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GOGOL'S *THE OVERCOAT* AS A PICARESQUE EPIC

"IN THE DEPARTMENT OF . . . but I had better not mention in what department",¹ Gogol begins, plunging the reader into the bureaucratic morass of Akaky Akakyevitch's world and then holding back on him. In the very first sentence, after whetting our appetites about this department of . . . , Gogol refuses to tell us any more about it. Instead, he generalizes about the self-aggrandizing tendencies of individuals and bureaucracies: "There is nothing in the world more readily moved to wrath than a department, a regiment, a government office, and in fact any sort of official body. Nowadays every private individual considers all society insulted in his person" (215). Then, the story of Akaky Akakyevitch is postponed long enough for Gogol to create a police-captain of an anonymous town who cannot distinguish between illusion and reality but who, because he is a person of consequence, cannot be brushed aside to let Akaky's story continue:

I have been told that very lately a petition was handed in from a police-captain of what town I don't recollect, and that in this petition he set forth clearly that the institutions of the State were in danger and that its sacred name was being taken in vain; and, in proof thereof, he appended to his petition an enormously long volume of some work of romance in which a police-captain appeared on every tenth page, occasionally, indeed in an intoxicated condition" (215).

We are presented with a petty functionary of the bureaucracy who, by virtue of the Gogolian manner, becomes the embodiment of the spirit of the institution in which he lives and has his being. Because of his obtuseness this police-captain wills anonymity on all the other characters and actions of the novel: "And so, to avoid any unpleasantness, we had better call the department of which we are speaking a certain department" (215). Thus does Gogol introduce us to Akaky's story, and thereby he makes it clear that the mode of

existence of this fictional world is not the usual realism of detail of the nineteenth-century novel.

It is true that we are given Akaky Akakyevitch's name, and, indeed, a good deal of attention is lavished on a description of how he acquired his name; but we are never told anything else about him that is factual. He is not a member of this club, does not frequent that establishment, does not live on that street or work in that neighborhood. Only at the end of the story when the ghost appears are actual streets and places introduced. All the paraphernalia of realism are denied Akaky in his human life. Akaky Akakyevitch is never located in a realistic world of space and time but exists only in a dream-like bureaucratic world. Thus, one of the ways in which it is possible to arrive at his significance in this tale is to consider the nature of the world within which he moves. And Gogol seems almost capricious about the way in which he presents this world.

From the very first sentence Gogol has given with one hand and taken back with the other. He has advanced the action and then immediately retarded it. The reader is led on a digression about shoes, or fate, or the amusements of simple people. The narrative voice forces itself upon the reader almost to the exclusion of what is happening in the novel.

To add to the confusion there is a constant shifting from the problems of eating or of copying a piece of work—between all those seemingly realistically detailed tasks that confront Akaky Akakyevitch—to the vague job of living. The narrator begins by discussing Baschmatchkin's copying, then talks about his clothes, about rubbish being flung into the street, and ends up by relating an incident that occurred to Baschmatchkin on his way home. But all these elements are juxtaposed in such a way that the reader receives the disquieting impression that Akaky Akakyevitch is copying himself home:

Whatever Akaky Akakyevitch looked at, he saw nothing anywhere but his clear, evenly written lines, and only perhaps when a horse's head suddenly appeared from nowhere just on his shoulder, and its nostrils blew a perfect gale upon his cheek, did he notice that he was not in the middle of his writing, but rather in the middle of the street (219).

Suddenly we have moved from the office to the street by means of copying. Strange vehicle indeed. As Nabokov puts it, there is something about Akaky as Gogol presents him that "gradually dissolves the clerk Akaky Akakyevitch, so that towards the end of the story his ghost seems to be the most tangible, the most real part of his being";² and the reader is left in a quandary about this

character of whom we are asked to notice such "harmless-looking details as his tiptoeing in the streets to spare his shoes or his not quite knowing whether he is in the middle of the street or in the middle of a sentence."³

It is evident that a discussion of this tale which does not take into account exactly how Gogol manages this bit of sleight-of-hand, and which does not consider the purposes of this legerdemain, is seriously in danger of doing an injustice to it. A frontal assault on this strangely oblique work would appear, however, to be useless. The reader is asked to allow himself to be led, perhaps in Gogolian fashion—by tweaking his nose cruelly in order to make him go where he is wanted—towards a position from which the nature and purposes of Gogol's technique can be assessed.

