

First through Kiev

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In 1844 a friend asked Gogol whether he was a Ukrainian or a Russian. In a much quoted letter, Gogol replied: "Two natures are united in me: that of a *khokhlik* and that of a Russian". (*Khokhlik* was an affectionate and mildly deprecatory diminutive that Russians used to denote a Ukrainian.) He added touchily, in an egregious non sequitur, "But tell me, am I a saint? Can I really see all my loathsome faults?". There are two remarkable features about this exchange. First, Gogol used a colloquial term to describe his own native nationality, but not for that of the Russians. Second, he evidently regarded the question as concerning not only ethnic identity, but also his moral standing. Many scholars have already adduced this letter as evidence of Gogol's ambivalent attitude to his own national identity, but Edyta M. Bojanowska's book *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian nationalism* is the first actually to elevate this ambivalence into a key to understanding his work. She makes a strong case.

Bojanowska considers nationalism an ongoing project. National identity is thus not a fixed category, but a fluctuating process, in the course of which one or more identities can evolve side by side in the same person, in greater or lesser tension with each other. In that sense, her work parallels that of Aleksei Miller, the Russian scholar who has written persuasively of Russian and Ukrainian nationalism as two alternative "national projects". Consistently with this approach, Bojanowska considers that national identity can be multiple or compound, that an individual can be both Scottish and British, or Ukrainian and Russian. The two (or more) national identities are not just superimposed on one another, but may complement each other and interact with each other, since the defining features of each nation differ from case to case. It is not necessary, then, to decide whether Gogol felt himself to be a Russian or a Ukrainian, but rather to observe how both identities evolved in his writings and to trace the relationship between them. He was both an ethnic Ukrainian nationalist and an imperial Russian patriot, but the attempt to hold together the two positions brought him continual spiritual malaise.

Gogol was writing at a time when the dilemmas of Russian nationhood were approaching their first major crux. The problem was that Russia could only become a multinational empire and European great power by absorbing all East Slavs into Russian nationality. The critical period when the different discourses of East Slav nationhood first clashed with one another was the 1830s–50s. Taras Shevchenko published his narrative poem *Kobzar* in 1840, in Ukrainian, not Russian, asserting a separate Ukrainian cultural identity. This was a challenge Russian statesmen could not countenance: the Russian project was inherently multi-ethnic and imperial, and to fulfil it Ukraine had to be part of Russia in the cultural as well as the geographic and political senses. In this view, Ukrainian culture could not become more than exotic rural folklore.

Bojanowska's study places Gogol at the centre of this historic controversy. His first published work, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikan'ka*, offered unproblematic Ukrainian local colour, in the Herderian sense, deployed

spontaneously and with attractive humour. That is why the work was so popular. Its success and Gogol's ambition drove him to settle in St Petersburg, become a Russian (rather than a Ukrainian) writer, and extol the Russians as a people with a mission to save humanity. But what he found there appalled him. Whereas other European capitals had their own "imprint of nationality", he remarked that "in St Petersburg there is no character whatsoever: foreigners who settled here . . . no longer resemble foreigners, and the Russians in turn become neither one thing nor the other". Actually, this perception was not so much a realistic image of

St Petersburg as the natural consequence of comparing modest provincial Dikan'ka with one of the largest and most cosmopolitan cities in the world, a kind of anti-Herderian Babylon. In the Russian capital, the relatively innocuous goblins of village Ukraine which Gogol had evoked in his early stories became monstrous diabolic presences sucking the humanity out of the hordes trudging along the Nevsky Prospect. Gogol never really got to know Russia's own provincial and rural culture: all he knew was St Petersburg and its bureaucratic ambience. In his novel *Dead Souls* he transplanted this world to the countryside, producing a grotesque satirical and comic masterpiece. It did not, however, communicate his driving vision that Russia was destined to save humanity. When he attempted to achieve that mission in the second part of *Dead Souls* he found the task beyond him and burned his manuscripts.

Bojanowska's study is the most thorough yet attempted of Gogol's internally contradictory national identity, and it presents a challenging and convincing portrayal of his creativity.

She gives close attention to early drafts of his works, and finds that in most cases they are more Ukrainian in outlook than the published texts. She maintains that the various editors of Gogol's collected works, being mainly Russian, have misunderstood some of the most important unpublished fragments that survive in his archive, and consequently have grouped and classified them in a way that obstructs understanding of the evolution of his ideas.

Her interpretation is not the whole story, of course: Gogol was one of the first European writers – he was soon followed by Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky – to search for salvation through the anguished awareness of imperfection and sin. Bojanowska remarks at one point that "the author-narrator gives luscious concreteness to what Russia is not, while he transforms into austere abstractions what Russia is". This was true not only of Gogol's national obsessions, but of his creative process as a whole. He succeeded in part because of what he saw as his own failure. This paradox rather than discordant national identity lies at the heart of his work. For a thorough and insightful study of Gogol's perpetual preoccupation with national identity, however, there is no better place to begin than with Edyta Bojanowska's book.

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