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**GOGOL'S VIA NEGATIONIS: AISTHESIS, ANAESTHESIA,
AND THE ARCHITECTURAL SUBLIME IN *ARABESKI***

"No kak izobrazit' to, chemu
eshche ne nashel khudozhnik
obrazitsa?"

(N. V. Gogol', *Vybrannye mesta
iz perepiski s druz'iami*)

1. The Absence of the Ideal

The discrepancy in Gogol's poetics between the author's affirmative aesthetic and metaphysical statements, on the one hand, and the negative failure of most of his fiction to endorse the Ideal by giving it adequate positive representation, on the other, has generally been interpreted in either of two ways. Neo-Formalist faction of Gogol' scholars subscribe to an axiomatic "literariness" of Gogol's texts and marginalize any metaphysical dimension as part of the semantic structure (*Bedeutungsaufbau*) of his fiction.¹ Those critics who do acknowledge that the relevance of Gogol's metaphysical concerns may not be confinable to his non-fictional utterings will generally analyse the author's fiction in terms of a positive theology which seeks to find that discourse which would finally spell out the ideal of which Gogol' speaks so much, a position which presupposes Gogol's assumption that the ideal could, in fact, ideally be spoken.

The critical conflict between the Ideal and its representation in Gogol's fiction may be studied with particular pertinence with regard to beauty. The latter's axiologically elevated position in Gogol's thinking (if not in his fiction) has rarely been doubted. Many of Gogol's pronouncements on art, from the early 1830's onward, presuppose a supreme position for the beautiful and for its artistic embodiment.² As a consequence, the author has been placed in close affinity with the Romantic programme of radical aestheticization developed in the wake of Schellingian philosophy. At the same time, however, Gogol's fiction consistently disavows the most central Romantic aesthetic topoi. The Schlegelian agenda of subsuming life under the aesthetic imperative finds no positive equivalent in Gogol's early fiction. Instead, we come across either a conspicuous absence of such positive representations of the aesthetic ideal as they dominate, for example, Schlegel's novel *Lucinde* (1799), or, secondly, a poetics of laughter, ugliness and coarse androgyny which seems aimed at invalidating and desecrating that

ideal.³ If Gogol' is placed in a positive mode of artistic enunciation, that is, if it is assumed that the author believed in the representability of the beautiful in positive representational terms, we are faced with a critical impasse from which stem either of two responses. The first, and most traditional, response is to firmly preserve the affirmative perspective and to read the non-aestheticism of Gogol's fiction positively, as approximations to an ideal which are deficient to the extent that any material representation of that Ideal is necessarily deficient. Gogol' is seen on a "quest for beauty"⁴ and the profanity of his fiction is interpreted as the result of his struggle with representation itself, that is, with the impossibility of circumventing the order of the material sign when representing the immaterial idea. The interpretation of Gogol' in this vein began in the 19th century and is customary for contemporary criticism, too.⁵ A second response to the apparent discrepancy between ideal and fiction in Gogol' maintains the assumption of the author's positive aesthetics but reads his profanations of the ideal affirmatively, i.e., as the positive manifestations of an explicitly anti-Romantic attitude which consistently inverts all the major tenets of Romantic aesthetics, including the Schlegelian aesthetic imperative.⁶ Both responses share the disadvantage of having to acknowledge a discrepancy between "saying" and "doing" in Gogol's poetics. If the first response places Gogol' in a tragico-aesthetic mode (inability to represent the immaterial aesthetic idea in material form), the second one cannot account for the many instances where Gogol' speaks about the beautiful in emphatically affirmative terms (opposition to the aesthetic in the fictional texts vs. affirmative attitude in a number of essays).

2. Aesthetics vs An(a)esthetics in Gogol's Poetics

In order to overcome the impasse which has in the past characterised attempts to describe Gogol's philosophy of the aesthetic sign, we would like to advance two fundamental propositions. Firstly, Gogol's understanding of the aesthetic artefact does not conceive of the latter as a "transmitter" (a sign) connoting a transcendent Ideal. On the contrary, Gogol' disavows art's symbolic "decipherment," i.e., a process of progressing from the work of art's material form to the metaphysical Essence in an act of symbolic reading. Secondly, this rejection is closely connected to a conspicuous moment of *Wirkungsästhetik* in Gogol's thinking which has frequently eluded critical attention. The author's aesthetic ideology is guided not primarily by the restricted modern notion of aesthetics as the study of beauty but, rather, by that broader *episteme aisthetike* which lies at the centre of the birth of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in the mid-18th century.⁷ Here, the aesthetic appears first and foremost as *aisthesis* (aisthesis or esthesis). In the context of Gogol's metaphysical aesthetics, the emphasis upon aisthesis suggests the revelation of the transcendent Idea in or

through a non-rational sensory affect or a sequence of affects within the perceiving subject rather than its presence within the materiality of the artistic artefact.

Aisthesis, however, has (at least) a double meaning. It denotes both "sensation" or "sense impression" (*Empfindung*) and cognizing perception, *Wahrnehmung*.⁸ Aisthesis is, hence, to be understood not merely as sense impression (and much less merely as the sensory apperception of beauty) but, more fundamentally, as an intuitive, non-rational grasp of the truth (*Wahrheit*). In order to elucidate the use Gogol makes of aisthesis, one further qualification must be made. For the author's thinking appears characterised by a certain drifting apart of the two mentioned elements of aisthesis (*Empfindung* vs *Wahrnehmung*). In many of the expository texts in *Arabeski* (1835) and *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druž'iami* (1847), the cognizing perception (*Wahrnehmung*) of the metaphysical essence is curiously disconnected from any sensuous corollary (*Empfindung*). The same may be shown to be the case in a number of Gogol's fictional texts. Insight, in these instances, is not the result of the truth being "in sight." In other words, the companion of perceptual cognizance, in Gogol's aesthetic philosophy, is not a felicitous act of aesthetic apperception but, on the contrary, an "an-aesthetic" moment of failing sensation, a sense-less apatheia. In *Arabeski*, for example, Gogol generally depicts the apperception of the work of art as a process of sensual immobilization and an(a)esthesia. The *Wahrnehmung* of the metaphysical essence appears as the result of a properly speaking anaesthetic, i.e., non-sensory disposition, a blindness which acts as the corollary of higher vision. Such anaesthetics do not, incidentally, suggest an anti-aesthetic, non-aesthetic, or even "un-aesthetic" attitude on Gogol's part.⁹

On a conceptual level, Gogol's "anaesthetic aisthesis" connects with a metaphysics of "nothingness" which is highly productive in the author's thinking and writing. For if the cognizance (*Wahrnehmung*) of the metaphysical essence comes about not through an act of aesthetic vision but, rather, in a moment of anaesthetic sensory numbness, then precisely "nothing" is sensed, seen, heard, or felt. The apperception of this essence is at bottom the apperception of a void, a void which is characterised by a-semanticty (sense-lessness) and a-referentiality ("nothing"). "Nothing" represents the only possible form of transitive linguistic reference to an essence whose status as being in existence cannot be sensorily verified. The most striking consequence of Gogol's insistence upon the anaesthetic perception of the Ideal is, then, the latter's status of a transcendent—"no-thing." Consequently, the transcendent Nothing's most natural rhetorical counterpart would be an "empty" (tautological) discourse with a tendency towards silence. This "rhetoric of blindness"¹⁰ would assume the co-presence, in any act of perceptual insight, of an opposing element of anaesthetic blindness without which no higher insight can occur.

The "rhetoric of blindness" in Gogol's anaesthetic concept of the work of art takes its cue from the tradition of apophaticism. Through this tradition, the author participates in disparate gnostic teachings about the nature of the divine Godhead. Gogol's avid interest in religious literature and his familiarity with the Russian and Western traditions of mysticism has long been an established fact.¹¹ Gnostic philosophy thematizes God precisely as a divine nonbeing, or "nothing." In German mysticism as well as in the Jewish kabbalah, the being of God is "being above all being" and, consequently, nonbeing (*Nichtsein*). According to Eckehart, God is "neither this nor that" ("weder dies noch das," Meister Eckehart 1955: 196), he exists in nonbeing ("er wirkt im Nichtsein," Meister Eckehart 1955: 196). The Kabbalah calls *kether* ("the crown"), among other things, *ain*, i.e., "nothingness" ("the absence of any definite or conditioned reality").¹² According to mystical theology, there can be no aisthesis of the divine except under the auspices of a mystical experience which represents a higher form of anesthesia.

