

How Russian peasants first read the Russian classics. The case of Nikolai Gogol¹

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What is the study of the reception of a great author by and within a social group? On the one hand, a discourse on the conditions of the reception, which may be described in terms of domination-submission, at least referring to what is perceived. On the other, a discourse on the specific stylistic features of certain textual structures and on the possible tactics of appropriation of those structures by the group. We intend, for one thing, to shed light on the influences and the pressures suffered by those who take possession of somebody else's discourse. At the same time, we wish to highlight the resistance, the censorship and the difference in meaning between "what is proposed by the text and what is made of it by the reader"².

In studying the reception of a classic Russian author such as Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852) by the peasant world, we will draw from two types of sources: 1) some re-elaborated versions of Gogol's works made by popular authors for a peasant audience in the 1880s; 2) the transcriptions of the verbal reactions of groups of peasants during the reading of Gogol's texts, recorded by village schoolmasters in that period. In both cases, we are dealing with representations of peasant readings as elaborated by educated observers. For this reason, it will be essential to pay special attention not so much to the system of values reflected in these sources as to the modalities of appropriation of texts that these sources presuppose. We believe, indeed, that only by identifying the concrete ways in which texts were accessed and read by Russian peasants in the late nineteenth century, as well as highlighting the pressures exercised on them in this process, can we understand how they actually read Gogol's works. As Roger Chartier pointed out, what characterises popular culture is not necessarily the repertoire of texts used, nor the norms and values which they reflect, but a specific way of appropriating and using those texts and norms³.

1. Which Gogol?

1.1 When Nikolai Gogol died, in 1852, the [printing rights](#)³⁶ of his works passed on to his heirs, who kept them until the mid-1880s, when they surrendered them to the Salavey publishers. In those thirty years, the situation of Russia's publishing industry had radically changed. Following the reform of public education of 1864 and the creation of thousands of village schools in the remotest Russian country areas, a new figure had emerged on the publishing scene: the peasant reader⁴. Starting from the 1870s, village schools and libraries began to increasingly request manuals and reading books. A growing number of countryside

¹This article is the result of the re-elaboration of a research paper published in Russian a few years ago, now featuring new materials and a novel interpretation. See Rebecchini 2001: 508-525.

²Chartier 1995: 92. Chartier, here, employs the concept of reading proposed by Michel de Certeau in De Certeau 1990: XLIX.

³Chartier 1995: 89.

⁴Brooks 1981: 242-278; Brooks 1985: 35-58.

readers started to look for new, enticing and entertaining stories to read, alongside religious texts. From that moment, the great traditional publishers, the public institutions in charge of spreading literacy and the new commercial publishers started a fight to secure the new peasant readers⁵.

The first low-cost editions of Gogol's works appeared in the collections of traditional publishers in the 1880s. They were first published by the Salaevy brothers in Moscow, then in the "Popular editions" by Vladimir Dumnov and finally, in the early 1890s, by the great publisher Adolf Marks⁶. Both Dumnov and Marks decided to focus on the Ukrainian stories from Gogol's first two collections, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831-1832) and *Mirgorod* (1835), the latter also including the historical novel "TarasBulba". These stories, set in the Ukrainian peasant world, rich in fantastic elements (devils, witches, creatures from the Slavic folklore), clearly seemed particularly suited to the new peasant readers from the perspective of traditional publishers. The stories are often told by fictitious popular narrators (Rudy Panko the beekeeper, Foma Grigorevich the sexton, etc.), who use colloquial language and deal with situations easily recognisable by peasant readers (the evenings in the typical Little Russia farms). Himself hailing from Little Russia (modern-day Ukraine), Gogol had written those tales drawing from the repertoire of legends and folklore of his homeland, and reworking them in a style that is only apparently popular. In fact, it is literarily complex, rich in parenthetical statements, metaphors, long similes and lyrical descriptions of nature. Initially, therefore, these works were not meant to address popular readers. In the 1880s, after years of circulating inside thick and expensive volumes or collections addressing an educated readership, Gogol's texts started circulating as small booklets of only a few pages length, aimed at finding popular readers. Stories like "St. John's Eve", "A May Night", "The Lost Letter", "Christmas Eve", "A Terrible Vengeance", "A Bewitched Place", "Vii", thus appeared in little volumes that were significantly less expensive than in the previous decades (Marks put them on the market at the price of 10-20 kopecks)⁷.

Apart from the Ukrainian stories, Dumnov and Marks only added to their publications two of the Petersburg tales – "The Nose"(1836) and "The Overcoat" (1842) – and one comedy – *The General Inspector* (1836). At the end of the 19th century, thus, the works by Gogol that had reached the peasant world were mostly his Ukrainian stories. The publishers' choice almost completely excluded the Gogol that describes the world of Russian landowners. Indeed, not only *Dead Souls* (1842), too long and too expensive for peasant readers, had never had a popular edition, but neither had shorter stories about landowners like "Ivan Shpon'ka and his Auntie" (1832)(the only *Evenings* tale to have been excluded by the publishers), "How the two Ivans Quarreled" (1834) and "The Old World Landowners" (1835). Apparently, traditional publishers must have considered the Gogol that satirically portrayed the Russian landowners either politically dangerous or, more simply, of little interest for peasants. Similarly, the popular reader could only know but little of the 'depraved' Petersburg world described by Gogol. He had had a glimpse of it in the tales "The Nose" and "The Overcoat", but he had been denied access to the erotic-gallant adventures of the two Petersburg lads described in "Nevsky Prospect" (1835), to the artistic obsessions of the painter depicted in "The Portrait" (1842), and to the madness of the poor clerk of "Diary of a Madman" (1835).

Gogol was for the people, at the end of the 19th century, almost exclusively the creator of the fantastic and superstitious world of the Ukrainian and Cossack tales of *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* and *Mirgorod*. And his work seems even more "mutilated" in the editions of St Petersburg's and Moscow's Committees on literacy, who had also excluded the author's two most politically 'dangerous' works: "the Overcoat" and *The General Inspector*. After many years of work, they had only managed to publish, at the cheap price of 10 kopecks,

⁵Cf. Brooks 1985.

⁶Moeller-Sally 2002: 86-89.

⁷*Ezhegodnik* 1895: 96-97.

“Taras Bulba” (1874), “The Fair at Sorocintsi” (1882), “A May Night” (1884) and “Christmas Eve” (1884)⁸.

