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WRITING THE UNDERDOG. CANINE DISCOURSE IN GOGOL'S
ZAPISKI SUMASSHEDSHEGO
AND ITS PRETEXTS

1. The talking dog, *canis familiaris loquax*, has an important place in canine literary mythology and strays through (Russian) literature under a variety of different guises.¹ Gogol's position in this mythology is a strong one: Medzhi and Fidel', the two *Fräulein*-dogs of his "Zapiski sumasshedshego" (1833/34), are overheard chatting with each other by the story's hero - an incident, it would seem, not without the gravest consequences for the madman's further development. The dogs' correspondence is itself engaged in a textual dialogue with at least two more canine conversations reverberating in Gogol's text. Of these, E.T.A. Hoffmann's "Nachricht von den neuesten Schicksalen des Hundes Berganza" (1813) appears to be an acknowledged pretext (Ziólkowski, 108). But the leash by which Medzhi and her companion are tied to the sophisticated species seems very stretchable indeed. Through a footnote Hoffmann's text acknowledges its indebtedness to another canine dialogue, Cervantes' "Novela y coloquio que paso entre Cipión y Berganza" from his *Novelas ejemplares* (first publ. 1613). Hoffmann delivers the sequel to Cervantes' text, a sequel which the writing chronicler of the dialogue between Cipión and Berganza, the human Campuzano, fails to produce despite being urged to do so by his friend Peralto.

Poprishchin's investment in Cervantes' text cannot be limited to the mere presence, in Gogol's story, of "talking dogs" (a commonplace which elicits only the mildest surprise in Poprishchin); to the fact that Poprishchin seeks to take the place of a (Spanish) king to whose weakness and waning power Cervantes' talking dogs Cipión and Berganza refer more than once, and that he may thus, quite literally, be said to fill a void unfolded by the pretext ("Как же может быть престол упразднен?" [Gogol', 664])²; nor indeed to such distinctly intertextual instances as Medzhi's hatred of breadcrumbs: "[...] но я не знаю ничего хуже обыкновения давать собакам скатанные из хлеба шарики. Какой-нибудь сидящий за столом господин, который в руках своих держал всякую дрянь, начнет мять этими руками хлеб [...]." (Gogol', 659). Such dislike by the well-bred *Fräulein* takes up Berganza's account of his encounter with the poet, in which the sharing of bread plays a vital role (cf. Cervantes, 205-6). Where and how do Gogol's dogs take up the conversation of their predecessors? What is the status of their discourse with respect to that of

Cervantes' dogs? What are Poprishchin's stakes in the dialogue he overhears and reads in the dogs' correspondence?

It is the purpose of this investigation to demonstrate how the textual dialogue between Cervantes', Hoffmann's, and Gogol's texts highlights Poprishchin's madness as an effect of *oscillation* and impossible authority, an effect whose maddening tension Gogol's text performs as the *impossibility of reading*.

2. The proposal to read "Zapiski sumasshedshego" as a text about reading and writing will hardly meet with surprise. The *чиновник* Poprishchin begins his career as a pencil-sharpener on the margins of the scene of writing, but ends up as its *King* (the anagrammatical presence of *Pisaniiia* in *Ispaniia* has been suggested by Peace, 129), the ruler in the realm of *écriture*, as put forward by A. Zholkovskii: "[...] the writer [...] [who] pretends to the crown of the Poet/Czar of the City he has blessed with his attention." (Zholkovskii, 16) What is the catalyst of writing's elevation to such a commanding status? The space of writing in Gogol's text stretches further than Poprishchin's writerly aspirations. His diary cites from the canine intertexts produced by Fidel' and Medzhi - evidence of an uncanny ambition to *write* in an animal to whom the literary mythology has assigned a place seemingly much closer to *voice* and philosophical reason: the talking dog. It would seem that, for Poprishchin, the unlikely gift exercised by the scribbling animals plays a role far greater than has commonly been assumed: is he King whose kingdom must be shared with others? The presence of the canine writing at the very centre of the hero's diary is no coincidence. It elicits Poprishchin's endeavour to erase what will yet remain indissolubly present. Only the finally reinstated King, the "mad" Poprishchin, can find the power to write the annihilation of the dangerous art of letter-writing: "Черг возьми! Что письмо? Письмо вздор. Письма пишут алтекари ..." (Gogol', 667). What are the reasons for the madman's anxiety about the canine epistles, an anxiety hinted at also by his abhorrent surprise at the very idea of the writing dog? It has been suggested above that such tension derives from Poprishchin's perception of a mad oscillation beyond his control. It is such dangling which governs the diary's central episode, the hero's reading of the letters he seized from the dog Fidel'. This scene is generally taken to, as it were, slice the text into two halves and to offer the reader two irreconcilable versions of the same thing, with the "sane" version of Poprishchin on one side and the "mad" one on the other. This borderline is commonly projected as the neutral ground of objective non-madness, the zero-point of sanity which does not have any investment in either of the two states it delineates: "The phantastic motif [=that of the talking dogs, S.S.] [...] constitutes [...] the cause for Poprishchin's madness rather more than its consequence [...]." (Guenther, 157) It would, however appear that this "borderline" of the central scene of reading the dogs' letters has rather more

