

Taras Bulba and Other Tales

by

Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol

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Introduction

Russian literature, so full of enigmas, contains no greater creative mystery than Nikolai Vasil'evich Gogol (1809-1852), who has done for the Russian novel and Russian prose what Pushkin has done for Russian poetry. Before these two men came Russian literature can hardly have been said to exist. It was pompous and effete with pseudo-classicism; foreign influences were strong; in the speech of the upper circles there was an overfondness for German, French, and English words. Between them the two friends, by force of their great genius, cleared away the debris which made for sterility and erected in their stead a new structure out of living Russian words. The spoken word, born of the people, gave soul and wing to literature; only by coming to earth, the native earth, was it enabled to soar. Coming up from Little Russia, the Ukraine, with Cossack blood in his veins, Gogol injected his own healthy virus into an effete body, blew his own virile spirit, the spirit of his race, into its nostrils, and gave the Russian novel its direction to this very day.

More than that. The nomad and romantic in him, troubled and restless with Ukrainian myth, legend, and song, impressed upon Russian literature, faced with the realities of modern life, a spirit titanic and in clash with its material, and produced in the mastery of this every-day material, commonly called sordid, a phantasmagoria intense with beauty. A clue to all Russian realism may be found in a Russian critic's observation about Gogol: "Seldom has nature created a man so romantic in bent, yet so masterly in portraying all that is unromantic in life." But this statement does not cover the whole ground, for it is easy to see in almost all of Gogol's work his "free Cossack soul" trying to break through the shell of sordid to-day like some ancient demon, essentially Dionysian. So that his works, true though they are to our life, are at once a reproach, a protest, and a challenge, ever calling for joy, ancient joy, that is no more with us. And they have all the joy and sadness of the Ukrainian songs he loved so much. Ukrainian was to Gogol "the language of the soul," and it was in Ukrainian songs rather than in old chronicles, of which he was not a little contemptuous, that he read the history of his people. Time and again, in his essays and in his letters to friends, he expresses his boundless joy in these songs: "O songs, you are my joy and my life! How I love you. What are the bloodless chronicles I pore over beside those clear, live chronicles! I cannot live without songs; they . . . reveal everything more and more clearly, oh, how clearly, gone-by life and gone-by men. . . . The songs of Little Russia are her everything, her poetry, her history, and her ancestral grave. He who has not penetrated them deeply knows nothing of the past of this blooming region of Russia."

Indeed, so great was his enthusiasm for his own land that after collecting material for many years, the year 1833 finds him at work on a history of "poor Ukraine," a work planned to take up six volumes; and writing to a friend at this time he promises to say much in it that has not been said before him. Furthermore, he intended to follow this work with a universal history in eight volumes with a view to establishing, as far as may be gathered, Little Russia and the world in proper relation, connecting the two; a quixotic task, surely. A poet, passionate, religious, loving the heroic, we find him constantly

impatient and fuming at the lifeless chronicles, which leave him cold as he seeks in vain for what he cannot find. "Nowhere," he writes in 1834, "can I find anything of the time which ought to be richer than any other in events. Here was a people whose whole existence was passed in activity, and which, even if nature had made it inactive, was compelled to go forward to great affairs and deeds because of its neighbours, its geographic situation, the constant danger to its existence. . . . If the Crimeans and the Turks had had a literature I am convinced that no history of an independent nation in Europe would prove so interesting as that of the Cossacks." Again he complains of the "withered chronicles"; it is only the wealth of his country's song that encourages him to go on with its history.

Too much a visionary and a poet to be an impartial historian, it is hardly astonishing to note the judgment he passes on his own work, during that same year, 1834: "My history of Little Russia's past is an extraordinarily made thing, and it could not be otherwise." The deeper he goes into Little Russia's past the more fanatically he dreams of Little Russia's future. St. Petersburg wearies him, Moscow awakens no emotion in him, he yearns for Kieff, the mother of Russian cities, which in his vision he sees becoming "the Russian Athens." Russian history gives him no pleasure, and he separates it definitely from Ukrainian history. He is "ready to cast everything aside rather than read Russian history," he writes to Pushkin. During his seven-year stay in St. Petersburg (1829-36) Gogol zealously gathered historical material and, in the words of Professor Kotlyarevsky, "lived in the dream of becoming the Thucydides of Little Russia." How completely he disassociated Ukraina from Northern Russia may be judged by the conspectus of his lectures written in 1832. He says in it, speaking of the conquest of Southern Russia in the fourteenth century by Prince Guedimin at the head of his Lithuanian host, still dressed in the skins of wild beasts, still worshipping the ancient fire and practising pagan rites: "Then Southern Russia, under the mighty protection of Lithuanian princes, completely separated itself from the North. Every bond between them was broken; two kingdoms were established under a single name--Russia--one under the Tatar yoke, the other under the same rule with Lithuanians. But actually they had no relation with one another; different laws, different customs, different aims, different bonds, and different activities gave them wholly different characters."

