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**THE „VANISHED PORTRAIT“, „LIVING EYES“,
AND A „FALLEN ANGEL“:
Metaphysics of Light in Gogol's „The Portrait“**

This entire effect which is poured out in nature, deriving from the battle between light and shade, this entire effect has become the aim and aspiration of all our artists.

Весь этот эффект, который разлит в природе, который происходит от сражения света с тенью, весь этот эффект делается целью и стремлением всех наших артистов.

(Nikolaj Gogol', „Poslednij den' Pompei“ (PSS VIII, 108)

1. Introduction

Я никогда не писал портрета, в смысле простой копии. Я создавал портрет, но создавал его вследствие соображенья, а не воображенья.

I never have written a portrait in the sense of a simple copy. I created the portrait, but I created it owing to deliberation, not to imagination.

Nikolaj Gogol', „Avtorskaja ispoved'" (PSS VIII, 446)

In a letter to Žukovskij, Gogol' writes about Jazykov's poem „The Genius“ (Genij): „What a light and what an austerity of greatness!“ („Какой свет и какая строгость величия!“). Gogol' bases his judgement on the poem's interrelation of poetry and religion: „[...] our poets have always seen every high subject in its legitimate contiguity with the supreme source of poetry, with God“ (PSS VIII, 249). In the present article, we will investigate the metaphysical meaning of light in Gogol's „The Portrait“ as a prominent example of the correlation between religion and art in Gogol's own writing.

It was not without reason that in 1905 the Russian modernist writer and critic Innokentij Annenskij (1979, 14) called „The Portrait“ „the story in which he [Gogol', R. G.] laid himself bare more than in any other of his works“. Indeed, in none of his completed artistic works does Gogol' seem to enunciate his artistic, religious and metaphysical beliefs with greater clarity. It is as if for one moment Gogol' removes the mask of laughter which through the narrator's skaz veils the author's position in much of his fictional prose. In another famous letter to

Žukovskij of January 1848, Gogol' explains that laughter is a compensation for his growing melancholy („melancholija“, PSS XIV, 34).

The basic discrepancy between Gogol's narrator figures and their author is grounded in the author's aesthetics; what is at stake here is a fundamental lack of identity, both of phenomena and of words with themselves.¹ For Gogol', the essence of being cannot be articulated and, every articulation of this essence has to be renounced. Apart from God, he perceives everything as having a double existence, both positive and negative at the same time; even God is father and son, „sophia“ and spirit at the same time.

„The Portrait“ was first published in 1835 as part of the *Arabeski* collection. When Gogol' prepared the second edition, he restored some of the masks which the first edition had momentarily lifted. At the time, most of his readers (especially the critic Belinskij) could not bear the close proximity of the realistic and the fantastic, of the physical and metaphysical elements in the text.

In the second version of „The Portrait“, Mixail Vajskopf (1993, 278) has noted Gogol's juxtaposition of painting's „useful didacticism“, on the one hand, with „forms learnt by heart“, on the other. In this context, Vajskopf suggests an „initial unity“ of both principles, which derives from the common ancestor of the devil and the sacred, the „picture of the wise „ruler of the realm of the sun““ (Vajskopf 1993, 283). Although Vajskopf's suggestion points in the right direction for the possible sources of Gogol's metaphysics in „The Portrait“, it seems unreasonable to reduce these sources to a single unified mythic state of affairs (the light of the sun). Since this light is in constant movement and since it cannot be seen as stationary or absent, it is – even in its archaic state – already ambivalent. Gogol's „The Portrait“ floods its truth with an all-embracing light, a brightness which is grounded in a genuine metaphysics of light. To be seen, the face of a human being or its portrait must be lit. However, since we cannot perceive anything rendered in pure light, the face and its portrait must necessarily also contain dark areas or shadows.

The cultural background of Gogolian aesthetics is highly disputed. In this essay, we suggest that Gogol's prose be read as the manifestation of what Tschizewskij once called a „thinking artist“. We are aware of the fact that Gogol' developed historical, aesthetic and religious ideas both in his fiction and in his theoretical and critical discourse alike. However, because of the nature of these ideas, the way in which they are articulated in his fictional writings differs greatly from the way in which they are rendered in his theoretical texts. Gogol's fictional writings should therefore be read above all as *artistic* texts, as texts, furthermore, which have a tendency to emancipate themselves from their creator's own worldview.

¹ Cf. Lotman 1970, 17-45; Smirnov 1979, 86; Mann 1978, 315.

A characteristic example of Gogol's complexity is his representation of space. As Lotman (1988, 282) has shown, on the level of everyday existence, Gogolian space displays a tendency towards pure fictionality. Lotman calls this space „menu“ space or „bureaucratic“ space; it might, however, be more appropriate to refer to it as „the space of civilisation“. On the level of the signifier, this space appears „endless,“ while on the level of the signified it is first and foremost „empty.“ In terms of the signified, this space appears as a hole, an abyss, or the space of nonbeing. Here, what at first glance seems to be beautiful reveals itself either as „tacky“ („pošlyj“) or as part of a universal evil. The fantastic element in Gogol's fiction consists, broadly speaking, in the transposition of one and the same phenomenon or object to another space, or, to be more precise, to another state of being.²

Of great importance in this context is the border („čerta“) which separates one state (of being) from another. For Gogol, the devil („čert“)³ is directly linked to the illegal crossing of frontiers, or the unethical transgression of limits. This is why any interpretation of concrete Gogolian space as being „realistic“ (for all its overabundance of minute detail) is just as inadequate as a reading based solely on a reduction to the fantastic. In the following discussion, I will try to show the metaphysical background of the interrelation of both these aspects of space in Gogol's oeuvre. This interrelation corresponds with the interplay of expression and non-expression and has its metaphysical roots in the apophatic Tradition of orthodox theology.