1.2 Peasant access to these editions was, moreover, rather difficult. The main obstacle was the competition of a large number of new commercial publishers who, attracted by the prospective earnings of the new market, had quickly emerged with the intent to address their production exclusively to the new popular audience⁹. These publishers, to meet the great demand for books coming from the countryside, had rapidly created catalogues with a rich repertoire of works, traditionally called *lubochnaia literatura*, which mainly included titles not subject to copyrights. Their production, corresponding more or less to the English chapbooks or the French Bibliothèque bleue, could be recognised from a few external features: the limited number of pages (from 36 to a little more than one hundred), the small format, the covers featuring flashy illustrations and garish colours. Especially, these booklets caught the peasants’ eye due to their very cheap prices. This had caused this kind of books to literally flood the Russian countryside. In 1892 alone, the twelve main publishers dealing in colportage literature published, excluding manuals and calendars, 403 titles, printing almost 4 million copies¹⁰. About half of these were literary works, mainly fiction. Only two years after, the annual production had already reached 5.5 million copies¹¹. In the Russian countryside, *lubochnaia literatura* titles almost always managed to outsell the great publishers’ popular collections, mainly for their cheap prices of between 1.5 and 8 kopecks, while Marks’s popular editions or those of other traditional publishers cost between 10 and 40 kopecks¹². Moreover, colportage publishers could count on a widespread distribution network mostly made up of rural pedlars, who took books not only to local fairs but also directly to villages, which traditional publishers often could not reach¹³.

Several studies analyse the repertoire of the Russian *lubochnaia literatura*¹⁴. The most common genres and subjects do not seem to differ much from those of other European colportage literatures, like the French Bibliothèque bleue¹⁵. Alongside hagiographies and the copious spiritual literature, there are various chivalric romances with fantastic and fairy-tale-like elements, like the famous adventures of *Bova Korolevich* and *Eruslan Lazarevich*. Many are also the stories full of romantic adventures, sometimes even erotic, like the very popular *The story of the adventures of the English Lord Georg*. There were stories of robbers, scary and superstitious tales, with creepy titles such as *A night with Satan*. And many were, indeed, the historical novels, like the famous *The Battle of the Russians with the Kabardinians*, and the comical and satirical tales. What mostly distinguishes the editions of the Russian *lubochnaia literatura* compared to, for instance, the Bibliothèque bleue is the absence of an explicit moralising intent on the publishers’ part, who seemed, in Russia, more interested in their own profits than in ideological or religious orthodoxy, so much so that they also published and mass spread the moralistic booklets by Tolstoy the “heretic”¹⁶.

However, a significant aspect of this phenomenon, which developed later in Russia than in other European countries, is perhaps that here, alongside tales that had circulated for centuries and remakes of works by minor early nineteenth-century authors, there were also many versions of texts by modern Russian classics like Pushkin, Gogol and Lermontov and by great contemporary authors such as Turgenev, Ostrovsky, Lev Tolstoy. The fact that they

⁸*Čto čitat’ narodu?* 1888: 56-59. In the same period, the Ministry of Education officially allowed the texts “Taras Bulba”, “A May Night”, “Christmas Eve”, “The Overcoat” to be owned by school villages libraries. Cf. *Ezhegodnik* 1895: 97.

⁹Brooks 1985: 91-100.

¹⁰Speranskij 1902: 155-156.

¹¹Speranskij 1902: 158.

¹²Speranskij 1902: 159.

¹³Brooks 1985: 101-108.

¹⁴Among the most recent studies, see Bljum 1981: 94-114; Brooks 1985: 166-294; Reitblat 2009: 146-168.

¹⁵Chartier 1987: 247-270.

¹⁶Dinershtein 1978: 70-97.

were mostly remakes usually protected publishers from accusations of plagiarism. Of these versions, the majority were precisely those taken from Gogol's works which, among nineteenth-century Russian classic authors, were the most copied and re-elaborated by the professional copyist-writers (*lubochnik*) writing *lubochnaia literatura*.¹⁷

Gogol's repertoire of texts that ends up in the "sea of stories" of the *lubochnaia literatura* does not differ much from the one selected by the traditional publishers. This regards especially the tales from the first two collections. Between 1884 and 1900, their catalogues feature as many as seven versions, each with a different title, of "Taras Bulba", and three reworkings of "Christmas Eve", "A Terrible Vengeance", and "Vii". The words of one of the main *lubochnaia literatura* publishers, Ivan Sytin, testify to how the works to be circulated in the countryside were selected.

One of our writers (from the Nikolskaya Street) comes to visit me and brings me a manuscript titled *The Terrible Sorcerer*. I take a look at the manuscript and notice that it is really well written and, especially, it is really thrilling. So thrilling as to make one's skin crawl. Well, think I, this story will surely be a best-seller. I bought the manuscript, paid the author five roubles and sent it for print. I had 30,000 copies printed. And you know what? It sold like hot cakes! They liked it oh so much that I immediately had another 60,000 copies printed¹⁸.

Only after the second reprint did Sytin realise that it was a reworking of Gogol's "A Terrible Vengeance". So he asked one of his assistants for details:

"But what did you do?" - I asked. "Well, we had it remade..." - "What do you mean, remade?" - "Very easy: we asked them to re-write it their own way, to change the characters' names, to add or take off something. Then we printed it and now it is sold under the title *The Terrible Sorcerer, or the Bloody Revenge*"¹⁹.

This testimony is perhaps speciously naïve. It is however interesting to see the way in which Sytin evaluates the manuscript submitted to him. He is only looking for "exciting" elements that could "give his readers the creeps". The *lubochnaia literatura* publishers knew their public's tastes well. Some of them, like Sytin and the Gubanov brothers, who published Gogol's remakes, were the children of peasants and had themselves started out as pedlars or bookshop assistants. To Sytin it had been enough to detect the presence of "exciting" elements to have 90,000 copies of the story printed in no time, while Dumnov had only printed 16,000 copies of his two different editions of the original²⁰. Moreover, successful *lubochnaia literatura* titles were reprinted yearly in similar numbers. It is no surprise, therefore, that books like *The Terrible Sorcerer* (the re-elaboration of "A Terrible Vengeance"), *Egor Urvan* (from "Taras Bulba"), *Three Nights by a Coffin* (from "Vii") and *Vakula the blacksmith* (from "Christmas Eve") were better known and more popular, in peasant settings, than Gogol's originals. Thus, as Gogol's works penetrated peasant culture, they got increasingly lost in the "sea of stories" of the *lubochnaia literatura*. Devoid of their author's name and sporting more attractive titles, flashy covers and plots shortened and watered-down by the copyists from Nikolskaya Street, the great writer's works progressively lost their original features and conformed to the canon of the *lubochnaia literatura*.

The testimony of a mediocre peasant poet of the period, G.I. Shpilev, can help us understand against what literary background Gogol's works were read. Shpilev recalls the moment in which he had started reading Gogol's books in his village as a young man:

¹⁷See Speranskii 1902: 151-183. Speranskii, however, does not use the whole corpus of Gogolian remakes that we considered here.

¹⁸Prugavin 1890: 177.

¹⁹*Ibidem*.

²⁰Moeller-Sally 2002: 91.

I used to read everything that passed through my hands, but especially the *lubochnye* editions, like *Bova Korolevich*, *Eruslan Lazarevich*, *The Battle of the Russians with the Kabardinians* and so on. I read the stories of Ilja Muromec and Taras Bulba in *lubochnye* editions and versions. I enjoyed *Taras Bulba* very much, and this led me, years after, to read Gogol's original too²¹.