What are the implications of Gogol's anaesthetics for his attitude towards Romantic aesthetics? It is arguable that Gogol's attitude towards Romantic aisthesis quickly moves from an early position of endorsement (*Gants Kiukhel'garten*) towards an attitude of implicit rejection. This rejection takes its cue from an anaesthetic poetics of in-sensitivity, blindness, invisibility, and silence which opposes itself to the synthesizing, visualizing efforts of Romantic thinking. Nowhere are Gogol's reservations vis-à-vis the Romantic philosophy of art as visible as they are in this implicit rejection of the latter's emphasis on the metaphorical interchangeability of different ontological planes. For Gogol, the word, the work of art, do not function as "windows" to transcendence. Instead, both ontological planes remain irreconcilably different. Gogol's skepticism towards the aisthetic is first and foremost a skepticism directed at the metaphysical implications of the Idealist and Romantic absolutizing of esthesis. As is well known, the axiom which underlies Romantic and pre-Romantic aesthetic theory is the appearance of the Absolute (the Ideal, the Truth) through the material form of the beautiful work of art. Art is "aesthetic" precisely in the sense that it allows for the aisthetic access to an otherwise unperceived transcendence. In a Schellingian perspective, the (visual) aisthesis of that which is beyond vision (the Absolute) in the aesthetic artefact is the result of an art which synthesizes time and timelessness, finitude and infinitude, immanence and transcendence, sign and referent and which makes that synthesis available to the perceptive apparatus. The latter process of "translating" the Absolute into the semantic code of the work of art is a dialectic one. The timelessness of the Absolute is revealed (aisthetically perceived) precisely through and by its being confined to the temporality of the material artefact. Artistic aisthesis, in the Romantic and Idealist understanding, is hence directed not at the outer shell of the natural phenomena but, rather, at their

inner Ideal, an Ideal within nature which is accessible not even to nature itself. The esthesis of art, in this way, objectifies nature for nature itself. The Romantic aesthetic imperative is essentially an aesthetic one, making present as it does the metaphysical Absolute in a continuous process of artistic semiosis. The aesthetic element in this process is not so much the formal beauty of the resulting artefact (philosophers like Schelling were rather opposed to a neo-classical art of proportions) but the aesthetic perceivability of that which is per definitionem beyond such perception.

3. Anesthetizing Aisthesis: the Sublime in *Arabeski*

The following remarks are devoted to the role played by the sublime in Gogol's aesthetic thinking during the mid-1830's. At this time, Gogol's views had arguably shifted from the early endorsement of Romantic aisthesis to a more skeptical approach. An affinity to the anaesthetic mode is one of the major characteristics of the sublime. The sublime has a conspicuous place in the expository texts collected in *Arabeski* which will represent the focus of our inquiry.¹³ Terms such as "velichavoe"; "velikoe"; "velichie"; "velichestvennost"; "velichina"; "neizmerimost"; "kolossal'nost," etc. appear as attributes with great regularity. Subjects praised by Gogol' for their "greatness" include Gothic architecture ("Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 56-75), Briullov's painting "Poslednii den' Pompei" ("Poslednii den' Pompei. [Kartina Briulova]," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 107-114), Egyptian and Indian architecture ("Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni"), the middle ages ("O srednikh vekakh," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 14-25), the warfaring Cossacks ("Vzgliad na sostavlenie Malorossii," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 40-49), etc.

Gogol's choice of the sublime for an "anaesthetic" viewpoint on art is not a coincidence. The sublime occupies an ambiguous middle position between aesthetic perception, on the one hand, and anaesthetic blindness, on the other. Within rhetoric, the sublime stands in direct opposition to the argumentative work of rationally conceived speech and its ambition to persuade. According to 'Longinus', the sublime induces "ecstasy," it "brings force [...] irresistible to bear upon the hearer, and takes its stand high above him." ('Longinus' 1926: 2) From its first poetological conceptualization in 'Longinus' treatise *Peri uyouV* to the reinterpretation of the concept by Kant and Hegel, the tension between aisthesis, on the one hand, and anaesthesia, on the other, has been found to lie at the very root of the sublime. It is precisely this paradox which the author of *Peri hypsous* describes as a sign of sublime greatness: "uyoV megalofrosunhV aphichma." ('Longinus' 1964: 9).¹⁴ The sublime appears as a "soundless echo," a statement which encapsulates the semiotic structure of sublime discourse and marks its implication in the anaesthetic (as that which is inaudible/invisible). The

sublime thematises the anaesthetic moment involved in any act of aisthesis. The experience of sublime greatness appears as a moment of insightful blindness, an anaesthetic vision. As is well known, the sublime experience, for example in its Kantian form, culminates in a moment of sense-less anaesthetic *Lust* deprived of any representational, visual corollary.¹⁵ At the same time, the relationship between aisthesis and anaesthesia, with the sublime, is not a dialectic one. Aisthesis does not "dissolve" into anaesthesia. The relationship between the two is marked, rather, by a certain oscillation and instability. Thus, Kant suggests that during the perception of the sublime the initial (aesthetically induced) negative emotion of "*Unlust*" interchanges at an unperceivably quick pace with its opposite, "*Lust*."¹⁶ The paradox of the sublime, then, consists in its inducement of a state of strictly anaesthetic "vision" by purely aesthetic (aesthetic) means.

3.1. The Refutation of the Central Perspective

Gogol's discussion of the sublime in *Arabeski* is marked by its emphasis upon the apophatic, anaesthetic element in the sublime. The author defends this element against the "aestheticising" efforts of the modern, enlightened age. Again and again, he charges that the sublime has disappeared in the wake of such efforts.¹⁷ One of the touchstones of this defense is Gogol's attitude towards the important issue of the perspectivizing distance between the viewer, on the one hand, and the sublime object, on the other. Ever since 'Longinus' treatise, the negotiation of that distance from the sublime object which both preserves the powerful immediacy of its impact and safeguards the physical integrity of the perceiving subject has been a key factor in the conceptualization of the sublime. The "right" distance negotiates a position for the perceiving subject which oscillates between dazzling proximity (anaesthesia), on the one hand, and "safe" visual contemplation (aisthesis), on the other. Any increase in distance from the sublime object widens the scope for its a(e)i(sthetic) contemplation. The sublime object, in this way, becomes beautiful or "poetic." In the last resort, it is the increase in distance from the sublime object as a result of a firm central perspective which makes possible the Kantian replacement of the sublime in nature by the sublimeness of the rational mind. Gogol', on the other hand, rejects any aestheticizing distance between the viewer and the sublime object:

Daite cheloveku bol'shoe rasstoianie — i on uzhe budet gliadet' vyshe, gordo na nakhodiashchiesia pered nim predmety; emu pokazhetsia vse malym.
(Gogol' 1952/VIII: 63)

Gogol' consistently reduces the distance which deprives the sequence of sublime vision of its element of anaesthesia, disavowing that "otdalenniaia perspektiva" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 110) which neutralizes the impact of fear.

Net, ne takov zakon velikogo: stroenie dolzhno neizmerimo
vozvyshat'sia pochtii nad golovoiu zritel'ia; chtoby on stal,
porazhennyi vnezapnym udivleniem, edva buduchi v sostoianii
okinut' glazami ego vershinu.
(Gogol' 1952/VIII: 62)

Implicitly, Gogol's conceptualization of the sublime also rejects the Romantic glorification of horizontal distance or *Weite*: "Slovo shirina dolzhno ischeznut'." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 65) Romantic *Weite* presupposes a physical and intellectual distance from the world of objects which allows the imagination the utmost freedom to roam beyond the confines of that which is close(d) and therefore devoid of any transcendent potential. Confronting the wide horizontal expanse, the Romantic subject experiences the smallness of objects in the distance as a token of the existence of a limitlessly open poetic horizon, a "storehouse" of transcendence (Koschorke 1990: 188). Strictly following the logic of the central perspective, the Romantic imagination associates distance with fiction and poesis. The quintessential Romantic gaze (*Fernblick*) is the panoramic view from aloft. The panoramic vision places the subject in the position of God and the universal overview associated with divine omnipresence (Koschorke 1990: 166). As is the case with the perceptual mode of the Kantian sublime, the core of the Romantic concept of *Weite* is the distance between perceiving subject and perceived object.