2. The Disappeared Portrait

„Whatever belongs to you will not go away from you“ („Твое от тебя не уйдет“, PSS III, 84), the Professor teaches the young painter Andrej Petrovič Čartkov in „The Portrait“. In a narrow sense, the Professor merely asks his student to be patient and not to cling to material values. However, in the context of the story as a whole, this utterance takes on a more general meaning. In a way, the whole of „The Portrait“ tests and expands upon this statement, the truth of which is investigated mainly via inversion.⁴ The professor's utterance defines a person in terms of everything that forms a part of such a person. In that sense, the statement might even seem to be tautological. However, Čartkov's master implicitly also draws a borderline between everything that forms part of a person,

² Igor' Smirnov (1979) has traced these transformations very carefully. He summarizes the specific feature of Gogol's poetics up to *Dead Souls* as the „alienation of the unalienable“ („otčужdenie neotčужdaemogo“, 547).

³ Contrary to Vasmer, Černyx 1993/II, 384 derives both words from one and the same indo-european root *(s)ker-t- (to cut). Cf. Koschmal 1984, Jackson 1992: 108, Vajskopf 1993, 61.

⁴ On topological inversion cf. Vajskopf 1993, 77.

on the one hand, and everything else (that does not), on the other. This „everything else“ is thus defined as that which belongs to otherness. In this way, it is clear that this „other“ also defines the person.

Beyond that, the professor's statement implies that a person will not lose that which is a part of him or herself. This means that a person's future is determined by everything that essentially belongs to him or her. In negative terms, the professor's sentence reads as follows: „What is not yours will go away from you,“ or: „What goes away from you is not yours“ or, as a caption in Ambodik's Russian book of emblems puts it: „Never look for what does not belong to you“. In „The Portrait“, this statement is of crucial importance, since it relates to the theme of (material and spiritual) acquisition which has such a high profile in the text: „Fame can give no delight to he who has stolen it and has not earned it“ („Слава не может дать наслажденья тому, кто украл ее, а не заслужил“, PSS III, 110). However, this still fails to explain why the purchased portrait disappears in Gogol's story.

Some of Gogol's writings deny the possibility of their own existence, and the most typical seems to be „The Portrait“. In fact, this text tells us why there can be no portrait in the first place. The two versions of „The Portrait“ imply two alternative views of this impossibility. In both cases, we are dealing with a split between expression (the material) and expressed (the spiritual), between the signifier and its signified. In the early version of the story, the portrait is despiritualized by being transformed into a „landscape“ („landšaft“, PSS III, 445). In contrast to the portrait, this landscape is said to be „meaningless“ („neznačuščij“, PSS III, 445). In this context, the disappearance of the portrait, the transition of the depicted person across the borderline between presence and absence happens „almost imperceptibly“ and is compared to the disappearance of „breath on pure steel“ („dyxanie s čistoj stali“, PSS III, 445). Since in Russian the word „breath“ („dyxanie“) is etymologically related to spirit (dux) and soul („duša“), we can interpret the disappearance of the portrait as its despiritualization, its deanimation. As a result, the sign and its meaning, the body and its soul, fall apart.

By contrast, in the second version, the portrait as a picture disappears altogether; it slips as it were into nothing. Here, the expression, the „body“ of the portrait vanishes together with its meaning or „soul“. The explanation that the portrait was „stolen“ is given in direct speech, as if it were uttered by the public at large. The reader, for his part, is unable to decide whether the picture has been removed by a thief or whether it disappeared all by itself. This uncertainty is enhanced by the fact that the public is not even sure whether there was in fact such a portrait with unusual eyes, or if perhaps it has all been nothing but a daydream („mečta“, PSS III, 137).

In the later version, the fantastic element is not abolished and replaced by „realistic“ depiction, as has often been asserted by Soviet critics. Rather, it is

enriched by ambiguity: there are now two possible explanations for the disappearance of the painting, a (naïve) realistic one, and a second more complex, supernatural one. This ambiguity is stressed by the public's uncertainty vis-à-vis the existence of any visual evidence confirming the existence of the portrait. What, then, is the relationship between the portrait and such visual evidence?

The Russian noun „portret“, via German „Porträt“, goes back to the French „portrait“, the noun of the past participle of the verb „po[u]rtraire“. The latter is rooted in Latin „pro-trahere“ which means „to draw“, „pull out“, or „show something in (its true) light“. It is also related to French „trait“ which in Gogol's text is present in the word „čerta“. We have already mentioned the phonetic affinity between the Russian words „čerta“ and „čert“, an affinity which is corroborated by the price which the shopkeeper asks for the portrait: „tri četvertačka“ („three quarters of a ruble“, PSS III, 82). At the beginning of „The Portrait“, the moneylender's features are described by way of negation as lacking the „[quiet] power of the north“:⁵ „The traits [„čerty“] of the face seemed to be caught in a moment of convulsive movement“ (PSS III, 82). Later on, they are described as simply strange: „What unusual traits!“ [„Kakie neobyknovennye čerty!“], (PSS III, 128). Since any portrait strives to bring to light the portrayed's face, we can consider the portrait's disappearance in Gogol's story as the inversion of its production. In fact, inversion is one of the most fundamental textual procedures in „The Portrait“.

