

GESTURE OF TRACE: RETHINKING “THE PHOTOGRAPHIC” IN GOGOL’S WRITING

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Introduction

On January 7, 1839, Louis-François Arago, a noted scientist and Republican deputy, introduced Louis Daguerre’s new invention at the weekly meeting of the French Académie des Sciences. On August 19, Daguerre’s process was introduced to the public. Since its inventor abandoned the rights to his process, this early form of photography, called daguerreotype, quickly spread to the world,¹ including Russia. The new medium generated immediate and acute responses among the older media that had dominated the country’s culture—namely, writing media.

Soviet literary historian Tseitlin has described Russian journals’ negative reactions to the “dryness” of photography, which “was at that time still only able to mechanically copy nature, and in its pursuit of outer resemblance, it often bypassed the inner side of human beings or natural phenomena.”²

The term “daguerreotypical [dagerrotipnyi]” soon came to be used in Russian literature, arousing similar critical responses from literary critics. According to Kyohei Norimatsu, such opinion was characterized by polarized discourses, as expressed by two major critics of the day—V. Belinsky and V. Maikov. For the former, a writer’s detailed descriptions of external phenomena should reveal the invisible, inner principle of society. Daguerreotype, as a process that reproduced external forms, lacked this capacity to show the hidden center. Belinsky situated daguerreotypical “description” or “copying” in opposition to “characterization,” by means of which the differences between visible phenomena should be grasped and given meaning according to their hidden inner “principle.”³

Unlike Belinsky, Maikov “demands that anything external be removed.”⁴ This idea is based on his theory of “sympathy”: regardless of differences, the writer and the objects of description must be united by “sympathy” on a universal human scale. Maikov criticized daguerreotype as lacking such unity-sympathy since it was regarded as concerned only with the external.

Such disagreements over the best way to describe society notwithstanding, both critics had

¹ In England, Daguerreotype remained protected by a patent filed by its inventor. Quentin Bajac, *The Invention of Photography*, trans. Ruth Taylor (London: Thames & Hudson), p.24.

² A. G. Tseitlin, *Stanovlenie realizma v russkoi literature (Russkii fiziologicheskii ocherk)* (Moscow, 1965), p.105. In this article, where no reference to a published English translation is provided in a footnote, the translation is mine. Published English translations have been modified as needed.

³ Kyohei Norimatsu, “Literature Against Visual Media: Discourses on the Visuality of N. Gogol’s Language,” In *Tekusuto toshintai* (Text and Body; in Japanese), ed. Satoshi Bamba (Sapporo: Hokkaido University, 2007), pp.5-8.

⁴ Norimatsu, “Literature Against Visual Media,” p.9.

a high opinion of Nikolai Gogol (1809-1852). Gogol was viewed as a writer who juxtaposed Romantic fantasy with realistic descriptions of the big city. Thus, how to evaluate his style was a central problem in the controversy over Romanticism at the time. Although Gogol's manner of description was popularly associated with daguerreotype, Belinsky and Maikov categorically distinguished the former from the latter. Hoping to resolve "a dilemma for all critics confronted with the materiality of externality, which thickens as they attach more and more importance to some invisible or inner value,"⁵ Belinsky and Maikov discerned something beyond the mechanical copying of nature in Gogol's writing.

These two critics focused on the similarities and differences between Gogol's writing and photography because they were completely new and shocking at the time. Since both are popularly accepted now, the problem raised by Belinsky and Maikov seems to have lost its novelty; yet, we still do not fully understand what this "something beyond" might be. This paper, therefore, attempts to revive the historical and theoretical link between Gogol's writing and early photography.

I. *Petrification*

In 1847, following a long silence after the 1842 publication of the first part of *Dead Souls*, Gogol published a book that went against readers' expectations as the continuation (i.e., the second part) of the "epic" (as Gogol called it). This book, the last published during Gogol's lifetime, assumed an unfamiliar form. Neither a novel nor a tale, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* is a compilation of fictional letters by the author addressed to mystified readers/friends. Moreover, the content of the work is ambiguous. Calling on readers to engage in endless self-reflection directed toward the "Absolute" (a literary-philosophical tendency of Gogol's later period, rooted in the German Romantics, especially F. Schlegel),⁶ the author-sender of these letters advocates for the existing social, political, and religious orders, while also criticizing their incompleteness (hence the book's ideological inconsistency, which drew fierce criticism from both radical and conservative literary camps).

