Reading Backwards: An Advance Retrospective on Russian Literature

Edited by MuiReann Maguire and Timothy Langen

This book outlines with theoretical and literary historical rigor a highly innovative approach to the writing of Russian literary history and to the reading of canonical Russian texts.

—William Mills Todd III, Harvard University

Russian authors […] were able to draw their ideas from their predecessors, but also from their successors, testifying to the open-mindedness that characterizes the Slavic soul. This book restores the truth.

—Pierre Bayard, University of Paris 8

This edited volume employs the paradoxical notion of 'anticipatory plagiarism'—developed in the 1960s by the ‘Oulipo’ group of French writers and thinkers—as a mode for reading Russian literature. Reversing established critical approaches to the canon and literary influence, its contributors ask us to consider how reading against linear chronologies can elicit fascinating new patterns and perspectives.

Reading Backwards: An Advance Retrospective on Russian Literature re-assesses three major nineteenth-century authors—Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—either in terms of previous writers and artists who plagiarized them (such as Raphael, Homer, or Hall Caine), or of their own depredations against later writers (from J.M. Coetzee to Liudmila Petrushevskaia).

Far from suggesting that past authors literally stole from their descendants, these engaging essays, contributed by both early-career and senior scholars of Russian and comparative literature, encourage us to identify the contingent and familiar within classic texts. By moving beyond rigid notions of cultural heritage and literary canons, they demonstrate that inspiration is cyclical, influence can flow in multiple directions, and no idea is ever truly original.

This book will be of great value to literary scholars and students working in Russian Studies. The introductory discussion of the origins and context of ‘plagiarism by anticipation’, alongside varied applications of the concept, will also be of interest to those working in the wider fields of comparative literature, reception studies, and translation studies.
2. Seeing Backwards:
Raphael’s Portrait of
Nikolai Vasil’evich Gogol

Ilya Vinitsky

What we need be sensitive to are those traces of the future, learning how
to listen to texts differently, while recalling that they are not inscribed
in a single linear temporality, moving in a straight line from the past to
the future, but rather within the movement of a dual chronology whose
different temporal strata encounter and traverse each other.

Pierre Bayard, ‘Anticipatory Plagiarism’

‘When we look back, all we see is ruins.’
A barbarian perspective, though a true one.

Joseph Brodsky, ‘Letters to a Roman Friend’

Sherlock Holmes was right to note a striking similarity between
the appearance of the naturalist Stapleton and the portrait of Hugo
Baskerville which hung in Baskerville Hall. Stapleton, as Sherlock
determined, was actually a Baskerville, ‘and hence has the motive
for murder: the naturalist wants to eliminate everyone who stands
between him and the succession to title and estate’. Although Pierre
Bayard wittily debunks this solution in his provocative book on The
Hound of the Baskervilles (in his interpretation, the real criminal in the
story is Stapleton’s wife), Holmes’ “gallery revelation” may serve as
a fascinating metaphor for the deductive method exemplified by the
famous detective. It is also helpful for the interpretative experiment
conducted in the present essay.

This chapter considers a paradoxical connection between the literary
word (text) and the visual image (a painting) presented not by means
of ekphrasis (the verbal description of an artwork), but rather by spontaneous ‘translation’ of the written text into the visual image, which serves as a key to the text’s enigma. In other words, I will examine a case of a certain old artwork which, like Baskerville’s portrait, reveals the mystery of a (bizarre) literary work written by a very unusual author who lived many years after the artwork had been created.

In what follows, I will focus on the striking final request made in Gogol’s (in)famous ‘Testament’ (‘Zaveshchanie’, 1845), which opens his Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends (Vybrannye mesta iz perepiski s druz’iami, 1847), and which concerns the writer’s prohibition of the reproduction and distribution of his portrait and expresses his passionate commandment that those who really love him should instead buy an engraving of Raphael’s Transfiguration (1516–20) made by one of his friends. The request produced a huge scandal. Gogol was accused of blasphemy, enormous arrogance, madness and complete lack of taste. In this paper I offer an alternative, Bayardian, interpretation of his undoubtedly peculiar request, based on inner, counter-chronological relationships between the two testaments—Raphael’s last painting, which, according to Giorgio Vasari, foretold the future development of western art, and Gogol’s last will, which effectively ruined his reputation as a writer.

Fooling Everyone Around

Nikolai Gogol’s controversial Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends opens with his ‘Testament’—one of the strangest and most scandalous works ever written in the Russian language. Every aspect of this text challenges the reader: it manifests as a last will published during the writer’s lifetime, and as an introduction to this collection of edifying letters and articles conceived as a redemptive replacement of all the author’s previous works. This ‘Testament’ is addressed to ‘all Russia’ in general and to every single compatriot in particular and it includes some extraordinary, practically unrealizable, immodest, blasphemous, and paranoid requests.