Even at the beginning of the text, we are confronted with an inversion of everyday experience: instead of giving away, of selling one of his own paintings, the painter takes another artist's work. In this act of buying, the picture is treated primarily as a commodity. Later on, the moneylender's portrait is even called a „most perfect thing“ („совершеннейшая вещь“, PSS III, 131). The object-quality of the picture is connected both to its commodity value and to the purchaser's (Čartkov's) disastrous pecuniary situation. Thus, the ancient Greek word for „thing“ (χρῆμα) also means „money“ and etymologically relates to the word for „need“ („χρῆ“) ⁶ In this context, it is noteworthy that the paintings at the dealer's shop are said to have arrived from the „exchange“ („birža“, PSS III, 81). In view of Čartkov's abject poverty, his purchase of the portrait would seem a most unreasonable act. In spite of this, he transgresses against the inverse form of his teacher's message by making his own that which does not belong to him. Significantly, the possession of someone else's painting does bring material profit to Čartkov, even though this is dearly paid for by his own loss of creativity.

After he has recognised this loss of creativity, Čartkov engages in what must be considered the most blatant inversion of his art – the destruction of paintings.⁷

⁵ The impatience of the painter serves as a first sign of his problematic inner nature. Gogol's quietistic aesthetics is related to German pietism. Cf. Tschizewskij 1966.

⁶ Cf. Toporov 1995, 7-111.

⁷ Some critics (such as Annenskij) even relate this destruction to Gogol's burning of the second volume of *Dead Souls*.

A similar inversion is Čartkov's impression that all the people around him are seemingly transformed into portraits. The painter's compulsion to see real persons as portraits clearly deprives them of their soul, transforms content into pure form. It appears to the protagonist as if the portraits multiply in space while space itself expands „infinitely“ (PSS III, 136). In this way, material expression finally expells that which is being expressed.

3. Living Eyes

At first glance, the portrait in Gogol's novella seems to be a positive phenomenon, since it has anthropomorphic „living eyes“ („živye glaza“, PSS III, 87, 116). However, these famous „living eyes“ are the result of an inversion of common experience. According to that experience, when a painter depicts a living person, the result is a non-living representation (hence the name of the genre *nature morte*).⁸ By contrast, in Gogol's Portrait, the eyes seem to have been „cut out of a living human being“ and transferred to canvas (PSS III, 87). The act of portrayal, in this instance, literally cuts the person to pieces. It does not come as a surprise that the depicted moneylender dies very soon after this manipulation; only his severed eyes survive in the strange portrait. In the living eyes, „living nature“ („živaja natura“, PSS III, 87), whose representation should, by definition, be the highest goal of realist art, gains a negative, even terrifying dimension.

The motif of „living eyes“ goes back to mythic culture. In that culture, the eye is perceived as the equivalent of the sun, while vision is associated with shining. Religious thought has often identified the visual organ with God. The phenomenon which combines the positive value of the sacred with the eye and the sun is light. The etymological root of the term „phenomenon“ is related to the Greek „faino“ (φαίνω „to bring to light“, „come to light“, or „show oneself“). Originally, it was the rising and the setting of the stars that was considered a „phenomenon“. Furthermore, the Greek verb „φαινομενισαίνω“ means „to show one's face in public“. It is evident from these examples that the notion of „phenomenon“ as the coming and going of light is ambivalent: it can have either positive or negative value.

It is significant that in „The Portrait“ the old monk-painter speaks in a religious context about the „devilish phenomenon“ („d'javol'lskoe javlenie“, PSS III, 136). The word „javlenie“ is also the Russian equivalent for the procedure of being shown or showing oneself. It is used, for example, in the title of A. Ivanov's masterpiece *The Appearance of the Messiah Before the People* (1837-

⁸ The painter of the second part has prototypes in a number of texts by the German romantic prose writer E. T. A. Hoffmann: Francesco from *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (1815/1816), the moneylender Dappertutto from *Das verlorene Spiegelbild* and Albano from *Der Magnetiseur*.

1857).⁹ The Russian verb „javit'sja“ (to appear, to show oneself) stresses the reflexive character, the inherent doubling of any (self)-appearance. The verb „javit“ („to make appear“), for its part, is etymologically connected to the Greek „αἶω“ / „αἰσθάνομαι“ („I hear“, „I perceive“) and thus with aesthetics.¹⁰ Other important connotations of the Russian verb „javit'sja“ are openness, wakefulness and reality (Old Russian „jave“ > „open“, Russian „na javu“ > „awake“, „real“). This state of mind contrasts with that of sleeping or dreaming, the time when the human being is not open to sensual experience. In „The Portrait“, it is in this dream state that Čartkov meets the moneylender three times, crossing from dream not into reality but into another dream and then even a third one.

In Gogol's text, the „horrifying sp̄ptom“ („strašnyj fantom“, PSS III, 89) appears within a space which lies on the borderline between waking and nightmare (PSS III, 91); Čartkov's three returns into the same dream delete the border between a merely life-like apparition, on the one hand, and authentic vision, on the other. In Russian, both of these types of perception may be referred to as „live(ly) vision“ („živoe videnie“, PSS III, 91). As is the case with the moneylender's body, visual reality is cut into pieces: „Within the dream there was a terrifying fragment of reality“ (PSS III, 92).¹¹ This oneric fragmentation of reality by broken mirrors serves Gogol' (1990, 105) as a model for the soul. In the following passage, Gogol' compares it to the shattering of a mirror:

In every limb of our body one and the same human soul is present, not as a part of itself but indivisible and whole. It is just like when a mirror has shattered into hundreds of pieces and even the smallest among them preserves the reflection of those objects.

Как в каждом члене нашего тела присутствует та же человеческая душа, не частью себя, но нераздельная и всецелая: как в зеркале, хотя бы оно и сокрушилось на сотни кусков, сохраняется отражение тех предметов, даже в самом малейшем кусочке [...]

