon Stilman, "The 'All-Seeing Eye' in Gogol" and "Men, Women, and Matchmakers."

As high as the quality is of the essays he has chosen, the work of the editor himself deserves nothing but praise. Maguire has done a superb job. His translations are virtually faultless, not only accurate, but amazingly sensitive to the varied stylistic qualities of the originals. Each essay is preceded by a brief introductory note, placing the author in his time, and the particular essay within his *oeuvre*. Sufficient, but never obtrusive, footnotes not only elucidate many references that most non-Russians would find obscure, but sometimes correct errors in the originals. Best of all, the book begins with an elegantly written introductory essay by Maguire, studiously fair, yet with a firm standpoint of its own, surveying the whole history of Gogol criticism.

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DOSTOEVSKY AND HIS DEVILS. By Václav Černý. Translated by F. W. Galan. Afterword by Josef Škvorecký. Ardis Essay Series, no. 3. Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1975. 77 pp. \$2.50, paper.

Václav Černý is a Czech critic and scholar who has combined a passionate commitment to ideas of freedom in art and society with a wide-ranging erudition, mainly in the history of Czech, French, and Spanish literatures. His fierce independence of mind and his outspoken participation in the ideological battles of his time have earned him the enmity of the two dictatorships which have plagued Czechoslovakia.