In Chapter XXIII, "The Historical Painter Ivanov," Gogol expresses admiration for the devotion of the painter A. A. Ivanov (1806-1858) to religious art. At the time, Ivanov was working on the monumental *Appearance of Christ to the People*. Gogol attempts to explain why the work had not yet been finished (it was completed in 1857; Gogol died in 1852): "[T]he movement of man to Christ" should be completed within the painter's body to be reflected on the canvas. Thus, Gogol says, "while a spiritual transition is going on, when, by the will of God, a process is beginning in the very nature of a man," the picture is not to be completed [VIII, 333].⁷

⁵ Norimatsu, "Literature Against Visual Media," p.9.

⁶ See Melissa Frazier, *Frames of the Imagination: Gogol's Arabesques and the Romantic Question of Genre* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000). On the theory and practice of self-reflection in the early German Romantics, see Walter Benjamin, *Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2008); Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); and Winfried Menninghaus, *Unendliche Verdopplung: Die frühromantische Grundlegung der Kunsttheorie im Begriff absoluter Selbstreflexion* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1987).

To demonstrate the impossibility of representing perpetual movement toward the Absolute (i.e., of representing self-reflection), Gogol gives the reader a shocking self-portrait—a “living dead” image of himself:

I myself felt that my spiritual state had become so strange that I would not even have been able to tell it plainly to one man in the world. When I tried to reveal but one part of myself, I soon saw that the many listening to me became gloomy at my words and shook their heads, and I bitterly regretted even the desire to be candid. I swear, there are situations of a man who finds himself in a lethargic sleep: he sees himself being buried alive and cannot stir a finger or make a sign to show that he is alive. No, God keep you, at these moments of spiritual transition, from seeking to explain yourself to any man whatsoever: you must have recourse to God alone and to no one else.⁸ [VIII, 334]

Gogol’s theory of representation is that real, vital movement is not representable. To be represented, the human body first requires a metamorphosis—into death.

Surprisingly similar images are found in photographs taken by a contemporary of Gogol, who was one of the inventors of photography. Three photographs show an uncanny image of a naked, anonymous body, with the same composition (with slight variations). Handwritten text on the back of one of the photographs explains the circumstances that led the photographer to take a self-portrait as a dead man, thereby situating the image within the play of self-reflection.

FIGURE 1. HIPPOLYTE BAYARD, *LE NOYÉ (THE DROWNED MAN)* (1840).
DIRECT POSITIVE.



Source: Bajac, *The Invention of Photography*, p.26.

⁷ Nikolai Gogol, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, trans. Jesse Zeldin (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), p.152. In this article, quotations from English translations of Gogol are followed by the corresponding volume and page number(s) in brackets in the original Russian complete works, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 14 vol. (Moscow and Leningrad, 1937-1952). In cases where the new Academy of Sciences version of the complete works, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem*, 23 vol. (Moscow, 2001-) is available (publication is ongoing), the volume and page number are indicated in parentheses.

⁸ Gogol, *Selected Passages*, p.154.

The corpse which you see here is that of M. Bayard, inventor of the process that you have just seen, or the marvelous results of which you are soon going to see. To my knowledge, this ingenious and indefatigable researcher has been working for about three years to perfect his invention.

The Academy, the King and all those who have seen his picture, that he himself found imperfect, have admired them as you do at this moment. This has brought him much honour but has not yielded him a single farthing. The government, having given too much to M. Daguerre, said it could do nothing for M. Bayard and the unhappy man drowned himself.⁹

Regarding the ambiguous situation of the body created through the combination of image and text, Geoffrey Batchen notes in his study of the early history of photography:

Le Noyé presents Bayard as both subject and object of the photograph, as acting even while acted upon, as a representation that is also real, as self and other, present and absent, dead but also alive, as nature and culture (nature and *nature morte*)—simultaneously both...and for that very reason never simply one or the other.¹⁰

Compare Gogol's abovementioned description of his predicament with Batchen's citation of Eduardo Cadava (regarding Benjamin's analysis of the photograph):

I, the photograph, the spaced out limit between life and death, I, the photograph, am death. Yet, speaking as death, the photograph can be neither death nor itself. At once dead and alive, it opens the possibility of our being in time.¹¹

The dead body *is* the living body of the photographer who took it: the (impossible) connection between the fragmented body of someone else and the real person living here and now is established through words. In this sense, Bayard's self-portrait, inscribed with text, embodies the same epistemological condition as Gogol's text about Ivanov. Both media require a paralyzed body as the theater where the (impossible) ritual of resurrecting the dead is played out with the help of language.