Shpilev only reads Gogol's original later on, when he has a deeper culture and has assimilated the canon of high literature. At the beginning, Shpilev, just like most peasants, who knew nothing about Gogol and did not find his name on the books, is influenced in his reception of Gogol's works by the aesthetic norms of the best known *lubochnaia literatura* texts, like *The Adventures of Bova Korolevich*, *Eruslan Lazarevich* or *The Battle of the Russians with the Kabardins*. Differently from the urban popular classes, who were more conscious of the existence of an author behind a book's pages, and more focused on his reputation, the peasant public cared for the story, not for the author²². For example, I.I. Naumov, a peasant from the Vjatka Governorate, writes, at the end of the century, that "for the peasants in our village, who can barely read, what matters is the stories, not the one who wrote them"²³. Also in the case of Pushkin's books, which started circulating at a low price from the late 1880s, the majority of the peasants did not have the faintest idea of who the author was: they often knew his stories, but did not know who had written them. One peasant wrote about Pushkin that "even if many read his works, nobody cares for who wrote what, what matters is that it should be interesting"²⁴.

In an environment in which works mostly circulate anonymously, and a reader does not have the chance to connect texts by the same author, the quantity factor – the number of printed copies of a given work – has a significant influence in creating a literary canon and an aesthetic model. In the countryside, the most widespread works establish the aesthetic parameters for the reception of the 'new' works. So it was that most peasants read the historical novel *Taras Bulba* starting from the model of historical narrations such as *The Battle of the Russians and the Kabardins* or the chivalric tales of *Bova Korolevich* or *Eruslan Lazarevich*. Stories by Gogol like "A Terrible Vengeance" and "Vii" were interpreted by peasants according to the norms established by the numerous horror stories common in the *lubochnaia literatura*, like *A night with Satan*. And Gogol's wonderful comical and fairy-tale-like story "Christmas Eve" was received against the background of the humorous tales and stories that were best known by peasants.

2. Re-writing Gogol

2.1 It may be useful to investigate how the *lubochnaia literatura* authors worked on Gogol's texts. What did they cut? What did they change? And, especially, what did they add in order to get closer to their public's tastes? Before dealing with these issues, though, let us see who the "authors" of these popular booklets were and what position they occupied in the literary field.

They were often young men coming from the countryside who, once they had received some basic education at a village school, moved to the city to look for work. As they could not find better occupations, they ended up working for the popular literature printers near the great publishing centres of Russia, like Moscow's Nikolskaya Street, Petersburg's

²¹*Sovremennye raboche-krestianskie poety* 1925: 3-4.

²²See Meilakh 1967: 105 and Brooks 1985: 34.

²³Meilakh 1967: 106

²⁴Meilakh 1967:105.

Apraksin dvor, or Nizhnii Novgorod's great Makar fair. It was in these places that, copying and adapting works that already circulated, and sometimes writing autonomously, they created the *lubochnaia literatura* booklets²⁵.

This was the case with Ivan Ivin, perhaps the most prolific *lubochnaia literatura* author, who fathered some of Gogol's remakes. Ivin, after leaving his village of Staraia Tiaga in the late 1860s, where he had learnt to read and write, settled down in Moscow. There he started working first for some textile factories, then at a printing press as a composer of captions for popular prints and, finally, he became the author of numerous booklets for peasants²⁶. Receiving a very low pay of between 2 and 5 roubles per printed page (while a moderately known author usually made between 50 and 100 roubles), Ivin, like many other *lubochniki*, was obliged to produce a great number of texts in a very short time. He wrote in his memoirs:

I wrote a lot, at a forced pace, in a hurry, without breaks, sometimes for more than 18 hours a day. I wrote until I was physically and mentally exhausted, until my head ached and I felt nauseated. And, in spite of this, I did not earn more than 20 roubles a month. They paid me little, from 2 to 3 roubles per 1 printed page [DR: about 36 pages], and only after some years did I start to get 5 and eventually even 10 roubles. The *lubochnaia literatura* publishers never considered my work as to be worth more than that.... Only the idea that I wrote for the people, for my peasant brothers, consoled me.²⁷

Despite his forced working pace, Ivin was often obliged by lack of money to go back to his village during the summer, to work the land: "Work was discontinuous. Sometimes it stopped, especially in the summer. But I, for the whole summer, every year, would go back to my village and work there as a peasant"²⁸. In this way, Ivin kept in contact with the world he came from.

Not all the *lubochnaia literatura* authors came from the countryside. Sometimes, like in the cases of V. Suvorov and V. Lunin, two other well-known Nikolskaya Street authors, they were writers coming from the low urban classes or the low army ranks. At any rate, although they knew the interests of peasant readers, who were flocking to the cities in those decades, these authors, as they lived in cities, represented the urban culture more than they did the peasant one. The economic and cultural capital that they had accumulated by living in town allowed them to access the original works of authors who were considered classics, like Pushkin and Gogol, and to transform them according to their public's tastes²⁹. At the same time, the poverty of their cultural background obliged them to depend almost entirely on high culture. The very way in which they copied and remade texts symbolically represented their ambivalent position in the process of cultural mediating between the city and the countryside. On the one hand, that work made them feel concretely submitted to publishers and high culture, which imposed on them tight deadlines and low pays. On the other, they could count on a dominating position in respect to their peasant readers, for whom they chose, edited and adapted the works they thought the most suitable for them. Finally, the anonymity of their work could offer them the secret pleasure of freely manipulating texts by authors that were considered untouchable in high culture, the great classics of Russian literature.

2.2 Therefore, when analysing the changes made to original works by the *lubochniki*, several factors need to be considered. Firstly, *lubochniki* usually had to write enough to reach a limited number of pages – from 36 to 108 – so that the booklet could be inexpensive for the publisher, and thus for readers. Furthermore, they often had to change a certain number of elements in the text, like the title, the names of the characters, sometimes the beginning, so that the original may not be easily recognised, otherwise they might have been accused of

²⁵On *lubochnaia literatura* authors, see Brooks 1985: 80-91 and Reitblat 2009: 151-156.

²⁶See Reitblat 1992: 392-393.

²⁷Ivin 1990: 371-372.

²⁸*Ibidem*.

²⁹On the canonisation of Pushkin and Gogol as classics of Russian literature during the 1880's, see Levitt 1989 and Moeller-Sally 2002.

plagiarism³⁰. Sometimes they re-wrote a text entirely in a coarser and more popular style. Other times they added episodes they had invented at the beginning and at the end of the text. Other times, finally, a text would be reprinted in a version substantially identical to the original, which proves how little attention authorities paid to *lubochnaia literatura* editions.

In general, the main changes made by popular writers to Gogol's texts regard: a) the characters' personalities; b) the structure of the plot; c) the style of the narration (lexicon, syntax, metaphors, similes and other rhetorical devices).

