

Pavel Lyssakov

Merezhkovsky, Sologub, Gogol, and the Devil of *Poshlost*'

Sometimes when two authors show the same vision of a subject, utilize the same motifs or employ similar techniques, one of them borrows directly from the other. Such an author may be a student, a follower, or an epigone. He may also engage in deliberate intertextual play. Other times the style and sensitivity towards particular issues are “in the air,” the vision and its literary manifestations are “a sign of the times.” They may be shared by authors who do not know each other personally and are not even familiar with each other’s writings. The interpretation of Gogol’s legacy and the vision of the devil and the demonic in the works by Fedor Sologub (1863-1927) and Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865-1841) could be explained by yet another set of facts: they were born and lived in the same city, St. Petersburg, knew each other, exchanged ideas and shared creative plans.

Fedor Sologub worked on his novel *The Petty Demon* for ten years (1892-1902). It was first published in 1905 in the journal *The Questions of Life (Voprosy zhizni)*. *The Petty Demon* was not Sologub's first attempt at dealing with Gogolian techniques and issues. According to Stanley Rabinowitz, as early as in his first novel *Bad Dreams (Tiazhelye sny, 1895)* Sologub displayed "a technique of satirization and comic portraiture which is highly reminiscent of the nineteenth-century master" (Rabinowitz: 331). It is in *The Petty Demon*, however, that the affinity with Gogol emerges most strongly. Many motifs and devices of the novel are typical of Gogol. The central theme of its plot is the insanity of an ambitious person of rank, a theme first introduced into Russian literature in Gogol's "The Notes of a Madman." The principal character is the provincial teacher Peredonov, who can be traced to Gogol's unfinished story "The Frightening Boar" (*Strashnyi kaban*). The protagonist has also been likened to Chichikov in that he makes a series of visits to local important people to discuss his business (Struc: 77). The novel is set in a highly improbable yet believable provincial Russian town where gossip is one of the main preoccupations of its citizens. Strong suggestions are made that the place is inhabited

by demons, and one of the issues introduced is the intrusion of the demonic into beauty. Certain types of characterization and phrase structure in the novel are borrowed from Slavic folklore (Lyssakov: 39-40). One of the main objects of Sologub's satire is vulgarity in life (*poshlost'*), a very important theme for Gogol¹, and *poshlost'* in the novel is linked to the demonic. The symbolism of grayness and dust, widely employed in the novel, is linked to the demonic too. One of the major techniques that Sologub employs is the grotesque.²

In the preface to the second separate edition of the novel (1908) Sologub made it clear that he had paid conscious homage to Gogol. When he says "This novel is a mirror, skillfully fashioned" (Sologub 1923: 6), he is working on the epigraph to Gogol's play *The Inspector General*: "Do not blame the mirror if your mug is twisted." The moral of the whole foreword—"No, my dear contemporaries, it is about you that I have written my novel ..." (Sologub 1923: 6)—echoes one of the lines in the play: "Who are you laughing at? You are laughing at yourselves!" (Gogol 1960 [4]: 120). In the text of the novel itself Sologub parodically cites the famous "bird of a troika" passage from *Dead Souls* investing it with the sensation of dullness and decay. The passage reflects Sologub's pessimistic view of the *poshlost'* of Russian life:

O, deathly melancholy (toska), resounding over fields and villages, over the broad expanses of our native land! A melancholy embodied in a frenzied din, a melancholy that devours the living word in a corruptive flame, debasing what was once a living song to an insane wail! O, deathly melancholy! O, sweet old Russian song, or are you truly dying?.. (Sologub 1923: 163)

¹ Gogol writes in "Four Letters to Different Persons Regarding *Dead Souls*" (Third Letter): "They spoke much about me, discussing certain sides of mine, but they did not determine my main essence. Only Pushkin sensed it. He always told me that no other writer had this gift of exposing the vulgarity (*poshlost'*) of life with such contrast, to define with such strength the vulgarity of a vulgar man (*poshlost' poshlogo cheloveka*), that all the little things that escape the eye would flash as *big* before everybody's eyes. This is my main quality, the one that only I have, and which, for sure, no other writer has." (Gogol 1847: 141-142)

² For more recent mentions of Gogolian elements in *The Petty Demon* see also M. Pavlova. *Pisatel'-Inspektor: Fedor Sologub i F.K. Teternikov*. Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007.