The word "theater" is not just used figuratively here.¹² In the final scene of Gogol's 1842 drama *The Government Inspector*, after the unmasking of the pretender to the title, Khlestakov, and all the important people of the city whose hidden desires turned him into the phantasmagoric figure of the government inspector, a gendarme enters and orders *a replay of the drama from its beginning* ("His Excellency the government inspector has arrived from the

⁹ Translated by and quoted in Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p.167. The context in which Bayard's self-portrait was produced is introduced with an excellent reading of the photo-text on pp.157-173.

¹⁰ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, p.173.

¹¹ Eduardo Cadava, "Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History," *Diacritics* 22, No.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1992), p.110. Quoted in Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, p.172.

¹² Roland Barthes has pointed out the similarities between photography and theater through the intermediary of death: "[H]owever 'lifelike' we strive to make it (and this frenzy to be lifelike can only be our mythic denial of an apprehension of death), Photography is a kind of primitive theater, a kind of *Tableau vivant*, a figuration of the motionless and made-up face beneath which we see the dead." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), pp.31-32.

capital. In the name of the emperor he demands your immediate presence at the inn"). The stage direction ("The entire group changes its position suddenly and remains frozen") is followed by a long description of the paralyzed bodies of all the important personages in the city; Gogol calls this the *Dumb Scene*.¹³ This scene provides a prime example of Gogol's poetics of "petrification [okamenenie]," as discussed by Iurii Mann.¹⁴

II. Fragmentation

In the previous section, we highlighted the petrification of the body, with its identification through language, as a common condition of representation in the context of Gogol's writing and early photography. This section will focus on the historical condition of the epistemological framework—specifically, the process of the fragmentation of the body.

First, it should be noted that in the early stages of photography, photographic materials required substantial exposure time to register a sharp image. Luis Daguerre acknowledged that "it is quite impossible to determine the time necessary for producing a design," because it depends "entirely on the intensity of the light on the objects, the imagery of which is to be reproduced. At Paris, for example, this varies from three to thirty minutes."¹⁵

The extended exposure time needed to create a successful photograph hindered daguerreotype from producing a clear record of motion. This limitation was keenly grasped by contemporary journalists. William Henry Fox Talbot, one of Daguerre's main rivals in the controversy over who invented photography (unlike daguerreotype, his paper-based negative-positive system is still used today, providing the principal basis for contemporary photography), commented critically on his French competitor: "Motion escapes him, or leaves only indefinite and vague traces."¹⁶ In addition, *The Literary Gazette* reported on February 9, 1839,

In one of the views of the boulevards of which I have spoken, all that was walking or moving does not appear in the picture; of two horses of a hackney coach on the stand, one unfortunately moved its head during the exposure and so the animal appears without a head in the picture.¹⁷

In addition, Samuel Morse said the following upon viewing of one of Daguerre's photographs:

Objects moving are not impressed. The Boulevard, so constantly filled with a moving throng of pedestrians and carriages, was perfectly solitary, except an individual who was having his boots brushed. His feet were compelled, of course, to be stationary for some

¹³ Nikolay Gogol, *Gogol: Plays and Selected Writings*, ed. Milton Ehre, trans. Milton Ehre and Fruma Gottschalk (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994), p.130.

¹⁴ Iurii Mann has made enormous achievements in the study of the motif. See, for example, Iurii Mann, "Gogol's Poetics of Petrification," trans. Susanne Fusso in *Essays on Gogol: Logos and the Russian Word*, ed. Susanne Fusso and Priscilla Meyer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), pp.75-88. On his general poetics, see Iu. Mann, *Tvorchestvo Gogolia. Smysl' i forma* (St. Petersburg, 2007).

¹⁵ L. J. M. Daguerre, *History and Practice of Photogenic Drawing on the True Principles of the Daguerreotype, with the new method of Dioramic Painting*, trans. J. S. Memes (London: Smith, Elder, and Co., Cornhill, 1839), p.62.

¹⁶ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, p.135.

¹⁷ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, p.135.

FIGURE 2. HENRY FITZ, *SELF-PORTRAIT* (1839). DAGUERREOTYPE



Source: Bajac, *The Invention of Photography*, p.29. The most active parts of the face—the eyes—are not captured.

time, one being on the box of the bootblack, and the other on the ground. Consequently, his boots and legs are well defined, but he is without body or head, because these were in motion.¹⁸

As these passages show, for technical reasons early photography had a certain limitation—namely, it could only represent motionless objects (*still life*). Consequently, bodies were fragmented into representable and unrepresentable parts by cutting and pasting them.

