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## Death by Delusion: Representations of Mental Illness in Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov

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Death by Delusion: Representations of Mental Illness in Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Abstract

This paper is dedicated to an analysis of representation of mental illness in 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> century works of Russian writers: Fyodor Dostoevsky (*The Double*), Nikolai Gogol (“Nevsky Prospect”, “The Overcoat”, and “The Diary of a Madman”), and Vladimir Nabokov (*Despair*). My analysis is primarily focused on the approaches these authors employ to represent mental illness. When I began my research, I also set out to trace the evolution of portrayals of mental illness in Russian literature, from one of its founders, Alexander Pushkin, to Nabokov as an émigré writer living in Germany during the 1930s and representing the literary tradition in exile. Underlying these approaches, my goal was to discover whether characters with mental illness were portrayed as completely shut in from the world around them, or whether the representation of their existence within society was determined by how Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky perceived the cultural, ideological, and social conflicts of their time. I have also attempted to answer questions about the peculiarities of narrative structures in works depicting mental illness. Does a story about “madness” told by a first-person narrator (*Despair*) differ from one told from the third-person point of view (*The Double*; “The Overcoat”)? By examining storylines, images, motifs, characterization, and dialogue, which aided Russian writers in mapping out behavior patterns of mentally ill characters as well as their social circumstances, I was able to effectively study Russian literary representations of mental illness as the effects of “poor folks” living in a socially repressive, unforgiving environment, such mid-19<sup>th</sup> century St. Petersburg. At the end of my project, I have created a summary of a literary trajectory, from Gogol to Nabokov, which points out the types of characters who faced “death by delusion” in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian prose.



For my parents.



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## Introduction

In a letter to his brother, Fyodor Dostoevsky ironically described Mr. Golyadkin from *The Double* as “a terrible scoundrel”, saying that “he refuses to move forward, pretending that he’s not ready yet, that for the present he’s on his own, he’s all right, nothing is the matter...He’s just like everyone else, he’s nothing special, just like everyone else...”<sup>1</sup> While he was being sarcastic, Dostoevsky highlighted a key feature of many characters with mental illness in the Russian literary tradition: their proclivity for living inside in a self-created world, stubbornly believing in the legitimacy, convenience, and potentiality of their isolated position. Russian novelists would repeatedly explore the paradoxical relationships between “madmen” and “the possessed” with their social milieu, transforming the turmoil within one’s inner world into more tangible conflicts: one’s obsession with the “Pharaoh” card game leading to an accidental death of an old countess; one’s fear of being pursued by another person who looks exactly the same becoming a scandalous public disintegration of a civil servant, one’s refuted love for a beautiful woman sliding into an opium-induced nightmare. Dostoevsky’s Mr. Golyadkin, Gogol’s Piskarev, Poprishchin, and Akaky Akakievich, followed by Vladimir Nabokov’s Hermann, each possess a distorted view of themselves and the world around them. Their opinions are often self-aggrandizing and disparaging of others, but, as the writers who introduced them to the world suggest, their “madness” stems not from a visible and diagnosable ailment – it might or might not be present – but from an obsession or spiritual need. As this project shows, the ideas of mentally challenged characters in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian prose often represent an *idée fixe*, or a belief so firm and unshakeable that it can gradually disable the believer. The evolution of the *idée fixe* in the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov is remarkably similar – from a young man’s strong wish for something to his complete undoing – but there are different ways

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 211

in which this or that literary protagonist deals with his passion. In “The Overcoat”, for example, Akaky Akakievich dedicates all of his spare money and resources towards purchasing a new overcoat. But once his object of fixation disappears and he has nothing left to obsess over, he dies. After he surprisingly returns to St. Petersburg as a ghost, Akaky begins to terrorize the city by stealing overcoats off the shoulders of privy and titular councillors alike. But why? Is it only because the otherworldly Akaky wants his revenge? Or, perhaps, Gogol sees St. Petersburg as a metaphysical city where the uncanny rules? And what if Akaky’s return to St. Petersburg is meant to represent another, eerily “victorious” side of mental illness? As I demonstrate in Chapter 2 of this work, there is no direct answer to this question. I argue that Gogol gives us a rare opportunity to see a “madman” rise over their obdurate surroundings, being liberated in death from the oppression that earlier fostered his madness. In other words, this meek victim of a brutal bureaucratic system, pushed to his boundaries by the absurd notion of a government employee having to religiously save and thrift in order to purchase a new coat, dies only to return and make the beneficiaries of the system face his wrath. By many measures, Akaky is the most “sane” out of all the madmen in Russian literature I will soon analyze, and his quest to acquire a new overcoat is somewhat tame when compared to the more deviant madness of Nabokov’s Hermann. Nonetheless, he fits into a larger canon of how Russian writers represent mentally afflicted characters who are perpetually stuck in their delusions. As I will demonstrate in my analysis of the three major works of fiction dedicated to the theme of mental illness among Russian “poor folk”: civil servants, destitute artists, or émigré merchants, each character, regardless of his station in life, has a propensity for sticking to their wild beliefs to the point of losing their sanity. That, in turn, leads to their eventual demise.

Although the goal of this project is to compare narrative features, such as composition, plotlines, voice, dialogue, and character arcs, which Russian writers utilize when portraying mental illness, I choose to pursue it through the analysis of the characters' social environment, including their relationship with the city of St. Petersburg. In a more general sense, the study of madness in literature can focus not only on characters's ostensible behavior, but also on their mental state in relation to the space they inhabit, social circles, work environment, and the political world in which they exist. As authors of a perceptive paper on representation of mental illness in literature suggest,

A psychopathological, contextualist approach would associate represented madness with pathological labels such as psychosis, schizophrenia, and paranoia on the one hand, and social topics such as abnormality, alienation, and exclusion on the other hand. If we follow this path, the literary text leads us into the psychology of author and character, and into the socio-cultural patterning of (in)sanity.<sup>2</sup>

In my approach to analyzing literary madness, I maintain that characters who express symptoms of this madness are not completely on their own in the world. This is why one of the tasks I set for myself in this project is to explain how Poprishchin and Piskarev, Golyadkin and Hermann interact and co-exist with others, be it a doctor, newspaper advertisement clerk, group of prostitutes, or a cohort of office workers. I explain how Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov portray their “madmen” not completely cut off from the real world, but, rather, with their symptoms developing as a *reaction* to the milieu they inhabit. While doing so, I pay attention to the fictional details outlining the characters' behavior (their internal monologue, speech patterns, evident delusions, etc.) not in an effort to diagnose a specific illness, but instead to conduct a more thorough analysis of character's impact on his environment and vice versa.

In reading *The Double*, for example, I demonstrate how Golyadkin – a civil servant of modest rank in St. Petersburg – cannot be separated from the city where he lives and works.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernaerts, Lars, Luc Herman, and Bart Vervaeck. “Narrative Threads of Madness.” *Style* 43, no. 3 (2009): 285

Dostoevsky's novella describes how, after he encounters an exact replica of himself, his alleged "double", the hero's life is uprooted. I study the main "symptoms" of Golyadkin's descent into madness, such as his rambling speech patterns, in order to show that they represent the maddening effects of the hero's navigation of a society with an disproportionately strong focus on rank and promotion, the society which has a cruel, dehumanizing influence on the vulnerable and downtrodden. My exploration of Gogol's portrayal of insanity in "Nevsky Prospect," "The Overcoat," and "The Diary of a Madman" leads me to a deeper understanding of the link between the strict social hierarchies of St. Petersburg and the disruption of egos. The writers who told these tales of mental disorders did not have access to the knowledge of symptoms and their treatments that we may have a firm knowledge of now. That said, their descriptions and in-depth contemplations of madness are nevertheless insightful, artistically veritable, and compassionate.