This same Prince Guedimin freed Kieff from the Tatar yoke. This city had been laid waste by the golden hordes of Ghengis Khan and hidden for a very long time from the Slavonic chronicler as behind an impenetrable curtain. A shrewd man, Guedimin appointed a Slavonic prince to rule over the city and permitted the inhabitants to practise their own faith, Greek Christianity. Prior to the Mongol invasion, which brought conflagration and ruin, and subjected Russia to a two-century bondage, cutting her off from Europe, a state of chaos existed and the separate tribes fought with one another constantly and for the most petty reasons. Mutual depredations were possible owing to the absence of mountain ranges; there were no natural barriers against sudden attack. The openness of the steppe made the people war-like. But this very openness made it possible later for Guedimin's pagan hosts, fresh from the fir forests of what is now White Russia, to make a clean sweep of the whole country between Lithuania and Poland, and thus give the scattered princedoms a much-needed cohesion. In this way Ukraina was formed.

Except for some forests, infested with bears, the country was one vast plain, marked by an occasional hillock. Whole herds of wild horses and deer stampeded the country, overgrown with tall grass, while flocks of wild goats wandered among the rocks of the Dnieper. Apart from the Dnieper, and in some measure the Desna, emptying into it, there were no navigable rivers and so there was little opportunity for a commercial people. Several tributaries cut across, but made no real boundary line. Whether you looked to the north towards Russia, to the east towards the Tatars, to the south towards the Crimean Tatars, to the west towards Poland, everywhere the country bordered on a field, everywhere on a plain, which left it open to the invader from every side. Had there been here, suggests Gogol in his introduction to his never-written history of Little Russia, if upon one side only, a real frontier of mountain or sea, the people who settled here might have formed a definite political body. Without this natural protection it became a land subject to constant attack and despoliation. "There where three hostile nations came in contact it was manured with bones, wetted with blood. A single Tatar invasion destroyed the whole labour of the soil-tiller; the meadows and the cornfields were trodden down by horses or destroyed by flame, the lightly-built habitations reduced to the ground, the inhabitants scattered or driven off into captivity together with cattle. It was a land of terror, and for this reason there could develop in it only a warlike people, strong in its unity and desperate, a people whose whole existence was bound to be trained and confined to war."

This constant menace, this perpetual pressure of foes on all sides, acted at last like a fierce hammer shaping and hardening resistance against itself. The fugitive from Poland, the fugitive from the Tatar and the Turk, homeless, with nothing to lose, their lives ever exposed to danger, forsook their peaceful occupations and became transformed into a warlike people, known as the Cossacks, whose appearance towards the end of the thirteenth century or at the beginning of the fourteenth was a remarkable event which possibly alone (suggests Gogol) prevented any further inroads by the two Mohammedan nations into Europe. The appearance of the Cossacks was coincident with the appearance in Europe of brotherhoods and knighthood-orders, and this new race, in spite of its living the life of marauders, in spite of turnings its foes' tactics upon its foes, was not free of the religious spirit of its time; if it warred for its existence it warred not less for its faith, which was Greek. Indeed, as the nation grew stronger and became conscious of its strength, the struggle began to partake something of the nature of a religious war, not alone defensive but aggressive also, against the unbeliever. While any man was free to join the brotherhood it was obligatory to believe in the Greek faith. It was this religious unity, blazed into activity by the presence across the borders of unbelieving nations, that alone indicated the germ of a political body in this gathering of men, who otherwise lived the audacious lives of a band of highway robbers. "There was, however," says Gogol, "none of the austerity of the Catholic knight in them; they bound themselves to no vows or fasts; they put no self-restraint upon themselves or mortified their flesh, but were indomitable like the rocks of the Dnieper among which they lived, and in their furious feasts and revels they forgot the whole world. That same intimate brotherhood, maintained in robber communities, bound them together. They had everything in common--wine, food, dwelling. A perpetual fear, a perpetual danger, inspired them with a contempt towards life. The Cossack worried more about a good measure of wine than