Such limitations in early photography aroused a desire to capture the aspects that were escaping representation, one of which was motion. An article in the *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth Century Photography* relates the history of “moving images produced from a series of pictures:”

In 1832 Belgian scientist Joseph Plateau, investigating the phenomena of Faraday’s Wheel, devised the phenakistiscope, a cardboard disc with a sequence of drawings that appeared to move when the images, reflected by a mirror, were viewed through slots in the disc. Viennese Professor Simon Stampfer simultaneously developed his similar Stroboscope. [...] The application of photography to moving images was inevitable, but slow exposure times before the 1860s/70s meant that photographing sequences of subjects moving in “real time” was an impossibility. Experimenters compiled sequences from series of static poses, the subject assuming the key positions of the action being represented.¹⁹

This is one of the most perplexing paradoxes of early photography. Creating the illusion of movement in a living body required both multiplying and fragmenting that body (i.e., the destruction of its unity). With the birth of daguerreotype, a line of demarcation was drawn for

¹⁸ Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, p.135.

¹⁹ “Motion Photography: Prechronophotography to Cinematography,” in *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth Century Photography*, ed. John Hannavy (New York: Routledge, 2008), Vol.2, pp.940-941.

the living body between its representable and unrepresentable parts. The former was related to the traces of life, and the latter—the one that moved and did not leave legible traces on the picture—was identified with life itself. Life became imaginable outside the traces and their representability. Henri Bergson later formulated this idea:

It is true that if we had to do with photographs alone, however much we might look at them, we should never see them animated: with immobility set beside immobility, even endlessly, we could never make movement. In order that the pictures may be animated, there must be movement somewhere.²⁰

It is worth recalling that this dialectical polarization between unrepresentable movement-life and materialized traces as its remnant was shared by the early Romantics. The upward spiral of the circuitous journey between the two poles—a return through alienation (materialization) to an original state on a higher level—is an archetypal pattern in the Romantic literary-philosophical quest for the Absolute.²¹ The next part of this section will investigate Gogol's texts from this perspective.

It has been noted many times that the world Gogol depicts is dispersed into fragments, especially in his middle-period work (as seen in the so-called *Petersburg Tales*).²² For our purposes, we divide Gogol's technique of fragmentation into three groups, although the characteristics of each group are, to some extent, also included in the others.

In the first group, words (mainly nouns and pronouns) are almost completely deprived of concrete bodies as their referents, approximating hieroglyphs.²³ See, for example, the narrator's enumeration of "all who were" at the party the police captain gives in "The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich" (hereafter, "Two Ivans"):

Taras Tarasovich, Evpl Akinfovich, Evtikhii Evtikhievich, Ivan Ivanovich—not *the* Ivan Ivanovich, but the other—Savva Gavrilovich, our Ivan Ivanovich, Elevferii Elevferievich, Makar Nazar'evich, Foma Grigor'evich...I cannot go on! It is too much for me! My hand is tired from writing!²⁴ [II, 264]

A similar but lengthier "catalog" is found in *Dead Souls* when the narrator lists the names of the society people the hero Chichikov has talked to.²⁵ The hieroglyph as witness to the past can be associated with memory; as Bely notes with regard to this scene, "Chichikov is a museum of memory."²⁶ Compare this with the "hieroglyphization" of the word "wife [zhena]"

²⁰ Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911), p.305.

²¹ On "the ascending circle, or the spiral" as a distinctive figure of Romantic thought and imagination, see M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: Norton, 1971).

²² See, for example, Andrei Bely, *Gogol's Artistry*, trans. Christopher Colbath (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009) and Iu. M. Lotman, "Khudozhestvennoe prostranstvo v proze Gogolia," in Iu. M. Lotman, *O russkoi literature* (St. Petersburg, 2005), pp.621-658 (see especially pp.635-645).

²³ On the Romantic conceptualization of the hieroglyph as trace, see Novalis's famous fragment: "Formerly all things were spirit appearances. Now we can see nothing but dead repetition, which we do not understand. The meaning of the hieroglyph is missing. We are still living on the fruits of better times." Novalis, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Margaret Mahony Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p.60.

²⁴ Gogol, *The Complete Tales*, Vol.2, p.205.

²⁵ Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls*, trans. Bernard Guilbert Guerney (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p.166. [VI, 170]

²⁶ Bely, *Gogol's Artistry*, p.110.

in the following passage from “Ivan Fedorovich Shponka and His Aunt.” After waking from a nightmare (narrated below), the hero of the story opens his fortunetelling book, “But there was absolutely nothing in it that remotely resembled this incoherent dream.”²⁷

