ARTICLES

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"The Overcoat" As a Civil Service Episode

Forty years ago Dmitry Chizhevsky asked rhetorically whether still another major essay were needed on Gogol’s “Overcoat,” and the question is surely more valid now. Nevertheless, the answer is affirmative even today with regard to the meanings and literary functions of the technical administrative terms Gogol uses to build the story. Administrative vocabulary predominates by a wide margin in Gogol’s “Overcoat,” but critics and commentators have underestimated this salient fact and continue to write as though the bureaucratese were of tertiary value. Most commentators dutifully note in passing that Akakii is after all a civil servant, but the fact that all English translators and critics continue to call him a “clerk” signals a serious degeneration of the meaning of bureaucratic terms from Gogol’s time.

While all of the main existing interpretations explore discreet aspects of the tale, and in outstanding instances very persuasively—narrative (Eikhenaum), religious (Chizhevsky, Merezhkovskii), sexual (Karlinsky), and word-symbolism (Mandel’shtam)—none has yet squarely faced the problem of recovering the origins and meanings of the prevailing administrative vocabulary. V. V. Vinogradov, in his “Iazyk Gogolia,” is the only student who has identified Gogol’s “bureaucratic style,” and lists the “chancery,” or “administrative,” dialect as one of the styles figuring prominently in Gogol’s writing. Although he cites examples of governmental words in Gogol’s stories, it is a skimpy listing, and he probes no deeper into the definitions and artistic functions of these kinds of words. Thus, he himself did not respond to his own injunction to investigate Gogol’s bureaucratic “stylistic tradition.” The present article attempts a response to Vinogradov’s suggestion.

We ought not be surprised that Gogol’ achieved a superb creative facility with Russian administrative jargon; rather, his class origins, upbringing, education and earliest work experiences would almost compel us to predict that by the time he wrote “The Overcoat” in the 1830s, he had deeply internalized chancery usage. His infancy and youth were steeped in exposures to spoken and written bureaucratese. His father, who was a retired bureaucrat him-

self and a medium-to-large landlord and serf owner, started up several entre-
preneurial projects on the estate while Nicholas was a child. Such activities re-
quired state licences over and above the Gogol’s’ routine involvements (in their
capacity as serf-owners) with census, soul-tax, and military recruitment agen-
ties. Surely these activities were often discussed in front of the children,
thereby laying a very early foundation for Nicholas’s mastery and later liter-
ary use of official governmental vocabulary. From the age of ten, Nicholas
was boarded in state schools on state stipends, and this too entailed contacts
with state agencies. The curricula of such schools explicitly aimed in large
measure to give potential civil service recruits (and Gogol’ himself initially
considered the civil service his calling) a modern education, including an in-
troduction to Russian public law and administrative procedures. In 1828 he
finished the Bezborodko Lycee of Higher Studies, and his attestat qualified
him to enter service at the lowest “ranked” level. The fact that Gogol”s attes-
stat qualified him for only rank fourteen while a few of his more studious
classmates were awarded the next higher, twelfth, rank was a serious disap-
pointment to him as well as to his mother. This first somewhat negative ex-
perience with the Russian civil service perhaps heightened Gogol’s acute a-
wareness of its inner workings. In the late 1820s and early 1830s Gogol’ held
two government office jobs in St. Petersburg and there acquired hands-on ex-
perience in lower administrative operations.3

There can be little doubt, therefore, that Gogol’ had acquired the official
vocabulary and directly observed many administrative situations during his
first twenty-five years, and had a deep knowledge of standard government
procedures and jargon before he wrote “The Overcoat.” However, the bureau-
cratic word usage of Gogol’ and his contemporaries is recoverable today, not
just through a more intensive concentration on the texts of Gogol”s writings
alone, but only by supplementing the texts with examples from the kinds of
governmental documents and sources from which Gogol’ himself most likely
acquired his vocabulary. The present article will do this with regard just to
“The Overcoat,” but the procedures and sources introduced herein, if proven
apt and helpful, might be applied to the total opus by future students.4

The preponderant bureaucratic content of the story is so well known that
very little needs to be recalled for the present essay. Gogol’ literally supersat-
urates the cast of “The Overcoat” with state functionaries and their menials

3. The author claims no originality on Gogol’s biography, but some findings here
might prompt further research. For the currently known biographical details, see the
sources in Maguire (pp. 405-06) and in Carl P. Proffer, trans. and ed., Letters of Nikolai

4. While this study focuses on Gogol”s mastery of bureaucratese, there is no inten-
tion to argue against his equal or superior mastery of all the other “styles” he used in
creating his masterpieces. As Maguire has pointed out, there is need for more study of
the origins and literary functions of Gogol”s usage of such vocabulary “styles” as those
of religion, folklore and psychology, among others (Maguire, “Introduction,” pp. 51-54).