Thus, in the ‘Testament’ Gogol demands that his body not be buried ‘until such time as clear signs of decomposition have appeared’. On the other hand, should his death have been established without doubt, no
monument is to be raised to him, either, except indirectly through the reader’s transformation into a better person. Nor should anyone weep for him, since to see his death as a loss would be a sin. Gogol also bequeaths to his friends a short work of his own, which he calls ‘The Farewell Tale’ (‘Proshchal’naia povest’’), intended to explain the reasons behind his mysteries (characteristically, there is no trace among Gogol’s papers of its ever having been written). The final request (which I will expand on below) deals with Gogol’s prohibition of the reproduction and distribution of his portrait and his suggestion that instead, one should buy an engraving of Raphael’s Transfiguration. The final sentence of this ‘Testament’ is a sombre warning: ‘My testament must be published immediately after my death in all the newspapers and reviews, so that no one may, in ignorance, be innocently guilty towards me and bring reproaches down upon his soul’.7

The general reaction of the Russian public to Gogol’s ‘Testament’ might be described by one word: shock. Critics of various convictions tried to guess what had led Gogol to write this weird text: a morbid fear of death? Religious mania? Catholic influence (a kind of ‘preacher’s narcissism’)? ‘If it was a joke on your part’, Sergei Aksakov wrote to Gogol in January 1847, ‘its success exceeded the most ambitious expectations: you made fools of everyone (vse oduracheno)’! 8

Gogol himself provided his readers with two contradictory explanations for the publication of his last will. In a ‘Preface’ to his Correspondence, he points out that the ‘Testament’ is to be published in order to apprise ‘all Russia’ of what people should do in case of his sudden death. At the same time, he confesses to his mother, who was frightened by her dear son’s ‘Testament’, that he merely wished to remind his readers of the existence of death, which threatens everyone in our world in every single moment.

On the one hand, the ‘Testament’ should be considered literally—as Gogol’s real last will, the strict execution of which was just postponed for a while: until his demise. On the other hand, the ‘Testament’ has an allegorical sense (‘memento mori’; or, to be sure, ‘remember about my, Gogol’s, not-yet-happened death’). Yet it is noteworthy that in the very same letter to his mother, Gogol hints that he has other numerous reasons for announcing his last will to the world during his lifetime.

What are these reasons?
The Secretics

As is well known, contradictory and vague explanations for his own plots and plans constitute one of Gogol’s most frequent rhetorical devices.9 These vague explanations help him to create an aura of impenetrable enigma around his texts and authorial persona. Unfortunately, Gogol’s rhetoric of secrecy has not been studied adequately yet.

I would highlight the following as typical Gogolian devices: frequent usage of aposiopesis (the rhetorical figure of omission or silence); intended unreliability of the source of information; sudden, unmotivated mood shifts by a narrator, or shifts in narration from accounts of heroes to lyrical digression and, especially, to reminiscences; mocking or edifying appeals to the reader; profane, false hints and pseudo-resolutions, which replace each other as fast as thoughts in Khlestakov’s head in Gogol’s play The Government Inspector (Revizor, 1836); all taken together with obtrusive suggestions by the narrator or implied author of numerous contradictory interpretative ‘keys’ to his own texts, and so on.

Many years ago I suggested for future (never realized) elaboration the term ‘the secretics’ of Gogol, which is both analogous and opposite to a traditional poetics and a relatively young ‘prosaics’.10 Thus, from the ‘secretics’ point of view, Gogol’s hermeneutic traps such as The Government Inspector (followed by a cycle of short plays and essays which ‘reveal’ its hidden meaning),11 the short story ‘The Portrait’ (‘Portret’, 1835 and 1842; both versions), and—especially—the story ‘The Nose’ (Nos, 1836) appear to be powerful means of kindling the reader’s interest in the author’s persona. Gogol does not quite parody the various authoritative hermeneutical systems. Instead he univocally collapses them in such a way that they annihilate each other in order to assert either directly (as in the unfinished 1842 novel Dead Souls (Mertvye dushi)) or implicitly (as in ‘The Nose’) his own privileged position in the text as the absolutely incomprehensible Master of Meaning. If anything can oppose ‘semiotic totalitarianism’ (Gary Saul Morson’s term)12 in Gogol’s texts, it is his ‘totalitarian secretics’, which implies a concentrated, eternal, and always unsuccessful readers’ search for a solution to the riddle of the text, or intention, or indeed the earthly mission of the person known as ‘Nikolai Gogol’. This quest is not a hoax or a fraud, but a special aesthetic system facilitated by the author’s post-factum ‘revelations’ of mutually exclusive keys to his writings.
As a result, there are ‘not secrets to be found out here one by one, but Secrecy’.  

Characteristically, one of Gogol’s trademark devices deals with offering or hinting at a visual key (or ‘pictorial metanarrative’) to his a priori enigmatic writing. Judith Robey observes that ‘moments featuring viewers looking at paintings can be found throughout Gogol’s fiction and essays, whether or not they are works explicitly about artists or the arts’ (she cites ‘The Portrait’ among other stories and essays). ‘Taken as a whole,’ the critic argues, ‘these moments correspond to the stages in a metanarrative in Gogol’s works’, which she defines as ‘a conversion tale in which reading is portrayed as a process that can lead to redemption and salvation’.  