Then he imagined that he was married, that everything in their little house was so peculiar, so strange: a double bed stood in his room instead of a single one; his wife was sitting on a chair. He felt strange; he did not know how to approach her, what to say to her, and then he noticed that she had a face of a goose. He turned aside and saw another wife, also with the face of a goose. Turning in another direction, he saw still a third wife; and behind him was still another. Then he was seized by panic: he dashed away into the garden; but there it was hot. He took off his hat, and—saw a wife sitting in it. Drops of sweat came out on his face. He put his hand in his pocket for his handkerchief and in his pocket too there was a wife; he took some cotton out of his ear—and there sat a wife.²⁸ (I, 239)

The second group in Gogol’s fragmentation technique is distinguished by its use of metonymy.²⁹ In the following collage à la Arcimboldo, a whole body is first decomposed into words denoting its parts, only to be recomposed as a heterogeneous body—an amalgam of the remainders of original words and foreign words, importing fragments of the other’s body. In this case, the already existing connection between word and object is not lost but transformed in a metonymical chain.

Ivan Ivanovich has big expressive snuff-colored eyes and a mouth like the letter v³⁰; Ivan Nikiforovich has little yellowish eyes completely lost between his thick eyebrows and chubby cheeks, and a nose that looks like a ripe plum.³¹ [II, 227] (“Two Ivans”)

At every few steps, mincing along rather deftly and turning right and left, he would suddenly throw in a punctuating scrape of his small foot, by way of a curlicue, as it were, or something like a comma.³² [VI, 165] (*Dead Souls*)

The monologue of Agaf’ia Tikhonovna (in *Marriage*), who is reluctant to choose a husband from four candidates, is noteworthy. Now, more than just body parts are exchangeable: “[T]he difference between ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the physical’ is eliminated here because all these qualities are perceived as relating to the category of ‘the material.’”³³

Now if I could combine Anuchkin’s lips with Podkolesin’s nose, and take some of the easy ways of Baltazar Baltazarovich, and perhaps add Omelet’s solid build, then I could decide in a moment.³⁴ [V, 37]

²⁷ Gogol, *The Complete Tales*, Vol.1, p.197.

²⁸ Gogol, *The Complete Tales*, Vol.1, pp.196-197.

²⁹ Metonymy is used here as “the action of substituting for a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc., a word or phrase denoting a property or something associated with it.” *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (December 2001, *OED Online* version, June 2015).

³⁰ Izhitsa; the last letter of the Church Slavonic and pre-1918 Russian alphabet. *Oxford Russian Dictionary*, 4th ed. (May 2007).

³¹ Gogol, *The Complete Tales*, Vol.2, p.173.

³² Gogol, *Dead Souls*, p.162.

³³ P. Bitsilli, “Problema cheloveka u Gogolia” in *Godishnik na Sofiiskia universitet. Istoriko-filologicheski fakultet*, Vol.44, Book 4, 1947-48, p.11.

³⁴ Gogol, *Gogol: Plays and Selected Writings*, p.29.

The third group in Gogol's fragmentation technique involves biography. Just as seeing a photograph can invite reminiscence, reading the words/fragments of a body can prompt an imagining of a forgotten life from its traces:

Ivan Ivanovich could no longer control himself; his lips were quivering; his mouth lost its usual resemblance to the letter v and was transformed into an O; his eyes blinked until it was positively alarming. This was extremely rare with Ivan Ivanovich; he had to be greatly exasperated to be brought to this pass.³⁵ [II, 237] ("Two Ivans")

In "The Overcoat," the subjectivity of an eternally copying clerk, Akakii Akakievich ("no, he loved his work. In it, in that copying, he found an interesting and pleasant world of his own"), can be expressed only by discrete facial gestures/hieroglyphs:

There was a look of enjoyment on his face; certain letters were favorites with him, and when he came to them he was delighted; he chuckled to himself and winked and moved his lips, so that it seemed as though every letter his pen was forming could be read in his face.³⁶ [III, 144]

In Gogol's works, "writing a biography" approximates "giving a life" (though never coinciding completely with it). This is clear in Chichikov's "recalling" of serfs' lives. As is widely known, the plot of *Dead Souls* is itself an idiosyncratic attempt to resurrect dead serfs. The hero collects lists of dead serfs from landowners for the hidden purpose of mortgaging them to the government. The names of the dead souls are exchangeable for money because both are signs without substance. In this scene, however, when he glances at the names of the serfs, Chichikov involuntarily starts telling their fictitious biographies, as if recovering each serf's lost life [VI: 135-139].³⁷

These three types of fragmentation in Gogol are based on the historical condition of representation. Before they were deciphered by Champollion in 1822, Egyptian hieroglyphics had specific symbolic meanings for the Romantics in their spiraling movement toward the Absolute. In one passage, F. Schlegel describes the hieroglyph using three predicates—"pictographic writing [Bilderschrift]," "natural script [Naturschrift]," and "riddle-language [Räthselsprache]"³⁸—thus potentially creating an analogy between hieroglyphics and early photography. In the Romantic interpretation of hieroglyphs as the deadly fragments of organisms that once existed, the hieroglyphic image does not entirely reproduce lost nature. Rather, with the help of its literality, it acquires the potential to invite infinite readings toward the recovery of nature's wholeness at a higher level. Beginning with his first collection, *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* (1831-32),³⁹ Gogol's work, playing on the threshold between letter and voice (especially through pretend conversational narration—the device known as "skaz"), consistently reacts to the historical condition of representation.