There are two aspects of this tale that can immediately be identified and, for the purposes of the discussion, treated separately. The first is its picaresque quality, as illustrated by the emphasis on the satisfaction of bodily needs, by the meanness of the fictional world which is only concerned with the satisfaction of these needs, and by the narrator's voice which comes from the world of *Lazarillo de Tormes*.⁴ The second element, more difficult to isolate and define, is represented by that police-captain and all those other typical Gogolian characters who have no part to play in the fictional world but are born and fatten themselves, as Nabokov puts it, "on the marrow of a metaphor."⁵ It is easier to consider their nature and function by suggesting their place of origin than by discussing them directly. They come from that fantasy world that was so important to Gogol, and their nature is articulated by his use of metaphor. Like so much of Gogol's work they yield their secret not to the analyst but to the sympathizer who can ferret out strange kinships by the faintest smell of potato soup.

Strangely enough it is in *Taras Bulba*, that curiously childish paean to power, that these characters (let us call them "secondary characters") have their origin. Or, rather, they originate in one of the techniques that distinguish *Taras Bulba* from the rest of Gogol's work. This novel was, as Mirsky tells us, written under the influence of Gnedich's translation of the *Iliad*.⁶ Thus, in some sense, it must be considered Gogol's attempt at an epic, though Mirsky feels that it was also suggested and influenced by the work of Scott. The happy union of the historical romance of Scott and the Homeric epic is exactly what *Taras Bulba* is. The real significance of this can be seen when it is realized that Belinsky defined the Scottian historical novel as "the epic of our time". Gogol was writing an epic for his time in *Taras Bulba* and using in it some of the techniques—notably the simile—of the Homeric epic. It is

here contended that it is precisely in the Homeric simile that these "secondary characters" originate, and that this birth has profound consequences for the characters and meaning of *The Overcoat*.

The Homeric simile is full of characters who serve to illuminate the action. Consider the description of the wound of Menelaos:

As when some Maionian woman or Karian with purple
colours ivory, to make it a cheek piece for horses;
it lies away in an inner room, and many a rider
longs to have it, but it is laid up to be a king's treasure,
two things, to be the beauty of the horse, the pride of the horseman:
so, Menelaos, your shapely thighs were stained with the colour
of blood, and your legs also and the ankles beneath them. (4, ll.141-147)⁷

Often, through the simile, we are referred to a scene that is part of the everyday world:

As when rivers in winter spate running down from the mountains
throw together at the meeting of streams the weight of their water
out of the great springs behind in the hollow stream-bed,
and far away in the mountains the shepherd hears their thunder;
such, from the coming together of men, was the shock and the shouting.
(4, ll.452-456)

The contrast between this pastoral scene and the furious battle that is raging before Troy makes us accept the heroic action more readily. This simile comes as a respite from the action of the heroes of the *Iliad*, but by containing within it energies commensurate with those being expended in the battle for Troy the simile helps us to suspend our disbelief: it engages us by referring us to a wider, more familiar world which is, however, very clearly related to the heroic action at the centre of the Homeric poem. In Homer's hands the simile also can become an escape from the heroic:

So long as it was early morning and the sacred daylight increasing,
so long the thrown weapons of both took hold and men dropped under them.
But at that time when the woodcutter makes ready his supper
in the wooded glens of the mountains, when his arms and hands have grown weary
from cutting down the tall trees, and his heart has had enough of it,
and longing for food and for sweet wine takes hold of his senses;
at that time Danaans by their manhood broke the battalions. (11, ll.85-90)

Though we escape from the heroic realm and are presented with a world that contrasts with the scene before Troy, we are brought back to the action with a shock. The last line comes as a surprise but we accept its truth because we have accepted the truth of the woodcutter's feelings and actions. This simile, therefore, like so many others, serves as an analogy—by describing something within the knowledge of us all, Homer is able to render, convincingly, the heroic action. The remarkable thing about this technique is its clarity. Both terms of the analogy are lucid. Indeed, this is Homer's strength. Were the first term of the simile confused—did we not get an absolutely clear picture of the woodcutter—we could not understand the full meaning of the action of the Danaans. Thus, it is evident that wherever Homer leads us in his similes he always returns to the central action of the battle: the simile serves to make the heroic action meaningful to us. In itself, however, the simile does not present the nature of the heroism being perpetrated at Troy. It serves always as a form of choric comment.