Gogol's "TarasBulba", for example, opens with a very lively scene: Taras the old Cossack warmly welcomes home his sons Ostap and Andrej, returning from the seminar, and jokingly starts to fight with one of them. The scene features great joy and spontaneity and it leaves a mark on the novel's entire representation of the Cossack world. In popular remakes, although they reported various details of the scene, sometimes using Gogol's very sentences, *lubochniki* totally change the characters' personalities. In one version, for example, Taras Bulba no longer is the joyful and cheerful Cossack of the original, but a sensitive and emotional figure:

"Well, Danil give me a kiss, and you too Peter," the little old man's voice started trembling. He did not want it to show, so he started speaking loudly. But, involuntarily, a tear appeared in his eye³¹.

In another remake, the arrival of the two boys was preceded by a family life scene in which Taras and his wife anxiously await the return of their children. Here the protagonist seems worried and "deep in thought", and the high spirited scene of the mock fight with his son is replaced by another episode³². In *Egor Urvan*, Taras's happy and joking character is changed even more radically. Taras even becomes threatening and evil, violently swears at his son Andrej, who hesitates to follow him into the Cossack warriors' camp because he is in love: "I'll strangle you with my own hands", he screams at him³³. In this new context the description of the mock fight with the children is totally cut.

In most popular versions, Andrej, Taras's younger son, also undergoes significant changes in both his appearance and character. He who was a tall and strong young man in the original is depicted here as a "slender linden tree", similar to "a shy Cossack beauty"³⁴; now he totally looks like his mother, who has a docile and sentimental nature³⁵. In two more booklets he becomes melancholic, "sad and pensive"³⁶.

The most immediate explanation for these changes is that, by emphasising the sentimental elements in Gogol's work, popular writers wanted to satisfy their public's tastes. There can be another reason, though, connected with the way popular writers worked. Before proceeding with the remake, the popular writer would usually read the entire work he was drawing from. In re-writing it, he would tend to remodel the characters right from the start, based on what he knew about the final outcome of his adventures. So it happened that, in light of his son Andrej's betrayal and the tragic ending, Taras's figure became, in the remakes, restless, worried or even threatening his son right from beginning, while Andrej also seemed sad and melancholic from the start. A first effect of the re-writing is thus the disappearance of the characters' psychology. In contrast to the original, in which they undergo some psychological evolution, in the remakes this is missing: like in folklore tales, the characters are

³⁰According to the Russian law of the time, the crime of plagiarism did not apply if the author used different words from the original text, as often was the case with popular booklets. If, on the other hand, the author used the same words, he could not appropriate more than one third of the original. That norm, however, was often ignored by the *lubochniki*. See *Svod zakonov* 1887: 1. On the subject of copyright on remakes and adaptations, see Shershenevich 1891: 277-291.

³¹*Taras Bulba, ataman zaporozhtsev* 1891: 20-21.

³²*Taras Bulba, ili Zaporozhskaia sech'* 1892: 4 and 11-14.

³³*Egor Urvan* 1899: 34.

³⁴*Taras Bulba, ataman zaporozhtsev* 1891: 4.

³⁵*Taras Bulba, ili Zaporozhskaia sech'* 1892: 9.

³⁶*Taras Bulba, ili Zaporozhskaia sech'* 1892: 16; *Egor Urvan* 1899: 7.

always the same, unchangeable. And this can be due not so much or not only to the readers' tastes, as to the way the authors composed texts.

The popular author's working method, moreover, also seemed to influence the plot of his works. They tended to organise it following a linear chronological order in which everything was aimed at the story's ending. Most descriptions of nature and of "local colour" disappear. Any kind of lyrical and poetic digression, so typical of Gogol's style, is eliminated. Analepses or flashbacks, which oblige the reader to go back in his mind to establish a prior event in the story, are cut. At the same time, though, and this is to be underlined, there are various prolepses and anticipations, which suggest to the reader what the ending of the story might be.

For example, in some popular remakes of "Christmas Eve", the episodes, masterfully arranged by Gogol into a complex plot of parallel narrative levels, are rearranged by the popular writer according to a chronological order that attempts to make the plot plainer³⁷. In a remake of "A Terrible Vengeance", all the lyrical and suggestive descriptions that Gogol makes of river Dnieper and of the nature of the Carpathians are cut³⁸. In many popular versions of "Taras Bulba", the descriptions of nature and of the Cossack community's daily life are eliminated, while in similar adaptations made by educated authors for popular readers they are kept³⁹.

The inclination to finalise all the parts of the plot in light of the ending is thus a recurring element in popular booklets. It seems to mark not only the writing method of the popular writer but also the way he believed the peasant reader would appropriate the stories. This view is supported by elements not depending on the fact that they were remaking a story. For instance, the appearance of continuous anticipations, premonitions and presentiments, which were not in the originals, aimed at cutting down the unforeseeable elements in the story as much as possible⁴⁰. The popular writer seems to hint to the reader how the story ends in all possible ways, as if the peasant reader found it difficult to bear the suspense and the uncertainty in the story for long.

The changes made by popular writers, however, do not only consist of cuts and simplifications, but also of additions and developments of original parts. These additions are particularly relevant for this paper because they suggest which elements of the original text the popular writer could enhance in order to satisfy his public's tastes. On the one hand, there is an inclination to make explicit elements that were implicit in the original text. On the other, there is an apparent predisposition to make concrete and defined what in the original was poetically vague and indefinite. This occurs both at the plot level and in the descriptions of the settings and the landscape.

One of the remakes of "A Terrible Vengeance" makes a clear example. Gogol's tale is masterfully designed by juxtaposing scenes that are not connected to each other through explicit narrative links. By suppressing these links, Gogol meant to create a specific prosody and imitate the structure of Ukrainian songs and folkloric verse⁴¹. The popular writer, instead, is preoccupied with filling any space left empty by adding narrative links and connecting episodes⁴². To fill in these 'gaps', he would sometimes draw from elements typical of magic fairy tales: the magic amulet, the enchanted forest, the wild beasts, the fire snake, the enchanted treasure, etc. Other times, he would add erotic elements, like tempting nude girls lying on tiger skins, typical of *lubochnaia literatura* 'classics' like *The Adventures of Milord Georg*⁴³. The popular writer thus seems to definitely prefer the erotic-adventurous element of the original to its poetical-lyrical component, as apparent. For this reason, for example, in this

³⁷*Kuznec Vakula ili dogovor s d'javolom* 1890; *Kuznec Vakula. Skazka* 1900. See also Speranskii 1902: 173.

³⁸Kassirov 1886: 54 and 57.

³⁹*Taras Bulba v sokrashennom vide* 1885: 20.

⁴⁰See, for instance, the many anticipations and premonitions in *Strashnyi koldun* 1887.

⁴¹Gogol 1940: 546.

⁴²*Strashnyi koldun* 1887: 44-51.

⁴³*Strashnyi koldun* 1887: 96-110.

remake, as well as in another re-elaboration of “A Terrible Vengeance”, popular authors eliminate the popular songs that Gogol had included in his tale⁴⁴.