In his consistent emphasis upon proximity over distance and the vertical line over the horizontal, Gogol' opposes a development which is inextricably tied to the logic of the central perspective (i.e., the progressive centrality of the perceiving subject over the perceived object). His turning to the Middle Ages for examples of sublime greatness, in this context, is not a coincidence. It suggests the author's preference for a concept of (artistic) representation which is dominated not by the perspectival depth of the 19th century but, rather, by the viewer's aperspectival proximity to the represented objects as we encounter it in medieval art. Here, even the distant object retains the size and immediacy which the central perspective diminishes. Gogol' questions the supreme position of the perceiving subject which is implicit in the elevation of the central perspective. The paradigmatic position of the Gogolian subject in its encounter with the sublime object is the glance upward from the base of the sublime object. By diminishing the hiatus between perceiving subject and sublime object, Gogol' stresses their irreducible ontological difference, i.e., the finitude, smallness, and insignificance of the subject vs. the infinite greatness of the sublime which confronts it. He

repudiates the Romantic transcendentalization of the immanent world itself. Gogol's consistent replacement of the horizontal with the vertical axis in his discussions of sublime *velichie* suggests the de-secularization of the sublime and the reversal of that process whereby the subject had arrogated for itself the superior vantage point of the divine itself.¹⁸

As an example of Gogol's preference for the aperspectival presence of the medieval period over the achievements of the central perspective, we might cite his discussion of Briullov's painting "Poslednii den' Pompei." Gogol credits the paintings of his century with the further development of perspective ("[...] kak v nikh delitsia i vykhodit [...] perspektiva stroenii") (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 108) but denies them the character of sublimeness ("priiatnyi dlia glaz"). "Perspektiva" is associated by Gogol' with the very same distance which sets in motion the Romantic longing for distance ("oni pokhozhi na otdalennye vidy"). In his further discussion, Gogol' sees the painting's sublimeness precisely in its emphasis upon aperspectival presence and proximity ("pered samymi nashimi glazami"; Gogol' 1952/VIII: 110). The interplay between shadow and light which regulates the perspectival vision gives way to a distribution of luminous areas which is determined by the spiritual importance of the depicted object (semantic perspective). Such a procedure is followed, for example, by icon painters: "Molnii u nego zalila [...] vse [...], chtoby vse vykazat', chtoby ni odin predmet ne ukrylsia ot zritel'ia." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 110) As a consequence of the refusal to hierarchize the represented world into background and foreground, all objects in Briullov's painting (similar, in this respect, to a medieval canvas) enjoy equal proximity and visibility.

3.2. Anaesthesia and Negative Representation

The aesthetic presence of the sublime object as a consequence of its heightened proximity induces a moment of anaesthetic senselessness. The sublime provokes "entuziazm" in the wake of "kakoe-to onemenie" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 66). The entry into the Gothic cathedral results in full-blown anesthetization: "[...] mysl' nemeet ot izumleniia [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 67).¹⁹ Such a moment of anaesthesia has, as we saw, formed part of the philosophical conceptualisation of the sublime from the earliest times. For Gogol', too, the apogee of the sublime experience appears as the paradoxical result of an overexposure to sense impressions, an overexposure which is, in its turn, a direct consequence of the refutation of "economizing" perspectival viewing. The "ecstasy" induced by the sublime represents, properly speaking, a form of hyper-aisthesis. This aisthesis, however, exposes distinctly its disconnectedness from any sensuous apperception of a real object. Precisely "nothing" is seen nor felt, on the contrary, Gogol

stresses again and again the mutual interdependence of "entuziazm" and "onemenie."

The anaesthetic cumulation of the sublime experience in Gogol's concept also cancels any symbolic understanding of the sublime object. The sublime, from the point of view of *Wirkungsästhetik*, does not "represent" anything except for the impossibility of representation (of the Absolute, the Godhead, etc.) itself. It is in this sense that the sublime, for Gogol, speaks that negative "nemoi iazyk" we mentioned above. The sublime appears as an intransitive mode of representation which "conceals" nothing in the sense that it stands for nothing, does not symbolize or allegorize. The Gogolian sublime represents — precisely "nothing."²⁰ The sublime is characterized by that gap between signifier and signified which Hegel conceived as the essence of the sublime mode of representation. The sublime appears as that *materia prima* which does not speak "about" anything. For example, it is precisely for its refusal to enunciate, i.e., to represent, the Absolute that Gogol praises Briullov's *Poslednii den' Pompei*: "[...] vo vsei kartine vykazyvaetsia otsutstvie ideal'nosti [...], i v etom-to sostoit ee pervoe dostoinstvo. Iavis' ideal'nost' [...], ona by ne proizvela togo vpechatleniia [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 111) The same point is made in connection with Michelangelo's plastic. Gogol critically asserts that the latter's material form is merely "odezhda mysli" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 111), a symbolizing form which takes an axiologically lower position vis-à-vis that which it symbolizes.

The aesthetic function of the work of art as the material vehicle of beauty is explicitly disavowed in *Arabeski*. In "Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni," Gogol rejects any axiomatic preference of classical and neo-classical aesthetics for the hegemony of the whole over its parts, formal harmony (garmoniia), unity (edinstvo), etc., as material signifiers of abstract "beauty." Such "harmony of parts" is an aesthetically unmarked element in Gogol's sublime: "[...] uznali iskusstvo bolee [...] garmonirovat' mezhdu soboiu chasti, no ne uznali iskusstva davat' velichie vsemu tselomu [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 60) The positively "harmonious" misses the mark of sublime *velichie*. Like distance in space, the classical striving for harmony of parts reduces their proportions ("malyi") for the benefit of the overall (abstract) aesthetic effect:

Eta sorazmernost' sostoiala eshche v tom, chtoby stroenie, kak by veliko ni bylo v svoem ob'eme, no nepremenno chtoby kazalos' malym. (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 61)

3.3. Aesthetic vs Anaesthetic Sublime

The sublime, in *Arabeski*, unfolds into two complementary types. They are typologically distinguishable as sublime "height," on the one hand, and as sublime "depth," on the other. The first of these is associated with the infinite

height of the skies (paradigmatically so in the Gothic cathedral), the latter with tellurian depth (as, for example, the "podzemnaia geografiia" Gogol' discusses in "Mysli o geografii"). This latter type of sublime greatness is, properly speaking, Gogol's "hypsos." We will call these forms "aesthetic" and "anaesthetic" sublime.²¹

The aesthetic sublime is a form of the artistic sublime (*Kunsterhabenes*). It is aesthetically marked by the gradual cumulation of aisthesis in an ecstatic moment of anaesthetic *onemenie*. This type of Gogolian sublime bears significant similarities with gnostic practice. The anaesthetic blindness which is the only adequate perceptual mode for the apperception of the Absolute is here describable as the consequence of a dazzling overabundance of aisthesis. The hypsos' soaring beyond the limen of the earth connotes the ascensus towards God.²² The classical conceptualization of the hypsos as an ascent toward the transcendent, as Homann 1977 shows, goes back to the Platonic idea of the ascent of the soul. The aesthetic sublime equals the efforts of mystical negative speech to embrace that which cannot be spoken by a proliferating a discourse of tautologies and oxymorons which seeks the approximation to that "everything" (God, the Absolute) which cannot be spoken.

The anaesthetic sublime, on the other hand, represents the total absence of speech, invisibility, and the darkness of the earth. Here, the anaesthetic mode of perception characteristic of the sublime has no a(e)(i)sthetic precedent whatever. The anaesthetic sublime is discussed in *Arabeski* as different types of invisible, subterranean greatness. The main typological distinction of the tellurian sublime is its enormous depth (as opposed to the height of the aesthetic hypsos). The anaesthetic sublime is associated with a tendentially negative representational mode. Both aesthetic and anaesthetic sublime are apophatic in nature. However, where the apophaticism of the hypsos represents the dialectical resolution of moments of heightened aisthesis on the level of anaesthesia (the lack of perspective as a prerequisite for "entuziazm" and "onemenie"), the anaesthetic sublime seeks the immediate exposure to the negativity of the Absolute. In the following discussion, we shall examine in some detail both types of sublime greatness as Gogol' represents them in *Arabeski*.

3.3.1. Two Types of Gogolian "Aesthetic Sublime"

Gogol's aesthetic sublime appears, firstly, as an aesthetic ascent whose ultimate ambition is the anaesthetic, or hyper-aesthetic, *unio mystica* with the Absolute. The paradigm of Gogol's aesthetic sublime is the Gothic cathedral. Its "greatness" (*velichie*) is the result, first and foremost, of its enormous vertical height ("izumitel'noe velichie").

