
‘DIARY OF A MADMAN’ BY N. GOGOL THEOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL COMMENTARY

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(Received 20 December 2017, revised 6 March 2018)

Abstract

The short story ‘Diary of a Madman’ (1834) by N.V. Gogol is one of the author’s most religious and philosophical works. In the context of M.M. Bakhtin’s dialog concept of culture that provides a possibility of a text’s ‘excellence’ over its author, as well as a possibility for brilliant author’s enlightments, Gogol’s work is considered in this article given both the Christian theology traditions and the intellectual experience of Philosophy and cultural anthropology of the 20th – early 21st century. The symbolic-allegorical approach peculiar to Christian exegesis is used here in the analysis of the artistic text. The story’s protagonist, Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin, reflects the premonition of ‘anthropological disaster’ (M. Mamardashvili), and Gogol with striking accuracy put its indications into imagery much earlier than it was interpreted using the conceptual framework of Philosophy. The tragic contradiction between the Gospel truths and social reality provokes the ‘simple man’ madness. The deeper a reader enters the protagonist’s consciousness, the more evidently he or she sees the ontological loneliness of the man manifested in the madness of the protagonist ‘thrown into the world’ (M. Heidegger). While looking for a way out of the man’s limitedness and finiteness, Gogol follows the same path that will be later defined by M. Heidegger’s opponent, E. Casisser, into the conscious existence of cultural forms. In accordance with the Orthodox theocratic idea, the concepts of ‘office’ (state service), ‘service’ (to people) and ‘prayer’ (divine service) are synthesized in Gogol’s text. In this regard, it is also important to look at the interrelation of the ‘national’ (Orthodox) and ‘universal’ (panhuman) in both ‘Diary of a Madman’ and Gogol’s prose in general.

Keywords: theology, love, ontological loneliness, existence, theocratic

“Though this be madness, yet there is method in it.”
W. Shakespeare

1. Introduction

The short story ‘Diary of a Madman’ (1834) by N.V. Gogol is one of the author’s most religious and philosophical works. Already V.G. Belinsky wrote

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about the “depth of poetry” and the “depth of philosophy” in the story [1]. When painting the satiric picture of officials’ Petersburg, Russia, and Europe as a whole, Gogol talks about the universal ontological loneliness of a man in a grotesque fictional form using the character of a low-ranking civil servant, titular counsellor Poprishchin, who suffer from megalomania due to persistent social and psychological humiliation [2]. “To the deuce with the stuff! What rubbish it is! <...> Give me a man. I want to see a man! I need some food to nourish and refresh my mind, and get this silliness instead...”, rails the character in the inverted, godless world, where a person has the name of Sverkoff (from Russian ‘zver’ (animal)) and dogs can speak and write in a human language [3]. The Poprishchin’s words are filled with the Gospel sense: “Therefore do not worry, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? <...> But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.” (Matthew 6.31-32) Poprishchin is looking for, he ‘need’ a man, created in the image of God, capable of godlike. (In Slavic Bible belonging to Gogol there is a litter ‘the needs’ (in the Church sense of ‘requirement’, ‘exigency’, ‘desire’) in front of the verse “I am having a desire to depart and be with Christ” (Philippians 1.23) [4].) The collision of the satirical form of diary with high spirit desire draws the inner conflict that reaches its culmination in the final protagonist’s miserere-prayer. There are no words about religion in the ‘Diary of a Madman’, but the whole short story content homologates the idea that there is no joy, no light of reason, no salvation outside of spiritual work.

A common feature of all research efforts on the ‘Diary of a Madman’ is the attention to details and phrases that allows comparing this text with interpretational features in different works of other authors [5]. For everyone, Gogol’s text becomes a special field of co-creation where multiple meanings can be found: ‘man lost the ability to think’ and ‘to pity a man’, ‘while looking for his place, the man forgot about the soul and the *Other*’, ‘for him, the form is more important than the content’, but there is still hope of salvation at the bottom of the abyss; the abyss, however, is multidimensional like Pablo Picasso’s paintings.