The tendency to make the images that Gogol purposely left vague and poetically indefinite concrete is present in many remakes and in particular in a scene of “A Terrible Vengeance”: the one depicting the wizard’s sorceries in his tower. In Gogol the entire scene is based on a suggestive fusion of indefinite and shimmering visions in a phantasmagoria that strikes the sight of Danil the hero: coloured lights, vague moving shadows, gusts of wind. In the popular remake these effects were replaced by very concrete objects: the magic book, furniture made of human bones, skulls, an owl, a cat, vipers, etc⁴⁵. Here the popular writer, instead of cutting or summarising the scene, seems to want to make more concrete the details of a very poetic and evocative scene, which the peasant reader may perhaps have found difficult.

Some of Gogol’s works, like “Christmas Eve”, for their complex parallel narrative levels and for the whimsical pace of the story, make it particularly difficult to re-organise the plot. In this case, the popular authors’ interventions mostly focus on style. The changes here mainly occur at the syntactic and lexical levels. On the one hand, we observe a radical simplification of periods by suppressing metaphors and similes, reducing asides and digressions, eliminating various subordinates. In other words, what disappears is all the joyful overabundance, typical of Gogol’s style, which, as Nabokov underlines, generates, with its multiple subordinates and hypertrophic similes, a myriad of “peripheral characters engendered by the subordinate clauses of its various metaphors, comparisons and lyrical outbursts”⁴⁶. On the other, in the remakes the lexicon is definitely of a lower level and, next to sentences from the original, paraphrases written in colloquial and street language also appear. Here, as in other remakes, the popular writer tends to fragment Gogol’s text into shorter chapters, providing them with titles summarising their content, and so trying to make it easier for their readers to understand the story. The new pace of Gogol’s text thus seems to imply a reader who reads with difficulty and who, unable to memorise large chunks of plot in his memory, prefers short chapters to long paragraphs, simple sentences to syntactically more articulated periods⁴⁷.

3. The response of the peasant village

3.1 So far we have highlighted the many factors that have somehow prevented peasants from fully appreciating the beauty of Gogol’s work: the small number of titles published; the peasants’ little awareness of the notion of authorship; the influence of aesthetic parameters of more popular *lubochnaja literatura* books; the anonymity of many Gogolian remakes; the cuts and changes made by the professional copyist-writers to the original texts. This, however, must not make one believe that the beauty of Gogol’s works was missed. The first one in Russia to insist on the Russian peasants’ marked sense of the aesthetic was Lev Tolstoy, in the 1860s. In the school of his Iasnaia poliana estate, testing his peasants’ ability to understand and write literature, Tolstoy had provocatively concluded that two of them had much more talent than he did⁴⁸. However, when reading Gogol’s “Christmas Eve” and “Viš” with them, Tolstoy was forced to admit that that style did not suit a peasant public at all: “The rich variety of colours, the fantastic element and the whimsical nature of Gogol’s narrative

⁴⁴Kassirov 1886: 58.

⁴⁵*Strashnyi koldun* 1887: 76-77.

⁴⁶Nabokov 1981: 22.

⁴⁷Cf. the similar trend in the Bibliothèque bleue in Chartier 1987: 247-270.

⁴⁸Tolstoy 1936: 308.

structures were the opposite of what they needed”, he had concluded⁴⁹. Tolstoy had highlighted the difficulty experienced by peasants in reading those stories, but had cleverly avoided defining them misunderstandings:

It is easy to say “he has not understood”. Isn’t it evident how many different things can simultaneously be understood when reading a book? A pupil can understand but two or three words per sentence, but he can grasp a delicate nuance of a thought or the relationship that that thought has with the preceding one. You, the master, insist on a particular aspect of understanding, but he does not at all need what you are striving to explain to him. Sometimes the peasant has understood, but cannot prove it to you, and at the same time he has confusingly grasped and received something else that is to him much more useful and important⁵⁰.

It is precisely their apparent misunderstandings that it is necessary to focus on when investigating how peasants read the Russian classics.

About twenty years after Tolstoy’s experiments, in the 1880s, a book titled *Čto čitat’ narodu? (What to read to the people?)* was published in Russia.⁵¹ This is a three-volume study collecting thousands of opinions and reactions of peasants and people from the low urban classes to the reading of Russian literary works. This very experimental study was born of an animated populist debate on the issue of popular education. It meant to answer the question of whether the people were able to understand the Russian classics, or they required the creation of a specific type of literature. The three volumes resulted from the collective work of dozens and dozens Sunday and village school masters scattered in various Russian governorates, especially in southern Russia. As the introduction shows, the authors initially only wanted to provide village schoolmasters and librarians with a reference tool, but over the time their work acquired wider scientific purposes: to record the reaction of various representatives of the people (peasants, low urban classes; men and women; adults and children) to the reading of different ‘high’ literature texts⁵². For this reason, authors intentionally decided to influence listeners as little as possible, and to record even the most original, contradictory and unexpected (for them) reactions⁵³. The opinions of the peasants – of whom they recorded the name, age and level of education – were carefully noted down in notepads, or directly in the books, both during public collective readings and in classroom readings in village schools. In some cases, the teachers would transcribe the audience’s exclamations and comments during and after the public reading. In other cases, they asked the participants to repeat the story they had been hearing, or to answer some questions in writing.

This is therefore a deeply different source from the remakes written by popular copyist-authors. Firstly, they are documents written by intellectuals and addressing intellectuals. The same premises on which *Čto čitat’ narodu?* is based – to verify whether the great Russian authors could be understood by popular readers – reveal a strategy aimed at involving the people in that process of ‘canonisation of the classics’ that was seen by some intellectuals as a possible way to secularise Russian society⁵⁴. Indeed, their teaching position alone implicitly placed those intellectuals in a dominant position compared to the peasant audience. Secondly, popular remakes are literary texts, whereas these are written records of oral exchanges. Even if the teachers reported all the peasants’ opinions, even if they noted down every word literally, it is still an intellectual’s representation of peasant readings, at least in that teachers could only record those words, gestures and reactions of the peasants that the teachers themselves could somehow recognise and understand. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to compare the conclusions drawn from so different sources. In particular, it is

⁴⁹Tolstoy 1936: 59.

⁵⁰Tolstoy 1936: 63

⁵¹*Čto čitat’ narodu?* 1884-1906. On this study, see. Vodovozov 1886: 425-440; An...skij 1894 : 117-136; Bank 1969: 70-122.

⁵²*Čto čitat’ narodu?* 1888: IV-VII.

⁵³*Čto čitat’ narodu?* 1888: VII.

⁵⁴Brooks 1981a:315-334; Moeller-Sally 2002.

necessary to pay specific attention to what the educated observers found unclear, strange or contradictory in the peasants' reactions. It is indispensable to highlight what, in their opinion, is little comprehensible to peasants in Gogol's works, i.e. those passages in the text that caused uncertainty, resistance, misunderstandings.

