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What's a Person Worth:
Character and Commerce in Dostoevskii's *Double*

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When Titular Councilor Iakov Petrovich Goliadkin, in Dostoevskii's 1846 novel *The Double*, rushes from one merchant to another to arrange purchases to be concluded at some unspecified future time or changes his larger bills into smaller bills in order to have a fatter wallet, he is manipulating the superficial details of commerce in order to give himself the appearance, and perhaps the inner sense, of affluence. The same may be said of his hiring a carriage, renting livery for his servant, driving around town, and "paying a call" on his doctor. These are the trappings of a station higher than the one he currently occupies, and Goliadkin's eventual descent into madness may be understood, as Dostoevskii himself indicated in his feuilleton of the period, as the result of an urge for upward social mobility, in short, ambition.¹

This conceptual framework links the book less to the world of the Gogolian petty clerk, that is, to "Diary of a Madman" and "The Overcoat," which, as numerous critics have shown, functioned as the inspiration for Dostoevskii's *Poor Folk*, than it does to that of *Dead Souls*. This latter relation, as Joseph Frank has shown, while uppermost in Dostoevskii's mind at the time of *The Double*'s initial creation, has tended to be neglected because of his subsequent revisions, which removed most of the direct intertextual references for the 1866 edition (Frank 1976: 299-300). Nevertheless, these two texts, even after Dostoevskii's changes, remain crucially connected to one another. While I agree with Frank that "the best way to understand *The Double* is to see it as Dostoevskii's effort to rework *Dead Souls* in his own artistic terms," the resulting "new synthesis of Gogolian elements" and, in particular, the "genuine exploration of encroaching madness" that he identifies in *The Double* depend upon an assumption of realism that the work itself calls into question. Indeed, it is not even clear that Goliadkin in fact goes mad at the end of the work. Goliadkin Junior, we are told, is outside the carriage in which Goliadkin Senior is being led away, and subsequently drops out of sight. For all we know, he returns to the ball from which he emerged "hatless" at the moment of Goliadkin Senior's discovery behind the woodpile. If one sees Junior as a manifestation of Senior's repressed social aspirations, as many have, then of course it is only the guilt-ridden, retiring, "conscience" that is committed. In other words, if half the man stays behind, well-adjusted, even giddy at the removal of his twin, that is not madness in any ordinary sense, let alone a clinical one, and the appeal to realism gives way before other, symbolic or metaphorical interpretations.

I do not mean to supply a definitive answer to the question of whether Goliadkin does or does not go mad in the present essay, for I don't think one is possible. Dostoevskii has provided equal evidence for at least two ways of interpreting his text, turning the "either/or" of reality into a dreamlike "and," in effect daring his readers to attempt to see through the filter of his words to a reality beyond it that is, of course, not there.² The work's conflicting details thus lead readers into an interpretive impasse, problematizing interpretation itself. Here the link to *Dead Souls* is relevant in another manner, with Gary Saul Morson's suggestion of Gogol's book as a "hermeneutic parable" providing a helpful starting point (Morson 1992). But such a reading—namely, seeing problems of interpretation as paramount—vitiates the social and political aspects of Dostoevskii's work, and Gogol's for that matter, to too great an extent. It is certainly true that both writers were interested in the manner in which readers read and interpret literature, making sense or nonsense out of life in the process. But Morson's equation of the puzzling aspects of Gogol's work with its purport, while rhetorically quite skillful, also divorces that work from pivotal features of its immediate socio-political context, and, as a result, distorts the very real sense in which the writer hoped to transform the world.