Possibly the most famous and telling example of Gogol’s usage of visual mysteries encrypted into his works is the final ‘Silent Scene’ in his play The Government Inspector, in which all the comic and corrupt bureaucrats of the town stand as if frozen in place for more than a minute. At different stages of his literary career, Gogol offered several (sometimes mutually exclusive) keys to this scene, but, as Iurii Mann convincingly showed many years ago, the famous tableau has its pictorial metanarrative. Mann argued that it was designed to make the audience perceive the image of the Last Judgement as portrayed by Karl Briullov’s Romantic canvas The Last Day of Pompeii (Poslednii den’ Pompei, 1833), lauded by Gogol elsewhere.
While Mann’s assertion is certainly plausible, I would argue that the silent scene, which took its final shape in 1840, contains another visual reference, intentionally concealed by the author in order to keep his lofty and incomprehensible status.

Let me quote the playwright’s ‘instructions’ (a kind of secret ekphrasis of an unnamed image) replacing the names of comic bureaucrats with X, Y, Z, etc.:

\[
X \text{ stands in the center rigid as a post, with outstretched hands and head thrown backward. On his right are [two women] } Y \text{ and } Z \text{ straining toward him with every movement of their whole bodies. Behind them } M, \text{ turned toward the audience, metamorphosed into a question mark. [...] To the left of } X \text{ is } N, \text{ his head to one side as if listening. Behind him is } O \text{ with outspread hands almost crouching on the ground and pursing his lips as if to whistle or say: ‘A nice pickle we’re in!’}. \text{ Next to him is } P, \text{ turned toward the audience, with eyes screwed up and making a venomous gesture at } X. \text{ Next to him, at the edge of the group, are } Q \text{ and } R, \text{ gesticulating at each other, open-mouthed and wide-eyed. The other guests remain standing stiff. The whole group retain the same position of rigidity for almost a minute and a half. The curtain falls [italics added].}^{16}
\]

According to Gogol’s plan, the Silent Scene, which had originally been introduced as the final part of the play’s Easter performance in 1836, was supposed to last for several minutes, giving the audience enough time not only to recognize but also to comprehend the profoundly serious secret message it comically mimicked and camouflaged. Eventually, Gogol shortened the time for the action of this scene. The well-known drawing which usually accompanies Gogol’s editions of the comedy (see below), is utterly misleading if compared with the author’s detailed description of the scene. According to A. Nekrasov, the drawing was done by the playwright’s friend Aleksandr Ivanov.\(^{17}\)
2. Seeing Backwards: Raphael’s Portrait of Nikolai Vasil’evich Gogol

The verbal description of the last moment of the play reveals that with their names and ranks silenced, one can easily recognize what the “late” Gogol may have hinted at and who stands behind this comic scene of judgement with outstretched hands. I will refrain from naming this powerful proto-image and invite the readers of this essay to guess and interpret it as a part of Gogol’s secretive message by themselves (please focus on the italicized words of the description above). All in all, I would like to stress here that Gogol’s visual secretics works as a kind of reading or seeing backwards, as if what we read or see now had been already foretold and foreseen by other artists.

Rhetoric of the Testament

Let us return to Gogol’s secretive antemortem publication of his last will (Andrei Siniavskii ironically dubbed this work a ‘poster for one’s own death’). Although Gogol’s contemporaries were shocked by its publication, throughout antiquity the composition of a testament was regarded as a solemn act, proclaimed publicly (‘Testamenti factio non privati sed publici juris est’). Deeply concerned about the fate of his own (and indeed all Russia’s) spiritual housekeeping, Gogol demonstratively
returns to the testament the character of a public exhortation—its primordial form (this device is, of course, Romantic in character: consider the numerous attempts by the Romantics to resurrect those archaic discourses, which represented, in the estimation of Romantic theorists, the collective consciousness of a nation). In short, the form of the public testament turned out to be aesthetically appropriate for an authorial manifesto addressed to ‘all Russia’.

In fact, Gogol’s ‘Testament’ is the testament of a writer. It expresses his new authorial creed, but it is addressed to his old readers. Its aim is to persuade the latter of the truth of his new views and to prepare the way for their perception of the important and uneasy message of his ground-breaking book. Old ideas concerning the role of literature in society appear unsuitable for his new missionary goal to help people’s suffering souls to return to Christ (Dead Souls’ arch-plot). Here originates his rejection of his previous, ‘useless’, literary works—the ones which brought him glory—in favour of his new, useful, non-literary (and sometimes never written!) writings. In this sense, Gogol’s ‘Testament’ constitutes a deliberate literary action in his struggle with the traditional (here: secular) vision of literature. It is conceived and constructed as a reevaluation and transfiguration of these views in accordance with his new authorial self-conception. Of course, one may find here the influence of a religious, edifying, literature, but we must not forget to be aware of the messianic literature-centrism of his thinking during this period of his life.