The widespread presence of madness in literature has made me question the devices Russian authors have used to represent it. I am especially interested in the question of reliability of a narrator, as well as with the narrators' self-perception and egos. For me, the Bakhtinian notion of the "truth" of the character is very important. I also rely on Michel Foucault's analysis of representability of mental illness in literature. "The symbol of madness," Foucault writes,<sup>3</sup> "will henceforth be that mirror which, without reflecting anything real, will secretly offer the man who observes himself in it the dream of his own presumption. Madness deals...with man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive" (27). I find it very useful how Foucault details two key features of literary madness. His pointing out the achieving of a "dream", specifically of one's "presumption", for me, is a direction in which a literary critic can move in order to figure out and analyze the crux of a character's *idée fixe*. In my study of Piskarev, for example, this means that the prostitute he falls in love with should possess qualities he values

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. Vintage, 1988: 27

most in a wife, rather than in an idealized beloved, a muse. As for Nabokov's Hermann, achieving his dream – carrying out a “perfect murder” and walking away with a handsome sum of life insurance money – would prove his exact resemblance to Felix, thus establishing Hermann's legacy as a great artist and a “genius”.

The key words that Foucault employs are “without reflecting anything real”. Literary portrayals of madness let us see the skewed perceptions of the mentally ill, in which a veritable image of reality is replaced with a deluded reflection of the world. This is why, firmly believing in their false ideas, the mad characters I analyze below comfortably fit into the mold that Foucault has laid out. Their primary concern is not to say anything directly pertaining to society, but instead to speak about their personal journeys towards a legitimate reckoning between their illusions and the truth. I explain throughout all three chapters that, by looking into their characters' madness-cracked mirrors, the Russian authors are able to construct images which themselves are purported in often grandiose ways, while others are reduced to objects of their desire.

Narrative structures of literary works can serve as an ideal tool for a writer to represent the development of a characters' *idée fixe*. I aim to analyze how authors juxtapose a character's view of what is real with their delusional states. I am especially interested in narrative voices, specifically those of first-person narrators who are unreliable. They can allow writers to severely distort our view of the plot, which is what happens in Nabokov's *Despair*. Such a narrator not only possesses an *idée fixe*, but is also able to appropriate the narrative in a way which justifies his fixation and disputes evidence that runs counter to his beliefs. Instead of simply narrating what happened, unreliable storytellers use the story as a means of glorifying themselves, their abilities, or their actions. This is the case both in Gogol's “The Diary of a Madman” and

Nabokov's *Despair*. In Gogol's tale, Poprishchin veers away from recounting his daily life and begins to believe that he is the rightful King of Spain who has been taken to Madrid to be crowned, not arrested in St. Petersburg. In *Despair*, Hermann believes he possesses the necessary gifts to tell about his delusion and make his crime appear "artistic." He continually insists that both his murder of the "double," Felix, and the novel he writes about it will create a lasting legacy for him. Each character occupies the roles of both their own narrator and the "madman" in their respective stories. Both Gogol and Nabokov twist their stories to make their delusions more believable for the reader.

In this project, I seek to elucidate the subtle and overt ways in which individual main characters of Gogol's, Dostoevsky's and Nabokov's works represent both a larger tradition in Russian literary history, as well as add their own unique twist to the concept of literary madness. I point out, for example, that Dostoevsky inherited some of Gogol's devices, such as interior monologue and rambling speech of protagonists, while Nabokov's hero is named after Pushkin's Hermann from "The Queen of Spades." That said, I also demonstrate how the Gogolian and Pushkinian tradition of portraying mental illness does not remain unchanged in Russian literature by explaining why Nabokov's character is far more sinister than Pushkin's.

In the first chapter, I read *The Double* as an ambiguous portrayal of a man's spiritual and social undoing that problematizes mental illness. I analyze Golyadkin's speech patterns, internal monologue, the role of polyphony, and the third-person narrator's role in Dostoevsky's representation of a gradual splitting of oneself into two. Through this argument I will also analyze how Golyadkin's apparent madness is not only a battle for rank or status, but also as a means of preserving his moral compass.<sup>4</sup> Ultimately, I explore how Dostoevsky's portrayal of

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<sup>4</sup> Dryzhakova, Elena, and Ona Renner-Fahey. "Madness as an Act of Defence of Personality in Dostoevsky's *The Double*." In *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, edited by Angela Brintlinger and Ilya Vinitsky, 59–74. University of Toronto Press, 2007.



Golyadkin's mental illness is incorporated within the canon of Russian literary "madmen," forming a bridge between Pushkin, Gogol and Nabokov. In the second chapter, I discuss Gogol as one of Dostoevsky's main influences and explain how his *St. Petersburg Tales* (1842) highlight the maddening effect of the city's stiff bureaucracy, particularly on those who work to ensure their survival.<sup>5</sup> By comparing how Piskarev, Akaky Akakievich, and Poprishchin go mad – each in a slightly different way – I translate the fact that they all live in the same maddening place into a study of the personalized nature of their experience. One of the arguments I make is that Gogol's characters are confronted with the pressure of fitting neatly into their roles as civil servants (or, in the rare case of Piskarev, as an artist), and instead of peacefully existing in their own delusional worlds, end up being forced to act against the isolating and maddening nature Russia's unforgiving "Northern Capital." While discussing Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Despair* in my third chapter, I focus on the legacy of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature in the work about mental illness produced away from Russia, in emigration. I discuss how Nabokov's first-person narrator, Hermann, treats the novel as his own literary project in order to turn the murder of his supposed "double" into a work of art. I also focus on the relationship between Hermann as the narrator/pseudo-author and Nabokov as the real author in order to understand the role of different narratorial voices and presences in the work.<sup>6</sup> My main interest in writing the chapter has been Nabokov's portrayal of a moral justification of crime by someone who becomes mentally ill after murdering an innocent man and presuming his actions to be a feat of masterful artistry.

I never try to analyze literary characters in order to diagnose them, or to understand them strictly as archetypes within a literary tradition, or to make grand claims about Russian literature as a whole. Nor do I aim to discuss "madness" in the entire opus of Gogol, Dostoevsky, and

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<sup>5</sup> Davydov, Sergei. "Gogol's Petersburg." *New England Review* (1990-) 27, no. 1 (2006): 122–27.

<sup>6</sup> Kimney, John. "The Three Voices of Nabokov's 'Despair.'" *Russian Language Journal / Русский Язык* 34, no. 119 (1980): 101–8.

Nabokov. Instead, I focus on the subtle literary moves which point to madness as a trope of displacement in society which these authors help shape in some of their “tales.” I am aware that Dostoevsky wrote other short works in which the presence of mental illness or an obsessive fixation drives the plot forward, but I do not have an opportunity to deliberate on *Notes from the Underground*, *The Gambler*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot* here. I also do not address Gogol’s “The Portrait” and “The Carriage,” also included in *St. Petersburg Tales*, or novels by Nabokov such as *The Luzhin Defense*, *Pale Fire*, or *Look at the Harlequins!*, in which the main character or narrator experiences persistent delusions. In choosing to analyze *The Double*, “The Overcoat”, “Nevsky Prospect”, “The Diary of a Madman”, and *Despair*, I attempt to approach to the stories which have already been thoroughly analyzed from a comparative perspective but also from the perspective of so-called “Petersburg literature studies.”<sup>7</sup> I am interested not only in how each of the characters occupy a place that is set aside for them in Russian literature, but also how they occupy a unique space within their own narrative. Outside of the realm of normalcy, characters such as Poprishchin and Mr. Golyadkin find themselves retreating into their own self-created worlds; this retreat is characterized not precisely by selfishness, but, rather, by self-defense. Instead of being able to recognize that what they believe is unreasonable or “mad”, the madmen I analyze possess an inability to see beyond their cracked self-constructed mirrors, mirrors which alter their own visages as well as others in their minds. I argue that, in order to represent this phenomenon, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and Nabokov each employ altered speech patterns, character-narrator hybrids, incoherently rambling inner monologues, and thematic features which reveal the protagonists’ fixations on rank and their station in life. The narrative features signal to the reader that there is something slightly *off* about the character, something unhealthy and possibly even dangerous to themselves and others. For me, the way Gogol,

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<sup>7</sup> Vladimir Toporov. *St. Petersburg and the St. Petersburg Text of Russian Literature*. St. Petersburg, 2003.

Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Nabokov illuminate what exactly motivates their creations endowed with mental afflictions, whether it be feelings of isolation, insignificance, a grandiose sense of self, or a desire to quickly advance to the next station in life, is the most interesting feature of the literary works I have set out to explore.

## CHAPTER 1

Polyphony and Confusion: A Case Study of Mr. Golyadkin in Dostoevsky's *The Double*

Following the success of his 1846 work *Poor Folk*, Fyodor Dostoevsky soon published his “Petersburg *poema*,” *The Double*<sup>8</sup>. Its apparently dull protagonist is Mr. Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin, a middle-aged and unmarried civil servant of comfortable means. The story begins on a gray morning in November, a day on which nothing especially interesting is supposed to happen. But once we are more acquainted with Mr. Golyadkin, we quickly realize that this is no ordinary day, and that he has a list of fake errands to run. To begin with, our hero has just made arrangements for a rented carriage, borrowed livery for his manservant, Petrushka, and is planning to make stops at all of the most noticeable and fashionable places in St. Petersburg. But why? You could say it was merely for attention, or to prove that he is worth being a member of the highest classes, that his ambition needs to be checked, etcetera. However, it goes a bit deeper than that: Golyadkin is clearly in a highly volatile state of mind, and all his actions, encounters, and dialogues testify to his being a man on the verge of a momentous breakdown.

In this chapter, I aim to analyze Dostoevsky's portrayal of Golyadkin's mental illness. By examining the changes in the character's speech patterns and habits throughout Dostoevsky's novella, I explore the author's approaches to depicting the deterioration of Golyadkin's mental health and the implications this descent into madness has for the character's social life and self-understanding. As we see in the text, Golyadkin begins the narrative with a relatively clear head, and even seems to be excited for the day he has planned out. But once we see him interact

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<sup>8</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, “The Double” & “The Gambler”. Transl. Larissa Volokhonsky and Richard Pevear (New York: Penguin Random House, 2007).

with his doctor Kretsyan Ivanovich, run into his two colleagues out on Nevsky Prospekt, ramble to himself upon being embarrassed at Klara Olsufyevna's party, and, in time, react to the presence of his "double", we begin to realize that Golyadkin suffers from . Dostoevsky's engagement with the Russian literary tradition of portraying insanity and his personal interest in this subject, caused by his own afflictions and those of others in his family, lead to the creation of a plot which hinges upon incoherence and provides the closure at the end without actually telling us where Golyadkin ends up, how he is treated there, and whether or not he was ever able to receive the care that he clearly needs.

Literary criticism is not a diagnostic tool, and drawing conclusions about a character's mental state based only on what we read in the story is not fully accurate, but we can still learn much through the scope of storytelling and character arcs through observable signs of mental illness. One way to do this is by looking at speech patterns, which reveal a lot about the character's state of mind. Authors frequently utilize them to indicate distress or try to tell the reader more than the character being studied wants to share. For example, in an effort to diagnose one of Russian literature's most notable madmen (and inspiration for Golyadkin), Poprishchin from Nikolai Gogol's *The Diary of a Madman*, Eric Lewin Altschuler focuses on the speech of the character who suffers from bouts of mania: "Mania can produce delusions such as that one is a king...Poprishcin says that he was in a crowd but did not point out to anybody that they were in the presence of a king. A manic patient would perhaps take such an opportunity to make a grand pronouncement" (Altschuler, 1476)<sup>9</sup>. In medical terms, the DSM-V (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) lists traits to look out for in someone who may show

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<sup>9</sup> Altschuler, Eric Lewin. "One Of The Oldest Cases Of Schizophrenia In Gogol's 'Diary Of A Madman.'" *BMJ: British Medical Journal* 323, no. 7327 (2001): 1476.

signs of suffering from schizophrenia, such as hallucinations, delusions, disorganized speech<sup>10</sup>. The same rhetorical approach is applicable to *The Double* as well. “Grand pronouncements” are made by Golyadkin during his meeting with Krestyan Ivanovich, his two colleagues, and in his monologues to himself. They serve as the foundation for Golyadkin’s own social philosophy: to disdain those who put on airs, who take “roundabout paths”, and to go completely one’s own way. He constantly asserts this to others and himself, until he is so convinced of his fidelity and merit that he begins to imagine another man that looks just like him. The outcome of what used to be “merely words” is dramatic. Golyadkin’s alleged namesake swoops in to take his entire life away until he’s eventually carted off to a mental hospital.

Despite Dostoevsky’s obvious affinity for Gogol’s work, there is a difference in how the two each portray madness. In Gogol’s story Poprishchin slowly goes insane and becomes more and more convinced that he is the rightful King of Spain – so convinced, in fact, that he ends the story in a mental hospital.<sup>11</sup> Golyadkin, conversely, begins with the air of grandiosity and descends into madness as his philosophies lead to a warped sense of self and worth. It is true that work on insanity as represented in Russian literature by other scholars, such as Elena Dryzhakova, can help us analyze Golyadkin’s dreadful journey by providing a backdrop for comparison as well as a useful framework for analyzing our hero’s ailment.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, it is also important to remember, Dostoevsky’s own methods are unique and require such approaches for exploring them as Bakhtin suggests in his *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*:

The hero interests Dostoevsky not as some manifestation of reality that possesses fixed and specific socially typical or individually characteristic traits, nor as a specific profile assembled out of unambiguous and objective features which, taken together, answer the

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<sup>10</sup> [DSM-5 Criteria: Schizophrenia - Florida Center for Behavioral Health](#)

<sup>11</sup> Nikolai Gogol. “The Diary of a Madman.” In *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*. New York: Penguin Random House, 1998.

<sup>12</sup> Elena Dryzhakova and Ona Renner-Fahey. “Madness as an Act of Defence of Personality in Dostoevsky’s *The Double*.” In *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*. Ed. by Angela Britlinger and Ilya Vinitsky. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. Pp. 59–74.

question “Who is he?” No, the hero interests Dostoevsky as a *particular point of view on the world and on oneself*, as the position enabling a person to interpret and evaluate his own self and his surrounding reality. What is important to Dostoevsky is not how his hero appears in the world but first and foremost how the world appears to the hero, and how the hero appears to himself.<sup>13</sup>

Bakhtin’s emphasis on Golyadkin representing a “particular point of view” highlights what makes Dostoevsky’s writing so special. As he explains, Dostoevsky wasn’t interested in pushing a single idea or philosophy to his readers or by trying to sway them in any direction. Instead, he created characters who sought to be completely their own people, and as we see with Golyadkin, sometimes these free spirits ended up losing their sense and being shunned away from society.

The plot of *The Double* hinges upon the device of confusion: is Golyadkin Jr. really there? Is Golyadkin Sr. insane or a victim of intrigues and slander? This type of deliberate narrative ambivalence is a result of Dostoevsky’s affinity for Gogol’s work, including his short story “The Nose.” Gogol’s protagonist, Major Kovalev, wakes up without his nose and begins to see it walking around in an officer’s uniform. Just like in *The Double*, trying to determine whether or not Kovalev’s nose is really walking around in an officer’s uniform is tough. Is this simply a comic trick on Gogol’s behalf, or is it meant to reflect Kovalev’s mental illness, just like with Golyadkin and his double?