³⁵ Gogol, *The Complete Tales*, Vol.2, p.181.

³⁶ Gogol, *The Complete Tales*, Vol.2, p.307.

³⁷ Gogol, *Dead Souls*, p.130-134.

³⁸ Translated by and quoted in Brian Tucker, *Reading Riddles: Rhetorics of Obscurity from Romanticism to Freud* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2011), p.51.

³⁹ See editors' commentary in the new *Complete Works* (I, 850).

III. *Defacement*

In the first section, we identified the paralyzed body as a common image delineating an epistemological framework in both Gogol's work and early photography. Subsequently, the fragmentation of the body proved to be the historical condition preparing the image. Gogol's texts contain three forms of fragmentation: hieroglyph (deprivation of a word's object), metonymy (rearranging the relation between word and object), and reminiscence (imagining the other that has already been lost, unrepresentable in the word-object relation). This section will examine Gogol's writing stylistically, underlining a lacuna in the "image-word-body" trifecta that retained early photography as media.

As mentioned earlier, at the time Daguerre's process was made public, the emerging technology required a long exposure time in sunlight, raising questions about its ability to take portraits in addition to monuments and landscapes. Arago's report of July 3, 1839, acknowledged the problem:

In order that the image be quickly formed, that is to say, during the four or five minutes that a living person can be required to remain in a state of immobility, the person must stand in the sun: now, if a person be exposed with his face in the sun, he will not be able to keep his eyes motionless; the person of the gravest disposition would not be able to refrain from the most hideous contortions of the features, which would thus be completely altered.⁴⁰

Indeed, many reports expressed similar concerns. "The constraint imposed on the face under the still too lengthy influence of sunlight makes these portraits resemble real victims of torture," Valicourt wrote in his 1845 treatise on daguerreotype.⁴¹ Furthermore, describing his impression of a portrait by M. Susse, Gaudin said in 1844 that "no one in the world can sustain the sunshine for a quarter of an hour without blinking. [...] [T]here were contractions of features and a grimace expressing suffering."⁴² In her monograph on early Russian photography, Barkhatova describes the method used by Grekov, the first Russian daguerreotype portraitist: "[A]s many of his clients could not stand in the sun for the two minutes the process required, he had managed to devise an arrangement whereby the model's head rested on a velvet cushion attached to an armchair, this enabled the person to remain completely motionless."⁴³

The deformed faces in early photography register the tensions inscribed in bodies between involuntary movements and the compulsive power to prevent them. Posing for a photograph thus became a kind of surveillance of control over the body.

The "grimace" points to another parallel between Gogol and early photography. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the Russian writer and thinker Rozanov made an observation about the life-death ambiguity in the faces of Gogol's characters—these lifeless puppets are

⁴⁰ Daguerre, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Various Processes of the Daguerreotype and the Diorama* (London: Mclean and Nutt, 1839), p.30.

⁴¹ Quoted in Bajac, *The Invention of Photography*, pp.34-35.

⁴² M. A. Gaudin. *Traité Pratique de Photographie* (Paris, 1844), pp.121-122.

⁴³ A comment on Grekov's announcement of June 13, 1840. Elena Barkhatova, "The First Photographs in Russia," in *Photography in Russia, 1840-1940*, ed. David Elliott (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), p.28.

already dead and only assume the appearance of living people by changing the looks on their faces:

In this picture, there are absolutely no living faces: these are tiny wax figures, but all of them are so skillfully grimacing that we have long suspected that they are about to move. But they are motionless.⁴⁴

An example of Gogol's descriptions of grimaces can be found in the final *Dumb Scene* from *The Government Inspector*:

*Behind him the Judge, his arms extended, squatting almost to the floor, and making a motion with his lips as if about to whistle or mutter, "Here's a Saint George's Day for you, old woman! [We're in for it now, my friends!]"*⁴⁵ (IV, 86)