Secondly, however, the Gogolian aesthetic sublime manifests itself in a pseudo-secular form. Here, the individual's anaesthetic blindness before the power of the sublime qua State is mirrored in the latter's visual surveillance of the former. In Gogol's secular aesthetic sublime, the pathos of blindness which surrounds the gnostic understanding of the apperception of God is usurped by the quasi-religious authority of the State. The dialectic resolution of aesthetic blindness into anaesthetic vision is replaced by the terror of a purely aesthetic panopticism. Sublime anaesthesia becomes the site of a carefully planned spectacle of power. The authority of the state, unbeknownst to the "blinded" individual, assumes the power of an invisible "all-seeing eye."²³

3.3.1.1. The Gothic Cathedral

Gogol's description of the Gothic hypsos in "Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 56-75) exemplifies the apophatic *ascensus* towards the Absolute, an *ascensus* which moves from aisthesis to a state of anaesthetic, enthused blindness which perceives (*nimmt wahr*) the Absolute without seeing it. The panic ("nevol'nyi uzhas," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57) which is generated in the subject as it enters the aesthetic sublime and casts its eyes upward, alongside the former's vertical axis ("gde teriaiusia [...] strel'chatye svody odin nad drugim, odin nad drugim, i im kontsa net [...]," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57) is sublimated on the level of a mystical immersion in the darkness and invisibility of the divine.²⁴ The "molaiushchii narod" inside Gogol's Gothic cathedral engages in an ascent which implies its abrupt distancing from the immanence of this world into a higher spiritual order and the concomitant dissolution of the initial feeling of *uzhas*: "Velichestvennogo, kolossal'nogo, pri vzgliade na kotoroe mysli [...] otryvaiut molel'shchika ot nizkoi ego khizhiny." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 65) Gogol's description of the Gothic hypsos confirms the author's identification with a medieval aperspectivism which testifies at every step to the irreducible difference between the immanence of this world and the other world, between finitude and infinity, etc. The perceiving subject takes a position of proximity ("voznosiashchisia nad golovoiu les svodov") vis-à-vis the aesthetic sublime, a proximity precluding both rationalization and the Romantic flight into the distance.

Not unlike Briullov's sublime painting, Gogol's hypsos is all a-perspectival presence, "everything" ("vse") at the same time: "V nei vse soedineno vmeste [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57)²⁵ As we mentioned earlier, one of the implications of Gogol's radical reduction of the distance between perceiving subject and perceived object is the impossibility of metaphorising distance, of turning it into the Romantic storehouse of transcendence. The subject's proximity to the sublime object and the fact that the former is denied any position of perspectival elevation

precludes the Romantic dualism of far vs close and replaces it with the premodern pair of high vs low, a binarism which is semanticized as transcendence vs immanence, divine vs human, finite vs infinite, etc. The only perspective which has any relevance in Gogol's discussion is medieval *Bedeutungsperspektive*, i.e., the representation of things as small or large not according to their position vis-à-vis the spectator but according to their ontological position. The result of Gogol's aperspectivism is a form of sublime greatness which, in a non-Kantian sort of way, is connected to the notion of absolute rather than comparative greatness.

The subject which steps into the interior of the Gothic cathedral at the beginning of Gogol's essay enters a space which marks at every point the transpatial, non-spatial nature of God: "Vstupaiia v sviashchenny mrak [...], podniavshi glaza kverkhu [...] gde teriaiutsia svody [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57) The semidarkness ("sviashchenny mrak") inside the cathedral and the light which "phantastically" ("fantasticheski") shines through its narrow windows signal the diaphaneity of the Gothic hypsos, its location in between the materiality of the phenomenal world and the immaterial transcendence of the Absolute. Gogol' extends the enormous vertical height of the Gothic hypsos to a tendency to "soaring" and consequent dematerialization, to a weightlessness which defies the earthly law of gravity. The visual effect of such elevation, however, comes about not as a result of perspectival vision but as a consequence of the sublime's suspension "in between" the immanent world and the higher transcendence of God: "Zdanie [...] letelo k nebu; uzkie okna [...] tianulis' neskonchaemo v vyshinu [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 56) The tension between body and soul, earth and heaven, etc. marks the aesthetic sublime everywhere in Gogol's text:

[...] velichestvennyi khrām tak byval velik pered obyknovennymi
zhilishchami liudei, kak veliki trebovaniia dushi pered trebovaniiami
tela.

(Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57)

The tendency towards dematerialization is also illustrated by the cathedral's "transparent" spire ("prozrachnyi shpits"). Its impact as a material (and, hence, possibly sexual) object is fully redeemed as it is de-materialised by its ascent towards the (immaterial) Absolute: "[...] tot legkii i prozrachnyi [shpits, S. S.], kotoryi [...] prinimal takuiu vozdukhnost' [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 59)

The height of the Gothic cathedral is linked genetically to the spatial depth of the perspectively approached "deep" Romantic landscape (Koschorke 1990: 53), but it also emphasizes the aperspectival transcendence of that which exceeds any space and any representation. In this context, it is interesting that the Absolute (God), in "Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni," is not simply characterised as that which is perspectively hidden from view, a hiddenness which still assumes the essential presence of that which is (temporarily) obscured. Gogol's aesthetic

sublime, on the contrary, marks the absence, hiddenness, and non-immanence of the divine precisely in the absolute openness of its inner space and in the totally aperspectival perceptual omnipresence of "everything" ("vse"; cf. also Gogol's discussion of Briullov's "Poslednii den" Pompei, "above). In his characterisation of the Gothic cathedral as "everything", Gogol's hypsos is particularly close to the oxymoronic speech of negative theology. The description of the cathedral bears all the rhetorical hallmarks of such speaking: "[...] roskosh' i prostota, tiazhest' i legkost' — eto takie dostoinstva, kotorykh nikogda [...] ne vmeshchala v sebe arkhitektura." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57) Gogol's architectural hypsos, like the Godhead in Jewish mysticism, is both *olam* (creation, time, and eternity) and place (*makom*).

3.3.1.2. The Sublime Watchtower

In its secular form, Gogol's aesthetic sublime in "Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni" (cf. Gogol' 1952/VIII: 62) involves an architectural urban utopia in which the position of the aesthetically inaccessible Godhead is taken by secular authority. The first and foremost characteristic of Gogol's urban architecture is height. Its paradigm is the medieval castle with its dominant elevated position vis-à-vis the surrounding countryside. The omnipresent aesthetic, i.e., the sublime, confronts the subject as a reminder of its own centrality and hegemony throughout. Gogol's aestheticized urban utopia, like the Gothic cathedral, denies any rationalizing distance to the viewer: "I potomu stroenie vseгда luchshe, esli stoit na tesnoi ploshchadi." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 62) The subject's perspective is the compulsory close-up ("pochti nad golovoiu zritel'ia"). The surveilling sublime subjects the viewer to the numbing hegemony of its vertical axis. That axis serves as a constant reminder of the transcendence and non-immanence of the Law:

Bashni ogromnye, kolossal'nye neobkhodimy v gorode [...]. [...] oni nuzhny dlia soobshcheniia gorodu rezkikh primet, chtoby sluzhit' maiakom, ukazyvavshim by put' vsiakomu, ne dopuskaia sbit'sia s puti.
(Gogol' 1952/VIII: 62)

The authority of the State qua sublime shrouds itself in the same infinity and boundlessness which it commands throughout *Arabeski*.

In his description of this secular version of his aesthetic sublime, Gogol' conspicuously assumes the perspective of the all-seeing-eye itself. The latter's visual surveillance of the surrounding countryside bespeaks an authoritarian panopticism which has usurped for its own designs the dialectic of anaesthetic blindness:

[Bashni ogromnye, S.S.] eshche bolee mizhay v stolitsakh dlia nabliudeniia nad okrestnostiami. [...] Stolitsa poluchaet sushchestvennuiu vygodu, obozrevaia provintsii i zaranee predvidia vse [...]. (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 62)

However, in the case of Gogol's secular aesthetic sublime, the panic [*uzhas*] associated with the perception of the sublime is left unresolved. The experience of Kantian *Lust* as the positive corollary of the negative feeling of *Unlust* is denied to Gogol's subject. The interchange of aisthesis and anesthesia does not take place. Gogol's secular sublime is all aesthetic presence, a presence which even includes the spectator himself: "Chtoby liudi lepilis' pod nim i svoeiu malost'iu uvelichivali ego velichie!" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 63) The instrumentalization of sublime aisthesis on the part of the state and its "higher" political order is based upon the general aestheticization of life. Gogol's description of the urban hypsos seems to curiously anticipate the law-giving elevation of Franz Kafka's castle in the novel of the same title, a structure whose power derives, similarly, from the impossibility of delimiting its all-inclusive presence and which, like Gogol's sublime, remains an unsolvable mystery for those who experience its aesthetic power.