Gogol's *Dead Souls*, which I have treated elsewhere (Valentino 1998), presents in part a reaction to the encroachment of a commercial ethic on the upper echelons of Russian society in the early nineteenth century. Chichikov's seemingly nonsensical wanderings represent a progression from the a-commercial, sentimental state of Manilov to the degradation of Pliushkin *as a result* of the gradual acceptance of commerce in human souls by the middle terms: Korobochka, who is fearful but acquiscent, Nozdrev, who is trade incarnate (along with lying, cheating, and gambling), and Sobakevich, whose knowing subjection of questions of human value to questions of price leads directly to the degradation of worldly value at Pliushkin's estate. Behind this interpretation lies a long-standing trend in republican thought that has tended, in opposition to capitalist apologists, to see social corruption as a function of the rising commercial ethic.³ Viewed in this manner, Gogol's depiction links commerce with fraud, depravity, corruption, and ultimately, slavery.⁴

There is, however, a fundamental ambiguity in *Dead Souls* with regard to the very commercial processes the work implicitly critiques. It is an equivalent to what Joseph Frank refers to as the "puzzling ambiguity of attitude" in *The Double*, where "a character is shown simultaneously as socially oppressed and yet as reprehensible and morally unsavory because he has surrendered too abjectly to the pressure of his environment" (Frank 1976: 307). In much the same way, all while suggesting the morally inflationary effects produced by the action of trading in human souls, Gogol gives us a hero, the explicitly non-virtuous Chichikov, who is both the commercial agent par excellence and the work's only catalyst for social change. Herein lies its most important connection to *The Double* and the one I shall pursue in this essay.

As social catalyst, Chichikov represents a revolutionary force. This force explains the rumor among the town's inhabitants that he is "Napoleon in disguise" (Gogol 1997: 209). Such an individual is not like what John Bayley calls "the Napoleonic hero, the man of will, obsession and dream" (Bayley 1971: 316). Nor is he primarily the Napoleonic manipulator, who reduces others to the means of achieving his own ends (see for instance Lotman 1978: 476-77). He is instead Napoleon the upstart, a man who, by obtaining power, wealth, and/or influence, will cease to be who he was and become someone new. This social, political, and economic advancement on the part of one man amounts to a revolution of the old system of landed wealth and title, which fixed the future position

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of a man as rigidly as fate itself. It serves therefore as an icon for the processes of modernization, the emergence of the modern social individual. The ambiguity that lies at the heart of Dostoevskii's *Double* may be understood in the very same way: in order to rise from one's place, whatever it is, one must break with oneself, perhaps take on a disguise or deceive and manipulate others. One must create an image of oneself in the eyes of others, which may or may not correspond to one's "true" self. One must nurture and manipulate the icons of consensual fantasy, including the very image one has created, in a thirty-year-mortgage style attempt to translate oneself into something real.

This is precisely what Chichikov attempts to do, namely, associate himself with the collective fantasy of the dead serfs' value, thereby acquiring *real estate* and transforming himself into a *pomeschchik*. In the process, he becomes at one point a "millionaire," at another the worthless kidnapper of the Governor's daughter, at a third "Napoleon in disguise," all as a result of the collective fantasy of the town's inhabitants, the fluctuations of which raise, lower, and altogether reformulate his social image, his social and political value, with the baselessness of rumor, or words on a page, or stocks floating in a market. In his relation to Goliadkin, the fact that Chichikov does not suffer psychologically from these shifts of identity has prompted critics to look elsewhere in Gogol's opus for a suitable model, but this leads one along a side path. While the *chinovnik* atmosphere of such works as "The Overcoat" and "Diary of a Madman" furnishes a superficial resemblance to that of *The Double*, the best way to understand *The Double's* relation to *Dead Souls* is to dig deeper into the origins of Chichikov's character, all while keeping in mind the broad socio-economic, political, and psychological implications of the interpretation I have offered. Chichikov's nearest literary referent is in fact not Popryshchin or Akakii Akakievich, nor indeed, any previous Gogolian creation. It is Hermann from Pushkin's "Queen of Spades."