In the context of M.M. Bakhtin’s dialog concept of culture that provides a possibility of a text’s ‘excellence’ over its author, as well as a possibility for brilliant author’s enlightments, we looked into Gogol’s work considering both the Christian theology traditions and the intellectual experience of Philosophy and cultural anthropology of the 20th – early 21st century. Research works devoted to both N.V. Gogol and other authors of previous eras offer the examples of how productive this approach can be with respect to the field of literary studies [6-10]. In Gogol’s protagonist, we see the premonition of an anthropological disaster, and the author with striking accuracy put its indications into imagery much earlier than it was interpreted using the conceptual framework of modern humanities. In the words of Y. Nechiporenko, “the entire history of the 20th century acquired Gogol’s direction to some extent” [Y. Nechiporenko, *Gogolevskii yubilei v mirovom masshtabe (Gogol’s anniversary at a global scale)*, <http://www.hrono.info/text/2009/nech0409.html>, accessed 10.11.2017].

2. Madness from non-thinking

After A. Schweitzer, M.K. Mamardashvili, A.M. Pyatigorsky, and others, we understand the “anthropological disaster” as the “failure to think on one’s own and all the consequences of this failure”, in other words, “madness from non-thinking” [V. Balayan, *Besedy s mudretsami. Aleksandr Pyatigorskiy. Chistyy vozdukh tvoey svobody (Conversations with wisemen. Aleksandr Pyatigorsky. Clean air of your freedom)*, tvkultura.ru/video/show/brand_id/29551/episode_id/959968/video_id/966041, accessed 06.06.2017; 11; 12]. Is it intentional that in this case the verb ‘to think’ is used as a key one (together with ‘to understand’) in the story?

Gogol’s protagonist is ironically similar to the modern man, who was critically portrayed by A. Tarkovsky: “When I think of the modern man, I imagine him a member of a chorus, which opens and closes his mouth in time with the song, but does not make a sound himself. Everyone else is singing! He is only imitating singing, because he believes that it is enough that the others are singing. Hence, he does not believe in the meaning of his actions. The modern man lives without hope, without belief in the fact that through his actions he can affect the society he exists in...” [*Filmy Andrey Tarkovskogo i russkaya dukhovnaya kultura (Films of Andrey Tarkovsky and Russian intellectual culture)*, predanie.ru/salvestroni-simonetta-simonetta-silvestroni/book/84924-filmy-andrey-a-tarkovskogo-i-russkaya-duhovnaya-kultura/, accessed 24.06.2017]

In the report ‘Consciousness and civilization’, M.K. Mamardashvili says that the ‘anthropological disaster’ is a violation of the principle of the first ‘K’ (Karteziiia) that can be expressed through a short formula ‘I am’ [11]. The man, however, abandons this existential privilege and becomes a slave. In early diary records of Gogol’s protagonist, traits of this servility can be found in every semantic aspect, such as dependence on one’s own habits, opinion of the others, lust for power, etc. That is why accents are apparent on the senses that objectify the external, envy, and adjustment. The conscious and unconscious of the protagonist is included in pieces of reflection of other characters (letters between dogs – records of his thoughts, flunkys – his servilism, etc.).

Diary entries as a writing genre help reflect ‘outbursts’ and ‘movements’ of the conscious and unconscious: 86th (7 is between them) *Martober* (between spring and fall), *between day and night* (in the evening) (seems to mark the transitional internal state). The diary entry titles have a semantic crescendo: the stronger the retreat from reality is, the more absurd and ‘piece-like’ the titles are. (The first title of the story is ‘Pieces from the diary of a madman’.) Aksenty Ivanovich Poprishchin is looking for his place (sim. ‘poprishche’, Russian for ‘walk of life’ according to the onomastic analysis) and it is the discrepancy between his perception of himself and the reality that deepens the madness (Aksenty (Avksenty) – ‘increasing’ (Greek)). The sheer Poprishchin’s craziness can be interpreted as an image of the human mind limitation, of the mind prone to pride and unable to see reality, “for the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God” (1 Corinthians 3.19).