By contrast, in *Taras Bulba*, the epic similes serve to create the heroic action itself. Instead of the similes referring us out to the action which in itself is heroic, as is the case in the *Iliad*, it is only the similes that are heroic. It is through them that Gogol attempts to convince us that the actions of the Cossacks are worthy of praise. Here is an example:

They [the Cossacks] were looking into the future like eagles perched on a rock, scrutinizing the boundless sea with its galleys, ships and vessels of all sorts that look to them like little gulls on the water, seeing the remote narrow coastlines on which the towns show like tiny insects and the trees of the forest like blades of grass (180)⁸.

This is the first part of the simile. Here we have the heroic Cossacks who are compared to eagles, obviously the bird of heroism *par excellence*. In their future the Cossacks see the towns as "tiny insects": it is equally obvious that the towns and the affairs of men taking place in them are being depreciated. By contrast the Cossacks and their actions are raised to an impossible pitch of heroism in the second part of the simile:

Like eagles, the Cossacks scrutinized their oncoming fate. They saw the whole plain, with its untilled fields and its paths strewn with blanching bones; soon, very soon, it would be drenched with Cossack blood and covered with broken wagons, shattered swords and splintered spears (180).

And the deeds of the Cossacks, by contrast with the life of the towns (like "tiny insects") will not be forgotten.

But there is much to be said for a common grave! Not a single noble deed would be lost as a grain of powder disappears in the barrel of a gun. There would come a day when a lute player, his beard waist-long but, perhaps, still full of manhood's fire, would compose strong, resounding words to describe their deeds. And their glory would cross the world like a wild horse and whoever was born in the future would talk about them, for a strong word carries far and wide, and is like a church bell into which the maker has put much pure silver so that its clear peals should carry farther and reach towns, villages, hovels and palaces, calling everyone to join in holy prayer (180-181).

The prayer is being directed to the Cossacks, for they are the gods of this world. Homer's world could not be more different.

Of course, what Gogol has failed to understand is that if the towns are "tiny insects" then the Cossacks cannot be giants. Homer's world convinces because all the actors in it, including the characters created by his similes, are capable of heroic action; all of them share in the Greek world. Not so with *Taras Bulba*. Here, there are two worlds—one heroic, the other mean. The world of the simile—the heroic world of choice, of the defiance of circumstance and time—is intended to ennoble the mean quotidian world in which the Cossacks act. Gogol's failure is evident. *Taras Bulba* remains a childish paean to power and violence—it is a work which worships power precisely because of this split between "reality" and heroism. A highly significant indicator of this is Andrei's failure to be heroic. In a Scott novel Andrei would have been at the centre of the action. In Gogol's novel he is given the paraphernalia of heroism—he is described as a hero—but when he meets his father in battle he becomes a schoolboy. Here, he leaves the world of the heroic simile and enters the "real" world:

He was like a schoolboy who has been hit on the forehead with a ruler by a classmate, and jumping from his seat, red with rage, pursues his frightened friend, preparing to take him to pieces, *when he stumbles on the teacher who has just entered the room* (192-3; italics mine).

In the Homeric world no one can ever be reduced to this. He may lose heart but he always remains a man. When a man is killed he always remains masculine: he is not unmanned as is Andrei at the moment of his death, which immediately follows the comparison quoted above.

We can characterize, then, the two worlds of *Taras Bulba*, the epic and the petty—by saying that one is lyric and the other, more realistic, is picaresque. In this novel they do not meet. When it is time for Gogol to be heroic he plunges us directly into the lyric—into the simile; alongside this world there exists the picaresque one which is contiguous to the epic world but does not modify it. Nor does the epic action raise the picaresque to a higher level. Only the Cossacks are heroes. The Jews are killed like flies.