Gogol’s “St. Petersburg Tales” feature confused speech and rambling madmen, but Dostoevsky took Gogol’s twisted rhetorical patterns and gave them a fresh form. What makes *The Double* so unique is its feature of polyphony. The narrator’s voice, Golyadkin’s voice, and even that of the double himself all take on forms that do not stem directly from Dostoevsky the author. As Bakhtin says, the characters’ and narrators’ “ideology” derives their own position as

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<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Edited by Caryl Emerson. University of Minnesota Press, 1984. P. 47.

well as from their interactions with one another. Dostoevsky wishes to slow down the reader's perception that Golyadkin is descending into insanity. This is why he positions his narrator to observe Golyadkin's actions from a third-person vantage point without remaining completely omniscient. The narrator passes his own judgements on Golyadkin and all of his adventures, but at times he speaks so similarly to Golyadkin that it is hard to determine who is who, which leads us to doubt the verity of the plot and constantly question the "sanity" of Golyadkin's musings. As Bakhtin says, this authorial/narratorial perspective and our awareness of its importance are crucial to our understanding of Dostoevsky's unique choices:

In *The Double*, the characteristic trait of consciousness and speech that we examined above is expressed with a sharpness and clarity not found in any other work of Dostoevsky's. The tendencies already embedded in Makar Devushkin are developed here with extraordinary boldness and consistency, carried to their conceptual limits, on the basis of the same deliberately primitive, simple, and crude material.<sup>14</sup>

As Bakhtin says, Dostoevsky experimented with dialogue in a similar way to *The Double* in *Poor Folk*, specifically with the main character, Makar Devushkin. But in his later work, Dostoevsky takes a leap; he decides to create a character that is entirely his own person, will not believe anything besides his own social creed, and if any of his "enemies" tries to get in his way, then he'll destroy them. This is not what really happens, but Dostoevsky skillfully encourages the reader that what Golyadkin thinks is the case can be true. The self-delusion, in its turn, leads to the character's downfall.

Doubling is not found in Gogol's shorter works to the extent that it is in the story of Golyadkin, as Gogol's preoccupation with mental illness mainly examines its other aspects, such as grandiose delusions ("The Diary of a Madman"), anxiety ("The Nose"), and depression ("Nevsky Prospekt"). *The Double's* focus on the character's speech patterns takes its inspiration from *The Nose* and *The Diary of a Madman*, while Dostoevsky's choice of narrator more closely

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<sup>14</sup> Bakhtin. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. P. 211.



resembles that of *Nevsky Prospekt*. Dostoevsky was also heavily influenced by German author E.T.A. Hoffman, in whose *The Devil's Elixir* a double appears. So while *The Double* wasn't *exactly* a completely original idea, Dostoevsky's choice to combine all of the above elements in order to create a nearly unnavigable text even more cryptic is clear.

In her essay *Madness as an Act of Defence of Personality in Dostoevsky's "The Double"*, Elena Dryzhakova writes about the added difficulty of analyzing the work the plot of which simultaneously functions on multiple levels: "This increasingly complex theme of doubling changed not so much the narration (the worsening condition of insanity) as the tone, the author's accents, and the whole artistic colouring...the story is taken over by the powerful and fantastic world of the absurd - a world distorted by the illness of pathological consciousness."<sup>15</sup> Because of Dostoevsky's desire to represent Golyadkin's illness through subtle shifts in character, dialogue, and plot, the reader's entire vision of the story changes as it goes on because of the distance between the narrator and Golyadkin. When Golyadkin is rambling to himself, Dostoevsky's narrator lets him speak, and when he is walking along the street in a daze (as we see him do after Klara Olsufyevna's party) with no idea of what is happening around him, the same narrator is able to separate himself from story and provide an omniscient report of what is happening. This duality gives us a completely honest idea of what Mr. Golyadkin is really like, regardless of what he wants us to believe about him.

Dostoevsky's choice to use a third-person narrator allows him to have an agent different from the protagonist who is supplying us with our first impressions not only of Golyadkin, but also the sense of uncertainty which envelops the entire plot: "For some two minutes, however, he lay motionless in his bed, like a man who is not fully certain whether he is awake or still asleep, whether what is happening around him now is a reality of a continuation of the disordered

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<sup>15</sup> Dryzhakova and Renner-Fahey. "Madness as an Act of Defence..." p. 68.

reveries of his sleep”.<sup>16</sup> Golyadkin is fully awake, and the narrator has acknowledged him waking up, but for some reason our hero is still having a hard time deciding whether or not he is actually awake. This brings up the question of the relationship between the narrator and the main character *The Double*. Julian Connolly in his essay *The Ethical Implications of Narrative Point of View in Dostoevsky's 'The Double'* says that they are separate entities: “From the very outset of the story, the narrator’s voice displays an external perspective on events that cannot be definitively identified with Goliadkin’s own inner voice. In the opening pages of the tale, we find the narrator depicting Goliadkin’s actions from the outside, and offering independent assessments of causation and motivation.”<sup>17</sup> Other scholars have discussed the possibility of the third-person narrator and Golyadkin sharing a single consciousness, such as Viktor Vinogradov and Apollon Grigoryev, but as Connolly argues, regardless of some similarities, Dostoevsky’s narrator remains at a comfortable distance from the consequences of the plot and is able to offer his own twist to the events of the tale. In later examples, such as in the storm after Klara Olsufyevna’s party, we see this detached relationship at work, as Golyadkin is forced to trudge through the nasty weather and the narrator is able to calmly and vividly describe everything that is happening.

In *The Double*, speech plays an important role in Dostoevsky’s representation of Golyadkin’s mental state. The changes in Golyadkin’s voice and manner of speech, as well as that of the narrator, reflect the transformation of his psychological state. Consider the differences in tone between the two following quotes, one taken from the beginning of the story before the appearance of Golyadkin’s double, and the other is from after:

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<sup>16</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 3

<sup>17</sup> Connolly, Julian. *The Ethical Implications of Narrative Point of View in Dostoevsky's 'The Double'* In *Dostoevsky Studies (17)*. Narr Francke Attempto Verlag, Tübingen, Germany. 2013. P. 101.

“‘Little brats!’ he began to reason with himself. ‘Well, what’s so strange? A man in a carriage; a man needs to be in a carriage, so he takes a carriage. Simple trash! I know them—they’re simple brats who ought to be whipped! They only play pitch-and-toss on payday and mooch about somewhere, that’s what they do’”<sup>18</sup>

In the first quote, while the meaning of what Golyadkin is saying is confusing, the language itself is coherent. This is the hero’s philosophy at work: he’s looking down on other workers around him, calling them “simple trash” and saying that they ought to be whipped for the way that they act. The second quote is different:

“‘Yakov Petrovich!’ he cried in anguish. ‘I have never been your enemy. Wicked people have described me unfairly...For my part, I’m ready...Yakov Petrovich, if you wish, you and I, Yakov Petrovich, shall we go in now? ...And there, from purity of heart, as you just said correctly, and in a direct, noble tongue...into this coffeehouse: then everything will explain itself—that’s what, Yakov Petrovich! Then certainly everything will explain itself...’”<sup>19</sup>

At this point in the story, Golyadkin is reaching his limit and clinging on to anything he can to survive. After being treated poorly by his double and losing some of his social capital along the way, here Golyadkin wants to try and make amends. But because of the effect that Golyadkin Jr. has on him, the original Golyadkin can no longer think or speak straight. On several occasions in this quote alone, he trails off in the middle of a sentence, repeats the name of his double (which is, of course, his own name too), and insists that they enter the coffeehouse to figure everything out. They never figure anything out, and a short while later, Golyadkin is shipped off to a mental hospital.