stakes in *both* areas than has been admitted. It might be argued that it functions more like a membrane which both delineates and merges at the same time, creating a space in which madness and sanity both lose and gain their distinctive features. Poprishchin's entry of 13 November illustrates an instance of radical *unreadability*. Approaching Medzhi's letters with a strident confidence in their epistemological authority ("Эти письма мне все откроют." [Gogol', 658]), Poprishchin finishes his attempt at decipherment by professing his inability to read: "Черт возьми! я не могу более читать ..." (Gogol', 662).

The mere possibility of canine writing prompts disbelief in the hero:

Я еще в жизни не слыхивал, чтобы собака могла писать.

Правильно писать может только дворянин. (Gogol', 653;
emphasis mine, S.S.)

The borderline between man and dog rests upon the order of the rule: *правила* allow for a consistent distinction between dog and man, and unruly writing is (almost) unfathomable. Uncontrolled writing is that which does not rule, that of the underprivileged: "Оно конечно, некоторые и купчики-конторщики и даже крепостной народ пописывает иногда; но их писание большую частью механическое: ни запятых, ни точек, ни слога". (Gogol', 653) Ruly / controlled writing, on the other hand, scribbles and governs at the same time. Its link with the aristocracy of the *дворянин* is not an arbitrary one and reinforces the proximity between *прави-ть* and the aristocratic *прави-льно*. The governing force of aristocratic writing is connected to Poprishchin's obsessive craving for distinction and nobility (the term *чин* is anagrammatically present throughout the text, cf. Kujundžić, 12-27). He who wants to rule will, at the same time, have to control writing - only if this project succeeds can Poprishchin harbour any hope to rise to his due place. The writing aristocrat is the figure of absolute control over writing, the instance where *правильно* and *править* are congruent with each other. Ruled, controlled *écriture* as the ultimate mark of aristocratic distinction determines it as the ultimate *чин*, precisely that rank to which Poprishchin is going to promote himself ("the King of Writing").

The ultimate threat posed to Poprishchin's ambitions by doggish writing could be described in terms of the possibility that it might inscribe itself into the very system of social differences, distinctions and hierarchies (epitomized by the table of ranks) by being just as *правильно* as that of the *дворянин*. If the writing dog managed to control the rules of writing in this way, it could approximate to the position of *правление*, the ruling aristocrat of writing. The aristocratic mannerisms displayed by Fidel' and Medzhi are not coincidental but heighten the tension around Poprishchin's endeavour to cancel out the rivals. As his sole ambition evolves around promoting *himself* to the position of the writing

пра в и-тель, the relationship between him and the writing dogs emerges as one of a deadly competition over the power of *écriture*.

The central scene of reading opens with the hero eager to tell canine from human writing: "Однако же в почерке все есть как будто что-то собачье." (Gogol', 659); "Тотчас видно, что не человек писал (emphasis mine, S.S.)." (Gogol', 660) However, Poprishchin soon has to realize that everything in the canine epistles is, unexpectedly, in its place: "[...] письмо писано очень правильно (emphasis mine, S.S.). Пунктуация и даже буквъ везде на своем месте." (Gogol', 659) Canine writing not only cannot be told apart from human writing, but it appears to supersede the latter in "humanness": "Да эдак просто не напишет и наш начальник отделения [...]." (Gogol', 659) Instead of satisfying Poprishchin's search for truth, Fidel' and Medzhi fill their letters with leisurely chatter about food, which "stands for idle pleasure, insofar as it serves no purpose, is pure expenditure [...]." (Felman 1983, 54) It is with respect to the question of food that Poprishchin discloses his own reading strategy:

Тыфу, к черту! ... Экая дрянь!.. И как можно наполнять письма эдакими глупостями. Мне подавайте человека! Я хочу видеть человека; я требую пищи - той, которая бы питала и услаждала мою душу; а вместо того эдакие пустяки ... (Gogol', 661; emphasis mine, S.S.)