Now it is in this lyric world that the “secondary characters” of *The Overcoat* and *Dead Souls* are spawned. Nabokov discusses the problem thus:

The peripheral characters of his novel are engendered by the subordinate clauses of its various metaphors, comparisons and lyrical outbursts. We are faced with the remarkable phenomenon of mere forms of speech directly giving rise to live creatures. This is perhaps the most typical example of how this happens. ‘Even the weather had obligingly accommodated itself to the setting: the day was neither bright nor gloomy but of a kind of bluey-grey tint such as is found only upon the worn-out uniforms of garrison soldiers, for the rest a peaceful class of warriors except for their being somewhat inebriate on Sundays.’

It is not easy to render the curves of this life-generating syntax in plain English so as to bridge the logical or rather biological hiatus between a landscape under a dull sky and a groggy old soldier accosting the reader with a rich hiccup on the festive outskirts of the very same sentence.

Gogol’s tricks consists in using as a link the word “vprochem” (“for the rest,” “otherwise,” “d’ailleurs”) which is a connection only in the grammatical sense but mimics a logical link, the word “soldiers” alone affording a faint pretext for the juxtaposition of “peaceful”, and as soon as this false bridge of “vprochem” has accomplished its magical work these mild warriors cross over, staggering and singing themselves into that peripheral existence with which we are already familiar.⁹

It is in this world that the police-captain comes to life. With one difference, however. The link between the picaresque world of petty reality and the lyric world in which these “secondary characters” move is not accomplished by such purely linguistic devices in *The Overcoat* as it is in *Dead Souls*. In fact, this is one of the distinguishing marks between these two novels. In the former the lyric-epic world enters directly into the picaresque world and modifies it, and in turn it is modified by the picaresque world in which it exists. To understand how this occurs it is necessary to turn to the function that these “secondary characters” play in *The Overcoat*.

There is, first of all, that obtuse police-captain. Then there are the Baschmatchkins who "without exception wore boots" (216). In the hands of any other novelist Akaky's family, at the very least, would have been "realistic". Not so with Gogol. Akaky's family is born out of the necessities of a word—*baschmak*, meaning shoe—and enters the universe of *The Overcoat* by way of the narrator's digression about shoes.

This clerk's surname was Bashmatchkin. From the very name it is clear that it must have been derived from a shoe (*bashmak*); but when and under what circumstances it was derived from a shoe, it is impossible to say. Both his father and his grandfather and even his brother-in-law, and all the Bashmatchkins without exception wore boots, which they simply re-soled two or three times a year (215-16).

In terms of the movement of the narrative the name of the object leads us to the characters. In this regard it is important to note how fate seems to enter into the situation. "Perhaps it may strike the reader as a rather strange and far-fetched name, but I can assure him that it was not far-fetched at all, that the circumstances were such that it was quite out of the question to give him any other name" (216), the narrator asserts, trying to justify, it would seem, the necessity for his digression about shoes and boots.

This digression, this lyric outburst of the narrator, leads to very serious consequences for Akaky—he receives his name because of this very peculiar fate.

Akaky Akakyevitch was born towards nightfall, if my memory does not deceive me, on the twenty-third of March. His mother, the wife of a government clerk, a very good woman, made arrangements in due course to christen the child. She was still lying in bed, facing the door, while on her right hand stood the godfather, an excellent man named Ivan Ivanovitch Yeroshkin, one of the head clerks in the Senate, and the godmother, the wife of a police official, and a woman of rare qualities, Arina Semyonovna Byelobryushkov. Three names were offered to the happy mother for selection—Moky, Sossy, or the name of the martyr Hozdazat. "No," thought the poor lady, "they are all such names!" To satisfy her, they opened the calendar at another place, and the names which were turned up were: Trifily, Dula, Varahasy. "What names they all are! I really never heard such names. Varadat or Varuh would be bad enough, but Trifily and Varahasy!" They turned over another page and the names were: Pavsikahy and Vahtisy. "Well, I see," said the mother, "it is clear that it is his fate. Since that is how it is, he had better be called after his father, his father is Akaky, let the son be Akaky, too." This was how he came to be Akaky Akakyevitch (216).