Merezhkovsky published his study *Gogol and the Devil* in 1906. It consisted of two parts: the first, "Works," dealt with *poshlost'* in Gogol's works; the second, "Life and Religion," discussed Gogol's religious crisis. The parallels between Merezhkovsky's and Sologub's visions of *poshlost'* and its connection with Gogol are most likely more than coincidental. First of all, as we mentioned, the journal version of the *The Petty Demon* came out in 1905, i.e., before Merezhkovsky's study.³ Second, his wife, Zinaida Gippius, mentions that she first read the novel in manuscript (Gippius: 74), and this suggests even more strongly the possibility of the direct influence of *The Petty Demon* upon Merezhkovsky.

Merezhkovsky makes the connection between the demonic and *poshlost'* in Gogol's art in the very beginning of his study. Citing Gogol's letter to S.P. Shevyrev he mentions that "the central idea of Gogol's life and thought" was the struggle with the Devil, or, in Gogol's own words: "How to present the Devil as a fool" (1).⁴ Merezhkovsky defines the Devil:

God is the infinite, the beginning and end of all being. The Devil is the denial of God and consequently the denial of the infinite as well, the denial of all beginnings and ends. The Devil is something that is begun and is left unfinished, but purports to be without beginning or end. The Devil is the noumenal median of being, the denial of all heights and depths--eternal planarity (ploskost'), eternal banality (poshlost'). The sole subject of Gogol's art is the Devil in just this sense, that is the Devil as the manifestation of "man's immortal banality" ... (2)

One of the characteristic features of this demonic *poshlost'* for Merezhkovsky is pettiness, just as it was for Sologub:

Gogol was the first to detect invisible evil, most terrible and enduring, not in tragedy, but in the absence of everything tragic; not in power, but in impotence; not in insane extremes, but in all-

³ Still, the second part of *Gogol and the Devil* was based on Merezhkovsky's earlier paper "Gogol and Father Mathew" delivered at the meeting of his Religious-Philosophical Society on 18 April, 1903.

⁴ D.S. Merezhkovsky, *Gogol' i chort* (Moskva: Skorpion, 1906). Here and below references to pages will be made in the text. Translations of the first part are taken from "Gogol and the Devil" in Robert A. Maguire, transl. and ed., *Gogol from the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976).

*too-sensible moderation; not in acuity and profundity, but in inanity and planarity, in the banality of all human feelings and thoughts; not in the greatest things, but in the smallest.*⁵ (3)

Gogol's two main characters, Khlestakov and Chichikov, are two hypostases of the Devil for Merezhkovsky, two examples of Gogol's revolutionary vision of the Devil as everyman:

...their essential natures are identical. They are two poles of a single force; they are twin brothers, offspring of the Russian middle class and the Russian nineteenth century, the most average and bourgeois of all centuries. The essential nature of each is the eternal median, "neither this nor that," utter banality (poshlost'). (33-34)

The Devil as the eternal median in Merezhkovsky's interpretation is akin to Sologub's *nedotykomka*, "a creature of indeterminate profile." Merezhkovsky writes about Khlestakov:

He is like everyone else; his mind, his soul, his words, his face: all are like everyone else's. Again, according to Gogol's profound characterization, nothing should be sharply accentuated in Khlestakov, that is accentuated definitively, conclusively, decisively. ... He has "lost all his beginnings and his ends," as Ivan Karamazov's Devil expresses it; he is the negation incarnate of all beginnings and ends, a moral and mental median incarnate, a mediocrity. (11)

In support of this interpretation of Khlestakov as the Devil, one may also recall Gogol's description of Chichikov at the opening of *Dead Souls*:

A small, rather smart, well-sprung four-wheeled carriage with a folding top drove through the gates of an inn of the provincial town of N.; it was the sort of carriage bachelors usually drive in: retired lieutenant-colonels, majors, and landowners with about a hundred serfs--in short, all those who are described as gentlemen of the 'middling' station of life. The gentleman in the carriage

⁵ Emphasis added.