N.V. Gogol gives the ‘madman’ the ability to understand an animal language. It can be assumed that it hints at Poprishchin’s transitional state of mind. However, is that only one of proofs of his madness? And what if it is not madness, but the ‘mirror world’ and ‘folds of different dimensions’? Similar to the dimensions in works of L. Carroll, O. Wilde, J. Borges, and others, “Over there the sky whirls round. A little star shines in the distance; the forest rushes past with its dark trees and the moon shines above. A deep blue haze is spreading like a carpet; a guitar string twangs in the mist. On one side is the sea, on the other is Italy. And over there I can see Russian peasant huts.” [3, p. 196] The reader’s interpretation seemingly does not exclude the assumption that N.V. Gogol predicted physical categories of multi- dimensionality of space (one of them is the imagination of Poprishchin, see entry of the third of December)? Or, using N.V. Gogol’s words, ‘physicians write a lot of nonsense’?

3. Attainment of the real existence

Entering into a dialog with the protagonist, the reader involuntary takes place of Aksenty Ivanovich himself, the ‘second’ conscious ‘I’ that seems to have compassion and irony, as well as awareness of a constant dissonance with the reality. The deeper we enter the protagonist’s consciousness, the more evident the ontological loneliness of the man becomes (the story's ending is one of its most tragic manifestations). The protagonist’s consciousness can be metaphorically identified with the image of wind (we can only see the consequences, bended branches). “And the whole reason for this, as I see it, is that people are under the misapprehension that the human brain is situated in the head: nothing could be further from the truth. It is carried by the wind from the Caspian Sea.” [3, p. 190] Lost in the ‘mirror world’, the protagonist who have lost, but still looking for or demanding the opportunity to say ‘I am’, makes it possible, in our opinion, to develop interpretative connections between the ‘Diary of a Madman’ and M. Heidegger’s ‘Being and Time’, which substantiates the concept of Dasein (‘being-there’) and such specific categories as ‘thrownness’ (Geworfenheit) and ‘fear’ (Furcht) [13; 14; *Videolektoriy: filozofiya Martina Khaydeggera v shesti lektsiyakh (Videolectorium: Martin Heidegger's philosophy in six lectures)*, monocler.ru/izbrannyie-lektsii-o-martine-haydegger/, accessed 17.06.2017].

While looking for a way out of the man’s limitedness and finiteness described by Heidegger, Gogol, in our opinion, follows the same path which will be later defined by Heidegger’s opponent, E. Cassirer, into conscious existence of cultural forms [15]. The protagonist discovers himself and its ‘place in the world’ [16, 17] only after he believed in the purpose and meaningfulness of his existence: “Today is a day of great triumph. There is a king of Spain. He has been found at last. That king is me.” [3, p. 190] In accordance with the Orthodox theocratic idea, the concepts of ‘office’ (state service), ‘service’ (to people) and ‘prayer’ (divine service) are synthesized in the Gogol’s text.

Aksenty Poprishchin “detaches from the reality of the dogs and department and rises in the superior reality, the reality of the new existence, which is, though comical as it sounds to onlookers, his real being” [18]. Through madness, Gogol leads his protagonist to the real existence, the sacrificial one. The sacrifice is sensible suffering: “...the chancellor struck me twice on the back, so painfully that I nearly cried out. But I controlled myself, as I knew that this was the normal procedure with Spanish knights before initiating someone into a very high rank and that even now the code of chivalry is still maintained over there” [3, p. 194].

With a piercing strength, Gogol depicts the tragedy of the man who suddenly believed in the purpose of his existence, but deluded himself: “No, I haven’t the strength to endure it any longer! Good God, what are they doing to me? They’re pouring cold water over my head! They don’t heed me, see me or listen to me.” [3, p. 196] Having gone through the internal feat of asceticism and at the same time through the existential catastrophe, the story’s protagonist “captures the right to mercy and compassion” [19]. Christian theological thought brings together Divine Providence and human suffering as a fatal consequence of the fall in the idea of Divine love that “suffers long and is kind; <...> Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. For we know in part and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away.” (1 Corinthians 13.4–10)

Having gone through suffering from physical pain and loss of purpose, the protagonist in the end appears to have acquired a “freedom from any fear of the actual world” (Cassirer [15, p. 135]), literally rising above the world: “Climb up, driver, and let the bells ring! Soar away, horses, and carry me from this world! Further, further, where nothing can be seen, nothing at all!” [3, p. 196] And, at the same time, the protagonist returns to it: “Is that my house looking dimly blue in the distance? And is that my mother sitting at the window? Mother, save your poor son! Shed a tear on his aching head!” [3, p. 197] The pity and the compassion raise and free a Gogol’s reader. True freedom is the understanding that “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17.21). ‘Love God and do what you want’, said Augustine. Gogol’s protagonist becomes real through the *miserere*-prayer, his reader becomes real through the compassion.