It would appear that Gogol is being satiric and making a joke about how names are given, but the tone of the narrator is not such that we can say he is being satiric in any common sense. Rather, through this lyric digression, the narrator attempts to body forth the nature of the fate of his world—a picaresque world—and this fate is, fittingly, a picaresque one. It is a world limited by the poverty of its possibilities, very poor even in the cheapest of things, a name—so limited that the people of this world cannot even conceptually, even in the matter of a name, go beyond it. Here a word about the narrator is in order.

The most important character in *The Overcoat*, Akaky Akakyevitch notwithstanding, is the narrator. His voice is ubiquitous. He is the one—not that police-captain of ill fame—who cannot distinguish between the illusion which he is creating, the fanciful realm of art, and reality. He projects himself into the novel as a character: he is bound by the same rules that hold the other characters in place. One of the clearest instances of this confusion in the mind of the narrator occurs when Petrovitch, the tailor, enters. Instead of describing him or getting on with the story, the narrator decides to discuss the sorry fate of being a novelist with his audience: “Of this tailor, I ought not, of course, to say much, *but since it is now the rule that the character of every person in a novel must be completely drawn*, well, there is no help for it, here is Petrovitch too” (222; italics mine).

The narrator is no more free than Akaky Akakyevitch, who is at the mercy of that “mighty foe of all who receive a salary of four hundred roubles” (221). The narrator is also part of a great bureaucracy. If Akaky, because of the exigencies of the Petersburg winter, is forced to get an overcoat, so the narrator, because of rules of the novel, must describe Petrovitch. In this way the narrator places himself at the same level as his fictional world: he becomes the *picaro*, the rogue, telling his life story. The narrator himself is the spirit of the bureaucratic world which all the characters of *The Overcoat* inhabit. He is a clerk in the institution of authors and is as much at the mercy of the circumstances and rules of his bureaucratic world as Akaky Akakyevitch is of his. This is evident from the very beginning of the tale; it is not upon Akaky but upon the narrator that the police-captain takes effect. The police-captain wills anonymity on the characters since he causes the narrator to fear that the story may have serious repercussions for himself in the world of the persons of consequence. The life of the narrator has been sucked into the fictional world of the story and has modified it.

At this point it is possible to return to the distinction, already made, between lyric and picaresque elements. The police-captain emerges from the

lyric world of simile and changes the picaresque world of the narrator. He deprives it of its names—one of the most important elements in any picaresque tale. The lyric—the simile—is not separated from the picaresque world, as in *Taras Bulba*, but is taken into the picaresque world. The narrator creates the lyric world. However, since the narrator himself is part of the picaresque bureaucracy, the lyric world is part and parcel of the picaresque world as well; for the narrator cannot, as we have seen, distinguish between reality and art. The lyric world becomes the narrator's effusion, his thought, about his picaresque world. But on another level—that of the teller of the tale—Akaky Akakyevitch is also a result of the narrator's thought-processes and thus he is placed, through a picaresque character, at the same level as the lyric, the epic world. This brings us back to the question of fate and its significance for the meaning of *The Overcoat*.

In the *Iliad*, fate is something the hero chooses. Achilles accepts his fate when he kills Hector. He is defined as a hero because, unlike Hector, he has been allowed a choice. By contrast, *The Overcoat* does not seem to have a hero who is allowed a choice. This, it would appear, is precisely what the narrator means by his long discussion of fate and of how Akaky received his name:

"Well, I see," said the mother, "it is clear that it is his fate. Since that is how it is, he had better be called after his father, his father is Akaky, let the son be Akaky, too." This was how he came to be Akaky Akakyevitch (216).

Fate here becomes the necessity of circumstance. There is nothing anyone can do but follow the path he is forced into by fate—i.e., bureaucratic circumstance—in this novel. This, as we have seen, is the narrator's problem. This is the nature of the world of *The Overcoat*:

So flowed on the peaceful life of a man who knew how to be content with his fate on a salary of four hundred roubles, and so perhaps it would have flowed on to extreme old age, had it not been for the various calamities that bestrew the path through life, not only of titular, but even of privy, actual court and all other councillors, even those who neither give counsel to others nor accept it themselves (221).

This is precisely the opposite of the Homeric world in which Achilles is a hero because he can rise above this fate, above circumstance, and perform a deed which makes him, for a moment, independent of time and human experience.