Like Chichikov, Hermann attempts to manipulate fantasy. True, it is not the fantasy of money or commodified labor, but it is no less powerful for all that. Moreover, the revolutionary implications of Hermann's "entrepreneurship" are highlighted once again in a *reputed resemblance to Napoleon*. The similarity is noted, appropriately, thrice (see Leighton 1977). First, Tomskii comments to Liza, "He has the profile of Napoleon and the soul of Mephistopheles." Then the narrator remarks, "He was sitting on the window sill, frowning fiercely, his arms folded. In this attitude he bore a striking resemblance to the portrait of Napoleon." Finally, we are told simply, "This resemblance struck even Lizaveta Ivanovna" (Pushkin 1936: 250, 252). The allusion to "The Queen of Spades," through the suggested resemblance of Chichikov to Napoleon, is strengthened by several parallel themes: false representation (Hermann pretends to be in love with Liza), social climbing achieved through criminal actions, and the subjection of questions of value to the measure of money. *Dead Souls* carries on where Pushkin left off, presenting a politically conservative reaction to a loss of social value as the result of commercial culture's spread in post-Napoleonic Russian society. But Gogol's depiction leaves out the psychological implications that such a transformation of social identity represented for Pushkin. Through its prominent interrogation of madness, *The Double* recreates this psychological dimension, accompanying it with a characteristically Dostoevskian emphasis on moral and esthetic questions.

The government *assignatsii* over which Goliadkin gloats at the beginning of the story are objects of beauty and sensual pleasure to him. Thus the "*pachka zelenen' kikh, seren' kikh, sinen' kikh, krasnen' kikh i raznykh pestren' kikh bumazhek*" looks at Mr. Goliadkin "affably" and "encouragingly"

(Dostoevsky 1972: 110). He must wipe his hands before touching them. He counts them for the hundredth time in the course of two days, caressing each between his thumb and index finger. Even in all their numeric specificity, they represent for him a rather indeterminate, "splendid" sum of money, which "can take a man far." In much the same manner, the government document, another kind of valued paper (*bumaga*), must be beautified before it is turned in. It is under the pretext of scratching out a blot that Goliadkin Junior is able to wrestle the crucial paper away from his elder twin in order to worm his way into the good books of their department superiors. The government issued money and the government office document are thus powerful in an equivalent manner, namely, through their appeal to desire and imagination.⁵ As such, they may be filled, on one hand, with all Goliadkin's hopes of success as well as, on the other, his fears of conspiracy and betrayal.⁶ But they are more than mere personal symbols. These are public phenomena that have underlain modern European society since the middle of the eighteenth century. As such, they are filled with the hopes and fears of the public as a whole and are powerful only to the extent that humans agree among themselves to value them and, most importantly, make good on their promises.

This aspect of Dostoevskii's works, that is, the importance of monetary promises—promissory notes—has tended to be overlooked by critics. A quick glance at the two most important of Dostoevskii's post-exile novels makes the omission clear. Raskol'nikov is brought to the attention of the investigating authorities initially because he faints at the police station, *where he has been summoned because of a stale IOU* that he earlier gave to his landlady. The entire subsequent development of the story hinges on the fainting spell, which the broken promise to pay has brought to the surface. Dmitrii Karamazov is led to his fateful encounter with Grushen'ka because his father has threatened to sell her Dmitrii's *promissory note*. The note thus links the three characters in what will become the novel's main conflict. In neither work is the piece of paper the central problem. In both it serves as a kind of catalyst, a container for potential inside the stories, which mirrors the actual role of promissory notes, and indeed, all forms of credit, in life itself. The power of such phenomena lies in the kind of imagination, consensual collective fantasy, that underpins modern society.