*was not handsome, but neither was he particularly bad-looking; he was neither too fat, nor too thin; he could not be said to be old, but he was not too young, either.*⁶ (7)

As with Khlestakov, there are no extremes in Chichikov. Nothing is "sharply accentuated"; he has only average qualities. Merezhkovsky discusses some of them. He stresses that Gogol's hero was "of *middle* age, and of a circumspect and phlegmatic temperament" (35) and cultivated "usefulness to everyone, convenience, comfort, cleanliness, hygiene—these are a golden mean (*seredina*) in the beautiful as well as the good" (45).

The notion of pettiness creates another parallel between Merezhkovsky's and Sologub's visions of the demonic. Both associate the Devil with grayness and dust:

He [Khlestakov] abbreviates every idea to the ultimate, lightens it to the ultimate ... What once had been the summit of a mountain ridge now becomes a speck of dust swept along the highway by the wind. There is no feeling so noble, no idea so profound that it cannot be reduced to dust [sdelat'sia seroiu pyl'iu—"turn into gray dust"] by the abrading and weathering action of Khlestakov's genius for making everything small and light. (17)

Like the dust in Sologub's town, the Gogolian Devil, according to Merezhkovsky, is omnipresent. At one point Khlestakov says that he is "everywhere." For Merezhkovsky "this is the noumenal word; this is now the face of the Devil almost without the mask: he [Khlestakov] stands outside space and time, he is omnipresent and eternal" (21). Chichikov also seeks to be omnipresent; like Ivan Karamazov's Devil he longs "to become incarnate, once and for all, irrevocably." His greatest "positivistic" dream is to have "a young woman and little Chichikovs in order to become incarnate once and for all, in order that all should know that he had actually existed" (52).

Merezhkovsky notes that both Khlestakov and Chichikov are associated with gossip. Gossip and the potential evil power of words is another Gogolian motif used by Sologub in *The Petty Demon*.

⁶ Emphasis added.

Bobchinsky and Dobchinsky "blurted out the word 'inspector general,'" and it started making rounds until everyone was convinced that Khlestakov actually was the inspector general (7). The characters of *Dead Souls* gossip about Chichikov, suggesting that he may be Captain Kopeikin, Napoleon, and the Anti-Christ himself. This only supports Merezhkovsky's belief that Chichikov is the Anti-Christ.

According to Merezhkovsky, Gogol's struggle with the Devil, or the Anti-Christ, was in the first place a struggle with himself, since he acknowledged in "Four Letters" that he had endowed his characters with his "own vile traits." This struggle with himself resulted in a crisis, to which the second part of "Gogol and the Devil" is devoted. There Merezhkovsky departs from the discussion of the Devil; but the second part sheds some light on the solution that Merezhkovsky offers to fight the Devil.

The second part of the study, entitled "Life and Religion," offers the following interpretation of Gogol's spiritual crisis. Gogol embodied two basic principles: the Christian one, that of the Spirit, and the pagan one, that of the Flesh. Those two principles struggled in him, and this caused Gogol's spiritual crisis and his death. Gogol would have been saved had he arrived at the *synthesis* of the two principles: Spiritualized, or Holy Flesh. The notion of Holy Flesh is the pivotal claim of Merezhkovsky's "New Christianity," the theory that he had extensively developed by the time his study on Gogol was written. It was the main ideological point of many of his articles and the two-volume study *Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (1900). In *Gogol and the Devil* Merezhkovsky propagates it once again. He writes: "from the same two features the new universal Christianity will emerge; it is the higher synthesis, the unification, the balance of these two features—the fleshly and the spiritual, the human and the Godly, the earthly and the Heavenly" (149). It is true that early Christianity had to stress the spiritual and mortify the flesh, but only because it had to establish itself and fight paganism. The time has come, however, for the real Christianity, not "the old, dark, exclusively monastic, solitary" one, but "the new, light, uniting, universal Christianity," the Christianity that will resurrect the Flesh and bring the Second Coming (148).