A portrait works like a metonymy, substituting the upper part of a body (or only the face) for the whole person.¹² This reduction of a person to the visible exterior may also be observed, for example, in the French term „visage“ which derives from Latin videre > „to see“. By contrast, the living eyes in Gogol's „The Portrait“ are directed not at outside reality but at Čartkov's inner self (PSS III,

⁹ Ivanov serves as a model for the purified painter in the second version of „The Portrait“.

¹⁰ Vasmer (1958/III, 478) sees the reflexive Russian verb „javit'sja“ as related to the ancient Greek verb „φαίνεσθαι“.

¹¹ In Russian and in Latin, the word for „sleep“ is the same as the one for „dream“ (Russian „son“).

¹² Cf. Toporov (1987, 279) on the metonymy of the face for the whole person.

89). They „shine“ into his soul and fulfill the desire expressed in the saying „If looks could kill“. The „living eyes“ of the depicted usurer's kill by looking.¹³

Gogol' exploits the fact that Russian has two different words to refer to the instrument of visual perception. In reference to the moneylender's eyes, Gogol' uses the more recent expression, „glaza“, which is etymologically related to a material object (a ball).¹⁴ In „The Portrait“, this materiality is related to „something demonic in the eyes“ (PSS III, 130). Gogol' reserves the older, more lofty Russian expression for „eye“, „oko“, for the eyes of Jesus: „the deep wisdom in the eyes of the holy child“ (PSS III, 134).¹⁵ In *After the Performance*, the term „oči“ merges aesthetics with religion to result in a final catharsis, the highest aim of art for Gogol':¹⁶

[...] someone came along who was depressed by grief and the unbearable burden of life, ready to kill himself in despair, but suddenly refreshing tears gushed from his eyes and he left reconciled with life.

[...] пришел удрученный горем и невыносимой тяжестью жизни, готовый поднять отчаянно на себя руку, и брызнули вдруг свежие слезы хлынули вдруг из его очей и вышел он примиренный с жизнью и просит снова у неба горя и страданий, чтобы только жить и залиться вновь слезами от таких побасёнок. (Gogol' 1960, IV, 194s.)

In this context it is worth noting that early Russian culture seems to be oriented much more towards the most developed human sense organ – sight – than towards hearing. As do many European cultures, Russian culture derives knowledge („vedenie“, cf. English „wits“) from seeing („vid“, cf. English „visual“). By means of synecdoche, the Russian expression „vo vse glaza“ („to be all eyes“) takes the organ of sight for the whole person, whereas in the English expression „to be all ears“ or in German „ganz Ohr sein“, it is the hearing organ that fulfills the same function.¹⁷

In his famous tract on the orthodox liturgy, *Meditations Upon the Divine Liturgy*, Gogol' shows both the religious relevance of the eyes and their complex relations with the (sacred) word. The significance of the eyes in orthodox liturgy has the character of a certain *demonstratio ex negativo*:

¹³ In this sense they represent an extension of the metaphor of the evil eye (Russ. „zloj glaz“, Latin „obliquus oculus“).

¹⁴ See Vasmer 1958/I, 271.

¹⁵ The word „oko“ is more closely related to the concept of light than „glaz“.

¹⁶ Cf. the „eyes, full of expectation“ („polnye ožidanija oči“) from *Dead Souls* (PSS VI, 221).

¹⁷ Shortly before his death, S. Ejzenštejn wrote about the correspondence of the German expression „ich bin ganz Ohr“ („I am all ear“) with the Russian „to be all sight“ (V.V. Ivanov 1973, 140).

The altar, which represents the lofty settlements, is hidden from the eyes; the Holy Gates close – this signifies that there are no other gates into heaven beside those that are opened by Jesus Christ, who has said „I am the gate“. Алтарь, изображающий горние селения, скрывается от глаз; врата Царские затворяются, знаменуя, что нет других дверей в царство небесное, кроме отверстых Иисусом Христом, сказавшим: „Яз есмь дверь.“ (Gogol' 1990, 51)

What is hidden from the eyes does not exist, except in the words of Jesus, or more precisely, in Jesus himself. Such showing fulfils the Latin expression „ad oculos demonstrare“ in a negative sense. According to Gogol', only the glance withheld opens the mind for the meaning of a word which is defined as „evidence without visibility“, or contents without expression. Russian also offers the colloquial expression „čertom gljadit“ („he has the devil's gaze“), implying someone's negative attitude towards another person. In „The Portrait“, the moneylender's portrait carries out the content of this expression. Gogol's devilish living eyes correspond to soulless creatures in the form of „wooden puppets called people“. ¹⁸

To be portrayed is one way to show oneself to the eyes of others. Toporov (1983, 1987) distinguishes two typological kinds of portrait, both of which derive from the essential duality of the human being as body and soul. The first type of portrait is spatially oriented. It aims at the reproduction of the outside appearance of the portrayed human being. It has its origin in the desire to give spatial representation to a double of the portrayed subject. This kind of portrait has an externalizing effect and is based first and foremost upon the iconic principle of similarity. The second type of portrait, according to Toporov, is grounded not in space but in time; it seeks primarily to evoke the memory of the portrayed subject. This type of portrait uses contiguity (substitution of the part for the whole) as a primary means of intensifying its impact.