By choosing to kill Hector, though he knows that in so doing he chooses to die himself, for the one event is inextricably linked to the other, Achilles chooses *kudos*. His act is heroic because his deed involves his own ultimate destruction and, because he knows this and yet chooses to act, Achilles is freed from the petty binding details of human experience.

Now it is obvious that the fate which the narrator presents as ruling the lives of the characters of *The Overcoat* is one that forces people to take certain actions in life and allows them no choice. But instead of leaving us in the picaresque world in which this fate reigns, Gogol takes us into the Homeric world—the origin of his lyric world—and thus ennobles the picaresque. Simply calling the circumstances of the picaresque world by the name of fate ennobles it. This also creates a tension between the word and the reality which it describes, and it is this that the plot must resolve.

The new overcoat which is forced on Akaky Akakyeveitch is, like his name, the product of circumstances beyond his control. He can only manipulate himself to fit those circumstances, and he sends his linen to the wash less frequently and goes hungry at night. He bears these privations because the new overcoat becomes his

spiritual nourishment, for he carried even in his thoughts the idea of his future overcoat. His whole existence had in a sense become fuller, as though he had married, as though some other person were present with him, as though he were no longer alone, but an agreeable companion had consented to walk the path of life hand in hand with him, and that companion was no other than the new overcoat with its thick wadding and its strong, durable lining. He became, as it were, more alive, even more strong-willed, like a man who has set before himself a definite aim. Uncertainty, decision, in fact all the hesitating and vague characteristics vanished from his face and his manners. At times there was a gleam in his eyes, indeed, the most bold and audacious ideas flashed through his mind. Why not really have marten on the collar? (229)

In the process, however, the reader is introduced to Akaky's mind. We enter into it and partake of this lyric outburst. Akaky has had a new vision of himself—one in which he is a hero.

The theft of the overcoat changes the situation. Akaky is given what amounts to a Homeric situation. To recover his coat he must act and manipulate circumstance, not himself. The coat has become his new idea of himself—his self-made ego—and so long as he retains even a memory of it he can act. In the realm of his lyric world the acquisition of his coat made him a hero in his own mind. He makes a decision to see the Person of Consequence. With this action Akaky confronts the circumstances of his world.

The Person of Consequence has just recently received his promotion. Previously, he was a person of no consequence. But now that he has received this promotion he becomes very strict about rank and administrative order. The rank of general has completely turned his head: the new circumstances of his position have put him "quite at a loss how to behave" (240). It is obvious that the Person of Consequence is circumstance itself. He is an onion of circumstance—peel him layer by layer and you will find nothing at the core. He is the essence of the picaresque world of caricature.

Akaky Akakyevitch enters to ask the Person of Consequence to help him recover his overcoat. The latter refuses Akaky's request, pulling rank on him, and terrifying Akaky: "Do you know to whom you are speaking? do you understand who I am? do you understand that, I ask you?" (242). When Akaky staggers out "positively terrified" (243), the Person of Consequence preens himself before the mirror of his self-esteem, for his value, within the world of circumstance, has been enhanced by this exploit:

The Person of Consequence, pleased that the effect had surpassed his expectations and enchanted at the idea that his words could even deprive a man of consciousness, stole a sideways glance at his friend to see how he was taking it, and perceived not without satisfaction that his friend was feeling very uncertain and even beginning to be a little terrified himself (243).

He has established a secure place for himself in the world of circumstance. The Person of Consequence has stripped Akaky of his coat-confidence, and without his coat Akaky catches a fatal chill. Yet, after Akaky left him the Person of Consequence "felt something not unlike regret" (247). When Akaky dies the Person of Consequence is reproached by his conscience and "depressed all day" (247). To overcome his feeling of remorse the Person of Consequence decides to visit his mistress, one Karolina Ivanovna. At this point, as we have seen when Akaky thinks about the new overcoat (almost as if the new overcoat were his wife or mistress), we enter into the mind of the Person of Consequence. We catch him thinking. In the Gogolian universe thought causes something unpleasant—in *The Overcoat* thought is always part of the lyric-epic world. And the Person of Consequence enters this world. Since he is rather stupid his thoughts are vague:

He remained in that agreeable frame of mind, sweeter to a Russian than anything that could be invented, that is, when one thinks of nothing while thoughts come into the mind of themselves, one pleasanter than the other, without the labor of following them or looking for them (248).