Gogol's tragedy, then, was that burdened by the stifling tradition of "historical Christianity" and ill-advised by Father Matvei Rzhnevsky, he could not foresee the coming of the "New Religious Consciousness," the future new Christianity. Instead of looking into the future, Gogol went all the way back to the Domostroi and the justification of serfdom:

Not having found the future in the future, he began looking for it in the present and in the past. From the white color of unification, through the black color of solitude, monasticism, to the gray color of mixing (smesheniia), of the middle, of the banality (poshlost')--this is Gogol's reverse route. (155)

The final paragraphs of the study fiercely advocate the New Christianity:

"Do not be dead, but be live souls"--this is Gogol's last will to all of us, not only to Russian society, but also to the Russian church. Some say: one cannot be alive without denying Christ. Others say: one cannot be a Christian without denying life. It is either life without Christ, or Christianity without life. We can accept neither one nor the other. We want life to be in Christ, and Christ to be in life. How shall we do it? The church did not respond to Gogol's question. Maybe then the time had not yet come. But now it has come.

Let the church respond. We ask the question. (219)

Reading *Gogol and the Devil* leaves the impression that the two parts of Merezhkovsky's study are barely connected. It is true that both deal with Gogol. It is also true that Merezhkovsky occasionally mentions the Devil (but not necessarily the Devil of *poshlost'*) in the second part, so it can be said that Gogol's struggle to reconcile the Flesh and the Spirit was the struggle with the Devil as well. Yet Merezhkovsky is clearly carried away by reaffirming the principles of his New Christianity, rather than by trying to find an appropriate conclusion for his discussion of Gogol.

It becomes possible to bring together the two parts of *Gogol and the Devil*, if we turn to Merezhkovsky's article "The Coming Ham" (Griadushchii Kham).⁷ The article appeared the same year as his study on Gogol⁸ and reveals textual parallels. Once again Merezhkovsky deals with *poshlost'* and with the New Christianity, this time in connection with Russia's social problems. Following Alexander Herzen, Merezhkovsky argues that *poshlost'* and philistinism (*meshchanstvo*)⁹ are taking over contemporary Western civilization. To define philistinism, he turns to Alexander Herzen's work "Ends and Beginnings" (Kontsy i nachala, 1862-63)¹⁰:

"Philistinism, says Herzen, is John Stuart Mill's autocratic crowd of conglomerated mediocrity, which possesses everything, a crowd without ignorance, but also without education... Mill sees that everything around him becomes banal (poshleet) and petty (mel'chaet); [...] He did not exaggerate at all when he spoke about the narrowing of the mind, energy, about the shabbying of personalities, about the ongoing diminution (mel'chani) of life, [...]"

"Christianity has become petty and has rested itself in the quiet and stony haven of the Reformation; so has the revolution become petty in the quiet and sandy haven of liberalism..."

⁷ Various translations of this title have been suggested. Bernice Rozenhal translates it as "The Approaching Beast," since "to Merezhkovsky, 'the boor' is one of the aspects of The Beast," i.e., of the Apocalypse (Bernice Glatzer Rozenhal, *Dmitrii Sergeevich Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age: The Development of the Revolutionary Mentality*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, p. 166). Harold Bedford translates it as "The Coming Ham," for he believes that Merezhkovsky uses the word *kham* in its original, Biblical sense: "it is the Biblical Ham, son of Noah and Father of Canaan" (C. Harold Bedford, *The Seeker: D.S. Merezhkovskiy*, Lawrence: The University Press of Kansas, 1975, p. 189). It is my understanding that Merezhkovsky uses the word *kham* and its derivatives in both senses: one is the rule of the vulgar crowd (*khamstvo*), while the other one is the setting in of the kingdom of positivism, which Merezhkovsky characterizes as the "Sinicization" of the West (hence, Hamism). Reviews of the article, such as Fedor Sologub's "O 'Griadushchem kham'e' D. Merezhkovskogo" (*Zolotoe runo*, 1906 (4), pp. 102-105), show that this is exactly how the title was understood by Merezhkovsky's contemporaries. Such double use of words is not untypical of Merezhkovsky. For instance, in *Gogol and the Devil*, he writes: "*potomu vse eto i v khod poshlo, chto tak poshlo*" (17), and again: "*v khod poshlo, a potomu--poshlo*" (36).

⁸ Separate edition, 1906 (Izdatel'stvo M. V. Pirozhkova); journal version in installments, *Polyarnaia Zvezda*, 1905 (No. 1, 3), *Russkoe slovo*, 1905 (No. 233).