3.3.2. The Anaesthetic Sublime

The anaesthetic sublime describes the sublime greatness of invisible "negative height," i.e., tellurian depth. Gogol' describes in the terms of this "counter-hypsos," for example, subterranean geography ("Mysli o geografii"), different types of Asian "podzemnaia arkhitektura" (catacombs, in "Ob arkhitekture nyneshnego vremeni"), but also the historical period of the Middle Ages ("O srednikh vekakh"), etc. The anaesthetic sublime mirrors Gogol's aesthetic hypsos:

"Aesthetic" sublime:

high, lofty
visible
"light" and "transparent"
associated with the sky and transcendence
represents a strict order

"Anaesthetic" sublime:

enormous depth
invisible
"heavy" and "dark"
associated with the earth
represents the chaos of
creation

The anaesthetic sublime is closely linked to the earth (tellurian). An important element of Gogol's description of the subterranean sublime in general is that material of which the earth is made, stone.²⁶ The Gothic cathedral, the sublime field of geography, the volcano in Briullov's painting, urban architecture — stone figures in virtually all of Gogol's sublime subjects, be it in the dynamic aspect of

the lithosphere (the volcano) or as a statically "infinite" structure (the cathedral). Petrological metaphors also play a conspicuous role in the Romantic and pre-Romantic conceptualization of sublime greatness.²⁷ There are, however, crucial differences in Gogol's use of stone in his analysis of the aesthetic hypsos (the Gothic cathedral), on the one hand, and the anaesthetic subterranean sublime, on the other. Where the architectural aesthetic sublime represents stone as part of the higher order of the constructed building, the anaesthetic sublime, in a Romantic vein, exposes the subject to the powerful effects of subterranean petrogenesis:

Ne meshalo by kosnut'sia slegka podzemnoi geografii. Mne kazhetsia, net predmeta bolee poeticheskogo, kak ona [...]. Tut vse iavleniia i fakty dyshat ispolinskoiu kolossal'nost'iu. Zdes' vstrecha-iutsia tselye massy. [...] Tut lezhit v glubokom uedinenii rakovina i uzhe prevrashchaetsia v mramor.
(Gogol' 1952/VIII: 102)

The difference between aesthetic sublime and anaesthetic sublime in *Arabeski* bears traces of the difference between the Apollonian and the Dionysian principles. Where the architectural Gothic hypsos is sublime in its resolution of heaviness ("tiazhest") into its opposite, the greatness of the invisible "podzemnaia arkhitektura" is the result precisely of its unsublimated heaviness. Gogol' calls this the "tiazheloe velichie" of Indian and Egyptian catacombs: "Eta podzemnaia arkhitektura imeet chto-to [...] velichavoe [...]. Zdes' tiazhest' ne bezobrazna, a velichestvenna [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 70) Gogol's tellurian architecture is associable with the darkness of the earth, with the chthonic and the unstructured pre-conscious chaos which complements the (terrestrial) Apollonian principles of order, light, and reason (cf. also the volcano in Briullov's painting). It equals the attempt to reach back beyond that point at which the marble sculpture becomes the highest form of positive speech and the embodiment of the highest form of beauty, that point where, in the author's words, "[v]se [...] slilos' v krasotu i chuvstvennost'." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 10) The invisible subaqueous hideouts of the sublime Cossack warriors in "Vzgliad na sostavlenie Malorossii" belong to the same typological group (cf. Gogol' 1952/VIII: 47).²⁸ The pre-structural nature of Gogol's anaesthetic sublime is also apparent in his metaphorical depiction of the Middle Ages. They appear as "temnoe podzemel'e" and as a rocky "fundament vsego novogo" which, in itself invisible and unstructured, represents the indispensable foundation of its superstructure (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 15). The Middle Ages, in this way, become the sublime chaos which precedes the appearance of the hypsos: "[...] sami etot khaos, v kotorom brodiat razlozhennye nachala strashnogo velichii nyneshnei Evropy [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 15) Like other forms of anaesthetic sublime greatness in

Arabeski, they are characterised as "dark" and "closed" ("*temnye*"; "*zakrytye*").²⁹

The anaesthetic sublime gives (negative) representation to that which the ordering marble of the Apollonian sculpture cannot conceive, i.e., "[v]se neopredelennoe, chto ne v silakh vyrazit' mramor [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 11) Gogol' stresses the amimetic and fantastic character of his tellurian sublime: "[...] arkhitektura, kotoraiia sozdana odnim tol'ko voobrazheniem [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 67) Gogol's tellurian sublime is characterised by the greatest possible discrepancy between the material signifier, on the one hand, and the transcendent signified, on the other. The very discrepancy between the infinite, immaterial, transcendent Essence and the dark, chthonian, non-transcendent weightiness of the sublime is its major signifying element. The anaesthetic sublime, in this way, foregrounds a gap, a discrepancy between meaning and its outward form, an absence which, precisely in its abandoning of any representation of that which is extraneous to representation "is" sublime. Gogol's anaesthetic sublime, in that sense, appears as that mode of expression which "expresses" nothing but the inadequacy of any attempt to represent the Absolute. Gogol's subterranean architectural myth has a crucial predecessor in Hegel's *Aesthetics*. Hegel sees the importance of "Indian and Egyptian Subterranean Buildings" (Hegel 1975/II: 648-650) precisely in their demonstration of the greatest possible discrepancy between inside and outside, form and content. Subterranean architecture is important for Hegel's argument as an art which seems to exceed the sphere of symbolic signification. To that extent, subterranean architecture foregrounds the absolute centrality of that which it enshrines:

But for us, however symbolical these [subterranean, S.S.] buildings may also be, they already belong to a further sphere because they are no longer so independently symbolical; they have the purpose of enclosing, providing walls and roofs within which the more symbolical productions are set up as such. (Hegel 1975/II: 649)

Like Hegel, Gogol's subterranean architecture appears as sublime precisely in its foregrounding of the discrepancy between signifier and signified.³⁰ Unlike the positive architecture of the hypsos, in the case of excavation "there is no question of positive building" (Hegel 1975/II: 649). With the anaesthetic sublime, God is indeed "in itself without shape and inaccessible to concrete vision." (Hegel 1975/I: 364) The tellurian sublime represents the belief that only the unbridgeable contrast between high and low, between God and man can "represent" that which cannot be represented. Its reception on the part of the subject is consequently far removed from contemplative aisthesis. Gogol's subterranean sublime in *Arabeski* radicalizes the representational negativity which, as we saw, had already been a

significant characteristic of his architectural hypsos. The Absolute is here repositioned into the full negativity of a semiotically inactive silence.

4. Anaesthesia in *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druž'iami*

In his last published collection of expository texts, *Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druž'iami*, Gogol' presents the outline of an anaesthetic religious art which bears distinct resemblance to the concept of the anaesthetic sublime discussed in *Arabeski*. The goal of this latter art would be the paradoxical representation of that "nothing" which structures the Absolute and which corresponds to the anaesthetic mode of being.³¹ Indeed, art, in *Vybrannye mesta* [...], exemplifies the unbridgeable gap between aisthesis and anaesthesia, between immanence and transcendence, or sign and referent. If the nothingness of the Godhead is beyond and above representation, its aesthetic re-presentation is not an option for the artist. The concept of God as a divine *ain* explodes the interrelationship of presence and absence which governs aesthetic semiosis. Art must consequently represent that which is not representable in a tendentiously empty or "silent" negative discourse. The avowed aim of that discourse is the metasemiotic display of the greatest possible gap between the Absolute's anaesthetic nothingness, on the one hand, and the sensorily accessible world of phenomena, on the other. That gap itself, however, is not and cannot be the object of esthesis. Instead, it is anaesthetically intuited.