about his fate. One has to see this denizen of the frontier in his half-Tatar, half-Polish costume--which so sharply outlined the spirit of the borderland--galloping in Asiatic fashion on his horse, now lost in thick grass, now leaping with the speed of a tiger from ambush, or emerging suddenly from the river or swamp, all clinging with mud, and appearing an image of terror to the Tatar. . . ."

Little by little the community grew and with its growing it began to assume a general character. The beginning of the sixteenth century found whole villages settled with families, enjoying the protection of the Cossacks, who exacted certain obligations, chiefly military, so that these settlements bore a military character. The sword and the plough were friends which fraternised at every settler's. On the other hand, Gogol tells us, the gay bachelors began to make depredations across the border to sweep down on Tatars' wives and their daughters and to marry them. "Owing to this co-mingling, their facial features, so different from one another's, received a common impress, tending towards the Asiatic. And so there came into being a nation in faith and place belonging to Europe; on the other hand, in ways of life, customs, and dress quite Asiatic. It was a nation in which the world's two extremes came in contact; European caution and Asiatic indifference, niavete and cunning, an intense activity and the greatest laziness and indulgence, an aspiration to development and perfection, and again a desire to appear indifferent to perfection."

All of Ukraine took on its colour from the Cossack, and if I have drawn largely on Gogol's own account of the origins of this race, it was because it seemed to me that Gogol's emphasis on the heroic rather than on the historical--Gogol is generally discounted as an historian--would give the reader a proper approach to the mood in which he created "Taras Bulba," the finest epic in Russian literature. Gogol never wrote either his history of Little Russia or his universal history. Apart from several brief studies, not always reliable, the net result of his many years' application to his scholarly projects was this brief epic in prose, Homeric in mood. The sense of intense living, "living dangerously"--to use a phrase of Nietzsche's, the recognition of courage as the greatest of all virtues--the God in man, inspired Gogol, living in an age which tended toward grey tedium, with admiration for his more fortunate forefathers, who lived in "a poetic time, when everything was won with the sword, when every one in his turn strove to be an active being and not a spectator." Into this short work he poured all his love of the heroic, all his romanticism, all his poetry, all his joy. Its abundance of life bears one along like a fast-flowing river. And it is not without humour, a calm, detached humour, which, as the critic Bolinsky puts it, is not there merely "because Gogol has a tendency to see the comic in everything, but because it is true to life."

Yet "Taras Bulba" was in a sense an accident, just as many other works of great men are accidents. It often requires a happy combination of circumstances to produce a masterpiece. I have already told in my introduction to "Dead Souls"[1] how Gogol created his great realistic masterpiece, which was to influence Russian literature for generations to come, under the influence of models so remote in time or place as "Don Quixote" or "Pickwick Papers"; and how this combination of influences joined to his own genius produced a work quite new and original in effect and only remotely reminiscent of

the models which have inspired it. And just as "Dead Souls" might never have been written if "Don Quixote" had not existed, so there is every reason to believe that "Taras Bulba" could not have been written without the "Odyssey." Once more ancient fire gave life to new beauty. And yet at the time Gogol could not have had more than a smattering of the "Odyssey." The magnificent translation made by his friend Zhukovsky had not yet appeared and Gogol, in spite of his ambition to become a historian, was not equipped as a scholar. But it is evident from his dithyrambic letter on the appearance of Zhukovsky's version, forming one of the famous series of letters known as "Correspondence with Friends," that he was better acquainted with the spirit of Homer than any mere scholar could be. That letter, unfortunately unknown to the English reader, would make every lover of the classics in this day of their disparagement dance with joy. He describes the "Odyssey" as the forgotten source of all that is beautiful and harmonious in life, and he greets its appearance in Russian dress at a time when life is sordid and discordant as a thing inevitable, "cooling" in effect upon a too hectic world. He sees in its perfect grace, its calm and almost childlike simplicity, a power for individual and general good.