In „The Portrait“, the moneylender evidently asks for a portrait of the first category. However, since the eyes of the portrait are so similar to those of the living person, they have the status less of a representation than of a reincarnation. Čarkov himself notes „how certain traits began to migrate to the canvas“ („как стали переходить на полотно некоторые черты“, PSS III, 128). Similarly, Čarkov's friend says about the new owner of the picture: „[...] the soul of the [portrayed] moneylender himself came to dwell in him“ („душа самого ростовщика переселилась в него“, PSS III, 132).

¹⁸ The motif of the demonic eyes within a painting has its source in Maturin's gothic novel *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820). Like Faust, Melmoth represents a reincarnation of the „wandering Jew“ and has made a contract with the devil in order to obtain (astrological) knowledge. In 1835, Balzac published a satirical sequel to the novel (*Melmoth reconcilié à l'église*). Oscar Wilde revived the motif of the animated painting in his *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Cf. Fowler 1985, 521-540.

This portrait is intended to overcome death by incorporating the portrayed person into a material object which is more durable than flesh and blood. Subsequently, the moneylender (who is most intimately connected with material goods and needs, such as money) goes on to play his destructive role from within the portrait – his „living eyes“ kill. This implies that Gogol' is critical of the practice of painting iconically, of painting „from life“ by observing exclusively the principle of similarity. „To be true to nature“ („byt' vernym prirode“, PSS III, 136) bears terrible fruit since it results not in works of art or „creations“ (PSS III, 112) but, instead, in „unnatural“ („neestestvennye“, PSS III, 136) works of hell. What is symbolised by the eyes that look „as if they wanted to destroy its [the portrait's] harmony with their strange liveliness“ is brute and raw naturalism. Like many other things in „The Portrait“, the eyes' „horrible liveliness“ (PSS III, 90) appears reversed since it belongs to a „dead body which has risen from the grave“ (PSS III, 88). What is lacking in the portrait is „something illuminating“ („čego-to ozarjajuščego“, PSS III, 88). It is striking that Gogol' compares this lack of illumination in the face of the portrait with a „view in nature“ („vid v prirode“, PSS III, 88) where there is no sun in the sky. It is this missing light which separates sacred art from its profane counterpart. In „The Portrait“, mere technical skill at copying is related to a machine¹⁹ or a soulless „automaton“ (avtomat, PSS III, 81). However, as is the case with the migration of the moneylender's eyes into the painting, the negative force of the face in his portrait is based upon the principle of contiguity – it is a metaphorical metonymy. As is the case in Stevenson's *Bottle Imp*, the portrait harms both its owners and their relatives.

The second kind of portrait in Toporov's typology is most impressively represented in the second part of Gogol's story – the painting of the Madonna and Jesus which the artist executes after he has freed himself from the negative influence of the portrait. Here the portrait is not a spatialised duplicate of the portrayed person, but rather an attempt to preserve the latter's essence for memory. In this mode of painting, the painter introduces the subject of his painting into his soul and reproduces its very essence: „With high inner instinct he [the painter] perceived the presence of the idea in every subject“ (PSS III, 126). The painter teaches his son to „[...] find in every thing the inner idea and, most importantly, [to] try to attain the lofty mystery of creation“ („[...] во всем уметь находить внутреннюю мысль и पुце всего старайся постигнуть высокую тайну созданья“, PSS III, 135). In fact, the young painter's most accomplished work in the first part is called *Psyche* („Psixej“, PSS III, 86, 104; „Psišeja“, PSS III, 417). He destroys this painting by treating it as an iconic representation of the young lady.

¹⁹ When Čartkov leaves the picture shop where his attention was „involuntarily“ drawn to the portrait, he is said to walk mechanically „like a machine“ („mašinal'no“, PSS III, 83).

Both types of portrait (spatial and temporal) may be traced back to pre-secular or even prehistoric culture, when drawing and painting were still bound to inspiration and were believed to be produced either with the help of or by means of supernatural powers. Thus, in the first case, a clergyman criticizes the picture which the artist has produced after painting the portrait because of its „demonic eyes“: „[A]s if an impure feeling has guided the hand of the artis“ („как будто бы рукою художника водило нечистое чувство“, PSS III, 130).²⁰ In the second case, the monk-painter's brothers remark about his painting of the Madonna with Jesus that it is as if „the holy highest power has guided your brush and the benediction of heaven has rested on your work“ („святая высшая сила водила твоею кистью и благословенье небес почило на труде твоём“, PSS III, 134). It is quite clear in both instances that it was the impure power itself which guided the brush of the artist when he painted the devil's portrait. The opposite of such a portrait is the pictorial representation of the „presence of holiness“ („prisutstvie svjatosti“, PSS III, 108).

It is significant that the moneylender dies as soon as he has (been) painted, i.e., after he has incarnated himself, however partially, in the portrait. We know that in early culture a beast was „portrayed“ in order to pronounce a ban or curse upon it so that it could be killed. It is thus with good reason that people of so-called primitive cultures are afraid of being portrayed or photographed. Indeed, the person executing the portrait brings the life of the portrayed person to an end; the portrayed person has no future outside of the painting. It was Mixail Baxtin who pointed out this essential absence of the portrayed person in the portrait:

To see one's own interior portrait is the same as to see one's own exterior portrait; it implies the gaze into a world where in principle I am absent and where, if I remain who I am, I have nothing to do; my aesthetically significant inner face is a kind of horoscope (with which one can do nothing; a person who would really know his horoscope would turn out to be in an internally contradictory and absurd situation. It would be impossible to establish any serious context for action).