The third-person narrator, while not entirely trustworthy himself, serves as a foil to Golyadkin. This narrator isn’t quite a character, but he still makes his presence felt often during the story by commenting on things Golyadkin is doing or saying in real time, giving the impression that he is standing right alongside him. While Golyadkin is speaking with his double,

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<sup>18</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 7

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131

he often mimics the way in which he talks to himself, and when the narrator talks about Golyadkin, he uses many of Golyadkin's unique speech patterns. This often sounds like we are reading the protagonist's stream of consciousness more than a narrator's own language.

By analyzing different conversations between Golyadkin, his double, his colleagues, his superiors, his doctor Krestyan Ivanovich, and, of course himself, we are able to take a much deeper look at deviations in the character's speech and shifts in his mental condition throughout the story. My analysis of several episodes in the novella offered below explores how Golyadkin's manner of speaking during the story changes as time passes and his "double," Golyadkin Jr., becomes increasingly present in his life.

## I.

Dialogue takes many forms within *The Double*. Sometimes Dostoevsky's narrator speaks directly to us, sometimes Golyadkin speaks to himself, and sometimes we even see the two Golyadkins speaking to each other. At first, before we ever meet Golyadkin Jr., the original Golyadkin speaks to others in a confident, outgoing way, proudly sharing his thoughts on those who try to be somebody they aren't. When he speaks to himself, Golyadkin is disorganized and meandering, straddling the edge of incoherence. While we are able to understand the content of his speeches to Krestyan Ivanovich and his two colleagues, their form and intentions are often a mystery. His meaningless asides, misdirected sarcasm, and repetitions of the same statements reveal the character's confusion about his inner life as well as his social displacement.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin details multiple facets of Dostoevsky's art that surround dialogue, dialects, and issues of perspective. Perhaps the most pressing issue for an

analysis of speech in *The Double* is Golyadkin, especially his habit of speaking to rambling on and on to himself about whatever happens to him. As Bakhtin points out, these outbursts and speeches are crucial in our understanding of the entire work: “Golyadkin’s speech seeks, above all, to simulate total independence from the other’s words... This simulation of independence and indifference also leads to endless repetitions, reservations, and long-windedness... Along with a simulation of indifference, however, goes another attitude toward the other’s discourse: the desire to hide from it, to avoid attracting attention to himself...”<sup>20</sup> As we will soon see, Golyadkin has a habit of keeping others at a distance from himself, only allowing them to know as much as he’ll permit and only if he consents first. This is obviously not entirely feasible for anybody, and the conflict that springs up in the story between who Golyadkin thinks he is versus who he really is put on display by Golyadkin’s speech, his way of speaking to the double, and even the narrator’s voice.

Bakhtin urges us to view *The Double* as a polyphonic novel. Instead of a story where all of the ideas and philosophies put forth by the characters are exactly those of the writer, Dostoevsky creates his own world where the story is determined entirely by the characters within it. In one of Dostoevsky’s later works, *Crime and Punishment*, the narrator shares a relationship with Raskolnikov that strongly resembles that of Golyadkin’s narrator and him. Just like in *The Double*, the third-person narrator takes a limited omniscient role, which means that they are able to accurately describe everything happening in the story and in the minds of every character, but they focus the majority of their attention on one character. In *The Double* this is Mr. Golyadkin, and in *Crime and Punishment* it is Raskolnikov. That character embarks on a philosophical journey that quickly turns awry and leads to him murdering an old pawnbroker and her sister, Lizaveta. Over time Raskolnikov grows more and more uneasy from bearing the guilt of his

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<sup>20</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. p. 212

crime, confesses, and the story ends with him in Siberia, beginning his sentence in a penal colony. Golyadkin and Raskolnikov's lives are different, but the way these stories are written, especially in regard to the narrator, is quite similar. *Crime and Punishment* opens with Raskolnikov leaving his tiny apartment in order to once again measure out the distance, in steps, from his home to the pawnbroker's. The narrator keeps their distance from Raskolnikov as he walks, but nevertheless is able to talk about him as if he were a close friend: "He had safely avoided meeting his landlady on the stairs. His closet was located just under the roof of a tall, five-storied house, and was more like a cupboard than a room. As for the landlady, from whom he rented this closet with dinner and maid-service included, she lived one flight below..."<sup>21</sup> Because of the distance between the narrator and the story, we are not given basic information such as this man's name, his occupation, or even where he is going until a bit later, but instead we can look into Raskolnikov's life from within.

We learn a few lines later that Raskolnikov is so paranoid because he is in a tremendous amount of debt to her and has been afraid of meeting her for some time now. The narrator tells us that Raskolnikov has been suffering from "hypochondria", and in *Crime and Punishment* this manifests itself in different ways than Golyadkin's affliction does. Instead of leading to rambling speech about his social philosophy to anybody who will listen and to seeing a false doppelganger all around him, Raskolnikov's mental health has already deteriorated so quickly that he kills the two women right at the very beginning. Because of the narrator's built-up knowledge about him and how clearly his idea of killing the old woman to benefit thousands has been developed so early in the story, we know the narrator and Raskolnikov are familiar with each other. This relationship allows us to trust the narrator more, as we are able to see Raskolnikov being both reasonable and unreasonable, just like we are with Golyadkin and his narrator.

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<sup>21</sup> Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Crime and Punishment*. P. 3.

There is a bit of a caveat though. Although on the surface *The Double* appears to us as a purely polyphonic novel, in a true polyphonic novel, the characters push ideas and morals that are entirely their own. They do this not in an effort to purport a larger idea that the author has tried to establish, but rather to establish *themselves* as wholly independent beings, apart from the author and any sort of influence they may impart on the story. Everything that happens to Golyadkin, according to Bakhtin, happens not because Dostoevsky is trying to toy with him, but because of his environment and the character's own failure to come to terms with what is going on around him. Bakhtin speaks at length about the impact of the relationship between the narrator and Golyadkin in these terms in Chapter 2 of *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, saying that because of the polyphonic relationship between Golyadkin and his narrator, as well as the freedom of characters in polyphonic novels, Golyadkin is "sentenced" to go insane as he did: "Dostoevsky's works are in this sense profoundly objective—because the hero's self-consciousness, once it becomes the dominant, breaks down the monologic unity of the work...The hero becomes relatively free and independent, because everything in the author's design that had defined him and...sentenced him...no longer functions as a form of finalizing him."<sup>22</sup> This raises a question: was everything that happened to Golyadkin his own fault, or was it meant to be from the outset? After all, it is clear that Golyadkin's mental health, just like Raskolnikov's, is already at a breaking point when the story begins. The events that proceed after Golyadkin and Raskolnikov's are results of the development of their respective mental afflictions, but as Bakhtin argues, these two men are only put into these positions because Dostoevsky put them there.

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<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. p. 51-52

## II.

Not only does Dostoevsky establish such an intimate relationship between Golyadkin and his narrator, but he also introduces his narrator as another conflicted consciousness. Sometimes the narrator reiterates what Golyadkin is saying and how he feels, but sometimes his voice takes over. This is why Craig S. Cravens, describes the relationship between Golyadkin, the narrator, and the distance between them to the rest of the story: "...Dostoevsky's novel appears to be a standard third-person narrated novel: an external narrator relates the words, thoughts, and actions of the protagonist Yakov Petrovich Golyadkin. Upon closer examination, however, it becomes evident that the narrator narrates only Golyadkin's thoughts and actions; we learn the actions of other characters only when they appear in Golyadkin's vicinity..."<sup>23</sup> In other words, instead of a narrator who is merely putting his own spin on the story, Dostoevsky creates a narrator who makes his presence physically felt in the plot, right beside Golyadkin. The narrator isn't quite a legitimate character in the story, but he is also not completely detached. Rather, we are told the story by a narrator who takes on speech patterns and habits similar to those of Golyadkin himself, which only further blurs any sense of boundaries that we feel in the story. Because of this immersion, and the narrator's influence in the story, we are given an intensely intimate look at Golyadkin. As a result, we are able to analyze his speech and shifting mental state even better.