"It combines all the fascination of a fairy tale and all the simple truth of human adventure, holding out the same allurements to every being, whether he is a noble, a commoner, a merchant, a literate or illiterate person, a private soldier, a lackey, children of both sexes, beginning at an age when a child begins to love a fairy tale--all might read it or listen to it, without tedium." Every one will draw from it what he most needs. Not less than upon these he sees its wholesome effect on the creative writer, its refreshing influence on the critic. But most of all he dwells on its heroic qualities, inseparable to him from what is religious in the "Odyssey"; and, says Gogol, this book contains the idea that a human being, "wherever he might be, whatever pursuit he might follow, is threatened by many woes, that he must need wrestle with them--for that very purpose was life given to him--that never for a single instant must he despair, just as Odysseus did not despair, who in every hard and oppressive moment turned to his own heart, unaware that with this inner scrutiny of himself he had already said that hidden prayer uttered in a moment of distress by every man having no understanding whatever of God." Then he goes on to compare the ancient harmony, perfect down to every detail of dress, to the slightest action, with our slovenliness and confusion and pettiness, a sad result--considering our knowledge of past experience, our possession of superior weapons, our religion given to make us holy and superior beings. And in conclusion he asks: Is not the "Odyssey" in every sense a deep reproach to our nineteenth century?

[1] Everyman's Library, No. 726.

An understanding of Gogol's point of view gives the key to "Taras Bulba." For in this panoramic canvas of the Setch, the military brotherhood of the Cossacks, living under open skies, picturesquely and heroically, he has drawn a picture of his romantic ideal, which if far from perfect at any rate seemed to him preferable to the grey tedium of a city peopled with government officials. Gogol has written in "Taras Bulba" his own reproach to the nineteenth century. It is sad and joyous like one of those Ukrainian songs which have helped to inspire him to write it. And then, as he cut himself off more and more from the world of the past, life became a sadder and still sadder thing to him; modern life,

with all its gigantic pettiness, closed in around him, he began to write of petty officials and of petty scoundrels, "commonplace heroes" he called them. But nothing is ever lost in this world. Gogol's romanticism, shut in within himself, finding no outlet, became a flame. It was a flame of pity. He was like a man walking in hell, pitying. And that was the miracle, the transfiguration. Out of that flame of pity the Russian novel was born.

JOHN CURNOS

Evenings on the Farm near the Dikanka, 1829-31; Mirgorod, 1831-33; Taras Bulba, 1834; Arabesques (includes tales, The Portrait and A Madman's Diary), 1831-35; The Cloak, 1835; The Revizor (The Inspector-General), 1836; Dead Souls, 1842; Correspondence with Friends, 1847; Letters, 1847, 1895, 4 vols. 1902.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS: Cossack Tales (The Night of Christmas Eve, Tarass Boolba), trans. by G. Tolstoy, 1860; St. John's Eve and Other Stories, trans. by Isabel F. Hapgood, New York, Crowell, 1886; Taras Bulba: Also St. John's Eve and Other Stories, London, Vizetelly, 1887; Taras Bulba, trans. by B. C. Baskerville, London, Scott, 1907; The Inspector: a Comedy, Calcutta, 1890; The Inspector-General, trans. by A. A. Sykes, London, Scott, 1892; Revizor, trans. for the Yale Dramatic Association by Max S. Mandell, New Haven, Conn., 1908; Home Life in Russia (adaptation of Dead Souls), London, Hurst, 1854; Tchitchikoff's Journey's; or Dead Souls, trans. by Isabel F. Hapgood, New York, Crowell, 1886; Dead Souls, London, Vizetelly, 1887; Dead Souls, London, Maxwell 1887; Dead Souls, London, Fisher Unwin, 1915; Dead Souls, London, Everyman's Library (Intro. by John Curnos), 1915; Meditations on the Divine Liturgy, trans. by L. Alexeieff, London, A. R. Mowbray and Co., 1913.

LIVES, etc.: (Russian) Kotlyarevsky (N. A.), 1903; Shenrok (V. I.), Materials for a Biography, 1892; (French) Leger (L.), Nicholas Gogol, 1914.