Увидеть свой внутренний портрет – то же самое, что увидеть свой портрет внешний; это заглядывание в мир, где меня принципиально нет и где мне, оставаясь самим собою, нечего делать; мой эстетически значимый внутренний лик – это своего рода гороскоп (с которым нечего делать; человек, который действительно знал бы свой гороскоп, оказался бы во внутренне противоречивом и нелепом положении: невозможна серьезная установка поступка). (Baxtin 1979, 114)

²⁰ Cf. the portraitist's confession that „the demonic feeling of envy guided my brush“ (PSS III, 31).

The aesthetic orientation towards a person's inner self is conditional upon the abandonment of any hope or faith in that person. This discrepancy between the aesthetic and the religious appears throughout Gogol's writing with great consistency. Thus, while in „The Portrait“ we find an extended elaboration on the moneylender's portrait, there is almost no description whatever of the sacred painting of the Madonna with child. The point here is that it is impossible to „reproduce“ a religious icon within a verbal artistic text since such an icon can only be the result of a vision. Pavel Florenskij even claims that religious icons can be painted only by saints (Florenskij 1985, 224pp).

To Florenskij we owe an intriguing argument about the interrelation of icons, sight, and light. Pointing to the way in which hellenistic thinking is grounded in sight, and the spiritual essence in the idea („eidōs“), he asserts that all of Platonic ontology follows a visual scheme: „All of the reality around us was recognized to be a mixture, as the coming together [...] of darkness (non being) and sights, or ideas (being); as the metaphysical basis of being was recognized the sun of the intelligent [umnjy] world, the idea of the good [...] that is the source of light“ (Florenskij 1985, 305).

Via the renaissance and the „enlightenment,“ the metaphysics of light has retained its power and value in (Christian) religion up to our times (Beierwaltes 1957). What is most intriguing about the concept of light is its potential to serve as the expression of the mode of expressing and of what is being expressed. With Nicolaus Cusanus, one might say that light is „expressio exprimentis et expressi“.²¹ In this sense, the eyes in the portrait are symptomatic of their owner's inner state – they are „expressions of what is being expressed“. By contrast, where the eyes are said to affect their viewer, Gogol' follows the traditional model of rhetoric as a means to affect the beholder. Here, the eyes serve as the „expression of the expressing“. In the first version of „The Portrait“, the narrator admits to his apophatic dilemma:²² „In the traits of holy people breathe secretly those mysterious phenomena which the soul cannot retell to anyone. Inexpressibly, the expressible came to rest in them“ („В чертах божественных лиц дышали те тайные явления, которых душа не умеет, не знает пересказать другому; не вырази́мо вырази́мое покоилось на них“, PSS III, 422).²³

Gogol' may be considered as an artist on the borderline between 18th-century-style rhetoric which affects the listener from outside and the more modern psychology of experience (*Erlebnispsychologie*) typical of the 19th century. The most adequate way of reading Gogol' would seem to require following his

²¹ *Compendium theologicum*, vol. VII. Cf. Gadamer (1972, 474-476): „The light makes everything visible, including itself and“.

²² In this variant we also find a reference to gold's „inexplicable charm“ (PSS III, 416).

²³ Cf. the German pietist Tradition as exemplified by Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling's *Szenen aus dem Geisterreich*. As Tschizewskij (1966) points out Gogol's reception of Jung-Stilling's book should be related to orthodox hesychastic mysticism.

sudden changes from outward affection to inner experience. In „The Portrait“, Gogol's integration of these two mutually exclusive concepts may be seen in the ambiguous position of author (the painter), for the latter figures both as the producer of his work (and is thus extrinsic to it) and at the same time forms part of it.²⁴ In a sense, the moneylender uses the artist to reincarnate himself, just as God later inspires him to present the Madonna with His son. When he utters the Russian proverb „Ты ему просто попал не в бровь, а в самые глаза влез“ (You simply did not fall into his eyebrow [you did not miss], instead you crawled into his very eyes, PSS III, 131),²⁵ the other painter's friend puts in a nutshell the kind of aesthetics whose goal is to reach the soul of the beholder like light through the eye.

Light conditions the appearance of the person on whom it shines.²⁶ In Gogol's description of the light's radiance, figurative and nonfigurative speech do not differ. Compare, for example, the old painter's son's description of his father's face which „was beaming with the lightness of heavenly mirth“ („оно сияло светлостью небесного веселия“, PSS III, 134). Without light there is no phenomenon, no person, no portrayal. Even when the moneylender, the „spirit of darkness“ („dux t'my“, PSS III, 127) is painted, light is necessary. Significantly, however, at this time the room where the portrait is being executed is dark, except for the upper parts of the windows.²⁷

By contrast, darkness, the „other“ side of light in meaning and value is traditionally grouped either with its semantic equivalent, evil (as is the case in Manicheanism), or it is seen as a profane subspecies of light itself. Thus Dionysius the Areopagite explains the coming into being of evil by means of an analogy with light and darkness: „As the lack of light darkens, the air, so the demon becomes evil by the lack of good“ (1857, 728 A). The notion of the „dark beam“ plays a central role in mysticism.

Closely related to darkness is the „bad“ light of night, moonlight (PSS III, 91), or lightning. In Gogol's essay „Woman“ (1831), Alkinoe appears as the incarnation of beauty. However, because of the horrifying light with which she is associated, she has a thoroughly negative effect on the beholder's soul: „The lightning of the eyes tore out the entire soul [...]“ („Молния очей исторгала всю душу [...]“, PSS VIII, 147). In „The Portrait“, the sound which corresponds to this negative light may be found in the mythical „Gromoboj“ (Thunderclap) which is

²⁴ Cf. Lotman's (1993, 131) hint at Gogol's martyrdom and its expression in „The Portrait“.