In *Vybrannye mesta* [...], Gogol' develops ideas about the "enunciation" of God in language which privileges anaesthetic, non-communicative silence over the functionally communicative speech of the everyday: "[...] byvaet vremia, chto dazhe vovse ne sleduet govorit' o vysokom i prekrasnom [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 298) The Godhead is to be expressed adequately only through anaesthetic silence or negative speech, two modes of expression which acknowledge the "being above being" of the divine and the subsequent impossibility for it to be expressed in language. For example, the difference between the Western and the Orthodox church is conceptualized by Gogol' in *Vybrannye mesta* [...] precisely as the difference between the positive speech of catholicism, on the one hand, and that silence whose very negativity preserves the impossibility of representation, on the other:³²

Pust' missioner katolichestva zapadnogo [...] razmakhivaet rukami i krasnorechiem rydanii i slov istorgaet skoro vysykhaiushchie slezy. Propovednik zhe katolichestva vostochnogo dolzhen vystupit' tak pered narod, chtoby [...] vse by podvignulos' eshche prezhde, chem on ob"iasnil by samoe delo, i v odni golos zagovorilo by k nemu: Ne proiznosi slov, slyshim i bez nikh sviatuiu pravdu tvoei tserkvi! (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 246)

Gogol's privileging of silence over speech, of absence over representational presence, and his preference for negative discourse over any attempt to give positive representation to the Ideal participate in a theological tradition of apophatic (as opposed to cataphatic)³³ speech which assumes that the axiologically highest Essence (i.e., the Godhead) may be expressed only in an empty discourse of either full silence or meaningless oxymorons/tautologies, on the one hand, or by means of a negative representation which thematizes the inexpressibility of those supreme essences in the terms of their negative opposites, on the other (*omnis determinatio est negatio*). Since the time of Dionysius the Areopagite (*Peri mustikhV geologiaV*), Rambam (Maimonides), Spinoza, and the German mystics, such as Meister Eckehart, God has been the object of a theological discourse whose most basic assumption is that God cannot be spoken.³⁴ The tautological assertions of the impossibility of making God the subject of transitive speaking which is characteristic of the negative theology of, for example, German mysticism, proliferates acts of speech which all testify to the futility of speaking.³⁵ The symbolic order may only reiterate again and again the extraneousness of the Ideal to symbolic representation.³⁶

The most succinct illustration of anaesthetic art's tendency towards the full silence of non-communication in *Vybrannye mesta* [...] is given in Gogol's discussion of the painter Ivanov and his painting "Christ before the People" (1833-1855; "Istoricheskii zhivopisets Ivanov," Gogol' 1952/VIII: 328-337). Here, Gogol thematizes the issue of aisthesis from the very beginning. Ivanov's painting had become famous even before completion not so much despite but because of the fact that noone had ever seen the finished product. Gogol' seeks to answer criticism to the effect that Ivanov had not finished his work even after eight years of endeavour. Conspicuously, however, Gogol's plea for patience with Ivanov is not based upon the promise that the painting would soon materialize. Gogol' does not promise the public any *a(i)(e)sthetic* reward for the long waiting period. On the contrary, he charges that the impression of Ivanov's painting as being not "finished" arises from a mistaken trust in aisthesis, i.e., from the assumption that the work's essence lies in its visible materiality. Gogol's text is therefore written as an apologia of Ivanov's silence rather than as its excuse. In his estimate, the painting *is* finished in all its visual (aesthetic) aspects: "Ivanov sdelať vse, chto drugoi khudozhnik pochel by dostatochnym dlia okonchaniia kartiny." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 330) Gogol' weakens the supreme position of artistic aisthesis with his charge that any attempt to positively "exhaust" the infinite plenitude of the Absolute (Christ) is bound to fail and that, consequently, noone should "look" for the expression of the inexpressible within the material presence of Ivanov's painting: "Est' liudi, kotorye uvereniy, chto velikomu khudozhniku vse dostupno." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 330) Ivanov's silence, his "medlennost'" and inability to finish appear as integral parts of the signifying

structure of the painting as a whole. Truly "aesthetic" creation is signless and hence anaesthetic. Here, Gogol' links Ivanov's mode of mute inner working to his own: "Ia eto [...] ispytal sam. [...] V prodolzhenie bolee shesti let ia nichego ne mog rabotat' dlia sveta. Vsia rabota proizvodilas' vo mne i sobstvenno dlia menia." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 333)

The anaesthetic nonbeing of God in mystical theology connects with artistic creation in the terms of the well-known divine "*creatio ex nihilo*."³⁷ God spans all that is materially in existence. Consequently, unlike man, the divine principle creates not "something," but only itself, out of "nothing" (Seppänen 1985: 113). Gogol's discussion of the painter Ivanov weakens the latter's position as *homo faber* (whose creation relies upon that which is already materially in existence, hence upon aesthetics) and likens him to a theomorphic *homo creator* (whose creation does not depend upon that which is already materially in existence, who creates without precedent, *ex nihilo*, hence anaesthetically). Gogol' conceives of Ivanov as a mystical creator *ex nihilo*, the Eckehartian "goddened" soul whose creation is tantamount to that of God in that its subject "matter" is the non-existent *materia prima* created by God: "No kak izobrazit' to, chemu eshche ne nashel khudozhnik obraztsa? Gde mog naiti on obrazets dlia togo, chtoby izobrazit' glavnoe [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 331) Like Gogol's own auto-dialogue, Ivanov's art is an inner working whose material manifestation is but the negative trace of its theological labour.

There are many other examples, in *Vybrannye mesta* [...], of Gogol's preference for empty, anaesthetic discourse over communicative speech. At its most obvious level, this preference has at its root the (Neoplatonic) fear that words may prove inadequate for the expression of the truth. More radically, Gogol's statements lead to the charge that representational language and the aesthetic perceptive mode which corresponds with it may be structurally unsuited for representing a truth for which no sense or ratio can account: "Do tekhn zhe por nichego ne skazhu imenno potomu, chto mogu oshibit'sia [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 313); "[...] slova moi mogut pridtis' ne sovsem kstati, luchshe ne proiznosit' ikh vovse [...]" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 318) This "inner" word is the anaesthetic word, the signifier turned inward, a mute sign of intransitivity. The semiotically inactive, oxymoronic *beredtes Schweigen* has to take the place of an erroneous transitive expression of that which is not amenable to positive representation.³⁸

5. Results

1. The present article represents an investigation into Gogol's theory of the aesthetic sign during the mid 1830's as reflected in the expository texts collected in *Arabeski*. It addresses the question of the author's attitude towards the artistic representation of a metaphysical Essence (the Absolute, God, etc.). This question raises the further problem of Gogol's perspective on the Romantic and pre-Romantic (German Idealist) axiom of the aesthetic artefact as a metaphorical transmitter of the transcendent.

2. Gogol's aesthetic thinking during his "middle" period is characterised by his reluctance to conceive of the "aesthetic" in terms of "beauty." Instead, the author emphasises the sensory *effect* of the work of art (*Wirkungsästhetik*). Hence, "aisthesis" (aisthesis) as both "sensation" (*Empfindung*) and insightful "perception" (*Wahrnehmung*) assumes the place of "aesthetics qua beauty."

3. Curiously, representations of epiphanous insight into the metaphysical Essence in *Arabeski* are frequently not accompanied by any sense impression. Gogol's essays suggest a drifting apart of the two poles of aisthesis (*Empfindung* vs *Wahrnehmung*). Whereas sensory perception is truly aesthetic, any insight (*Wahrnehmung*) into the Absolute within the work of art follows the rationale of an anaesthetic moment of blindness. To sum it up in a paradoxical formula, it is the perception of anaesthesia which is at stake in Gogol's concept of the work of art.

4. If the metaphysical Absolute is paradoxically "perceived" in an act of anaesthetic blindness, the former must be assigned the status of a non-object, an absolute "Nothing." The discourse corresponding to that supreme nullity would be a tautologically "empty" or negative one. Gogol's aesthetic philosophy, at this point, participates in disparate gnostic teachings about the nature of the Godhead.

5. The conspicuous presence, in *Arabeski*, of instances of the sublime as that discourse which combines aisthesis and anaesthesia is not surprising. From the earliest times, the sublime has been conceptualised as ambiguously oscillating between aesthetic vision, on the one hand, and anesthetizing incapacitation, on the other.