In *The Double* Dostoevskii has in effect concentrated this fantastical potential in the mind of a single individual. Goliadkin thus begins his journey by fantasizing about his fantasy-based *assignatsii*. He toys with the trappings of wealth that can create an image of himself as prosperous in the eyes of others. He sinks himself into the symbols of the government bureaucracy that serve to verify the greatness of the Russian state, its power and "benevolence," and by extension, the power and greatness of each of its individual human cogs. The split that takes place in him as a result of this wholehearted acceptance of 1840s modernity is merely a coming to terms with the trade-off that his complicity necessitates. In this interpretation the story may be seen as yet another version of the moral or spiritual decay that accompanies modernity in such works as Goncharov's *An Ordinary Story* (1847) and Balzac's *Illusions perdues* (1837-43), as the growth of social dependence in the forms of salaried office, personal and professional patronage, "the exchange of forms of mobile property" and "modes of consciousness suited to a world of moving objects" with fluctuating values, signal a fundamental transformation in the social and political life of the individual.⁷ The loss of such "human" traits as sensitivity and a Schilleresque beauty of soul that make one capable of appreciating the love that binds us to others and to the world itself, are an inevitable, lamentable, but "ordinary" complement.

To the questions of what one might give up, beyond psychological integrity, by coming to terms with such a world and what might constitute an appropriate rebellion against it, this early work of Dostoevskii's furnishes intriguing responses. The first dovetails with what Albert O. Hirschman has called the "Romantic critique of the bourgeois order," which, from Fourier and Marx to Freud and Weber, portrays the triumph of the ideology of self-interest as an impoverishment of the "full human personality." The irony of such a critique stems from its historical blindness, since, as Hirschman explains, "capitalism was precisely expected and supposed [by its eighteenth-century apologists] to repress certain human drives and proclivities and to fashion a less multifaceted, less unpredictable, and more 'one-dimensional' human personality" (Hirschman 1997: 132-33). For Dostoevskii, particularly in his pre-exile, humanist phase, this irony would have weighed little in comparison with the very real conditions of early nineteenth-century Russian society, with its entrenched serfdom and dehumanizing bureaucracy. Goliadkin's complicity in the modern world, his desire to raise himself in it through the manipulation of his self-interested public persona, may be seen therefore as an impoverishment of his humanity, which is depicted as a fundamental division.

The sense of human kind's moral diminution must also be related to a perceived loss of heroism, particularly as a chivalric, aristocratic ideal, in modern times, when "to strive for honor and glory" comes to seem anachronistic, if not ridiculous. Dostoevskii gestures toward this chivalric mode by having his hero, love letter in hand, look up to the window behind which Klara Olsuf'evna supposedly awaits him, thereby invoking the gaze of the devoted knight toward his feminine inspiration.⁸ But what looks back from behind the window is not his beloved at all, or at least not the beloved woman Goliadkin has convinced himself to expect. It is an undifferentiated *public gaze*:

Suddenly, in all the windows at once, a strange commotion took place. Figures appeared, curtains opened, entire groups of people rushed to Olsufii Ivanovich's windows, all looking for something in the courtyard. From the safety of his pile of firewood, our hero, in turn, began following the general commotion with curiosity and stretched his head from right to left as far as the little shadow of the woodpile concealing him would allow. He froze all at once, shivered, and all but sat down on the ground from fright. It occurred to him—in a word, he guessed it with all his being—that they weren't looking for something or someone: they were looking precisely for him, Mr. Goliadkin. Now everyone is looking, pointing in his direction. [...] Suddenly they have all seen him, all at once, and are waving at him, nodding towards him, saying his name. (Dostoevskii 1972: 224)

This substitution of public notice, public opinion for the approval of an exalted, untouchable woman is a masterstroke of literary transfiguration, by means of which all the "tainted" ambitious motives of the hero are stripped of their idealist veneer. The utterly confused Goliadkin Senior does not have the conceptual wherewithal to comprehend that what emerges from the ball to meet him in the very next moment is not an alien enemy-twin but the public self his own desires and fantasies have unleashed.