²⁵ This is a significant variation of the Russian saying „не в бровь, а в [самый] глаз“ („not in the brow, but in the eye itself“). Cf. Fedorov 1991, Vol. I, 42.

²⁶ Cf. the change in the appearance of phenomena as a result of the changing light in the fragment „The Horrible Hand“ („Strašnaja ruka“): „One single lantern capriciously lit the street and shed a horrible lustre on the stone houses and left in gloom the wooden ones [which] changed from grey to black“ (329).

²⁷ In this context, it is interesting that the Russian name for „hell“ („ad“), refers back to an „invisible country“. Cf. Florenskij 1995, 379.

associated with the moneylender (PSS III, 95). The counterparts of darkness are blackness and shadow. Both suggest the resistance of all material to light. Thus, when the police officer sees the portrait in Čartkov's apartment and criticizes the black spot under the usurer's nose, he does not accept Čartkov's explanation that this is mere „shadow“ (PSS III, 94). This is not surprising when we consider that the absence of light, in Gogol's metaphysics, can be tantamount to death: „It seemed as if everything had died, nowhere was there any fire“ („Все казалось умерло, нигде огня“, PSS III, 330). Throughout Gogol's writing, the ambivalence of beauty is connected, firstly, to the appearance of light²⁸ and, secondly, to the theme of narcissistic self-reflection. In Gogol's metaphysics, only „white light“ is of high value. This is because such light is opposed to outward beauty: „But the white light – nothing can be compared to it“ („Но белый свет – с ним нет сравнения“, PSS III, 330). White light is related to the sacred sphere. Similar to angels, its beams function as a bridge from heaven to earth.

4. The Fallen Angel

The fallen angel („otpadšij angel“, PSS III, 113, 423) is the theme which Andrej Petrovič Čartkov decides to carry out as his ultimate masterpiece after being confronted with the young Russian painter's „holy work“ („božestvennoe proizvedenie“, PSS, 112, 422) from Rome. Apart from being „most congruent with the state of his soul“ (PSS III, 113, 423), this painting represents Čartkov's attempt to portray himself. Does he really fail to complete this painting for lack of talent, as the text seems to suggest? To answer this question, we shall take a closer look at the concept of fallen angels.

Russian orthodox thinking on angels and devils (demons) is determined, among other things, by the so-called *Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagitum*, and especially by *On the Divine Names* and by *The Heavenly Hierarchy*. In *On the Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius raises one of the major axiological problems of the Middle Ages, the question as to how evil came into the world, and how it could be that besides benevolent spirits there are also evil ones: „Why does the army of demons not strive for grace and goodness but, on the contrary, clings to matter? And why, having broken with the identity of angels striving for goodness, is it the cause of all Evil?“ (1857, 716, 1A). In *The Divine Names*, the existence of evil is connected to the attractions of matter, attractions to which the evil spirits succumb. This is the kind of weakness which we also see in Čartkov's passion for money and glory.

In Dionysius the Areopagite's theological interpretation of Proclus' philosophy,²⁹ evil is not an alternative quality to goodness. It is separated from goodness

²⁸ See Langer 1991, 149.

²⁹ Dionysius' authorship of this text is still in question.

not by quality, but by quantity: „Evil is privation and lack of goodness“ (732 B). Evil, in Dionysius' conception, has not come into the world later than goodness, but together with it, as its negative counterpart. Dionysius rejects the notion that Evil is nothingness (717. 1A-B). However, more important for our purposes is the fact that Dionysius explains the relation between good and evil, the sacred and the demonic, in terms of light. For Dionysius, much as for Gogol' in „The Portrait“, only shining phenomena are seen as beautiful. Dionysius calls Jesus Christ the light that brings recognition and he also observes that the material form of phenomena hinders the perception of light. In *The Heavenly Hierarchy*, Dionysius' remark is supported by the holy scriptures:

So let us call Jesus, the light from the father, the real and „the true light which enlightens every human being as it enters into the world“ [Joh. 1,9]. It is through this light that we have „access to the father“ [cf. Rom. 5,2; Eph. 2, 18], the source of light. Through this light we raise our eyes as high as we can to the revelations of the most holy WORDS [...] and contemplate the hierarchies of heavenly thoughts which the WORDS have presented to us through symbols [...]. As soon as the eyes of our spirit, which are not dulled by the materiality of things have grasped that it is the light from the father [...] superceding any notion of an origin, that the holy hierarchies of angels present to us in symbolic images, we will stretch forward from this representation to the indivisibility of the light ray which acts within it. (121, 1A)

In the second part of „The Portrait“, we find a parallel between Dionysius' heavenly hierarchy and the quality of works of art. In the following passage the „light“ in the expression „light soul“ functions as the *tertium comparationis* between the status of the spirits and the quality of the art:

[J]ust as an angel is above all the countless powers and proud passions of satan merely through the pure innocence of his *light* soul, thus the lofty creation of art is above everything that is on earth.

[В]о сколько раз ангел одной только чистой невинностью светлой души своей выше всех несметных сил и гордых страстей сатаны, во столько раз выше всего, что ни есть на свете, высокое создание искусства. (PSS III, 135, emphasis mine, R.G.)

However, unlike Dionysius, Gogol's narrator also spells out the devilish „passions“ (strasti – the usurer's obsession with money and gold) by which Čartkov is possessed. In the first version of the story, Čartkov even declares money to be „holy“ (PSS III, 412). Čartkov's passion, which manifestes itself in his constant inversion of values can be understood as a concretization of Dionysius' statement concerning „clinging to things material“. The work of art comes down

to earth in order to bring about reconciliation („primirenje“, PSS III, 135) and liberation from all passions.