Taras Bulba

Chapter I

"Turn round, my boy! How ridiculous you look! What sort of a priest's cassock have you got on? Does everybody at the academy dress like that?"

With such words did old Bulba greet his two sons, who had been absent for their education at the Royal Seminary of Kief, and had now returned home to their father.

His sons had but just dismounted from their horses. They were a couple of stout lads who still looked bashful, as became youths recently released from the seminary. Their firm healthy faces were covered with the first down of manhood, down which had, as yet, never known a razor. They were greatly discomfited by such a reception from their father, and stood motionless with eyes fixed upon the ground.

"Stand still, stand still! let me have a good look at you," he continued, turning them around. "How long your gaberdines are! What gaberdines! There never were such gaberdines in the world before. Just run, one of you! I want to see whether you will not get entangled in the skirts, and fall down."

"Don't laugh, don't laugh, father!" said the eldest lad at length.

"How touchy we are! Why shouldn't I laugh?"

"Because, although you are my father, if you laugh, by heavens, I will strike you!"

"What kind of son are you? what, strike your father!" exclaimed Taras Bulba, retreating several paces in amazement.

"Yes, even my father. I don't stop to consider persons when an insult is in question."

"So you want to fight me? with your fist, eh?"

"Any way."

"Well, let it be fisticuffs," said Taras Bulba, turning up his sleeves. "I'll see what sort of a man you are with your fists."

And father and son, in lieu of a pleasant greeting after long separation, began to deal each other heavy blows on ribs, back, and chest, now retreating and looking at each other, now attacking afresh.

"Look, good people! the old man has gone man! he has lost his senses completely!" screamed their pale, ugly, kindly mother, who was standing on the threshold, and had not

yet succeeded in embracing her darling children. "The children have come home, we have not seen them for over a year; and now he has taken some strange freak--he's pommelling them."

"Yes, he fights well," said Bulba, pausing; "well, by heavens!" he continued, rather as if excusing himself, "although he has never tried his hand at it before, he will make a good Cossack! Now, welcome, son! embrace me," and father and son began to kiss each other. "Good lad! see that you hit every one as you pommelled me; don't let any one escape. Nevertheless your clothes are ridiculous all the same. What rope is this hanging there?-- And you, you lout, why are you standing there with your hands hanging beside you?" he added, turning to the youngest. "Why don't you fight me? you son of a dog!"

"What an idea!" said the mother, who had managed in the meantime to embrace her youngest. "Who ever heard of children fighting their own father? That's enough for the present; the child is young, he has had a long journey, he is tired." The child was over twenty, and about six feet high. "He ought to rest, and eat something; and you set him to fighting!"

"You are a gabbler!" said Bulba. "Don't listen to your mother, my lad; she is a woman, and knows nothing. What sort of petting do you need? A clear field and a good horse, that's the kind of petting for you! And do you see this sword? that's your mother! All the rest people stuff your heads with is rubbish; the academy, books, primers, philosophy, and all that, I spit upon it all!" Here Bulba added a word which is not used in print. "But I'll tell you what is best: I'll take you to Zaporozhe^[1] this very week. That's where there's science for you! There's your school; there alone will you gain sense."

[1] The Cossack country beyond (za) the falls (porozhe) of the Dnieper.

"And are they only to remain home a week?" said the worn old mother sadly and with tears in her eyes. "The poor boys will have no chance of looking around, no chance of getting acquainted with the home where they were born; there will be no chance for me to get a look at them."

"Enough, you've howled quite enough, old woman! A Cossack is not born to run around after women. You would like to hide them both under your petticoat, and sit upon them as a hen sits on eggs. Go, go, and let us have everything there is on the table in a trice. We don't want any dumplings, honey-cakes, poppy-cakes, or any other such messes: give us a whole sheep, a goat, mead forty years old, and as much corn-brandy as possible, not with raisins and all sorts of stuff, but plain scorching corn-brandy, which foams and hisses like mad."

Bulba led his sons into the principal room of the hut; and two pretty servant girls wearing coin necklaces, who were arranging the apartment, ran out quickly. They were either frightened at the arrival of the young men, who did not care to be familiar with anyone; or else they merely wanted to keep up their feminine custom of screaming and rushing away headlong at the sight of a man, and then screening their blushes for some time with

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