The story's mock heroic narration, the subject of much critical speculation,⁹ is also best understood within the intellectual historical context of the demise of knightly glory in the modern world.¹⁰ Here again Dostoevskii's text appears to take its cue from Gogol's *poema*, which functions in

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part as a form of lament on the disappearance of the hero, particularly the virtuous hero. "The virtuous man," explains Gogol's narrator,

has not been taken as a hero [...] because it is time finally to give the poor virtuous man a rest, because the phrase 'virtuous man' idly circulates on all lips; because the virtuous man has been turned into a horse, and there is no writer who has not driven him, urging him on with a whip and whatever else is handy; because the virtuous man has been so worn out that there is not even the ghost of any virtue left in him, but only skin and ribs instead of a body; because the virtuous man is not respected! No, it is time finally to hitch up a scoundrel. And so, let us hitch up a scoundrel. (Gogol 1997: 224)

What Gogol develops is an opposition between the virtuous man and the confidence man, the trading man engaged in shady commercial transactions, which points to a long legacy of negative attitudes toward business in Russian culture.¹¹ Dostoevskii's critique of modernity, however, does not limit itself to the morally inflationary consequences of allowing commerce to infiltrate culture. Instead, he directs his attention inward, to modernity's very "fantastical" foundations, to the fashioning of public personae, the wearing of masks, the acquisition of status, and the effects of such "progress" on the inner life of one "not handsome, but also not bad looking, neither too fat nor too thin" individual (Gogol 1997: 3). His story is not that of the petty clerk crushed by the monolithic bureaucracy but of the everyman who tries to get by within it. The monumental struggle between the two Goliadkins, then, is mock heroic only in a historical sense, that is, when placed alongside what Bakhtin has called the "externalized" heroes of the ancient epic (Bakhtin 1981: 13-20). For the modern individual by contrast, Goliadkin's inner struggle is, more often than not, the only kind of heroism available.

I am suggesting that Dostoevskii's novel be understood in effect as something of a *Psychomachia*, or "struggle for the mind," on Prudentius' fourth-century model, just as Gogol's work, in its finished form, was to be something of a *Divine Comedy*. But, it should be noted, Gogol's book was to be an active, transformative *Divine Comedy*, which would mark the end of Russia's Middle Ages and also propel the country into a new, moral and spiritual renaissance.¹² The question arises: how can a work of literature, or any work of art for that matter, manage to transform society if not by its imaginative potential? Here the great power of modern society re-enters each of these quintessentially modern works, pointing once again to the fundamental "ambiguity of attitude" that they share. Gogol's aborted attempt subsequently to transform his hero introduced in effect an open question into Russian nineteenth-century literary depiction: how could notions of self-interest—so important to the development of modern society in Western Europe—be appropriated by Russian society without its socially corrosive concomitants? In other words, how might a self-interested agent be depicted in the Russian context as a non-fragmented behavioral entity, socially valuable in a manner that redirected the self-interested energies Gogol satirized so devastatingly? For Dostoevskii in *The Double*, the fantasy of the *assignatsiia* and the fantasy of the document exercise a transformative power equivalent to the fantasy of the literary work, as all represent the power to make ideas, collective consensual fantasies, into reality and create something out of nothing.¹³ The effect of *The Double* on a reader attempting to locate the boundary between truth and fantasy is to point to what Slavoj Žižek has called

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the fantasy of "ontological consistency" (Žižek 1989: 68), the pervasive truth of ideological fantasy in the modern world, the "positive structuring of social reality by shared fantasy" (Mulcaire 1999: 1039). It is ironic that of all movements, realism, with its explicit truth claims and denigration of the imaginary, would make the greatest use of this fantastically transformative power of literature.

In the specific context of Russian literary history the task of depicting the whole man is of course bound up with the notion of the positive hero.¹⁴ It was Chernyshevskii and his followers who would take up Gogol's question most forthrightly in subsequent years, namely in their attempts to create self-interested, yet virtuous heroes whose actions were directly beneficial to the whole of Russian society. Dostoevskii's well-known opposition to such representations, while on one hand demonstrating the great chasm that separates his later political views from his early humanism, nevertheless stems from a similarly internalized look at the inevitable contradictions of modern personality.

NOTES

¹Goliadkin, states Dostoevskii, "goes mad out of *ambition*, while at the same time fully despising ambition and even suffering from the fact that he happens to suffer from such nonsense as ambition." Frank 300.