6. The sublime culminates in a state of insightful anaesthesia. Such anaesthesia is the result of an excess of sensory aisthesis. This excess, in its turn, appears as a consequence of the radical reduction of neutralizing distance between the perceiving subject, on the one hand, and the sublime object, on the other. Gogol's disavowal of the central perspective is, in this context, to be seen as a token of his effort to redirect the sublime beyond the rationalist watershed of German idealist philosophy.

7. The sublime, in *Arabeski*, unfolds into two distinct types. The first type finds its paradigm in the Gothic cathedral. Confronting the sublime work of art,

the perceiving subject is exposed to an excess of visual aisthesis which results in a state of non-rational anaesthetic blindness. It is this pseudo-mystical state of blindness which leads to the (paradoxical) apperception (*Wahrnehmung*) of the transcendent "Nothing" (the Godhead).

8. We have called the second type of sublime in *Arabeski* the "anaesthetic sublime." This type foregoes the oscillation between aisthesis and anaesthesia which characterises, for example, the Gothic cathedral. It is associated with the chthonian element, with chaos, pre-civilizational life, and total amimeticism. The anaesthetic sublime "represents" the greatest discrepancy between signifier and signified and thus coincides with the Hegelian notion of sublime greatness. Here, the "being beyond being" of the Absolute is demonstrated with the utmost negativity. Sublime greatness, in this case, has no visually aesthetic corollary. It rests, on the contrary, in that gap which divides immanence from transcendence and sign from referent.

Notes

- 1 Cf. Fanger 1979: "In fact the Gogolian 'content' is *in* the form." (Fanger 1979: 235)
- 2 Cf. the pseudo-Platonic dialogue "Zhenshchina" (1831), where Gogol' speaks of "vyrazit' bozhestvo v samom veshchestve" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 12).
- 3 "The world may not be the best of all possible worlds [...] yet I do know that it is the most beautiful." (Friedrich Schlegel, *Lucinde. Ein Roman*. Stuttgart 1964, 7)
- 4 Jesse Zeldin, *Nikolai Gogol's Quest for Beauty. An Exploration Into His Works*. Lawrence 1978.
- 5 Cf., for example, Dostoevskii in his review "Knizhnost' i gramotnost'": "Iavilas' potom smeishchaisia maska Gogolia, s strashnym mogushchestvom smekha — s mogushchestvom, ne vyrazhavshimsia tak sil'no eshche nikogda [...]. I vot posle etogo smexa Gogol' umiraet pered nami [...] v bessilii sozdat' [...] sebe ideal, nad kotorym by on mog ne smeiat'sia." (Fiodor M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*. Vol. 19. Leningrad 1979, 12)
- 6 This is the reading put forward by Langer 1991. In Langer's view, Gogol' sees the true artist engaged in the production of non-aesthetic and anti-aesthetic ("unästhetisch," "antiästhetisch") art. Langer reads Gogol's early fiction as testimony to the author's general opposition to the Romantic aestheticization of life. See Langer 1991: 171.

- 7 Cf. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Philosophische Betrachtungen über einige Bedingungen des Gedichtes*, Ed. H. Petzold. Hamburg 1983, 86-87.
- 8 Wolfgang Welsch, *Ästhetisches Denken*. Stuttgart 1993 [Reclams UB8681], 11.
- 9 See Wolfgang Welsch, *Ästhetisches Denken*. Stuttgart 1993 [Reclams UB8681], 10.
 "Nothingness" is a concept with very comprehensive implications for Gogol's poetics. In the present context, we are interested, first and foremost, in Gogol's identification of the metaphysical Absolute with an essential "Nothing." It must, however, be noted that nothingness and the anaesthetic perceptual mode which corresponds with it characterise also the immanent physical world in Gogol's fiction. It is no coincidence, for example, that Tschizewskij insists upon the translation of the ubiquitous Gogolian "poshlost" precisely as "nothingness" (*Nichtigkeit*, Tschizewskij 1964: 101). Here again, nothingness finds itself in close proximity to anaesthetic senselessness. For Gogolian *poshlost* represents precisely the utmost degree of anaesthetic indifference, a state of generalised sensory numbness. The rhetorical equivalent of such anaesthesia in Gogol's fiction are, for example, certain types of extended hyperboles (*hyperoche*) which thematise absence, nullity, and non-existence (see Tschizewskij 1966: 92-94).
- 10 The term is used by Paul de Man in his "The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau," *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Theory and History of Literature. vol.7. Minneapolis 1983, 102-141.
- 11 See, for example, Hildegund Schreier, *Gogol's religiöses Weltbild und sein literarisches Werk. Zur Antagonie zwischen Kunst und Tendenz*. Slavistische Beiträge. Vol. 115. Eds. J. Holthusen and J. Schrenk. München 1977. Mysticism was particularly prominent in Russia during the age of Alexander I, the period which has frequently been said to represent Gogol's spiritual home. See Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought from the Enlightenment to Marxism*. Oxford 1988, 71. On mystical trends in Russia during the 1830's and aspects of gnosticism and Neoplatonism in Gogol's poetics, see Mikhail Weiskopf, "The Bird Troika and the Chariot of the Soul: Plato and Gogol. In: *Essays on Gogol. Logos and the Russian Word*. Eds. S. Fusso and P. Meyer. Evanston, 1992, 129.
- 12 Leo Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*. London 1971, 36.
- 13 And, beyond that, for Gogol's poetics in general. The sublime plays a role in Gogol's writing both as an aesthetic concept and as a rhetorical practice ("high style").
- 14 Longinus describes the encounter between Ulysses and one of the heroes of Troy, Aias, in the eleventh canto of Homer's *Odyssey*. Ulysses is in Hades

and talks to the soul of his mother and to those of some of Troy's former heroes. Aias stands aside. He has committed suicide because the weapons of the dead Achilles were given not to him but to Ulysses. Ulysses attempts to make Aias speak but the latter responds with silence. See Winfried Menninghaus. "Zwischen Überwältigung und Widerstand. Macht und Gewalt in Longins und Kants Theorien des Erhabenen." *Poetica* 1/2 (1991): 1-19.

¹⁵ Cf. Kant 1922: 315-412.

¹⁶ In Kant's concept, we notice the characteristic split of aisthesis into sensation (*Empfindung*=*Unlust*), on the one hand, and (anaesthetic) insight or perception, on the other (*Wahrnehmung* of reason's superiority=*Lust*). *Unlust* is the result of the inability of the imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) to synthesize into one image that which is "great beyond all measure" ("*über alle Maßen groß*") or "mighty beyond all measure" ("*über alle Maßen mächtig*"). *Lust*, on the other hand, represents Kant's sublimation of the agony of the imagination by choosing, as it were, another setting. The conflict is resolved on the higher level of reason (*Verstand*), where the subject cognizes the insignificance even of that which is "great beyond all measure" when compared to the infinite power of the idea, i.e., of reason. In this way, the initial defeat of the imagination is reinterpreted as the indispensable insight into the individual's victory as a rationally free subject on a higher level. Cf. Kant 1922: 315-412.

¹⁷ The hallmark of the sublime's atrophy in modern times, according to Gogol', is the modern substitution of anaesthetic blindness by enlightened knowledge: "Vek nash tak melok, zhelaniiia tak razbrosany po vsemu, znaniia nashi tak *entsiklopedicheski*, chto my nikak ne mozhem usredotochit' na odnom kakom-nibud' predmete nashikh pomyslov [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 66; emphasis mine, S.S.) The 19th century, according to Gogol, produces what one might call a positivist counter-sublime, the encyclopedia. The latter represents the attempt to resolve the aesthetic crisis of blindness in an effort to "cure" such blindness. The encyclopedia represents a cultural process of aestheticization, i.e., of *Sichtbarmachen* of that which had hitherto been invisible. This process abolishes the sublime and its reliance upon anaesthesia: "Zametili takie tainye iavleniia, kakikh prezhde nikto ne podozreval." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 107) Like the gnostics, Gogol' proposes, instead, the "unknowing" (agnosia) of all that is known. He characteristically refers to the sublime as a negative "nemoi iazyk" which defies the positivist epistemology of the Enlightenment: "Vse tainoe [...], ves' etot nemoi iazyk peizazha [...] ukradeny, vyrvany iz samoi prirody [...]." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 107) Gogol' seeks to reach back beyond the effects of the sublime's aesthetic domestication. This implies his rejection of any attempt to produce sublime greatness synthetically, i.e., to incorporate it into a positive aesthetics which would forego the concept's irreducible anaesthesia. "V Anglii vse novye tserkvi stroiat v goticheskom vkuse. Oni ochen' mily, ochen' priiatny dlia glaz, no, uvy, istinnogo velichiiia [...] v nich net." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 66)

