Pavel Ivanovich Chichikov, protagonist of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, is also on a certain level the novel's author: the plot hinges, after all, upon his quest, from whose object the novel takes its title. It is Chichikov who determines the itinerary of this quest, and thus of the narrative; consequently, he is also the only character to be fully apprised of the motivation behind this itinerary. Chichikov’s efforts to steer his own narrative course are, however, not allowed completely free reign. His planned trajectory is often frustrated by other characters, who by a variety of means contrive to divert, hijack, or even overturn his carriage, literally and figuratively.

These diversions, in which Chichikov is temporarily dislodged, as it were, from the narrative saddle, serve to draw the reader’s attention to the strikingly linguistic character of his adventures. The very object of his quest is to collect signifiers whose referents no longer exist: ownership papers for the erstwhile serfs of the novel’s title. By accumulating these empty signalers in sufficient quantity, Chichikov hopes to obtain a further document of ownership, this one *with* a physical referent: an estate of his own, a place for his dead souls to live. In order to acquire his symbolic fortune, and eventually to give it literal extension, Chichikov must deal with an assortment of landowners and officials, each of whom is characterized by a peculiar and distinctive mode of discourse. The success of his mission is contingent upon his rapid mastery of these idiolects. Some of them cause him negligible difficulty; others, however, elude his grasp, confronting him with the hurdles that form the subject of this paper.

Of the landowners, the two who cause Chichikov the most difficulty are those he visits unintentionally: Korobochka and Nozdrev. These two are characterized by linguistic “disorders” of opposite types: Nozdrev seems to ascribe no referentiality to language at all,
whereas Korobochka affords it too much. Nozdrev is an apparently in-exhaustible generator of empty simplifiers, Korobochka, an incorrigible "filler" of them.

Thus, in her negotiations with Chichikov, Korobochka is unable to grasp that the "dead souls" stand for nothing at all. She is, in fact, unable even to parse the paradoxical phrase "dead soul," and seems capable of apprehending only one of its mutually exclusive terms at a time. The idea of a purchase that takes place entirely on paper is equally alien to her, for in her literal world, a purchase must entail the physical exchange of goods. As a result, she transacts for her dead serfs as if they were still alive, periodically running aground on the recollection that they are not. Her ruminations on their possible utility (and consequent market value) are punctuated, to Chichikov's even greater exasperation, by the objection: "The only thing that makes me hesitate is that they are, you know, dead" (52). She is deeply shocked, moreover, by Chichikov's language — "What fearful things you utter!" — and seems afraid that his mere mention of the devil will cause the latter to materialize: "Oh, don't bring him into it, let him go!" (54). Simply put, Korobochka takes words seriously — too seriously. Chichikov eventually stumbles on the words — "government contracts" — that transform her contrariness into cooperation, but unfortunately for him their effect does not stop there. By invoking the authority of "government contracts," he has at last established the fungibility of "dead souls" as a legitimate concept. This, however, has the undesirable consequence of bringing the credulous Korobochka to town three days later, eager to learn the going rate for this (she now imagines) standard form of merchandise. In making her inquiries, she alerts the townspeople to the unorthodox nature of Chichikov's purchases, setting in motion the train of events that will culminate in his flight from the town.

If Korobochka's trouble is an exaggerated sense of signification, Nozdrev's is that he imputes no signification to words at all; he appears not to acknowledge a hard-and-fast bond between verba and res. He is constantly generating language with no apparent foundation in

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1. Except where noted, quotations from Dead Souls are taken from N. V. Gogol', Polnoe sobranie sochinenii, vol. 6 (Moscow and Leningrad: Ak. Nauk SSSR, 1951). Page numbers are given in parentheses in the text. All translations from the Russian are my own.