3.2 *Chto chitat' narodu?* reports various reactions to and comments about the reading of stories from *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* and from *Mirgorod*⁵⁵. Generally speaking, these observers, differently from Tolstoy, tend to conclude that Gogol's works proved comprehensible and interesting for the peasants. In fact, the reactions they reported included "misunderstandings" that are worth investigating.

In the collective reading of "A Terrible Vengeance", some of the trends emerged in popular remakes are confirmed. During the reading, for instance, peasants decidedly tended to guess, with continuous hypotheses and suppositions, how the story went on⁵⁶. This tendency, which naturally occurs with every reader, was especially strong here, and is partly explained by the special narrative structure employed by Gogol. Wolfgang Iser notices how "one common means of intensifying the reader's imaginative activity is suddenly to cut to new new characters or even to different plot-lines, so that the reader is forced to try to find connections between the hitherto familiar story and the new, unforeseeable situation [...].The temporary withholding of information acts as a stimulus"⁵⁷. In fact, as said, in "A Terrible Vengeance" the plot is voluntarily divided into various scenes not connected by explicit narrative links. To an educated reader it would be clear that this is a poetic device willingly employed by the author. In the peasants' view, however, those 'jumps' from one scene to another could be considered not an intentional poetic device but a sort of withdrawal of narrative information, a gap in the narration, which favoured hypotheses all aimed at guessing the plot. Their reactions, therefore, showed a difference between the sense meant by the author and the sense that the text produced on the peasants.

Another indication of how their reaction was mostly based on the plot comes from their response to the descriptions of nature in "A Terrible Vengeance". Here Gogol, after describing the death of Danil the Cossack and the fate of his wife Catherine left alone with their young son Ivan, starts a new scene with a famous description of the river Dnepr'. Using a long simile, the writer compares the sound of the river's stormy waves, crashing against the banks, to the sobs of a Cossack mother abandoned by her son who went to war:

But when dark blue storm-clouds pile in the sky, the dark forest totters to its roots, the oaks creak, and the lightning, zigzagging through the clouds, suddenly lights up the whole world, terrible then is the Dnieper. Then its mountainous billows roar and fling themselves against the hills, and flashing and moaning rush back and wail and lament in the distance. So an old mother laments as she lets her Cossack son go to war. Bold and reckless, he rides his black steed, arms akimbo and jaunty cap on one side, while she, sobbing, runs after him, seizes him by the stirrup, catches the bridle, and wrings her hands over him, shedding bitter tears...⁵⁸.

Precisely at this point in the text, a peasant exclaimed, self-confidently:

It's Ivan! He's grown now and he's leaving his mother, Catherine!⁵⁹

The peasant thus interprets the simile referred to the landscape as an element of the plot. The teacher observes that none of the listeners makes any objections, everybody stays silent, and

⁵⁵*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 479-494.

⁵⁶*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 485.

⁵⁷Iser 1978: 192.

⁵⁸Gogol 1960: 217.

⁵⁹*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 485.

she is forced to explain to them that it referred to the Dnepr' and not to Ivan. The teacher laconically concludes: "The descriptions of the beauty of the Dnepr' have not been understood"⁶⁰.

A similar reaction happened during the reading of "The Fair of Sorochintsy". After having described the protagonist, Cherevik, his wife and his pretty daughter Parashka riding on a wagon to the fair, Gogol introduces, in a highly metaphorical language, a colourful description of the river Psel along which the three are travelling. During the reading of this passage, the observer noticed that the peasants, "having lost track of the fact that it referred to the river, did not understand the description of its beauty and thought it all referred to the pretty girl"⁶¹. Here, too, it is interesting to notice how the misunderstanding took place: the metaphorical passage on the river is understood by the peasants as referring to the plot. In this setting, even one word unknown to them because it was literary and non-Slavic – "landschaft" (landscape) – is interpreted very concretely, as if it were the name of a character. The peasants reacted similarly to the reading of "A May Night" when, hearing the Gogolian metaphor "*landschaft spit*" ("the landscape is sleeping"), they, forgetting the context, had thought "landschaft" to be the name of a new character⁶². Thus, interpreting Gogol's metaphoric language literally, the peasants involuntarily re-people Gogolian prose with that very same swarming crowd of peripheral characters and secondary figures that continuously glimpse in the long Gogolian similes and that popular authors had meant to eliminate in their remakes.

In both the cases described, the peasants' misunderstandings were somehow elicited by the Gogolian text, with its long similes, its strongly metaphorical language, and the personification of the landscape, but it is interesting how the peasants overcame the difficulty posed by the text. They understood the lyrical, metaphorical and descriptive elements of the text as part of the plot, seeing them as possible developments of the story.

3.3. The critic M.I. Sluchovskii in *Kniga i derevnia (The book and the peasant village)* has noticed "the peasants' inclination to concreteness, to vividly and realistically imagining even pictures unfamiliar to them"⁶³. In the peasants' reactions to the readings of these Gogol tales, this statement seems to be confirmed both as regards the settings and the characters, and the narrator's figure.

We have already seen how, in the popular remake of "A Terrible Vengeance", in the scene in which the protagonist, Danil, observed the wizard's sorceries as he evoked Catherine's soul in his tower, the popular copyist-writer tends to replace Gogol's poetically undefined visions with real objects (the skulls, the owl, the cat, the snakes, etc.). During a public reading of this very scene, a peasant woman exclaims: "Who's being called? Catherine's sister?" she asked. "Not her sister, her soul", somebody answered in a low voice⁶⁴. Similarly, while reading "The Overcoat", when at the end of the story, at a crucial moment, the ghost of the poor copy clerk Akaky Akakievich appears, stealing the coat from the high ranking officer who had insulted and mistreated him, the spirit is taken by the peasants for a real, living robber. The observer comments that "nobody not even for a minute suspected that it could be Akaky Akakievich returning from the other world; everybody explained the facts in totally concrete ways"⁶⁵. A key moment for the ideal payback of Gogol's poor hero is misunderstood, here, for some very real and violent social revenge by the robber against the "Important Personage".

⁶⁰*Ibidem*.

⁶¹*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1888: 56.

⁶²*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1888: 60.

⁶³Sluchovskij 1928: 138.

⁶⁴*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 485.

⁶⁵*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889:492.

There could be different reasons for these misunderstandings. However, as already seen in popular writers' remakes, here, too, the peasant public find it difficult to grasp abstract and indefinite figures and images. At the same time, they tend to replace them with more concrete entities. The peasants did not have problems dealing with the devil's image: "he is described in the scriptures and in our church, above the northern door, is painted as if he were alive!", they had exclaimed when faced with the devil in "St. John's Eve"⁶⁶. They found it more difficult, instead, to imagine Catherine's soul or the ghost of Akaky Akakievich the clerk.