⁹ *Meshchanstvo* will be translated here as "philistinism." In Russian, however, this word means both "philistinism" (i.e., a way of life and an ideology) and "philistines" (i.e., a social group).

¹⁰ Merezhkovsky wrongly dates it 1864.

*With such a condescending church, with such a tame revolution, the Western world began to settle down, to get balanced."*¹¹ (351)

Philistinism, according to Merezhkovsky, is the final product of Western positivism, which "in a broad sense is the affirmation of the world open to empirical experience as the only real one, and the defiance of the supra-sensual (*sverkhchuvstvennogo*) world, a defiance of the end and the beginning of the world in God, and the affirmation ... of the endless and beginningless environment impenetrable to man (*sredy nepronitsaemoi dlia cheloveka*), of the middle, the mediocrity ..." (352) Philistinism is the affirmation of materialistic values and the abandonment of spiritual ones.

For Merezhkovsky, philistinism is a "religion without God," and therefore is associated with the Devil:

You should fear one thing--slavery, and the worst of all slaveries--philistinism, and the worst of all philistinisms--boorishness (khamstva), for the slave that has acceded to the throne is the boor (kham), and the boor (kham) that has acceded to the throne is the Devil--no longer an old, fantastic one, but a new, a real Devil, who is indeed frightening, more frightening than he is painted (chem ego maliuiut), the coming Prince of the world, the Coming Ham. (375)

Philistinism and *poshlost'* are thus understood in "The Coming Ham" the same way as in *Gogol and the Devil*: their essence is mediocrity, and their origin is demonic. Some characterizations even correspond. For instance, in both works the Devil of mediocrity is associated with the defiance of all beginnings and ends. In "The Coming Ham" China, after Herzen, is considered the ultimate positivist Kingdom of Philistinism, which is yet to be established in Europe: "The Chinese are perfect yellow-faced positivists; Europeans are still not perfect white-faced Chinese. In this sense Americans are more perfect than Europeans. Here extreme West meets extreme East" (353). In *Gogol and the Devil*, when

¹¹ D.S. Merezhkovsky, *V tikhom omute. Stat'i i issledovaniia raznykh let*, Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991. Here and below references to pages are given in the text. Merezhkovsky's quotation, which is abbreviated for our purposes, is composed from different places in Herzen's article (A.I. Herzen, "Kontsy i nachala," *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 8 (Moskva: Pravda, 1975), pp. 85, 90, 92, 128).

Merezhkovsky criticizes Chichikov's materialist values, he writes: "Any 'yellow-faced' positivist disciple of Confucius, and any 'white-faced Chinese' disciple of Auguste Comte would concur with this metaphysic, which Chichikov holds to instinctively: here extreme West meets extreme East, Atlantic meets Pacific." (49-50)

But when Merezhkovsky speaks about the New Christianity in "The Coming Ham," the connection between his religious ideas and his vision of the Devil is much clearer than in *Gogol and the Devil*:

The world ruler of the darkness of this age is the philistine acceding to the throne, the Coming Ham.

This Ham has three faces in Russia.

The first, the contemporary one [...] is the face of the autocracy, the dead positivism of the bureaucracy [...]

The second, the past one [...] is the face of the Orthodoxy, which renders unto Caesar that which is God's, the church, which Dostoevsky described as "paralyzed" [...] The dead positivism of Orthodox bureaucracy serves the positivism of the state bureaucracy.

The third, the future face [...] is the face of boorishness. It is the worst of all the three faces.
(376)

To defeat the Coming Ham,

a new common idea is needed [...] and this common idea may be produced only by a religious revival along with social revival. Neither religion without the community, nor the community without religion, but a religious community¹² will save Russia [...] The Coming Ham will be defeated only by the Coming Christ.¹³ (376-377)

¹² "Religious community" (*religioznaia obshchestvennost'*), for which he sometimes substituted the term "theocracy" in his own

The conclusion of "The Coming Ham" thus reconciles the two subjects of *Gogol and the Devil*—*poshlost'* and the New Christianity. If we apply Merezhkovsky's own ideology to his study on Gogol, the connection between its two parts can be formulated as follows: Gogol struggled with the Devil of *poshlost'*, or the Coming Ham, but he could not defeat him, for he had not discovered the future New Christianity and the Coming Christ.