Poprishchin's endeavour to tell canine from human writing fails not only on the "formal" level outlined above. If reading, as Paul de Man asserts, presupposes "the possibility of distinguishing the literal from the figural", and if the absence of such a possibility would, as a consequence, entail that "the entire order of discourse would collapse" [de Man, 201], Poprishchin's project appears well founded. For it can be inferred from the passage quoted above that the notion of human writing, for Poprishchin, would have to elicit a necessarily *figural* reading ("Я хочу видеть человека;" / "той, которая бы питала [...] мою душу [...]"), whereas "doggish" writing entails the *literal* one which is immediately dismissed as "empty" ("пустяки"), i.e. as lacking in figural underpinnings and merely self-referential. The distinction between dog and man could thus be upheld as that between literalness and figure. But the passage also reveals that Poprishchin's project fails. The phrase with which he approaches the text ("Я требую пищи") can be read both literally and figuratively, its referential status being far from determined: is reference being made to canine food or to spiritual nourishment (with its purely "human" reference point)? It is because of such oscillation that the hero has to instantly qualify his statement in a (syntactically clumsy) appendage: "той, которая бы питала [...] мою душу [...]." (Gogol', 661) But if it can be inferred from this that there is a possibility

that the dogs might be writing in the "human" (i.e., *figural*) referential mode, how is this to be reconciled with the fact that it occurs in texts whose origin would appear to be a purely "doggish" one? The literate dog in command of the figural mode of writing would indeed appear to represent the trope of the "ruling aristocrat of writing", for "[m]etaphoric style is 'aristocratic'; it allows people of the same kind [race] to recognize each other; it excludes the member of the herd as inappropriate, foul smelling [...]." (Kofman, 163-4)³ Poprishchin's worst expectations about the "ruliness" of canine scribbling are all but confirmed. On several levels Gogol's text throws into relief the hero's identification as a member of the (canine?) "herd" lacking in any specific identity (cf. "Ну, посмотри на себя, подумай только, что ты? ведь ты пуль, более ничего." [Gogol', 655]) Consequently, the dogs' dialogue works on the assumption that it is possible to exclude the intruder. Medzhi's refusal to communicate with Poprishchin and Fidel's fierce attempt to prevent him from seizing Medzhi's letter are but symptoms of such anxiety.

Poprishchin himself has to question the possibility of textual authority in his very attempt to confirm such guidance, since "the innumerable writings that dominate our lives are made intelligible by a preordained agreement as to their referential authority; this agreement however is merely contractual, never constitutive. It can be broken at all times [...]." (de Man, 204)

In Gogol's story, the familiar talking dog turns canine writer and joyfully breaks the contract which tied it to its predecessor, the so-called "philosophical dog" with its rigorous epistemological confidence. Gogol's writing dogs are writing an unreadable text. Poprishchin's exclamation "Черт возьми! я не могу более читать ..." (Gogol', 662) testifies to the disturbing, maddening effect of the letters' oscillation between two referential frames. The suggestion that the dogs drive Poprishchin mad would thus appear to be confirmed, as they seem to introduce a "dangling in an intolerable semantic irresolution" which would be "worse than madness": "[...] the mere confusion of fiction with reality, as in the case of Don Quijote, is mild and curable compared to this radical dyslexia." (de Man, 202) As the traditional "philosophical dog" based its existence upon the presence of voice and the possibility of creating an immediate context for the spoken word thus saved from uncanny oscillation, Medzhi and Fidel', on the contrary, leave the scene of their writing. It is demonstrable, though, that Cervantes' "Colloquy" as well as Hoffmann's "Nachricht von den neuesten Schicksalen des Hundes Berganza" (with their dogs seemingly mere "talkers") already display a split in the "philosophical dog" which may be said to be decisive for Poprishchin's development. The maddening force of the talking dog is, incidentally, a consistent element in its development. What Ziolkowski terms the "modern literary sensibility" is said to have found in the dog "precisely those

schizophrenic characteristics that have fascinated writers in their human subjects." (Ziolkowski, 94)

3. Poprishchin's reading of the canine correspondence occurs within the hierarchies determining the traditional "talking dog" as it appears in the pretexts to "Zapiski sumasshedshego". If his efforts to read Medzhi's letters revealed their essential unreadability, it would seem that Poprishchin's abortive effort to read is in itself the result of a misreading. Poprishchin approaches the writing dog with assumptions that are derived from the ("philosophical") talking dog.⁴ This "philosophical dog", of which Cervantes' Cipión and Berganza appear as distant and troubled relatives, seems to stray far from madness. The philosophical dog is the Platonic figure of a pure truth-committed reasoning untinged by rhetoric. It is the figure of pure voice in the Derridean sense, the voice of wisdom and original truth. The philosophical dog's investment in the epistemology of Platonic dialogue relegates it to a realm of strictly enforced sanity. The dog speaking philosophy acquires its cynical vantage point by dint of a speech which has to be purely cognitive and committed to the epistemology of truth. With S. Felman, and Austin's theory of speech acts, the insistence upon language's functioning as a truth-seeking tool unimpaired by any "supplementary" side-effects may be termed *constative*:

According [to] the cognitive (=constative, S.S.) view [...] language is an instrument for transmitting *truth*, that is, an instrument of knowledge, a means of *knowing* reality. (Felman, 1983, 27)

In the constative view, language as a truth-seeking instrument of cognition seeks to exclude what it considers a frivolous appendage to its project: the *performative*, where language is "not informative; it is a field of enjoyment, not of knowledge. As such it cannot be qualified as true or false [...]." (Felman, 1983, 27) Performative expressions "accomplish an *act* in the very process of their enunciation." (Felman, 1983, 15) They perform the event they designate in speech and thus exploit language's self-referentiality. The difference between the constative and the performative function of language may be described in terms of the authorities they invoke. The constative function would ultimately have to derive its authority from God: "Thus incarnating the authority of truth, God, or the 'voice of Heaven' [...] underwrites [sic!] the authority of language as a cognitive instrument." (Felman, 1983, 27) The performative utterance, on the other hand, derives its authority from the speaking "I".⁵

It is no coincidence that the philosophical dog should derive its own authority from Heaven, as is the case in Cervantes' "Colloquy" (Cipión: [...] let us enjoy that favour which Heaven has seen fit to bestow on both of us [...]." [Cervantes, 125]) The dog speaking philosophy appears as the prophet of a theological epistemology. With speech bestowed upon it by God Himself, its discourse

acquires the primary, original relation to truth denied to "ordinary" (human) speech. It is thus not by accident that we should find literary heroes eager to spy on and, perhaps, even catch a glimpse of such a reassuring presence. The ideal dog in an ideal constative realm of speech erases itself and functions as a pure medium. But, again, the dog's schizophrenia asserts itself: associated with the devil as much as with God⁶, the talking dog derives authority as much from the divine Father as from the (performative) authority of the "I", from self-referential and thus *atheistic* language as much as from that of "theological" reference. The talking dog establishes itself in an impossible "in-between", a space aptly characterized by the twilight in which both Cervantes' and Hoffmann's canine conversations are said to take place. The figure of the talking dog is hence multiply oxymoronic. The speaking animal enunciating in speech what cannot be spoken, the pure voice (God) before speech is, at the same time, the voice of the narcissistic "I" speaking *itself* rather than reference. The so-called "philosophical dog" thus displays a rupture and a split where mere confidence in language's epistemological faith should be well in place. It is precisely this impossible, oxymoronic element which surfaces in Cervantes' "Colloquy". The discoursing dogs Cipión and Berganza may be said to act out the opposing forces of the constative and the performative. The exclusive hierarchies upon which the traditional "philosophical dog" depended are championed primarily by Cipión: speech over writing, truth over action, reality over literature, dog over man, cognition over action and performance (it is *Berganza* who offers the vivid tale of his adventures).

The dogs' efforts in the "Colloquy" circle around the way in which Berganza should tell the "story" of his life. Telling a story is to command its beginning and its end and to be certain about both its constituent parts and about the question of what forms part of the story and what does not. The story is thus in no need of commentary, interruption or dialogue, as it is fully recovered by language's constative function. The story's authority, in this case, derives not from the speaker's investment in the communicated narrative but from its pre-linguistic substance. Cipión battles against the intrusion of the performative into this concept of the "story". However, the performative reaches the dog, first of all, as the inscription of an irresistible *seduction* by the speech they are given, a seduction, that is, into the very self-referential element that would mitigate the purity of the story:

Cipión: [...] let us **enjoy** that favour which Heaven has seen fit to bestow on both of us at one and the same time. (Cervantes, 125; emphasis mine, S.S.)

The discourse committed to its own erasure thus starts on a discordant note: seeking authority in a theological epistemology, it engenders a speaking subject

(Berganza) relishing what ought to pale and cancel itself out before the truth. Berganza enjoys his ability to speak as a performative action, as a self-referential "speaking for speaking's sake", doing rather than stating the "truth", a task to which he willingly subscribes again and again without, however, being able to live up to such promise. Berganza finds it increasingly impossible to control his urge to be led "astray" by language and to produce continuous supplements to the story. Such straying meets with harsh reprimands from Cipión who thus unwittingly supplements the very discourse he is eager to keep unmitigated by such "appendages".

Cipión: What I mean to say is that you should tell it (= his story, S.S.) in a straightforward manner, without tacking on so many appendages that it comes to look like an octopus. (Cervantes, 157)

Berganza: That I will, if it is possible for me to resist the great temptation I feel to speak, which I can barely control.