It is worth considering the role and significance of the third person narrator in representing Golyadkin's mental struggle when questioning what sort of diagnostic function speech plays in *The Double*. Dostoevsky often portrays characters whose becoming confused is manifested through their interacting, overlapping voices, which, according to Bakhtin, is the

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<sup>23</sup> Cravens, Craig S. "Čapek's Hordubal and Dostoevsky's The Double: Madness and Free-Indirect Discourse." In *Comparative Literature* 52, no. 1 (2000). p. 63



signature feature of his poetics: “A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky’s novels ”.<sup>24</sup> Take for instance how the narrator describes the weather Golyadkin walks out into after being humiliated at Klara Olsufievna’s party: “It was a terrible November night—wet, foggy, rainy, snowy, fraught with fluxes, colds, agues, anginas, fevers of all possible sorts and kinds, in short, with all the gifts of a Petersburg November”.<sup>25</sup> This is a vivid and clear description, but its syntax is overshadowed by the conceptual implications of this scene. It signals a break from the narrator and Golyadkin, who up until this point have pretty much shared the same conscience. As Connolly argues, “Similarly, the description...is provided with a scope and level of detail that does not seem to emanate from Golyadkin’s own conscience, in his completely distraught condition...”.<sup>26</sup> On the one hand , this is excellent support for an argument for the narrator being a completely separate entity from Golyadkin. His own reputation and mental health are not at stake in *The Double*. Therefore, he is able to coherently describe the treacherous weather that Golyadkin has to deal with. Compare this sort of calm presence to that of Golyadkin, who has just been embarrassed at Klara Olsufyevna’s party and has just stumbled out into the weather described by the narrator. We know that Golyadkin was rattled after leaving the party, and as Connolly points out, he certainly would not have had the wherewithal to describe his surroundings as well as the narrator did. On the other hand, when the narrator mentions “fevers of all possible sorts and kinds,” he reflects on the conditions which may have precipitated Golyadkin’s feverish state of body and mind. In describing the weather the narrator creates a counterpoint to the hero’s inner reality: the place that is dark and “foggy.”

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<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, p. 6

<sup>25</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 43

<sup>26</sup> Connolly, *The Ethical Implications...* p. 102

In order to emphasize Golyadkin's distraught condition, Dostoevsky solidifies the distance between the narrator and protagonist. After Golyadkin has been introduced to the horrible weather, the narrator says: "...at one blow suddenly attacked Mr. Golyadkin, destroyed by his misfortunes even without that, granting him not the slightest mercy or respite, chilling him to the bone, gluing his eyes shut...as if purposely cooperating and agreeing with all of his enemies..."<sup>27</sup> This may be the worst thing for Golyadkin: he just had the horrible experience at Klara Olsufyevna's party and is being bombarded with bad weather, and he is so out of it that when one of his galoshes falls off in the snow, he doesn't even notice. This is all leading up to the appearance of his double, and we are beginning to see Golyadkin start to disconnect more from reality as his psyche deteriorates and Golyadkin Jr.'s arrival looms in the near future. At first I thought that the appearance of the double and his meeting with Golyadkin was our hero's firm breaking point, but the narrator's description of the horrible external conditions prior to that meeting suggests that an array of factors gradually puts Golyadkin at his wit's end: "He was so bewildered that several times, suddenly, in spite of everything, around him, totally pervaded by the idea of his recent terrible fall, he would stop motionless, like a post, in the middle of the sidewalk..."<sup>28</sup> Thus, Golyadkin reaches his breaking point not when the double emerges, but somewhat earlier. Completely ignorant of the storm going around him and of his loss of an entire shoe, he has no idea that his life has already turned upside down.

After Golyadkin Sr. and Jr. meet and walk to Sr.'s apartment, the narrator's role diminishes for a while. The dialogue between two characters now takes on a much more scattered tone, and the two men are able to show that while there may be two physical Golyadkins, mentally there is only one. While they may sound different within the story, they

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<sup>27</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

frequently sound uncertain and doubting their every move, especially during their conversation in Golyadkin's apartment. For example, compare the effectiveness of the narrator's description of November in St. Petersburg with the confused tone of Golyadkin's conversation with his double: "'Excuse me for...,' Mr. Goliadkin began, 'however, will you allow me to know your name?' 'Ya...Ya...Yakov Petrovich'...'Yakov Petrovich!' our hero repeated, unable to conceal his embarrassment. 'Yes, sir, exactly right...Your namesake, sir,' Mr. Goliadkin's humble guest replied, venturing to smile and something of a jocular sort."<sup>29</sup> Golyadkin Jr. never ends up saying something of a "jocular sort", and on the whole this entire interaction consists of the two Golyadkins acting exactly the same, and on the next page when Golyadkin Sr. looks "around at himself, his walls, his guest."<sup>30</sup> The fact that the narrator tells us how Golyadkin is able to see *himself* when he looks around his room turns his role from that of an augur of his mental background to the witness of its consequences. The narrator basically assures the reader that the character is not in his right mind, as there is logically no way there can be an exact copy of Golyadkin who shows up one day and begins to take over his life.

### III.

Dostoevsky invites the reader to consider Golyadkin's manner of speech and habits in order to draw conclusions about the character's changing mindset and how it affects the disintegration of his self. In early conversations, such as with his two colleagues in an unnamed "famous restaurant" on Nevsky Prospect, Golyadkin speaks coherently about himself; he also shares his thoughts on people with others as to prove that while *those* kinds of people are out

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<sup>29</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 65.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* p. 66.

there, he *certainly* is not one of them. Golyadkin is so adamant about not revealing his true intentions, that his speech literally loses sense and coherence while he tries to say less and less. In the beginning of the novella, the coherence is still part of Golyadkin's speech, but even then the reaction of others to his soliloquies reveal the beginning of his unhinging. Thus, Golyadkin's speaking to his colleagues from work who happen to be at the same restaurant on Nevsky Prospekt is an excellent example of his saying a lot of different things without saying them with much meaning. He begins sentences and then stumbles off in another direction, forever hinting at something without really coming out and saying it. After Golyadkin has finished speaking, the two other clerks begin to laugh heartily right in his face. When Golyadkin sees this, he gets frustrated and says: "Laugh, gentlemen, laugh meanwhile! You'll live and you'll see," he said with a feeling of injured dignity, taking his hat and retreating towards the door".<sup>31</sup> The confused tone of Golyadkin's speech here signals a beginning of sorts for Mr. Golyadkin: this is the scene that precedes his going to Klara Olsufyevna's party, his ensuing humiliation, and the ultimate appearance of the double. Compare how vague and loose Golyadkin is with his claims about proving his colleagues wrong to how sure of himself he was during his meeting with Krestyan Ivanovich. In his earlier speech he made it known that he dislikes people who take roundabout paths and "mask" themselves, but he doesn't realize that he is currently doing just that. He considers revealing his true self to the two other men, but never ends up doing it.