This representation of a face in motion eludes the traditional representative system of physiognomy, where a person's character is determined by reading his or her face.⁴⁶ The grimace is not a static object of representation or interpretation in Gogol, who was interested in creating an iterative process of facial defiguration and refiguration. In the lengthy account (in *Dead Souls*) of Chichikov's facial twitching during his preparations to visit the governor's ball, the emphasis is on the face's physical ability to metamorphose rather than the exhibition of various masks:

A whole hour was consecrated to the mere contemplation of his face in the mirror. He tried to impart to it any number of varying expressions; now an important and dignified one, now a deferential one, yet not devoid of a certain slight smile, then simply a deferential one, without the smile. Several bows were dealt out in front of the mirror, accompanied by indistinct sounds bearing some resemblance to French, although Chichikov was entirely ignorant of that language. He even surprised himself with a host of pleasant mannerisms: he twitched his eyebrow as if winking, and moved his lips, and did something or other even with his tongue.⁴⁷ [VI, 161]

In his famous reading of "The Overcoat," Boris Eikhenbaum subtly captures the moment of transfiguration, referring to "the phenomenon of sound-semantics in Gogol's language: the phonic 'envelope' of the word, or its acoustic characteristics, takes on significance quite independent of logic or of concrete meaning."⁴⁸

[T]his *skaz* has a tendency not simply to narrate, not simply to talk, but also to reproduce

⁴⁴ V. V. Rozanov, "Pushkin i Gogol," in *Gogol' v russkoi kritike: Antologïia*, ed. S. G. Bocharov (Moscow, 2008), p.178.

⁴⁵ Gogol, *Gogol: Plays and Selected Writings*, p.130. In an appendix to the play, "Advice to Those Who Would Play *The Government Inspector* as It Ought To Be Played," written c. October-November 1846 and published posthumously, the phrase "making a motion with his lips" was, with the word "grimace" openly added, modified as follows: "making a grimace with his lips." (IV, 111)

⁴⁶ On the physiognomic tradition from the eighteenth century and its reception in Russian Romantic literature, see Helena Goscilo, "Lermontov's Debt to Lavater and Gall," in *Slavic and East European Journal* 59, No.4 (October 1981), pp.500-515.

⁴⁷ Gogol, *Dead Souls*, pp.157-158.

⁴⁸ Boris Eichenbaum, "How Gogol's Overcoat Is Made," in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*, ed. and trans. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p.273.

words with an emphasis on mimetic and articulated sounds. Sentences are devised and put together not according to the principle of logical speech alone, but more according to the principles of expressive speech, where articulated sound, mimicry, phonic gestures, etc., play a special role.⁴⁹

As such, Gogol's narration "seems to be concealing an actor," becoming "a kind of play-acting."⁵⁰

Gogol's narration reveals the split between a body and its image, as does the description of Chihikov's pantomime. These are analogous to the gesture interpreted by Giorgio Agamben as "*the exhibition of a mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.*"⁵¹ As an index of the metamorphosis of the face, Gogol's grimace prepares a space for the other that is supposed to exist outside. This space is also seen in the blurred grimaces of early photographs as the space of "in-betweenness" animated by "an antinomic polarity" (Agamben).

[O]n the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture; [...] on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamics* intact. [...] [W]hile the former lives in magical isolation, the latter always refers beyond itself to a whole of which it is a part.⁵²

A void in the antinomic polarity is suggested by the Mayor in *The Government Inspector*, who questions the responsibility of Luka Lukich as the superintendent of schools. He takes great pains to interpret an uncanny grimace made by one of the teachers:

[W]hat's his name?—the one with the fat face—he can't get up in front of a class without making a grimace. Let me show you (*makes a grimace*). Then he starts smoothing out his beard with his fingers. Of course it doesn't matter if he makes a face like that at one of his pupils. It may even be necessary for their education.—I'm not one to judge. But suppose he does it to a visitor? That could mean trouble. The government inspector might take it personally. Where the hell would that leave us?⁵³ (IV, 13)

The "mute grimace" signifies nothing but "the illusion of referentiality by its convulsion."⁵⁴ Utilized to fill the gap between body and image, biography—the narrative of the body—has the potential to occupy that space. However, it becomes an endless process that performatively highlights the gap. At this point, the grimace in Gogol becomes a "gesture of trace" corresponding to the limits of representation in early photography. It has a close affinity with prosopopeia, a trope that means "to confer a mask or a face (*prosopon*)." As defined by Paul de Man, the rhetorical figure is "the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply and confers upon it the power of speech. [...] Prosopopeia is the trope of autobiography, by which one's name [...] is made as intelligible and memorable as a face."⁵⁵ Yet, providing a face by means of language also takes

⁴⁹ Eichenbaum, "How Gogol's Overcoat Is Made," pp.272-273.