Cipión: Look well to your tongue; from it come the major ills of human life. (Cervantes, 133)

The dog's "story" finally tells another story, that of the impossibility to decide between story and appendage: "Berganza: You know how easy it is, when you have invented something, to keep adding to it." (Cervantes, 178) If a narrative is expected ultimately to control its authority by having a beginning and an end, Cipión's and Berganza's dialogue collapses such control into an infinite structure of multiplied reprimands (Cipión urging Berganza to "get back to the point"), confessions, and pardonings (Cipión pardoning Berganza who confesses, promises to obey and is thus permitted to start afresh). The dogs' dialogue is built upon that most conspicuous of all performatives, the *promise* (and, furthermore, the promise not kept, for Berganza always veers off again from the trajectory of truth): "Cipión: [...] I confess my error and ask you to pardon me as I have pardoned you so many times." (Cervantes, 149) For Cervantes' dogs, the divine gift of speech turns out to be an indecidable *pharmakon* which is both medicine and poison, blessing and curse, reason and madness. Only the muteness of the speaker's *intention* can still be seen as an ultimate safeguard of the presence of meaning behind a speech which generates the "appendages" into which the story disappears. Cervantes' dog ("Berganza: How can I be still and tell my story at the same time?" [Cervantes, 157]), but particularly Hoffmann's Berganza are caught in the Romantic predicament of having to view silence as the only repository of controlled meaning, while at the same time being obliged to confirm their identity as "talking dogs". Hoffmann's Berganza, in particular, appears as the canine strayer between the language of seduction and the muteness of meaning ("[...] to preserve true meaning in a long silence [...] ", [Hoffmann, 115]). Such totalization

would appear to be the Romantic dog's attempt to remedy the infestation with words.

4. Poprishchin repeats the moves of the talking dogs in Cervantes' and Hoffmann's texts. The oscillation between the quest for knowledge and subsequent disenchantment with a language beyond the speaker's cognitive control is observable in the way he approaches the canine epistles, only to realize soon afterwards that all his attempts to read the unreadable canine text are doomed from the start. Poprishchin, in his quest for knowledge and the truth, operates precisely from the position of the "philosophical dog". The considerable stratum of constative lexis in Gogol's text is, thus, given not to the corresponding dogs (Medzhi and Fidel'), but to the hero, whose whole endeavour can be summarized as an effort "to know": "Я сейчас узнал ее [...]." (Gogol', 652); "Она не узнала меня [...]." (Gogol', 652); "Пойду-ка я, - сказал я сам себе, - за этой собачонкою и узнаю, что она и что такое думает." (Gogol', 653); "Желалось бы мне узнать, о чем он больше всего думает [...]." (Gogol', 657); "[...] вот что бы мне хотелось узнать!" (Gogol', 657); "[...] я теперь узнаю все." (Gogol', 657); "Там я, верно, кое-что узнаю." (Gogol', 657); "Девчонка была глупа! Я сейчас узнал, что глупа!" (Gogol', 658). "Теперь-то паконец я **узнаю** все дела [...] и доберусь паконец до всего." (Gogol', 658; emphasis mine, S.S.) The central scene of Poprishchin's reading the canine letters leaves behind such epistemological confidence. As writing does not afford the truth to which Poprishchin aspires, he seeks refuge in the Romantic call to silence. Gogol's story, significantly, assigns the "silence-motif" consistently to Poprishchin rather than to the writing dogs Medzhi and Fidel', whose joyful correspondence does not command either beginning or end. The "silence-motif" appears in "Zapiski sumasshedshego" as Poprishchin's desperate attempt to discontinue his own reading of the maddening letters. The future King of Writing seeks to control writing by a futile attempt to erase it back into a fully significant silence, an attempt whose continuous repetition marks it as a resounding failure. Like a Pavlovian dog, Poprishchin reproduces the "silence-motif" whenever he is reminded of the object of his desire, Sofi. Her father, the *директор* (the very epitome of knowledge and wisdom), metonymically connoting Sofi and usually associated with her, is, first and foremost, mute: "Он больше молчит. Говорит очень редко [...]." (Gogol', 660) The "silence-motif" itself appears as Poprishchin's *leitmotif*. "Государственный человек. Я замечаю, однако же, что он меня особенно любит. Если бы и дочка ... **эх, канальство!** .. **Ничего, ничего, молчание!**" (Gogol', 654); "Пела одна актриса очень хорошо. Я вспомнил о той ... **эх, канальство!** .. **ничего, ничего ... молчание.**" (Gogol', 656); "Посмотреть бы ту скамеечку, на которую она становит, вставая с

постели, свою ножку [...] ай! ай! ай! **ничего, ничего ... молчание.**" (Gogol', 657) "Моя барышня, которую папа называет Софи, любит меня без памяти.' Ай, ай! ... **ничего, ничего. Молчание!**" (Gogol', 659; emphasis mine, S.S.) The signifier *канальство* (as a synonym of *плутовство*) feeds into Poprishchin's *leitmotif* the discourse of guilt and repentance, of confession and pardoning, a theme which is familiar from our reading of Cervantes' "Colloquy".