- ¹⁸ In his fiction, Gogol' frequently represents a secularised and profaned version of the theological sublime in which the protagonist's "glance upwards" plays a central role. The glance into the elevated (and inaccessible) world of higher ranks and libidinally desired objects dominates the sujet, for example, in "Shinel'" and "Zapiski sumasshedshego." In the latter short story, the protagonist is consistently and literally placed in the position of an (under-)dog watching the world from below. Cf. Sven Spieker, "Writing the Underdog: Canine Discourse in Gogol's 'Zapiski sumasshedshego' and its Pretexts." In: *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*. 28 (1991), 41-56. Gogol's consistent "diminution" of his protagonists and the latter's tendency to increase beyond reason the size and importance of the people, objects, and institutions they confront create a secular counter-sublime. The latter's particular *poshlost'* consists in the fact that the insignificant nothingness of rank and ordinary objects (such as fur coats, letters written by dogs, etc.), here, usurp the place of the unrepresentable transcendence and simulate that transcendence (in the Romantic vein) within the confines of the immanent world. Rhetorically speaking, the relative superlative usurps the position of the absolute elative. The world of (fake) images, in Gogol's fiction, stages an inverse sublime spectacle. Cf. Tschizewskij's analysis of "Shinel'" and the importance of the term "dazhe" which he interprets as a pointer to the seeming all-importance of the desired "great" objects. See Dmitrij Tschizewskij, "Zur Komposition von Gogol's 'Mantel'." In: *Gogol'. Turgenev. Dostoevskij. Tolstoj. Zur russischen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts*. Ed. Dmitrij Tschizewskij. Forum Slavicum. Vol. 12. München 1966, 100-126.
- ¹⁹ This incapacitation is in line with the generally irrational thrust of the Gogolian sublime: "[...] *estestvenno oshchutit'* [...] *uzhas prisuststviia sviatyni, kotoroi ne smee i kosnut'sia* [...] *um cheloveka*." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 57)
- ²⁰ Its only positive expression is the very style in which Gogol' writes about the sublime. Gogol' illustrates the inaccessibility of the sublime to representation throughout his essays by the fact that his own expository style has distinctly sublime stylistical features. Generally speaking, amplificatory ("enlarging") rhetorical devices abound in Gogol's discussions of the sublime. Auxesis, exclamation, congeries, and iteratio in the following passage may serve as an example: "[...] *chtoby vyshe, vyshe, skol'ko mozno vyshe, podnimalis' ego steny, chtoby gushche, kak strely, kak topoli, kak sosny, okruzhal i ikh beschislennye ugol'nye stolby!*" (Gogol', 70). In terms of lexis, stylistically "high" terms frequently replace their lower counterparts.
- ²¹ Cf. *Peri hypsous* = "On Height."
- ²² Cf. *Hebrewkomah*, "height." Cf. Gershom Sholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*. New York 1991, 21.
- ²³ The "all-seeing eye" of the sublime in Arabeski may be seen as a transformation of instances of magic vision in Gogol's early Ukrainian texts. Cf. Leon

Stilman, The 'All- Seeing Eye' in Gogol," *Gogol from the Twentieth Century. Eleven Essays*, ed. R. Maguire, Princeton/NJ 1974, 375-389.

- ²⁴ On the mystical ascensus towards God, see Lossky 1976: 27.
- ²⁵ Cf. also Gogol's remark about Briullov's painting that "v nei vse zakliuchilos' [...] ona zaxvatila v oblast' svoiu stol'ko raznorodnogo [...]". (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 109)
- ²⁶ Cf. Mann 1992. Mann's discussion of Gogol's poetics of petrification stresses both its negativity (petrification as sudden silence, the inability to name and describe) and its connection to extreme affects: "The words *strakh* (terror), *strannyi* (strange), and *porazhennyi* (struck) are ambiguously connected in Gogol'. The poetics of petrification is the language of terror and horror [...]" (Mann 1992: 78)
- ²⁷ Cf. Böhme 1989.
- ²⁸ Cf. also Gogol's analogous association of the medieval knights with "podzemel'e" and "podzemnye sud'i" in "O srednikh vekakh" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 22). The Cossacks are, furthermore, characterised by their namelessness, a fact which strengthens their association with the tellurian sublime: "Magometanskii sosed ne znal, kak nazvat' etot nenavistnyi narod." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 47)
- ²⁹ As Böhme 1989 points out, stone oscillates symbolically between its connection to death (i.e., that which, unlike the soil, lacks water and thus cannot live), on the one hand, and its function as a supporting frame, on the other. In nature, stone gives such structural support to the earth. In the human body, the bones offer equivalent support to the flesh as the "skeleton," i.e., a dried corpse and reminder of death inside the human body (Böhme 1989: 128). The shaking up of this support in the form of subterranean rock formation, an earthquake, or a volcanic eruption (all of which figure prominently as examples of the tellurian sublime in *Arabeski*), consequently, represents the greatest form of terror in nature. In the Gothic cathedral, the heaviness of the stone is sublimated in a mystical flight. Gogol's urban hypsos ("ogromnye bashni"), on the other hand, represents the close proximity of stone and socio-political petrification, between the sublime and power. The anaesthetic tellurian sublime, finally, refers back to a pre-civilizational age in which the exchange of money for goods ("nashi merkantil'nye dushi") has not as yet led to the petrification and dehumanization of life, a petrification which Gogol' refers to as "kholodno-uzhasnyi egoizm" (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 12).
- ³⁰ Cf. Hegel's definition of the "Art of the Sublime": "In sublimity [...], external existence, in which the substance is brought before contemplation, is degraded in comparison with the substance, since this degradation [...] is the only one and only way whereby the one God can be illustrated in art [...]" (Hegel 1975/I: 372)

- ³¹ In this context, Gogol' explicitly disavows the positive representation of beauty [prekrasnoe] and, implicitly, the (Schillerian) position that beauty and ethics coincide: "Vyvesti neskol'ko prekrasnykh kharakterov [...] ni k chemu ne povedet." (Gogol' 1952/VIII: 298)
- ³² On some aspects of mysticism in Orthodox theology, cf. Ernst Benz. *Geist und Leben der Ostkirche*. 3rd ed. München 1988, 43-47.
- ³³ According to Dionysius, cataphatic (positive) theology proceeds by affirmative statements about Gods. The perfect way, however, to speak about that which per definitionem is unknowable is the apophatic (negative) speech which denies everything that exists as that which is inferior to God. Apophaticism is a form of agnostic "unknowing" which seeks to reduce (rather than increase) any knowledge about the Unknowable. (Lossky 1976: 25)
- ³⁴ "[...] although we cannot know what God is, we can learn much by realizing what He is *not*. In this sense, we speak of God using 'negative attributes.'" (Aryeh Kaplan. *The Handbook of Jewish Thought*. Jerusalem, 1979, 8)
- ³⁵ Cf. also Michel de Certeau. "On Mystic Speech." In: *Heterologies. Discourse on the Other*. Theory and History of Literature. Vol. 17. Minneapolis 1985, 82.
- ³⁶ By "negative" we mean, firstly a discourse which responds to the impossibility of expressing the Absolute, God, the essence, etc., firstly, with the proliferation of oxymoronic, tautological, i.e., "empty" discourse. Secondly, a discourse which, instead of proliferating speech, responds to the inexpressibility of the Absolute with complete non-communication, i.e., silence. Thirdly, a discourse which replaces the representation of the Absolute with the representation of its opposite and reinterprets that representation as the latter's only possible expression. In the present context, we are concerned with the first and the second variants.
- ³⁷ The term is discussed in numerous works by Gershom Sholem. Cf. also Jürgen von Kempfki. "Zinzum: Die Schöpfung aus dem Nichts." In: *Merkur* 12 (1960): 1107-1126.
- ³⁸ To this extent, we are not dealing with a (neo-) Platonic critique of the sign, an attitude which assumes that only the most economical use of symbolic signifiers can assure the greatest proximity to that which cannot be spoken. The theology of negative speaking assumes the opposite position, proliferating an empty discourse of tautological assertions of its own ineptitude.

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