While Golyadkin's self-aggrandizing may not make much sense, the hero's speech demonstrates that he still believes that he is on equal footing with the other two men and even holds an upper moral hand in describing his honesty and transparency. Golyadkin claims that the reason why they don't know everything about him is because he has only let them know the very basics, which also seems to be the way that he likes to be seen. His phrases "In any case I don't

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<sup>31</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 24

undermine anyone” and “Till now, gentlemen, you have not known me” give us the impression that Golyadkin is proud of himself and doesn’t shy away from the opportunity to judge others for wearing masks and putting on airs. He also praises his own non-hypocritical ways when he says: “There are people, gentlemen, who dislike roundabout paths and mask themselves only for masked balls...Finally, there are people who do not like to leap and fidget in vain, to flirt and fawn, and, above all, to poke their noses where they are not asked...I, gentlemen, have told you nearly all...” (24).<sup>32</sup> The catch here is that while at first Golyadkin makes it seem like he is actually going to reveal something meaningful to his colleagues, in reality he only reveals how insecure he is. Moreover, when he takes his own roundabout path while talking about others, he reveals more about his paranoia than he realizes. Golyadkin keeps his two colleagues at arm’s length, right where he wants them to be, but he also shows them that he is far more insecure with himself than he lets on.

Golyadkin does not want to compromise his own authority over how others perceive him. So, he opts to say that he has told them “nearly all”, which to me sounds like he is trying to intrigue them in some way so that they begin to ask more questions about him. Instead, they simply laugh in his face, since they can easily tell that instead of delivering on his promise to share information, he has said nothing of any meaning and only led them on. The two men can also see that Golyadkin is not in his right mind, and instead of taking him seriously, they brush him off and decide that engaging with him is not worth any of their time.

A key detail to mention here is that while Golyadkin may not have been making any sense, his sentences and grammar are reasonably structured. Everything he says in his little speech to the two other men is coherent enough to be understood, but not clear enough to be interpreted by them the way he wishes. (He is not able to manipulate his audience into accepting

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<sup>32</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 24

his self-image). Take the ending of this speech as an example: “Finally, there are people who do not like to leap and fidget in vain, to flirt and fawn, and, above all, to poke their noses where they are not asked...I, gentlemen, have told you nearly all; permit me now to withdraw...”<sup>33</sup> All content aside, formally these final two sentences are understandable and their tone is polite. Golyadkin is making sure he doesn’t step on his colleagues’ toes and cross any boundaries, but at the same time he is being so cautious with information about himself that others cannot understand why the conversation is happening in the first place

This is not the first time that Golyadkin has spoken at length about nothing at all in order to bring his distorted world back into a more coherent form. He can also be seen asserting his identity and confidence during his impromptu meeting with his doctor, Krestyan Ivanovich. This scene takes place in one room and between only two people, but it sounds like they are having two different conversations. Dostoevsky writes: “Mr. Goliadkin, still smiling, hastened to observe that it seemed to him that he was like everybody else, that he was his own man, that his diversions were like everyone else’s ...”<sup>34</sup> The rest of Golyadkin’s monologue maintains the tone of self-assuredness and allows him to take comfort in his argument. Krestyan Ivanovich reacts to this by saying: ““Hm, no, that’s not the right order, and that’s not at all what I wanted to ask you. I’m generally interested to know whether you are a great lover of merry company, whether you spend your time merrily...”<sup>35</sup> While Golyadkin is concerned only with describing his philosophies to Krestyan Ivanovich, the latter is concerned with his patient’s health. By suggesting to him that he make sure to socialize often, Krestyan Ivanovich is most likely worried about Golyadkin’s mental health.

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<sup>33</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 24

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12

The very end of the story marks the long-anticipated end of Golyadkin. After being spotted outside lurking behind a woodpile, our hero is confronted by his double. What follows is a real mess of a conversation:

“Yakov Petrovich,’ the man known for his uselessness chirped. ‘Yakov Petrovich, you here? You’ll catch cold. It’s cold out here, Yakov Petrovich. Please come inside!’

‘Yakov Petrovich! No sir, I’m all right, Yakov Petrovich,’ our hero murmured in a humble voice.

‘No sir, impossible, Yakov Petrovich: they beg, they humbly beg, they’re waiting for us. ‘Make us happy,’ they say, ‘bring Yakov Petrovich here.’ That’s what, sir.

“No, Yakov Petrovich; you see, I’d do better...it would be better if I went home, Yakov Petrovich...” our hero said, roasting on a slow fire and freezing from shame and terror, all at the same time.<sup>36</sup>

Golyadkin knows he has nowhere to go, and he is eventually overcome by those who are saner and more capable of controlling his life. But what is most interesting in this exchange between Golyadkin and his double is the feeling of empathy evoked by the narrator’s description of Golyadkin’s words. Golyadkin Jr. is only given lines, but Golyadkin Sr. is described much more, talking to his double in a “humble voice” and “roasting on a slow fire”. The narrator is clearly on Golyadkin’s side here, as he normally is, and this goes to further support Cravens’ theory that Golyadkin and the narrator are not separate, but instead merely split versions of the same man. It also may suggest that Dostoevsky has more say in the story than we originally thought, and he actually wrote the narrator in a way to always side with the original Golyadkin, especially in situations like this where he is the least confident. The narrator sympathizes with Golyadkin Sr. by calling the double “the man known for his uselessness”, and before the chaotic scene that follows, this is one of the last instances of solidarity we observe in *The Double* before Golyadkin’s ultimate persecution.

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<sup>36</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 163

## IV.

Golyadkin's double, who Dostoevsky simply calls "Golyadkin Jr.," is the catalyst for all of Golyadkin's major troubles in the latter half of the story. In the character's delirious mind, Golyadkin Jr. is the version of Golyadkin that is making a name for himself in St. Petersburg. He is the exact kind of person that Golyadkin Sr. works hard to be the antithesis of. He flirts and fawns, and is willing to make questionable compromises: "Very well, sir. Why not take the side street, sir,' Mr. Goliadkin's humble companion said timidly, as if hinting by the tone of his reply that it was not for him to choose and that, in his position, he was ready to be satisfied with a side street".<sup>37</sup> The exact kind of subordination to the authority of Golyadkin Sr. is an excellent example of Golyadkin Jr. being the kind of person that puts on masks outside of masked balls, that takes roundabout paths, and does everything else that Golyadkin Sr. doesn't approve of. However, is he really there? Golyadkin Sr. wants everyone to believe that the only thing holding him from being the kind of successful and widely-recognized civil servant is his being against flirting and fawning. His speech reveals, though, that by trying to seem like somebody completely different from who he actually is he ends up imagining a phantom other self – his evil "double."

At this point in the story, the main character of *The Double* feels as though his entire life is beginning to fall apart. The morning after his conversation with the other Yakov Petrovich, Golyadkin begins to unravel with anxiety about what's to come of the situation. He wonders about the damage he caused to his life by revealing sensitive information to Golyadkin Jr., saying: "Very well, we'll see,' he thought to himself, 'we'll see, we'll crack all this in due time...Ah, Lord God!' he moaned in conclusion, in a totally different voice, 'why did I invite

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<sup>37</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 63



him, to what end did I do all that? I'm truly putting my own head in their thievish noose, I'm tying the noose myself".<sup>38</sup> He accuses himself of ruining any and all social capital that he had to that point by revealing so much to Golyadkin Jr., and the "noose" he claims to be in is the impending damage that he knows his reputation is going to take. As far as he knows, Golyadkin has just ruined his entire life, even though in reality he never had much of a reputation to begin with.