As is the case with Cervantes' Berganza and Cipión, the impossibility of bringing to a halt the divine gift of speech, of overcoming the play of self-reference and performance, generates the guilt which sets off the mechanism of confession and pardoning outlined above. Every new promise of silence on Poprishchin's part increases by itself the amount of writing it wishes to cancel out. Poprishchin's diary, ostensibly committed (as is any diary) to the "story" (the "truth") thus produces appendages in the very act of forswearing them. Poprishchin's guilt, at regular intervals, discharges itself. The quintessentially constative "у-знаю" gives way to the self-referential confession in "признаюсь". *The very act of expiating the failure of the constative is contained in a performative* (признаюсь). The constative finds itself always already contained in the performative function of language: "Признаюсь, я бы совсем не пошел в департамент [...]." (Gogol', 651); "Признаюсь, я очень удивился, услышав ее говорящую по-человечески." (Gogol', 653); "Но, признаюсь, я гораздо более удивился, когда Межди сказала: «Я писала к тебе, Фидель [...]»," (Gogol', 653). "Признаюсь, с недавнего времени я начинаю иногда слышать и видеть такие вещи, которых никто еще не видывал и не слыхивал." (Gogol', 653); "Признаюсь, я даже подозревал было к себе один раз Меджи [...]." (Gogol', 657); "Признаюсь, эти происшествия так меня убили и потрясли [...]." (Gogol', 664); "Признаюсь, меня вдруг как будто молнией осветило." (Gogol', 664; emphasis mine, S.S.).

Poprishchin re-enacts the moves observable in his canine predecessor, Cervantes' Berganza: the quest for knowledge, the appeal to the constative authority and epistemology of the father (the *директор*) is confronted with the impossibility of producing this knowledge and this authority as a referent within language. It should not surprise us that the scene of guilt projected by Poprishchin's diary should for the most part be related to the existence of the talking/writing dogs, as it is precisely their existence which, if confirmed, marks the possibility of the failure of reading. Fidel's and Medzhi's refusal to partake in the cognitive project which engages the traditional philosophical dogs thus has important stakes in the text's development. Their correspondence knows neither beginning nor end and is thus markedly different from the "story" governed by both. The performative joyfulness of writing is the very starting point of the

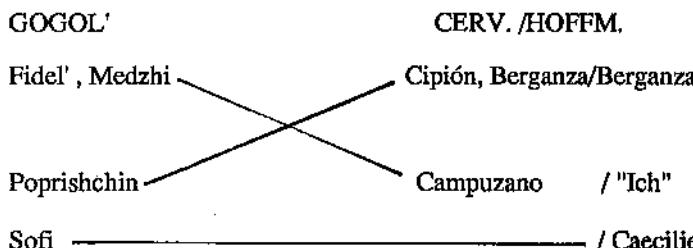
canine exchange: "Я очень рада, что мы вздумали писать друг к другу." (Gogol', 659) Such elation relates to Cipión's "Let us *enjoy* that favour [...]." (Cervantes, 125; emphasis are mine, S.S.) But the seduction by language is, here, no longer treated as a supplementary side-effect. Instead, it would appear to assume centre-stage.

5. Poprishchin's confidence in the readability of the dogs' letters appears based upon the assumption that the philosophical dog can *succeed* in excluding the performative from the constative, the figural from the literal, writing from reading. But the proximity of writing as a split and a rupture in the dogs' project is well observable in Cervantes' and Hoffmann's dogs. Cervantes' "Colloquy" illustrates the animals' growing inability to trust even the muteness of intention as the presence of writing on a scene whose success would appear to depend upon the latter's rigorous exclusion. Cipión's and Berganza's most ambitious and, at the same time, least successful project is the expulsion from their dialogue of anything that would smack of slandering others, "backbiting", satire, and hence, writing. Reiterated again and again, the dogs' pledge to refrain from backbiting is as (em-)phatic as it is ineffective. "Backbiting", *murmuración* (from Span. *murmurar* = to murmur), as speech which clouds its origin and referent in an inarticulate whisper, is as such deeply worrying to Cipión. In *murmuración*, the two dogs, but particularly Cipión, fight the (very human) noise of communication, or what M. Serres calls the "pathology of communication" (Serres, 66). In Cervantes' dialogue, such noise holds an uncanny seductive power over the dogs. Gogol's dogs continue Berganza's seduction. In one of Medzhi's letters, Poprishchin reads: "В ушах у меня вечный шум, так что я часто, поднявши ножку, стою несколько минут, прислушавшись к дверям." (Gogol', 661) Early in the "Colloquy" Berganza, on being reprimanded by Cipión, takes a vow to "bite his tongue" should he ever again be heard slandering. But slander, as the above quotation shows, appears as speech's inextricable companion: "Berganza: [...] I myself am but a brute beast, and yet every three or four sentences I utter I find words swarming to my tongue [...], and all of them slanderous and malicious." (Cervantes, 149) Only *barking* dogs do not (back-)bite. After the dialogue has produced yet another supplementary digression, Cipión takes Berganza up on his promise, "for all that we are doing is to find fault." (Cervantes, 159) But Berganza denies having intentionally made a promise, although he does not seek to deny having *uttered* it:

I was not laying down any law, however. All I did was promise that I would bite my tongue if I found myself speaking ill of anyone. [...] Leave tongue-biting to the devil; I don't intend to bite mine [...]. (Cervantes, 159)

In order to escape from embarrassment, Berganza exploits the performative, self-fulfilling force of his utterance. The very act of verbal promising ("I promise") is said to have already contained within itself the fulfillment of its promise, irrespective of the speaker's intention (Berganza, therefore, cannot be accused of being a liar). Cipión is forced to come to grips with the possibility that speech might escape from the determining force of intention. It would seem that the authority of intention thus questioned erases the borderline between speech and writing and collapses their opposition. Writing, with its absence of any authoritative intentionality, is never quite as far from the talking dog as might be assumed. Indeed, Hoffmann's Berganza already speaks with the written text in mind: "As you will no doubt have our conversation written down and printed, I shall strive to speak as beautifully as I possibly can." (Hoffmann, 98) To speak is to write satires, an observation confirmed by Cervantes' Berganza as he refers to Juvenal's *"Difficile est satyram non scribere."* (Cervantes, 137) The writing dogs Fidel' and Medzhi are, in fact, less distant relatives of their talking predecessors than might appear at first glance.

6. "Zapiski sumasshedshego" subverts the expected structural analogies between itself and its pretexts.



The intertextual reading of Gogol's story allows for an interpretation of the structural reversal which it highlights. Gogol's text confirms Poprishchin's status as an under-dog by consistently re-positioning him into the place of the *dog* with regards to the pretexts here under discussion. This crucial reversal has been demonstrated by the way in which "Zapiski sumasshedshego" grafts the themes of madness; the failure of the ambition "to know" and its subsequent guilt; and the "silence-motif" (all of which are distinctly "canine" elements in Cervantes' and Hoffmann's dialogues) onto a hero whose position may be described as that of a "neither-nor", a curious in-between dog and man. In both Cervantes' and Hoffmann's dialogues, the human figure acts as the writing chronicler of the doggish discourse. In the former, such chronicling is the result of the human Campuzano's spying on the conversation between the two canine protagonists.

Gogol' reverses this structure by having, instead, Fidel' and Medzhi spy on the human hero who is thus again put in place of the dog.

Poprishchin is forced to read in Medzhi's letters his own life. The talking dog is no longer in need of man's recording facilities. It invents the institution of writing for itself and chronicles its masters. Fidel' and Medzhi, in Gogol's story, appear compatible with Campuzano and Hoffmann's "Ich" rather than with their canine counterparts in these texts (cf. illustration above). Given the essential unreadability of Medzhi's letters for the hero, Poprishchin's dilemma can be described as an incapacity for authoritative self-reading, the inability to decide, in one's own life-text, between fiction and reality, figure and literalness. The central scene of reading the canine correspondence in "Zapiski sumasshedshego" hence prefigures the madman's later musings: "Отчего я титулярный советник и с какой стати я титулярный советник? Может быть, я какой-нибудь граф или генерал, а только так кажусь титулярным советником? Может быть, я сам не знаю кто я таков." (Gogol', 663)

The radical repositioning of Gogol's hero into a limbo in-between dog and man is confirmed on the plot level by a comparison with Hoffmann's "Nachricht von den neuesten Schicksalen des Hundes Berganza". The central theme of Hoffmann's dialogue between the dog Berganza and the narrator is Berganza's amorous veneration for his master, the young lady Caecilie. The Frenchman George, who is in love with Caecilie and about to marry her, is pouted by Berganza with hatred and scorn. Berganza hides in Caecilie's bedroom during the couple's first night and ends up "rescuing" Caecilie from her betrothed by mutilating him. Correspondingly, the desire to enter Sofi's bedroom is Poprishchin's most secret ambition: "Хотелось бы заглянуть в спальню ... там-то, я думаю, чудеса, там-то, я думаю, рай, какого и на небесах нет." (Gogol', 657) As is the case with Berganza, his whole ambition is to prevent the marriage and slander the future husband: "Свадьбе не бывать! Что ж из того, что он камер-юнкер." (Gogol', 663) Hoffmann's dog ends his narration with a gradual return to doggish language: "Trau - Hau - Hau - Au - Au!" (Hoffmann, 183). Poprishchin transcribes the canine sounds in his repeated "ай, ай, ай", which is but one of the numerous incidents where his speech appears to revert to a more canine status: "эге", "фу", "э", "Гм!", "А!", "Эх" etc. all display the canine aspects of Poprishchin's nature. The non-human aspect of Poprishchin's character is corroborated by the way Medzhi writes about him: "[...] какой это урод. Совершенная черепаха в мешке ..." [Gogol', 662] In his office, Poprishchin's existence is that of an obedient underdog whose movements betray his canine nature: "Отворилась дверь, я думал, что директор, и вскочил со стула с бумагами [...]." (Gogol', 654; emphasis mine, S.S.) Cf. the way in which the dogs' movements are described: "Собачонка ее, не успевши вскочить в дверь магазина [...]." [Gogol',