The peasants' reactions to the tales "Vii" and "Christmas Eve" allow us to make some observations on their ability to distinguish between fiction and reality. Russian critics, analysing the peasants' attitude towards literature, have often underlined their difficulty in distinguishing the border between truth and fiction⁶⁷. The historian Rappoport wrote that the popular reader "is not able to distinguish in it what is possible from what is born of fantasy, the fantastic from the real"⁶⁸. More recently, some historians have argued that peasants attributed a different value and truth to texts depending on whether they were reading books with a religious content, which they called "divine books" (*bozhestvennye knigi*) and considered truthful, or secular books with supernatural elements, which they termed "fables" (*skazki*) and deemed void of any moral functions.⁶⁹ The peasants' reactions to the reading of the tale "Vii" can help us to specify and develop this distinction better.

"Vii" is read to a group of peasant men and women in a southern Russia village, Alekseevko, during a particular night, i.e. on the eve of the Nativity of St. John the Baptist. During the reading some peasants, after having laughed at the seminarists' mischiefs at the beginning of the tale, in the middle of the narration are especially struck by the appearance of the diabolical creatures while the protagonist Choma Brut is keeping watch over the corpse of the witch-girl. Hence the many misunderstandings and exclamations: "Is he perhaps dreaming?" observes one peasant. "Probably those diabolical creatures really exist, since they are described", adds another. "They may not even exist, but the people talk about them in this way, and those who can write then describe them" answers back another listener. And, finally, another says: "They certainly did exist in the past"⁷⁰.

A complex and contradictory picture emerges. Some peasants find a legitimation of the real existence of what is being narrated in the written word. The existence of devils is guaranteed by the written word, for writing is, like in "divine books", the depository of truth. Others, instead, seem more sceptical about the narration: literature can be a lie because written texts, like "fables" can be born of men's words. Others, finally, tend to find the story's legitimation in the past. Although the teachers tend to negate the impact of the story on the peasants' superstitiousness, in order to declare Gogol an author suitable for the people, it is clear that it is precisely the final part of the story that stimulates the liveliest reactions among the peasants⁷¹. At the end of the reading, some peasants spontaneously start telling personal tales. The experience of the reading is compared to the experiences lived in the village. One of the peasants, for instance, tells about having once left the village and met, in the middle of the steppe, far from the houses, a dog that had followed him up to a ravine. Then the peasant concludes, unexpectedly: "But where do you think a dog should go, alone, in the middle of the steppe, with no houses, no *izbas*? It's clear, it was a witch!"⁷². The use the peasant makes of Gogol's text is very interesting. Even if he does not interpret the text as necessarily true, he

⁶⁶*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 487. On the reactions of peasant readers to the literary representations of devils, see Rubakin 1895: 145-146 and An...skij 1914: 195-197.

⁶⁷An...skij 1914: 138-145; Sluchovskij 1928: 110-111.

⁶⁸An...skij 1914: 138.

⁶⁹Brooks 1985: 27-34; Rejblat 2009: 138.

⁷⁰*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 480.

⁷¹*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 481.

⁷²*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 480.

projects it against a real life experience, so giving a defined and concrete shape – a witch’s – to the irrational fear he felt in an unfamiliar situation.

The reactions stimulated by the reading of “Christmas Eve” seem to highlight a different attitude toward literary fiction than that experienced during the reading of “Vii”, and a different degree of belief in its truthfulness. In this story too, like in “Vii”, there appear devils and witches, but during the reading the peasants do not have the slightest doubt about the fictional nature of this story. The story stirs continuous laughter but no personal tale. A peasant, satisfied after an evening reading, comments: “It is such a trifle, but one would keep listening to it till the morning light!”⁷³.

The element that appears fundamental in guiding the reception of the text seems to be, rather than the religious or secular subject, the narrative form. In “Vii” the narrating voice, which in the initial parts mostly used a comical register, gradually acquires a serious intonation. With the appearance of diabolic creatures, it also takes up a horrific function, thus creating a strong identification effect and strongly involving listeners emotionally. In “Christmas Eve”, instead, the story about the supernatural creatures is told at the beginning by a narrator who adopts an openly comical intonation. With his hyperboles and exaggerations, he prevents the audience from identifying themselves with the characters and makes the fictional nature of text evident. The person observing the reading concludes that “although they were totally enraptured with the narration and laughing heartily at it, the villagers perfectly understood that it all was nothing but fiction”⁷⁴. A similar reaction was experienced by the peasants who listened to “The Lost Letter”, in which the story was told by a comical narrator, Foma Grigor’evich the sexton. The observer notes: “The sexton’s story about his dead grandfather’s trip to the devils is filled with that joyful humour that, stirring no fear at all, not even among the most superstitious readers, makes them laugh heartily”⁷⁵.

The issue of the narrative form and the narrator’s intonation in a text is crucial when studying a text’s reception by the less literate social groups. For most Russian peasants, still illiterate or semi-literate, the only possible contact with literature was through collective readings⁷⁶. Whether they were collective readings organised by a more educated peasant during winter or summer evenings, or public readings organised by teachers, the narrator’s intonation in the text played an essential role in guiding the peasants’ reception.

In Gogol’s Ukrainian tales, in particular, the fictional narrator Foma Grigor’evich, the sexton, is especially important. With his popular-comical intonation, he appears in most stories from *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*. Thanks to his colloquial narration, to the continuous references to the peasant world, the audience at readings tend not only to imagine the narrator very realistically and personally, speaking to him as if he were real, but also to assign the same fictional value to the stories he tells. So, for example, in a tale like “St. John’s Eve”, in which the main story about a Cossack’s pact with the devil is narrated very impersonally, the intervention of Foma Grigor’evich the sexton at the beginning tends to make the peasants receive it as a comical rather than a horror story. The observer witnessing the reading is surprised to notice that “‘St. John’s Eve’ is received with hilarity rather than fear”⁷⁷. At the beginning of the reading of “A Bewitched Place. A True Story told by the Sexton of the N. Church”, a peasant, as soon as the title is read out, concludes: “There comes the sexton again – it’s a fable, then!”⁷⁸. In this case, the title has been enough to induce comical reception right from the start. Therefore, the narrative form – the narrator’s intonation and the specific distance he keeps from what he narrates – is what determines

⁷³*Chto chitat’ narodu?* 1889: 556. The reactions reported actually refer to a popular remake in which the text is identical to the original, though. About the reactions of workers-readers to the same story, see An...skij 1914: 143-145.

⁷⁴*Chto chitat’ narodu?* 1889: 556.

⁷⁵*Chto chitat’ narodu?* 1889: 487.

⁷⁶Reitblat 2009: 156-157.

⁷⁷*Chto chitat’ narodu?* 1889: 487.

⁷⁸*Chto chitat’ narodu?* 1889: 488.

peasant participation to the text, rather than the subject or the presence of supernatural elements.