If we compare Merezhkovsky's and Sologub's visions of the Devil and *poshlost'* at this point, Merezhkovsky's vision will appear much more optimistic. Unlike Sologub, he does see the possibility for Russia to escape its Devil. Sologub, however, responded to Merezhkovsky's article and showed an attitude different from that expressed in *The Petty Demon*.

Sologub wrote a review of "The Coming Ham" shortly after it was published. It is notable that the review shows his familiarity with *Gogol and the Devil* as well. Sologub's choice of particular expressions, many of which are borrowed directly from the two works by Merezhkovsky, indicates that he accepts Merezhkovsky's interpretation of *poshlost'*. Moreover, it indicates his belief that with regard to the problem of *poshlost'*, "The Coming Ham" and *Gogol and the Devil* should be considered together.

Sologub agrees with Merezhkovsky that

what always seemed usual, everyday, commonly accepted and recognized is most terrifying for a poet, a philosopher, and a Christian, because it is banal (poshloe), while the devil is precisely eternal planarity, eternal banality [sic!--P.L.] [...] And this planarity, [...] the defiance of all heights and depths, this eternally gray, invariably miserable and truly dangerous devil [...] shows

non-traditional understanding, is Merezhkovsky's social realization of the idea of Holy Flesh. See, for example, "The Prophet of the Russian Revolution", *V tikhom omute* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), pp. 310-349.

¹³ In the last sentence emphasis is added.

*his face almost without a mask, [...] shouts hysterically "I! I! I!" and is going to accede to the throne himself.*¹⁴ (Sologub 1906: 102)

Sologub, however, offers his own cure for the crisis, and in the heat of argument sounds almost like a revolutionary. He believes that the aristocrat Merezhkovsky is afraid of the revolution and refuses to see that Ham is the face of Old Russia, not of Russia's future. Only he who does not believe in liberty fears Ham. Thus Merezhkovsky, according to Sologub, simply fears the future, and calls it Ham. He fears to recognize that the Coming One is a man in his complete autoaffirmation.

In this renouncement of Merezhkovsky Sologub hardly sounds like a Symbolist. He advocates the theory of progress, proposes in the Gorkian fashion that "'Man,'—that sounds proud," and even defies metaphysical evil. But in yet another article, Sologub took the notion of autoaffirmation to the extreme and began sounding like a mystical idealist again. As early as the following year, 1907, he publishes the article "Man is a Devil to Another Man" ("*Homo homini—diabolus*") where he says that there are two types of phenomena in the universe: those of "I" and those of "not-I" (*ia i ne-ia*). Not-I is the Devil, and one can defeat the Devil only by taking the route of complete autoaffirmation, for all others are the Devil:

*Can't you see how flat and gray [!--P.L.] they are? All the devils are flat and gray. All the people—could it indeed be that all of them are flat and gray? People are devils. Are they really devils? Yes, to the extent of being not-I (naskol'ko oni ne-IA).*¹⁵ (Sologub 1907: 55)

This dichotomy of "I" and "not-I" and the attribution of demonic qualities to all others bring us back to the preface to the earlier-mentioned second edition of *The Petty Demon*, which Sologub was to publish the following year: "No, my dear contemporaries, it is about you that I have written my novel." "*Homo homini—diabolus*" marked Sologub's return to pessimism.

¹⁴ Emphasis added.

¹⁵ Emphasis added.

As we have seen, Merezhkovsky's critical response to Gogol's art paralleled Sologub's fictional response. Both authors interpreted Gogolian *poshlost'* in similar aesthetic terms: they refused to treat it as a merely positivist matter and they attributed to it demonic qualities. The works of the two authors, however, show disagreement over the solution for the social problem of *poshlost'*. This Gogolian issue reflected in their works became a pretext for the argument about social change. In this argument Merezhkovsky appears to be more optimistic. Unlike Sologub, he sees the possibility for Russia to escape its Devil. To paraphrase the title of Herzen's article, Merezhkovsky saw beginnings where Sologub saw only ends.

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