4. The universal in the national

In the illusion, ‘mirror’ world, suffering is the way to return to the reality, which is impossible without the feeling of Motherland, but to the reality ‘seeable by the mind’s eyes’, to the ‘sphere of pure form’ (Cassirer). In this respect, the question of national nature of Gogol’s prose becomes relevant. Would a ‘Russian’ author (in the narrow national understanding of this word) write literally the following: “There wasn’t a soul about; except for a few old peasant women sheltering under their skirts, some Russian merchants under their umbrellas and one or two messengers” [3, p. 176]. Would a Russian writer point to the nationality of merchants in St. Petersburg?

However, Gogol's prose is one of the most vivid manifestations of the national 'fundamental' Russian world and Orthodox culture (in this case, we don't consider the question of Ukrainian or Russian nature of Gogol's prose [20]). The power of the national language is fully expressed in it. In the Russian grammar, it is not the noun denoting an established term that lies at the core, but the verb that actualizes the action and expresses the new part of the idea in the predicate. In Gogol's text, the need of a man to obtain a purpose actualizes in the key verbs of the story, 'to think' and 'to understand'. Such means as predominant subjunctive mood ('wouldn't have gone', '[woul]d like' '[woul]d have given in'), inversion, oxymoron ('black, and shining bright as fire'), exaggeration ('now I'll find out what it's all about'), detailed elaboration ('sharpened twenty-three quills for him'), categoricalness and boundedness of self-affirmation ('There just can't be a wedding'), and general nihilism [21].

In the language and thought, N.V. Gogol finds a way to show the universal in the national [16, p. 223]. "While flying to reunite with the whole, in music of the world orchestra, in ringing of strings and jingle-bells, in howling of wind, in screaming of violins was Gogol's child born. He called this child Russia", wrote A. Blok in 1909 [22]. The 'panhumanism' of N.V. Gogol that he inherited from A.S. Pushkin manifests itself as he defines himself as Russian, but at the same time dodges from the Russian reality. The true Russian patriotism, which is based on the love to the Motherland, presumes an intuitive pursuance of universalism as a way to overcome the national secludedness, closedness, and detachment.

5. Conclusions

Coming back to the idea of the protagonist looking for his 'poprishche' (place) we should recall D. Kharm's poem 'The Constancy of Merriment and Dirt' where God is implicitly depicted as a yard-keeper who does not sweep his world ('mesto' (place) – 'mesti' (to sweep)). According to S.Z. Agranovich, "art has a bunch of such crazy texts", while "sacrilege is almost mandatory for deeply religious Russian writers" [A. Shvedovskaya, *Agranovich Sofya Zalmatovna*, shvedovskaya.com/video/lectures/agranovich/, accessed 29.06.2017]. It appears that the researcher meant the combination of incompatible worlds that Gogol captures in his works, where the 'nose' disappears on the Annunciation, and a 'lump' appears after a prayer. The last sentence of 'Diary of a Madman', 'And did you know that the Dhey of Algiers has a lump right under his nose?' both takes off and underlines the tragic message of the story. This emphasized oxymoron has presumably a 'hidden agenda'. First of all, we observe the author's setting on co-creation with the reader, demonstrated by 'intellectual hooks' scattered around the whole story ('think!'). Secondly, the contrast change of register in a strong textual position (ending) does emphasize the prayer-like sounding of the ending.

A work of fiction is not supposed to be understandable and be understood to a full degree: 'there's method in this madness'. The search for meaning of existence in one way or another leads a man to the choice: to live and love, to live and know, or to live and wish. It is apparent, that the first path is the most difficult

as it implies self-sacrifice (Arksenty Poprishchin's soul aspires for it); the second path is actualized by the phrase 'for in much wisdom is much grief'; and the anthropological disaster rests on the third path. In Gogol's story, we see the premonition of the anthropological disaster and the proposed way to overcome it.

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