Another key element in guiding the reception of Gogol's works is the order in which the tales are made known to the listeners. After having listened to a series of stories narrated by the joyful country sexton Foma Grigor'evic, the peasants are read "The Overcoat". The female reader tells her audience beforehand that in this case the narrator is not the sexton, but the book's very author, Gogol, and shows them a portrait of him. After a few pages, though, a female listener exclaims, surprised, "I can't tell if it's him [*Gogol*] speaking or the sexton"⁷⁹.

The particular narrative form of "The Overcoat" creates the impression of a double narrator, as if there were two of them, separate. The peasant woman's apparent misunderstanding in fact reveals a literary sensitivity worth of a perceptive critic. The narrative form of "The Overcoat", characterised by clerical colloquial language and a bureaucratic lexicon, is very different from that of the peasant tales from *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*. However, the peasants' little familiarity with that world is enough for them to recognise, in the comic and colloquial intonation of its first pages, the sexton from *Evenings*. As first cleverly highlighted by the formalist critic Boris Eikhembbaum in his famous essay "The Structure of Gogol's 'The Overcoat'"⁸⁰, in this tale two different intonations overlap, a comical one and a pathetic-sentimental one. This causes the peasants to identify the first intonation with the sexton's voice, and the second with Gogol's. The observer notes down: "It's very likely that in the listeners' imagination, these two creatures, mythological for them, blended into one and they obviously found it hard to tell where Gogol ended and the sexton began"⁸¹.

In fact, behind the peasants' misunderstandings, we can also see their noticeable sensitivity regarding the narrator's different intonation registers. The peasants' little familiarity with terms and images from the bureaucratic world is compensated here by their sophisticated skill in story listening and in grasping the complex alternation of intonations. The refined phonic texture of Gogol's narration, well described by Eikhembbaum, seems to be grasped with greater precision by the peasant listeners than by the educated readers in their silent readings. The observer notices the perfect change in the mood and reactions of the peasants the moment in which a more pathetic intonation sets in. "Willing to listen to something 'comedy'-like, they were very happy with the first pages, which met all of their expectations. [...] But when it came to the description of Akaky Akakevich's overcoat and the fun his colleagues make of him, the comments stopped immediately"⁸². The peasants, that is, seem to clearly and precisely understand the differently modulated intonation of the narrator, just as it is subtly modulated in Gogol's famous tale.

3.4 *Conclusions*: Concepts like "Unbestimmtheitsstellen", spaces of indefiniteness (R. Ingarden), "blanks" in the text (W. Iser), "the text indefiniteness" (U. Eco) are key concepts that reception theory has long employed to describe the processes of interaction occurring between the reader and the literary work⁸³. Wolfgang Iser, in particular, has powerfully underlined the importance of the interaction between the explicit and the implicit in a text, between the definiteness and indefiniteness of a literary work. If we accept this perspective, what mostly distinguishes, in our eyes, a peasant's perception from an educated reader's is precisely the width and the distribution of what, for him, is indefinite and implicit in a literary text. And, consequently, what distinguishes his perception is the tactics he applies to interpret and overcome these indefinite elements. In Gogol's case, if some elements of the text appear

⁷⁹*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 489.

⁸⁰Eikhembbaum 1963: 383-388.

⁸¹*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 489.

⁸²*Chto chitat' narodu?* 1889: 489-490.

⁸³Ingarden, 1973: 251 and ff.; Iser, 1978: 170-202.; Eco 1979: 52.

like indefinite spaces to the peasant reader, for instance a non-linear plot, a metaphoric speech, a description of nature full of similes, etc. – other elements in the text – the different modulations of the narrator’s intonation, a vivid detail in the description of a character, a setting, an object, etc.– may seem to him much more definite than what they did to an educated reader. Peasants developed various skills and competences both in their daily work (the particular sense of space developed by working in the fields, the practical and concrete sense of details and colours developed by craftsmen, etc.) and in their cultural activities (their competence in evaluating almost exclusively oral texts, the specific sense of pace developed in practicing popular songs and dances, etc.). These they also used in interpreting high literary texts, resulting in aesthetic responses that were very different from those of educated readers. In other words, modalities of thought and expression typical of oral cultures are also applied in approaching, describing and interpreting the fictional world of Russian classics, which then acquires radically different shapes and colours to those that educated readers saw. The way of thinking of oral cultures which, like Walter Ong wrote, tends to be “additive rather than subordinative”, “aggregative rather than analytic”, “redundant”, “close to human life world”, “agonistically toned”, “empathetic rather than objectively distanced”, “situational rather than abstract”, cannot but return a representation of fictional worlds that is totally different, with its well-defined contours and resonant voices, compared to that which written culture has passed down to us⁸⁴.

The image of Gogol’s work returned by peasants is thus not a simply mutilated, rounded down, inadequate image. It is a work in which the descriptions of nature, the metaphors and the similes tend to transform into a myriad of characters and micro-stories that intersect and intertwine in the plot designed by the author in a way that seems to educated observers apparently unexpected and incoherent. The peasants’ Gogol is a Gogol whose poetically vague images, sorceries, ghosts tend to transform into real entities, solid and well-defined objects, into bright-coloured devils like those painted in Russian country churches, or into frightful robbers. It is a Gogol in which the sophisticated phonic and intonational score of the narrative level tends to resonate more clearly and sharply than how it may do to an educated reader, used to reading in silence. The different degree of realisation of these trends naturally depends on different factors, linked to the type of Gogolian texts that reach the Russian countryside (in the last decades of the nineteenth century, especially the Ukrainian tales of the first two collections and some *Petersburg Tales*; from 1902, when the copyright expires, other works too), to the material conditions in which peasants appropriate the text (the different degree of the village’s cultural isolation, the presence or absence of village libraries and schools, their different familiarity with complex poetic texts, the different reading practices common in the village, etc.) and, finally, to the specific interpretative skills and habits developed by the peasant community in its working and cultural activities. They are, at any rate, interpretative skills and habits that peasants also applied to the variegated fictional world created by Gogol, and that provided them with an image of his work that was significantly different from that to which educated readers were used.

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⁸⁴Ong 1988: 37-57.

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs how Gogol's works were read by Russian peasants at the end of the 19th century. It employs two different types of sources: 1) Remakes of Gogol's works made by popular authors for a peasant audience; 2) the transcriptions of the verbal reactions of groups of peasants during the public reading of Gogol's texts, as recorded by village schoolmasters. Special attention is paid, on the one hand, to the different forms of pressure and conditioning exercised on peasant readers and, on the other, to the difficulty, resistance or misunderstandings that, in the eyes of educated readers, Russian peasants experienced when reading or hearing Gogol's texts. This paper highlights how their apparent difficulty and misunderstandings, in fact, resulted from the different way peasants interpreted certain stylistic elements of the writer's works (metaphors, similes, non-linear narrative, the narrator's different intonations, etc.). The new image of Gogol emerging from peasant reading derives from the fact that peasants applied different interpretative skills, which they had developed working in the fields or from the oral culture of their villages, to Gogol's fictional world. This way, they formed impressions of his works that had different contours, sounds and colours from those of educated readers.

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