First of all, there was nothing unusual in the very form of the author’s testament for Gogol’s contemporaries. This was a traditional literary genre with its respectable genealogy and canonical examples—both serious and mock ones (Villon, Shakespeare, Donne). Literary testaments in verse and prose were very popular in Russian Romantic literature (Pushkin, Venevitinov, Lermontov, Shevchenko). These poetical testaments usually included sentimental appeals to friends, the indication of the site where a writer wished to be buried, farewell advice, instructions, and, sometimes, threats. Logically, one of the central motifs of a literary testament was that of the responsibility of the testator’s friends towards him.

However, these were conventional, allegorical, sometimes playful testaments, which required an aesthetic, rather than a literal response from the readers. It seems that in his Correspondence, Gogol strove to
oppose a real, unconventional testament to the literary, conventional genre—that is, his own (not a lyrical ego’s) will, a legal rather than a literary document.

I say ‘it seems’ because in reality we see an extremely interesting case of usage of the semantic possibilities of a legal document for aesthetic purposes. Indeed, within Correspondence, the ‘Testament’ introduces the author’s ‘real’ voice and establishes a peculiar relationship between the author and his readers. The form of the last will and testament allows the author to present these relations as judicially and mystically ‘fixed’. They are formulated in terms of unilateral will rather than as a traditional treaty (you must not erect, not cry, not buy, etc.) The realization of this juridical metaphor provides the author’s word (at least, in Gogol’s view) with an unconditional character—this is his legal demand, and the addressees’ duty is to fulfill this will strictly. Moreover, this device creates an illusion that the author himself will oversee the execution of the will!

In other words, the Testament presents a legalized request of the dead (as it were) Author, addressed to ‘all Russia’ (remember that the living Gogol wrote the words ‘perhaps my posthumous voice will be a general reminder of caution’). This is nothing less than a sort of public posthumous speech (‘the fiction of the voice-from-beyond-the-grave,’ in Paul de Man’s terms), which strives to immortalize, to imprint the image (or, to be specific, the voice) of the author in his compatriots’ hearts, or, speaking in Gogolian terms, to set an indestructible and eternal link between his soul and Russia, meaning the Russian nation. This might be called a rhetorical attempt to conquer death by means of a printed text: a simulation of an afterlife being, a realized prosopopeia of the scale of Russia itself. Paradoxically, with each utterance it announces that its author is neither properly dead nor alive but somewhere between the two. In Pierre Bayard’s terms, this strange text might also be called Gogol’s attempt to plagiarize his own forthcoming death, such that ‘the after may be situated before the before’.

The Spiritual Monument

Let me now consider how Gogol’s ‘Testament’ is made. It consists of seven items, connected both functionally (the testator’s will) and thematically (the individual faced with death). Each item of the testament begins
with the words ‘I hereby bequeath (zaveshchaitu)...’ (not to bury my body; not to erect a memorial; not to weep; the best of everything written; not to hasten to praise or condemn). This formal structure (motivated by the format of the ‘last will and testament’) creates a very palpable rhythmical effect, a kind of ‘stanzaic’ organization.

In an earlier version of this chapter, ‘Exegi Testamentum’, I suggested that the implicit addressee of Gogol’s provocative last will was Pushkin’s 1841 poem ‘Exegi Monumentum’—the summa summarum of the classical (secular) conception of poetic self-awareness. I argued that Gogol’s text was a polemical translation of Pushkin’s proud poem and the authoritative tradition that stands behind it into the language of humble sentimental pietism that dwells amidst ruins and graveyard memorials.

So, what kind of spiritual monument, capable of further growth, does Gogol feel to be worthy of a Christian writer? We find the answer in the final, most passionate and mysterious, seventh item (‘stanza’) of his memorial poem in prose, which contains instructions concerning his portrait: ‘I bequeath—but I remind myself that I cannot dispose of some things.’ The request stems from Gogol’s prohibition of the reproduction and distribution of his portrait, which against his will and without his permission was ‘published abroad’. Instead, he suggests that another portrait be substituted, and sold for profit, the one engraved by a fellow artist in Rome, Fedor Ivanovich Iordanov (Iordan). Let us quote this request in full:

I bequeath—but I remind myself that I cannot dispose of some things. Because of my impudence, my proprietary rights have been stolen from me: against my will and without my permission my portrait has been published abroad. For many reasons that I need not declare, I did not want this; I have not sold anyone the right to publish it and I have refused all the bookstores that have assailed me with their offers. I would contemplate permitting it only in the case that God would help me to accomplish that labor with which my thought has been occupied all my life, and besides, accomplish it so that all my compatriots would say with one voice that I have honestly fulfilled my task and would even wish to learn the lineaments of the man who worked in silence for a long time and did not want to profit from underserved fame. Another circumstance is joined to this one: my portrait could be sold immediately in a great number of copies, which would bring considerable profit to the artist who had engraved it. There is an artist who has labored in Rome for some years engraving the immortal picture of Raphael, ‘The Transfiguration of the Lord’ [sic]. He has sacrificed everything for his
labor—a labor destroying, devouring years and health, and he has accomplished it with a perfection (it is now approaching the end) that no other engraver has attained. But by reason of his high price and the small number of experts, this print cannot be distributed in sufficient quantities to pay him back for everything. My portrait would help him. Now my plans wrecked: once the image of anyone is published abroad, it is anyone’s property, taken up by the publishers of engravings and lithographs. But if it should happen that my posthumously published letters are of some general benefit (even if it be only by their sincere effort to furnish it), and if my compatriots should also want to see my portrait, then I ask all those publishers generously to renounce their rights; those of my readers who, by a vain fancy for things that have enjoyed a certain fame, will have acquire some portrait of me, I ask to destroy it forthwith upon reading these lines, especially since it was badly done and bears no resemblance to me, and to buy only the one on which will appear ‘Engraved by Yordanov’. This at least will be a just act. And it will be still more just if those persons who have the means buy, instead of my portrait, the engraving of ‘The Transfiguration of the Lord’, which, even in the opinion of foreigners, is the crown of the engraver’s art and constitutes a Russian glory.24

What does this confusing narrative mean? Why Raphael’s Transfiguration? Why should Gogol’s portrait be engraved by Iordan?
In 1997, Vladimir Paperny suggested an interesting interpretation of Gogol’s choice for his memorial painting: ‘Raphael’s *Transfiguration* offered a sort of model, based upon which Gogol sketched his own “painting,” in which he tried to depict himself, and Russia, and also “everything that there is upon earth”, depicting this, moreover, by means of an “intellectually glimpsed” incorporation of his own portrait within Raphael’s painting’.25

Simply put, where is Gogol in this engraving?

**The Transfiguration**

Surely we can argue that Gogol’s reference to Raphael’s *Transfiguration* transposes the theme of artistic and spiritual metamorphosis, central to his *Correspondence* as a whole, onto the Christological plane as we recall in the last scene of this comedy. Indeed, Gogol was very familiar with

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25 Iordan, E. "Engraving (1835–50) of Raphael, *Transfiguration* (1516–20)." Public domain, http://www.artsait.ru/foto.php?art=i/iordan/img/1.
Vasari’s description of this last *unfinished* painting by Raphael as the latter’s supreme achievement and artistic testament. Vasari wrote:

> He finished the course of his life on the day of his birth, Good Friday, aged thirty-seven [Gogol’s age at that point! – I. V.]. We may believe that his soul adorns heaven as his talent has embellished the earth. At the head of the dead man, in the room where he worked, they put the *Transfiguration*, which he had done for the Cardinal de Medici. The sight of the dead and of this living work filled all who saw them with poignant sorrow.\(^{26}\)

Lastly, Iordan, this Pierre Menard of Russian painting, kept working on this engraving for many years (like Gogol on his *Dead Souls!*—a typically Romantic *dolgostroi*, or lengthy project). In Gogol’s eyes, as Paperny noted, Iordan’s engraving presented a true monument to the artist’s self-sacrifice, as well as to the artistic and spiritual maturity of the Russian nation.

Still, one might suspect some sort of *personal* connections between the writer’s true monument and the engraving of Raphael’s masterpiece. It actually sounds like the depiction of Christ at the moment of his Transfiguration should take the place of the deceased writer’s portrait. Paperny states that ‘Gogol “made himself at home”, spiritually, in Raphael’s painting, “spiritually” exchanging the head of Christ for his own’.\(^{27}\) No wonder Gogol’s Orthodox readers were outraged. With an ill-concealed feeling of anger Aksakov wrote:

> I could not read without revulsion the published testament of a man still alive and well, in which each word smacks of incredible pride […] where the engraving of *The Transfiguration of Christ* hangs alongside his own portrait.\(^{28}\)

But was Gogol so grandiosely overconfident that he identified himself with Christ on the painting? I suspect that he meant something very different, but that he nevertheless became a victim of his own secretics as well as of an odd *anxiety of prophetic plagiarism*. As is well known, Raphael did not paint the standard interpretation of the story of the Transfiguration, as seen in other works from the period. Instead, he created a work of extraordinary complexity and *strangeness*, combining in it two closely related, yet distinct, episodes from the Gospel: the Transfiguration of Christ (as seen in the upper part of the canvas) and
the Healing of the Lunatic Child (from the lower part, and as described in Matthew 17.1–20).

In Vasari’s description, this ‘most famous, most beautiful and most divine’ work of the artist

represents Christ transfigured on Mount Tabor with the eleven disciples at the foot, awaiting their Master. A boy possessed by a devil is brought so that Christ when he has come down from the mount may release him. [...] An old man is embracing and supporting him, his eyes shining, his brows raised, and his forehead knit, showing at once his resolution and fear. He steadily regards the Apostles, as if to derive courage from them.\(^{29}\)

According to Vasari, Raphael, portraying the transfigured Christ, is himself transfigured. When Vasari adds that Raphael gave up his last breath after painting Christ’s face, he further invokes Saint Paul’s words in Corinthians, since the painter now saw Christ ‘face to face’.\(^{30}\) Moreover, Vasari argues that the painting foretells the future development of sixteenth-century art.