⁵⁰ Eichenbaum, "How Gogol's Overcoat Is Made," p.270.

⁵¹ G. Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in G. Agamben, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p.58.

⁵² Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," p.55.

⁵³ Gogol, *Gogol: Plays and Selected Writings*, p.58.

⁵⁴ Mikhail Iampol'skii, *Demon i labirint: diagrammy, deformatsii, mimesis* (Moscow, 1996), p.24.

⁵⁵ Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-Facement," in Paul de Man, *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), pp.75-76.

it away.

Death is a displaced name for a linguistic predicament, and the restoration of mortality by autobiography (the prosopopeia of the voice and the name) deprives and disfigures to the precise extent that it restores. Autobiography veils a defacement of the mind of which it is itself the cause.⁵⁶

Conclusion

Using de Man's notion of "prosopopeia as de-facement," we can propose that Gogol problematizes the (impossible) relationship between image, word, and body in a way that corresponds to the framework of early photography. First, a body is rendered into fragments. Second, an image of the body is assembled from the fragments, each of which is deprived of motion and petrified. Third, words are employed to identify the image with the body. These words could be the name on a passport photo or the fake autobiography on the back of Bayard's self-portrait. Benedict Anderson suggests that the photographic image in collaboration with autobiography has contributed to identifying a body as a modern person:

The photograph, fine child of the age of mechanical reproduction, is only the most peremptory of a huge modern accumulation of documentary evidence (birth certificates, diaries, report cards, letters, medical records, and the like) which simultaneously records a certain apparent continuity and emphasizes its loss from memory. Out of this estrangement comes a conception of personhood, *identity* (yes, you and that naked baby are identical) which, because it can not be 'remembered,' must be narrated. Against biology's demonstration that every single cell in a human body is replaced over seven years, the narratives of autobiography and biography flood print-capitalism's markets year by year.⁵⁷

However, the photographic "image-word-body" relationship is not stable at all: "How strange it is to need another's help to learn that this naked baby in the yellowed photograph, sprawled happily on rug or cot, is you."⁵⁸ Seeing a self-portrait always produces some degree of shock because it locates the viewer in the face of the other, turning his or her self-image into uncanny fragments. It is the experience of the self as other, as Roland Barthes wrote:

"Myself" never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn (which is why society sustains it), and "myself" which is light, divided, dispersed; like a bottle-imp, "myself" doesn't hold still, giggling in my jar: if only Photography could give me a neutral, anatomic body, a body which signifies nothing!⁵⁹

The collision between the weight of the image and the amorphous, nomadic body always in motion is indicated in a fundamental way by the grimace—the deformation of the face in

⁵⁶ De Man, "Autobiography," p.81.

⁵⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), p.204.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p.204.

⁵⁹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.12.

early photographs.

Gogol mentions early photography in a letter to P. V. Annenkov on August 12, 1847. Referring to the *Paris Letters* recently published by his friend, Gogol compares his description of Paris with daguerreotype: “There is a lot of observation and exactness, but exactness daguerreotypical” [XIII, 363]. This comment repeats the popular view held by contemporary critics, as discussed earlier—namely, that photography is a process for copying nature, as indicated by the title of Talbot’s paper, “The Process by Which Natural Objects May be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist’s Pencil.”⁶⁰ However, in comparison with the last phrase of the title (“without the aid of the artist’s pencil”), the following passage from Gogol’s letter suggests where his interests lay:

The hand which wrote them [*Letters*] cannot be felt; the author himself—wax, which has not received a form, although wax of the first quality, transparent, clean, just as needed for to cast a figure from it. [XIII, 363]

The “writing hand” is, as an allegory of mediality (technical in-betweenness), inserted into the photographic “image-word-body” relationship. Gogol urges paying attention to the possibility of failure inherent in nature’s “spontaneous reproduction.”⁶¹ In this sense, his writing practice was a form of media criticism.

FIGURE 3. DAGUERRETYPE, IN THE CENTER OF WHICH GOGOL IS ALLEGED TO BE STANDING (ROME, 1845)



Source: V. Stasov, “Gogol’ i Russkie khudozhniki v Rime,” in *Drevniaia i novaia Rossiia*, Vol.15 (December 1879), pp.524-532.

⁶⁰ “Some Account of the Art of Photogenic Drawing, or the Process by which Natural Objects May Be Made to Delineate Themselves without the Aid of the Artist’s Pencil.” The paper was read before the Royal Society in London on January 31, 1839.

⁶¹ On the definition of photography as “spontaneous reproduction,” which was popular during its early period, see Batchen, *Burning with Desire*, pp.90-100.