In the picture shop³⁰ at the beginning of the story, next to a painting depicting Jerusalem, there is another one showing a „red evening, like the glow of a conflagration“ (Gogol' often relates the colour red to the devil). In this juxtaposition of the two paintings, the holy city of Jerusalem is directly confronted with the Antichrist. When Čartkov goes home, we recognize the devil in the shadows reaching the earth: „The red light of dusk still lingered in one half of the sky [...]. Semitransparent light shadows fell like tails on the earth“ („Красный свет вечерней зари оставался еще на половине неба [...] Полупрозрачные легкие тени хвостами падали на землю“. PSS III, 83).

At the beginning of this essay, we drew attention to the connection between the devil, the borderline and the Russian term for „trait“.³¹ The words „devil“ („čert“) and „trait“ / „borderline“ („čerta“) reappear in the names Čertkov (first version) and Čartkov (second version).³² Thus the devil affects the human being with a deadly passion to descend across the border of evil towards death. Here we discern the traditional rhetorical model as a means of affecting the listener. By contrast, a more recent psychological rather than rhetorical approach finds expression in signs or symptoms. Here, the word „čerta“ becomes a telling psychological symptom. Thus in the female characters, their „traits“ reveal first and foremost their immoral way of life (PSS III, 414). In this way, the final version of „The Portrait“ answers affirmatively the following question from the first version:

[O]r is there for the human being a borderline to which the highest form of cognizance leads him and after whose crossing he begins to steal what which cannot be created through human labour, dragging from life something living which animates the original?

для человека есть такая черта, до которой доводит высшее познание, и чрез которую шагнув, он уже похищает несоздаваемое трудом человека, он вырывает что-то живое из жизни, одушевляющей оригинал (PSS III, 405)

One can read „The Portrait“ as an aesthetic myth involving the ascendance and descent of an artist. In the novella's first part, the painter Čartkov leaves the middle level of (earthly) art to descend to the hell of devilish machinations (copying,

³⁰ Jackson (1992, 106) misreads Gogol's expression „kartinnaja lavočka“ as „secondhand shop“.

³¹ Cf. also Koschmal 1984; Jackson 1992, 108; Vajskopf 1993, 61.

³² On the change of the name cf. Gippius 1924: 230. Cf. also Gogol's own etymology of the name: Rudokopov: „his name [...] really corresponded with his occupation“ (PSS III, 219). Gogol' liked to play with the phonetics of the devil's name even in Italian. For example, he changed the saying „dio, che cosa divina“ into „diavolo, che divina cosa!“

the machine, the automaton). In the second part, by contrast, the narrator's father rises from the darkness of devilish painting to the shining heights of sacred art. This double structure allows us to understand the composition of „The Portrait“ as consisting of two parts, with an inverted timescale. It implies a vision of art which combines the descent to material expression with the ideal ascent to that which is being expressed.

5. Conclusion

In „The Portrait“, the ambivalent painting with its tendency to disintegrate into body and soul serves as the model for all works of art.³³ Gogol' himself painted in his early years (Haertel 1929) and attended lessons at the Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts (Maškovceva 1955). The first version of the novella identifies the poet with the painter (PSS III, 419), and even in the later version Gogol' himself literally makes his appearance: „he strutted along the sidewalk“ („prošelsja po trotuaru gogolem“ PSS III, 97; emphasis mine, R. G.).

It is a well-known fact that at the beginning of Gogol's career, his identification of art with religion was inspired by Wilhelm Wackenroder's *Outpourings of an Art-Loving Monk* (1797, Russian transl. 1826). Later on, Gogol' supplemented his early notion of art as divine revelation with a view of art as a devilish descent into hell. That which is to be expressed in words now involves a descent to the material realm in order that it may find expression. In the later version of „The Portrait“, Gogol's emancipation from the German Romantic tradition is apparent in his break with the artistic cult of the Madonna.³⁴ It may be that Gogol's aesthetics is influenced not only by the metaphysics of light but also by orthodox hesychastic mysticism, a school of thought which tried to combine the cult of the Madonna with the idea of Sophia and offered the „light of Tabor“ as a holy vision.

Gogol's aesthetics is grounded in the apophatic mystic tradition within orthodox culture and it links artistic prose writing to that religious tradition. Nevertheless, Gogol's main works are not primarily religious but aesthetic texts. Likewise, Gogol's poetics should not be misinterpreted as a form of deconstruction *avant la lettre*. Although he strongly perceived the inexpressibility of the highest essence, the author of „The Portrait“ also stated that „art is not destruction. In art are hidden the seeds of creation and not of destruction“ („Но искусство не разрушение. В искусстве таятся семена создания, а не разрушения“, Gogol'

³³ As is the case with „portret“, the Russian term for „work of art“, „pro-iz-vedenie“, is etymologically linked to a form of knowledge („ved-“) based on seeing and showing. Historically speaking, the prefixes of the two terms („pro-“ „por-“) are also related.

³⁴ There are also similarities with the legend of Theophil who was said to have had a contract with the devil which he could revoke only through the help of the Virgin Mary (cf. also Vajskopf 1993, 278).

1992, 411). Still, according to Gogol's aesthetics, a completely secular portrait is an impossibility since the essence of a person, his soul, cannot be fully expressed. Therefore, a true icon may be painted only by a holy person. The realm of the sacred, however, is religion, not art.

We opened our discussion with Gogol's eulogy in response to a poem by Jazykov. We would like to close with another quotation which may outline the limits of our own work: „How impoverished is the narrow horizon which is seen by the dead eyes of the academic, compared with this immeasurable horizon, which opens itself up to the living soul“ (Gogol' 1992, 428).

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