Raphael’s *Transfiguration* has always been considered a mysterious piece: ‘Combining two distinct narrative subjects with anachronistic witnesses in a single setting, it had few equivalents for sheer complexity among altar-places of its period, being marvelous not only for its diversity of elements but also the harmony of their integration’.\(^{31}\) A contemporary critic interprets the meaning of Raphael’s painting as follows: ‘Christ is the savior of man; only he can heal the pains of this life. The father of the possessed boy performs a function similar to that of God’.\(^{32}\) Those who have faith will be saved. The curing of the boy echoes the words of God: believe in Christ’s power.

In the 1970s, Dr Gordon Bendersky offered a provocative interpretation of the painting based on medical observations of the boy’s figure:

instead of depicting the boy in the midst of an actual epileptic attack, he is coming out of his convulsion. This focus on the postictal image is consistent with the interpretation that ‘God heals.’ It also suggests that Raphael depicted the boy as cured, in which case the open mouth is the organ through which the devil issues rather than the site of the boy’s cry during the epileptic seizure. [...] Therefore, contrary to the opinion that Raphael primarily shows the apostles failing in the attempt to heal the boy, my neuroiconographical interpretation supports the contention that
Raphael intentionally linked the divine revelation directly with the cured boy in a causal relation.

In other words, in *The Transfiguration*, Raphael functioned as though he were an angelic intercessor. Empowered by his name [which means in the original Hebrew, ‘God heals’ – I. V.], he facilitated a conjunction between the healer and the healed. For Raphael, life’s final irony lay in his theophoric name. It gave him the power to integrate two disparate Biblical sequences in the painting that would be his last.33

What was Gogol’s secretive take on this painting?

**The Likeness**

Let us undertake a visual experiment. Look at the face and pose of the sick child’s father in Raphael’s painting.

![Raphael, *Transfiguration* (1516–20), fragment (a lunatic boy), Pinacoteca Vaticana, Vatican City. Taken from photograph by Alvesgaspar (2015), CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfigurazione_(Raffaello)_September_2015-1a.jpg.](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Transfigurazione_(Raffaello)_September_2015-1a.jpg)
And now turn to the famous ‘shivering’ group of a father and a son in the lower right of Aleksandr Ivanov’s painting *The Appearance of Christ to the People* (*Iavljenie Khrista narodu*, 1857)—another important ‘pictorial metanarrative’ used by Gogol.

I believe that the scene in Raphael served as a symbolic prototype for Ivanov’s group. Furthermore, as is known, Gogol persuaded Ivanov to portray in this ‘shivering’ group himself and his young friend Iosif Vielgorskii (the death of the latter in 1840 deeply affected Gogol and led to his conversion to religious mysticism).
Scholars argue that in this group Gogol wanted to personify his spiritual guidance of, and fraternal friendship with, Vielgorskii.\(^{34}\) Since Gogol’s own position in the foreground as the ‘shivering’ figure was too prominent and very likely to reveal his identity, Gogol and Ivanov eventually decided to create a ‘spiritual portrait’ of Gogol in the figure of the ‘sinner’ closest to the Messiah... in the background of the painting.

In the seventh request made in his Testament, Gogol complains that his secret plans were wrecked when Aleksandr Ivanov published his portrait.
However, if my hypothesis is correct, Gogol does not discard his former plan, for he secretly names (at the end of his testament) the precise source of Ivanov’s and his own mystical and artistic project. Indeed, with some exaggeration and through the ‘visual’ intermediacy of Ivanov’s sketches, one may recognize typical Gogolian features in the image of the father in the Transfiguration, as if divine Raphael had prefigured (or plagiarized by anticipation) the physical appearance (and religious/artistic ideas) of the great Russian writer. I suspect that Gogol might have ‘read’ this ‘likeness’ as a symbolic (déjà vu) confirmation of the legitimacy of his own self-imposed mission of bringing sick souls back to Christ, for only Christ can heal them! In this case, the possessed boy may represent his suffering compatriots (the addressees of his Book), as well as his deceased dear friend (the object of his reminiscences and religious aspirations). With an understanding of himself as a healer performing God’s work, Gogol assumed a role greater than that of an artist. It is quite understandable now why Iordan’s engraving of Raphael’s Transfiguration remained among Gogol’s very few belongings at the author’s real death in March of 1852.