652]⁷ Poprishchin's despairing call to a halt, his battle-cry "молчание" hints at his ardent desire to be the dog quietly present in the proximity of knowledge, a true *молчани*.⁸

7. Poprishchin's abortive attempts to read the dogs' letters stem from the latters' uncertain referential status and Poprishchin's incapacity to tell the dog from the man. As his own status between dog and man appears in a position of equal oscillation and undecidability, the resistance Medzhi's letters offer to the deciding / deciphering hero acquires an anguished urgency. It might not be too speculative to assert that Poprishchin / the under-dog unable to read the difference between dog and man opens the discourse of madness in a writing which results from the impossibility of decipherment: "It now appears that writing can just as well be considered the linguistic correlative of the inability to read. We write in order to forget our foreknowledge of the total opacity of words and things [...]." (de Man, 203) The canine epistles offer Poprishchin a textual version of his own existence (*vis-à-vis* his superiors and *vis-à-vis* Sofi: "тот чиновник, который сидит у папа в кабинете [...]." [Gogol', 662]) The unreadability of these texts thus amounts to the madman's inability to decipher himself. The pretexts suggested in our interpretation of Gogol's story tell yet another tale of reading failed. It emerges that Poprishchin, in the way he approaches Medzhi's letters, assumes the traditional philosophical dog as a story of success, as the pure voice untinged in its aspiration to truth by the interference of the performative and of writing. This seems the only way to account for his confidence in the epistemological authority of Medzhi's writings and those of dogs in general ("Я давно подозревал, что собака гораздо умнее человека [...]" [Gogol', 657]) Cervantes' and Hoffmann's dialogues present a different tale. The talking dogs' attempt at excluding the performative from a language devoted purely to the constative function is doomed as Cipión and Berganza find themselves unable to tell the two apart. As the authority of intention wanes, it might appear as if Cervantes' and Hoffmann's dogs are already writing their own speech, a development preempting Fidel' and Medzhi. Poprishchin's search for authoritative reading in the texts of Medzhi and Fidel' is a project doomed from the very beginning and the difference between dog and man cannot be told. "Zapiski sumasshedshego" is a text about an underdog's maddening attempt to read the difference between dog and man, figure and literalness, truth and error.

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Translations from Hoffmann's "Nachricht von den neuesten Schicksalen des Hundes Berganza" are mine.

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Notes

- 1 For an evaluation of literature's "caninization", cf. Ziolkowski, "The Caninization of Literature". For a discussion of Bulgakov's *Sobach'e serdtse* (1925) in the context of Gogol's, Hoffmann's and Cervantes' dogs, cf. Böhmig 1986.
- 2 Cf. p.132, where Berganza reports that the King's authority does not extend to those of the city's streets where the butchers and game merchants have their shops. Cf. also p. 199.
- 3 English translation of this passage as quoted in Nehamas, A. 1985. *Nietzsche. Life As Literature*, Cambridge/Mass. and London, 15.
- 4 cf. Ziolkowski, 96-8.
- 5 "[...] the authority of the performative is nothing other than that of the first person." (Felman, 1983, 51)
- 6 On the proximity dog/devil as an expression of its ambivalence, cf. Ziolkowski, 93. References to the possible connection between Berganza and the devil abound in Cervantes' text.
- 7 Cf. also the way in which Poprishchin, on his way to seize Medzhi's letters, offers a description of his itinerary from the point of view of a dog, focussing primarily on smells: "Я терпеть не люблю капусты, запах которой валит из всех мелочных лавок [...]; к тому же из-под ворот каждого дома несет такой аду, что я, заткнув нос, бежал во всю прыть." I am grateful to Prof. A. Zholkovskii for pointing out to me this important detail.
- 8 Cf. Dal's definition of *молчанъ*: "Собака, которая кусает молча, изподтишка, безъ яю; безголосая гончая, которая гонить молча." V. Dal', *Tolkovy slovar' zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka*, Moscow, 1955, 344.