Immediately following this reverie, the Person of Consequence is robbed of his

overcoat. Here I follow Leon Stilman's reading.¹⁰ He argues very convincingly that the same person who robbed Akaky Akakyevitch has also perpetrated this crime. What is of interest here, in any case, is the reaction of the Person of Consequence. He looks upon the deed as an act of retribution for his shabby treatment of the poor clerk. In the mind of the Person of Consequence it is Akaky who has robbed him.

As a result, the Person of Consequence is thrown into a state of confusion, he almost dies of fright and, contrary to his earlier intention, orders the coachman to drive home with all haste. But this incident has a greater significance. It humanizes this caricature—this Person of Consequence. Even before his coat was stolen he had felt remorse over his shabby treatment of Akaky, but now his feelings produce a consequence. Up to this point in the tale the Person of Consequence has only had the right feelings—never before had he acted upon them:

Indeed it happened far more rarely that he said to his subordinates, "How dare you? do you understand who I am?" and he never uttered these words at all until he had first heard all the rights of the case (249).

What has happened? The thought-processes of the Person of Consequence have entered into the picaresque world. He has confused the two worlds—of thought and reality—and has taken a robbery for an act of retribution. All this has happened because Akaky's coat-confidence enabled him, like any epic hero, to brave the circumstances of his world. Now in any other novel but this one this incident and this confusion would merely be the occasion for a good laugh at the expense of the Person of Consequence. However, because of the position of the narrator, who also confuses reality and illusion, thought and the picaresque world, the reader is in exactly the same position as the Person of Consequence. To all intents and purposes it appears, then, that Akaky has come back from the grave and stolen the coat from the Person of Consequence. Thus, he has performed a heroic action. He has returned and reduced the man of circumstance to a state of uncontrolled fear: he has had his revenge on bureaucracy. The outcome of all this is that the man of circumstance becomes transformed into something resembling a human being. Thus, in the reader's mind, Akaky Akakyevitch has done something heroic, for he has acted upon his world and changed the nature of this picaresque world. In doing this he has become liberated from this world and gained the stature of a hero.

Because of the position of the narrator with regard to the fictional world of *The Overcoat*, the lyric world comes to have important consequences for its picaresque world of circumstance. The nature of the picaresque world has

been changed by the lyric world—by the world of thought—which, we have seen, originated in *Taras Bulba* with the idea of the epic. Thus, when we return to the incident in which Akaky receives his name we reinterpret the idea of fate differently. It has become a truly Homeric idea, or rather, it has become so Homeric an idea as to transform the picaresque world which it describes into an epic world. In this sense, then, *The Overcoat* is a picaresque epic.

NOTES

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1. Nikolay Gogol, *The Overcoat*, translated by Constance Garnett, in *Six Great Modern Short Novels* (New York, 1954), p. 215. This and all subsequent page references to *The Overcoat* are to this edition.
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (London, 1947), pp. 147-8.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-8.
4. This is the first of these peculiarly Spanish tales which appeared anonymously in 1554. In *The Literature of the Spanish People from Roman Times to the Present* (New York, 1958), Gerald Brenan says of *Lazarillo* (and the picaresque writers in general) that "they strip life of its pleasant coverings and show us the naked struggle that goes on underneath But the peculiar merit of *Lazarillo* is that it does not do this by broadening its view to include disagreeable and sordid details . . . but by concentrating it so as to get a greater penetration We quickly acclimatize ourselves to a world where bread is hard to come by and eating an exceptional event" (p. 170).
5. *Op. cit.*, p. 85.
6. D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature* (New York, 1958), p. 156.
7. Homer, *The Iliad*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1949).
8. Nikolai Gogol, *Taras Bulba*, translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew, in *The Diary of a Madman and Other Stories* (New York, 1960). Page references to *Taras Bulba* are to this edition.
9. Nabokov, *op. cit.*, pp. 147-8.
10. Leon Stilman, in an afterword to *Diary of a Madman and Other Stories*, concurs in this reading: "In 'actual fact' he is robbed by the same man who robbed Akaky" (231).