Once again, it seems that Gogol was far from identifying himself with Christ. Most likely, he wanted to transform the Horatian tomb of Pushkin’s secular interpretation into a spiritual monument to the Lord; and to ‘reserve’ for himself an honourable place on its pedestal. Through the agency of a Russian artist, he probably hoped to conquer death by being literally en-graved into a sacral scene, portrayed by the divine Italian Master. Or, in Pierre Bayard’s words, Gogol—as interpreter of art—by recognizing in Raphael’s painting ‘those traces of [his own] future [image]’, makes the case for the construction of a new art and literary history, which reverses ‘traditional chronology by restoring to authors their true [cultural] place in time [and …] acknowledging that some are occasionally posterior to writers whom they appear to precede’, while ‘modifying their biographies’ by turning them into ‘participants in another temporality, that of literature or art, which obeys its own rhythms’. 35

Alas, Gogol was misunderstood and condemned by his contemporaries as an arrogant impostor. How could this have happened? I think he fell into his own rhetorical trap. Indeed, the
writer’s real behest could be considered a further demonstration of his humility (as if he were to state that he devoted his life and oeuvre to God), if not for its *Horatian foundation*. Characteristically, at the very end of his testament, Gogol calls Iordan’s engraving of Raphael’s *Transfiguration* ‘the crown (*venets*) of art’ which will further Russia’s glory. Gogol’s words thus transform the well-known motif of the national poet’s crown which Pushkin demonstratively refuses by ‘not demanding a wreath’ (‘ne trebuia ventsa’) in the concluding stanza of his poem ‘Exegi Monumentum’, a poem which marks Pushkin’s own transposition of Horace.

This led to an unforeseen consequence: the Horatian subject (the proud poet), which Gogol hoped to transform into a Christlike figure, took the place of the humble and righteous father. That is, the Horatian poet-demiurge ‘objectively’ turned into Christ himself, and Gogol’s last will was textually transformed (if we follow this argument to its logical conclusion) into an equivalent of a Holy Testament. Such a monument, of course, rises even higher than Pushkin’s unruly head. But it does sound like unspeakable immodesty *no matter what Gogol actually wanted to say or to conceal by it*. Indeed, in his readers’ comprehension, his weird request did not sound as a manifesto of the Christian continuity of art (moving back and forth in time), but rather as a self-parody of the author.36

It is precisely this linguistic pose by Gogol which Dostoevsky, as Tynianov convincingly demonstrated and interpreted in his theory of parody as the vehicle of literary evolution, ridiculed in the ‘humble’ appeal uttered by the pompous windbag Foma Fomich Opiskin in his 1859 novella *The Village of Stepanchikovo* (*Selo Stepanchikovo i ego obitateli*): “Oh, don’t build me a monument! I don’t need a monument! In your hearts erect me a monument, and nothing else is necessary, nothing, nothing!”37

From the Bayardian perspective, a parody precedes the object of its mockery, making the history of literature flow backwards and leaving, to paraphrase Gogol’s description of the bird-troika at the end of *Dead Souls*, everything in front. Scholarly spectators, meanwhile, are ‘struck with the portent’, observing the ‘awe-inspiring’ movement of a bizarre chronology whose different temporal strata, according to the French theorist, encounter and traverse each other.
Conclusion

In struggling for the encoded restoration of his true spiritual likeness as if anticipated by Raphael, Gogol erected himself a testament. Having read this text, his compatriots decided that the author of *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls* had indeed died (obviously, as a writer!). None of them saw in this text a hint that he had already been envisioned and immortalized by the divine sixteenth-century artist. What a spectacular failure for the bizarre experiment of inviting the readers to see backwards in order to resolve the author’s impenetrable mystery!
Notes

1 An early version of this essay, now substantially reworked and refocused, was published, under the title of ‘Exegi Testamentum: Gogol’s Posthumous Ode’ in the Columbia University Slavic graduate students’ journal Ulbandus Review, 6 (2002), 85–112.

2 Pierre Bayard, ‘Anticipatory Plagiarism: For an Autonomous Literary History’, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman, New Literary History, 44:22 (2013), 231–50 (p. 249), https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2013.0019. The original may be found in Pierre Bayard, Le Plagiat par anticipation (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2009), p. 148.

3 Joseph Brodsky, A Part of Speech (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), p. 83.

4 Pierre Bayard, Sherlock Holmes Was Wrong: Reopening the Case of The Hound of the Baskervilles (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), p. 25.

5 For more on the paradoxes and idiosyncrasies of Gogol’s ‘Testament’, see: Ruth Sobel, Gogol’s Forgotten Book: Selected Passages and Its Contemporary Readers (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981); Lina Bernstein, Gogol’s Last Book: The Architectonics of Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends (Birmingham: Slavonic Monographs, 1994); Iu. Barabash, ‘“Sootechestveniki, ia vas liubil...”: Gogol: zaveshchanie ili “Zaveshchanie”?’, Voprosy literatury, 3 (1989), 156–89; Alexander Zholkovsky, ‘Rereading Gogol’s Miswritten Book: Notes on Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends’, in Essays on Gogol: Logos and the Russian Word (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992), pp. 172–84.

6 Nikolai Gogol, Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends, trans. by Jesse Zeldin (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), p. 7. Hereafter referred to as Correspondence.

7 Ibid., p. 13.

8 Cited in N. V. Gogol, Perepiska N. V. Gogolia v dvukh tomakh, 2 vols (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1988), II, p. 30.