²"Dreams are quite incapable of expressing the alternative *either-or*; it is their custom to take both members of this alternative into the same context, as though they had an equal right to be there. [...] There is not really an alternative in the dream-thoughts, but an *and*—a simple addition." Freud 267.

³The history of republicanism in West European thought is well documented in the works of Quentin Skinner, J.G.A. Pocock, and others in the Cambridge School of the history of political theory. This essay relies in particular on numerous underlying themes of modernity as formulated by Pocock 1975.

⁴"Trade, without doubt, is in its nature a pernicious thing; it brings in that wealth which introduces luxury; it gives rise to fraud and avarice, and extinguishes virtue and simplicity of manners; it depraves a people, and makes way for that corruption which never fails to end in slavery, foreign or domestic." Davenant 1771: 275.

⁵See Mulcaire 1999 for a well-argued reformulation of the understanding of the role of public credit, especially in early eighteenth-century British society.

⁶Likewise, his concerns about Petrushka are invariably presented as fears of being "sold out" (*prodan*). See Dostoevskii 1972: 111, 188. All translations from this text are my own.

⁷On the advent of a "world of moving objects" and its questioning of the constitution of modern personality, see Pocock 1975: 464.

⁸This supremely charged trope is ubiquitous in nineteenth-century literary representation, from Schiller's "Knight of Toggenburg" to Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, Hugo's *Les Misérables*, Turgenev's *A Nest of the Gentry*, Henry James' *The American*, and the list goes on. Dostoevskii began his first published work, *Poor Folk*, by invoking this image. He would toy with it on more than one occasion in subsequent works, not only in his pre-exile period. It is inverted, for instance, at the conclusion of *Crime and Punishment*, when Sonya looks up to the hospital window behind which Raskol'nikov is recuperating and understands that her life is now meaningful only as a reflection of his.

⁹Cf., for example, Bakhtin 1963: 291-92; Vinogradov 1929: 261-67; and Terras 1969: 206-212.

¹⁰Hirschman sketches a brief history of "the Idea of Glory and its Downfall" in *The Passions and the Interests*, 9-12.

¹¹I do not wish to claim that this is a trait unique to Russian culture. From *Lazarillo de Tormes* to Defoe's *Moll Flanders* to Le Sage's adaptations of *Guzman de Alfarache* and, especially, *Gil Blas*, one repeatedly witnesses the social and economic rises and falls of individuals through calculating, self-interested, and not always legal, commercial undertakings. However, retarded commercial development in Russia and its artificial freezing by the Soviets meant in practice a preservation and even popularization of certain aristocratic attitudes toward commercial enterprise—what Gogol's narrator refers to as that "which the world dubs as *not quite clean*"—and a shielding of the Russian populace from the dilemmas of modern commercial society. In the socialization of school-age Russians one finds even today a strong suspicion of self-interested motives and a tendency to denigrate the individual who puts "*Ja*" at the front of the alphabet, instead of where it belongs, at the end. Such suspi-

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cion may have passed through and been institutionalized by the Soviet period, but its roots in Russian culture are far deeper than the twentieth century.

¹²For a discussion of Gogol's literary models, particularly in relation to Dante, see Maguire 1994: 296-97; and Fanger 1979: 167-68.

¹³Certainly in this Gogolian phase and probably later as well, Dostoevskii believed that art could have such transformative power. The great responsibility such a stand conferred upon the artist, which clashed with the professionalization of literature taking place in this very period, tormented him throughout his creative life. Dostoevskii's financial straits are well known, though the extent to which he might have unconsciously sabotaged his own financial well being, almost always in connection with his literary endeavors, can of course never be known for certain.

¹⁴The classic treatment of the expression of politically virtuous behavior in Russian literature of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries remains Mathewson 1958. It generally steers clear of economic history, leaving issues of republican thought in the Russian context untouched.

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