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GOGOL’S POPRISHCHIN
IN “THE DIARY OF A MADMAN”

“. . . that intentionally unfinalizable something in man.”

Mikhail Bakhtin states that the basis of human identity is formed through interaction and dialogue with others. He writes: “I cannot become myself without another; I must find myself in another by finding another in myself” (PDP: 287).1 Genuine recognition of the other in the broadest democratic sense came late in history, according to Bakhtin, only with the emergence of the modern novel.2 Bakhtin characterizes Neoplatonism, for example, as basing itself primarily on one’s relation to oneself, excluding the other: “All events are concentrated in the unitary ‘I-for-myself’ without introducing the value of the other” (AA: 54). In his fiction Nikolai Gogol’ depicted characters with a persistent habit of not acknowledging the other, like the landowners in Dead Souls who sink into a philistine state of self-complacency. Gogol’ defines this state with the term poshlost’, which connotes vulgarity and in Bakhtinian terms implies a rejection of others’ values and thus the other. Bakhtin says that in extreme, pathological cases refusal to interact with the other may lead one to “the danger of the separate thought,” that is, solipsism or madness (PDP: 93). Bakhtin sees Dostoevskii’s Goliadkin in The Double as an extreme example of a character who rejects dialogue and thereby goes mad: “The novel tells the story of Goliadkin’s desire to do without the other’s consciousness, to do without


2. I borrow the terms for making this point from Wlad Godzich, “Correcting Kant: Bakhtin and Intercultural Interactions,” Boundary 2, 18, 1 (Spring 1991), pp. 5-6. Godzich takes the point from Bakhtin’s essay “Epic and Novel.” For Bakhtin (AA 56-58) Christianity granted genuine recognition to the other, but introduced with this recognition a problematic and negative attitude to the body.
recognition by another, his desire to avoid the other and assert his own self” 
\textit{(PDP: 215)}.

Bakhtin's literary theory applies revealingly to one of Goliadkin's 
predecessors, Gogol’’s Poprishchin in “The Diary of a Madman.” In 
\textit{Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics} Bakhtin, for the sake of argument, 
intentionally overstates a claim that Gogol’’s characters are finalized in 
contrast to Dostoevskii’s:

One might offer the following, and somewhat simplified, formula for 
the revolution that the young Dostoevsky brought about in Gogol’s 
world: he transferred the author and the narrator… into the field of 
vision of the hero himself, thus transforming the finalized and integral 
reality of the hero into the material of the hero’s own self-
consciousness. (49)

I contend that Gogol’ does not finalize or, to use a synonymous term, 
objectify the character of Poprishchin as completely as Bakhtin suggests. 
Gogol’ encourages the reader to laugh at Poprishchin, to treat him as an 
object, but at the same time shows us glimmers of humanity and subjectivity 
in him. In the last few diary entries Gogol’ humanizes him, makes him 
someone for whom we can feel sympathy. Gogol’’s portrayal of Poprishchin 
disturbs the reader precisely because he encourages us to ridicule Poprishchin 
and then makes us sympathize with him. Bakhtin overlooks this subtle 
treatment of Poprishchin in his brief comments in passing on Gogol’s 
characters; this oversight shall serve as a point of departure in this article to 
argue (using Bakhtin’s own terms) that one of Gogol’s clerks, Poprishchin, 
is more complex than Bakhtin admits.

What Bakhtin overlooked with regard to Poprishchin is that his character 
is unfinalized, that is, free and open to change. To be sure, Gogol’ makes 
this point about the essential freedom of human character, the right to resist 
being labeled and typified—finalized—in a ironic manner. Only when 
Poprishchin goes completely mad does he seem human. Though “The Diary 
of a Madman” is an absurd story, Gogol’ ultimately shows that Poprishchin 
is characterized by “\textit{that internally unfinalizable something in man},” that is, 
by what Bakhtin claims is “the thing that Gogol’ and the other authors of 
tales about poor government clerks’ could not show from their monological 
positions” \textit{(PDP: 58-59)}. No matter how absurd the story, we should not 
readily belittle Poprishchin; for regarded as a hero testing an idea in a 
menippean satire, as defined by Bakhtin, Poprishchin appears in a more 
serious light.