9 For more on Gogol’s rhetoric, see D. Chizhevskii, ‘Neizvestnyi Gogol’, Novyi zhurnal, 27 (1951), 126–58; Gary Saul Morson, ‘Gogol’s Parable of Explanation: Nonsense and Prosaics’, in Essays on Gogol: Logos and the Russian Word, ed. by Susanne Fusso and Priscilla Meyer (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1992); Mikhail Vaiskopf, Siuzhet Gogolia:
Vinitsky, ‘Exegi Testamentum’, pp. 86–87. On prosaics, see Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Prosaics (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 15–62.

11 These include the following texts by Gogol: ‘Excerpt from a Letter Written by the Author Shortly after the First Performance of The Inspector General’ (1836), ‘Advice to Those Who Would Perform The Inspector General Correctly’ (1842), ‘Leaving the Theater’ (1842), and ‘The Denouement of The Inspector General’ (1846).

12 Gary Saul Morson, Hidden in Plain View: Narrative and Creative Potentials in War and Peace (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 195.

13 Frank Kermode, The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 143.

14 Judith Robey, ‘Modeling the Reading Act: Gogol’s Mute Scene and Its Intertexts’, Slavic Review, 56:2 (1997), 233–50 (p. 233), https://doi.org/10.2307/2500784.

15 Iurii Mann, ‘“Uzhas okoval vsekh...” (o nemoi stsene v “Revizore” Gogolia)’, Voprosy literatury, 8 (1989), 223–35; Robert A. Maguire, Exploring Gogol, pp. 97–134.

16 N. V. Gogol, The Inspector-General: A Comedy in Five Acts, trans. by Thomas Seltzer (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1916), p. 119.

17 A. Nekrasov, ‘Pripisyvaemye Gogoliu risunki k “Revizoru”’, Literaturnoe nasledstve, 19–21 (Moscow, 1935), pp. 533–35.

18 Il’ia Vinitskii, ‘Nikolai Gogol’ i Ugroz Svetovostokov: k istokam idei revizora’, Voprosy literatury, 5 (1996), pp. 167–95.

19 A. D. Siniavskii, V teni Gogolia (London: Overseas Publications Interchange, 1975), p. 8.

20 Cited in John George Phillimore’s Introduction to the Study and History of the Roman Law (London: William Benning & Co, 1848), p. 124. In the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Brockhaus and Ephron we read: ‘Here as well the T[estament] was at first an ordinance, the directives of a dying man regarding who should head the home and take charge of housekeeping, how to live and how to manage property held in common. The character and content of the T[estament] change radically as the earlier communal
life declines and is replaced by a civil society founded on individualism. ...
...the Testament loses its public character, its affirmation by folk assembly is replaced by its attestation in the presence of witnesses’. F. A. Brokgauz and L. A. Efron, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar’*, 82 vols (St Petersburg, 1894), XII, pp. 111–14. My translation.

21 Gogol, *Correspondence*, p. 7.

22 Paul de Man, ‘Autobiography as De-facement’, *Modern Language Notes*, 94:5 (1979), pp. 919–30, p. 927, https://doi.org/10.2307/2906560.

23 Bayard, ‘Anticipatory Plagiarism’, p. 233.

24 Gogol, *Correspondence*, pp. 12–13.

25 V. Paperny, ‘“Preobrazhenie” Gogolia (k rekonstruktsii osnovnogo mifa pozdnego Gogola)’, *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, 39 (1997), pp. 155–73, p. 167.

26 Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, trans. by A. B. Hinds (London: Everyman’s Library, 1963), p. 247.

27 Paperny, ‘“Preobrazhenie” Gogolia’, p. 167.

28 S. T. Aksakov, *Istoriia moego znakomstva s Gogolem* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1960), p. 165. My translation.

29 Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, p. 243.

30 Paul Barolsky, *Why Mona Lisa Smiles and Other Tales by Vasari* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2010), p. 39.

31 Christian K. Kleinbub, ‘Raphael’s Transfiguration as Visio-Devotional Program’, *The Art Bulletin*, 20:2 (2008), 367–93 (p. 367), https://doi.org/10.1080/00043079.2008.10786399.

32 Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, p. 243.

33 Gordon Bendersky, ‘Remarks on Raphael’s “Transfiguration”’, *Notes in the History of Art*, 14:4 (1995), 18–25 (p. 24), https://doi.org/10.1086/sou.14.4.23205609.

34 See N. G. Mashkovtsev, ‘Istoriia portreta Gogolia’, in Gogol, *N. V. Gogol*: *materialy i issledovaniia*, 2 vols (Moscow; Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo AN SSSR, 1936), II, pp. 407–22; Vahan D. Barooshian, *The Art of Liberation: Alexander A. Ivanov* (New York: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 34–42; Simon
Karlinsky, *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 197–201.

35 Bayard, ‘Anticipatory Plagiarism’, p. 233.

36 Thus ‘instead of a speaker’s position, we get a speaker’s pose’. Iu. N. Tynianov, *Poetika. Istoriia literatury. Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), p. 310.

37 F. M. Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 30 tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1972), III, p. 146. Tynianov, *Poetika*, pp. 212–26.