Shortly after, Golyadkin tries to send a letter to his double, but since they have the same name and live in the same apartment, the letter was returned and our hero was left back at square one. The morning after his most recent humiliation, Golyadkin awakes and is in dire straits. But instead of a typical Golyadkin monologue about what happens, the narrator sees that his hero is suffering so badly that he steps in and does the monologue for him. The voice is a bit removed, but the details and their importance to the story are grave: "...and suddenly, out of the blue, the person known for his ill intentions and beastly impulses appeared again, in the guise of Mr. Golyadkin Jr., and straightaway, at once, in an instant, by his appearance alone, Golyadkin Jr. destroyed all the triumph and glory of Mr. Golyadkin Sr., eclipsed Golyadkin Sr., trampled Golyadkin Sr., in the mud...".<sup>39</sup> The voice of the narrator in this passage can also be tied back into an analysis of polyphony in *The Double*, as while the story doesn't fit an *exact* model of polyphony (since the two main voices are that of Golyadkin and the narrator, not Golyadkin and other physical characters), but it can also testify to the impact and damage that have been caused in Golyadkin Sr.'s life after the appearance of his double. The delusions never stop developing, and the proud Mr. Golyadkin ends up being chased out of town because of them.

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<sup>38</sup> Dostoevsky, *The Double*. p. 75

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109

Dostoevsky's story is an original contribution to the already existing trend in Russian literature during the 1830's-1840's. *The Double* most closely resembles Gogol's story *The Diary of a Madman*, but there are some key differences. For example, we do not see polyphony and the melding together of the voice of the narrator and his main character, Poprishchin, at nearly the same scale that we see in *The Double*. This may be because the two characters exhibit symptoms of different mental afflictions, but it is most likely due to Dostoevsky's deliberate narrative choices, such as including a narrator and main character who are so close as well as the polyphonic aspects of this relationship.

## CHAPTER 2

Analyzing the Personalized Nature of Madness in Gogol's *St. Petersburg Tales*

St. Petersburg has always been considered a place of mystery, inner struggle, and mental conflict. Portrayed by nineteenth-century Russian authors as a confusing and ever-changing environment, it serves as the setting for many tales of madness. In this chapter, I will analyze Nikolai Gogol's illusive vision of St. Petersburg through his short stories "Nevsky Prospect", "The Overcoat", and "The Diary of a Madman."<sup>40</sup> More specifically, I will argue that Gogol placed his St. Petersburg characters in absurd situations in order to highlight the maddening and delusional nature of the Russian capital, where Gogol himself migrated to from Ukraine in 1828. He worked for a short time in the civil service before beginning to write short stories based on Ukrainian stories and folk tales. His "St. Petersburg Tales" began to surface in the mid-1830's, with "The Overcoat" as the final one published in 1842. These stories reflect daily life in the Northern city at the time Gogol lived in it, featuring pitiable characters and disastrous plotlines. In particular, "Nevsky Prospect", "The Nose", and "The Diary of a Madman" each contain their own unique reflection of a disadvantaged city dweller's life, while emphasizing the notion that Gogol most prominently introduced in his story about the city's famous thoroughfare, the Nevsky: there is something slightly *off* about St. Petersburg, and this strangeness affects the population directly and from within, driving some of them to insanity. The most striking example of this impact is the fate of Gogol's protagonist, Piskarev. Bred by the city's atmosphere, and especially its fondness for the arts, this hapless character ends up losing his mind because, even

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<sup>40</sup> Gogol, Nikolai. *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol*. Transl. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York, New York: Random House, 1998.

as an artist himself, he is unable to reconcile his dreams and St. Petersburg's harsh, unforgiving reality.

For most characters and narrators of what is known as Gogol's "Petersburg Tales," St. Petersburg is just as maddening and elusive. While his other characters, Ukrainian peasants and merchants, priests and petty clerks, go about their days unscathed with exceptional events happening in their village homes, churches, cemeteries, and orchards, characters from St. Petersburg get hit hard by peculiar distortions in their space and ways of life. Something as fantastic and unbelievable as a nose wearing a uniform and praying in a church or dogs corresponding by mail may happen at any moment in Russia's "Northern Capital," Gogol suggests. What is most amazing about St. Petersburg, however, is not the events that occur, but the regularity at which they do and the force with which they affect the city's inhabitants. Piskarev, for instance, dies a tragic death, because he falsely believes that a prostitute is a sublime damsel in distress who craves his attention. His death is tragic, but Gogol cannot help adding a scathing touch to it in the end: the only person to attend his funeral is a soldier-sentry who "wept as he followed the coffin...and that because he had drunk an extra dram of vodka".<sup>41</sup> Similarly, in "The Nose", the story of a nose detaching itself from its owner's face and walking around can be seen as something repugnant, absurd, or poignant. But instead of there being widespread fear and confusion in response to this occurrence, citizens elect to build bleachers and charge onlookers money to stand on them for a chance at seeing such a spectacle. And in *The Diary of a Madman*, Gogol gives us a first-person perspective on insanity by letting a delusional character deliver one raving monologue after another. Through that distorted lens we are able to observe the calm and progressive way that Poprishchin's madness festers undetected and the city that feeds and embraces it even while locking the madman up in an asylum.

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<sup>41</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". p. 267

While St. Petersburg is a Russian city, it's known to be Russia's "window" into Western Europe. Europeans flocked to and settled in the city right alongside native Russians, creating a divide between what is native and what is foreign or what is authentic and what is "borrowed". Peter I's foundation of the city in a marshy landscape prone to flooding led to the idea of its being an "unnatural" or "cursed" place. The conflicts between the resolve of the city's founder to establish his capital in the nearly uninhabitable land, and the resentment of Russia's population, between nature and artifice, and between the ideas of heavenly protection granted to St. Petersburg and its "demonic" foundation led to the reputation of mystery that St. Petersburg holds in Russian literature, culture, philosophy and even politics. As Ekaterina Sukhanova elaborates in her article, "St. Petersburg and Mental Illness: A Literary Viewpoint," the city is the epitome of duality and treacherous uncertainty which imperil its inhabitants' mental state:

St. Petersburg quickly developed its own mythology as a city denying the usual norms of perception. Buildings double, being reflected in the water of the channels as in numerous mirrors. There are mirages, doubles, ghosts, a myriad of legends, surreal stories...Majestic wide prospects exist next to suffocatingly narrow courtyards. During the long winter, the sun shines for only a few hours; during the white nights in early summer, it seems never to descend. All this contributes to the image of the city as a temptation to reason and by reason."<sup>42</sup>

As a city that splits and doubles up in reflections while breeding insanity, St. Petersburg inspired Gogol to write about men on the brink of mental collapse or depict characters who are outright insane. For Gogol, arriving in St. Petersburg from his native Ukraine must have felt like a complete upheaval of the lifestyle grounded in strict religious observance, unshaken social rituals, patriarchal family values, and other "old world" order. As described by Gogol, St. Petersburg is a space of ambiguity where the impossible rules. It is not a wondrous place that

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<sup>42</sup> Sukhanova, Ekaterina. "St. Petersburg and Mental Health: A Literary Viewpoint." In *International Journal of Mental Health*. Vol. 28, no. 4 (1999). P. 86.

breeds progress and success in the civil service, but a locus that is full of lies and illusions. The Ukrainian author marvels at his new environment and its unsettled ways and celebrates their fictional potential by placing the emphasis not on the narrator or protagonist of his stories, but instead on the stories' settings. In "Nevsky Prospect" especially, the city is a place where false promises are assumed and broken, hopes of success in society destroyed, and individuals appear to find the way out of the urban delusional maze only by destroying themselves, as Piskarev does. When the artist sees a beautiful girl on Nevsky Prospect, he immediately falls in love and believes her to be an ideal of sublime beauty, but she turns out to be a prostitute who spurns his advances. Falling deeper and deeper into madness, he eventually takes to opium and commits suicide. Could this story happen in another city, such as London or Berlin? For Gogol, it is one of his St. Petersburg "arabesques," because the city itself is designed in such a way as to make the downfall of his character possible.

Although to Gogol the whole city is a warped and absurd reality, the main thoroughfare of St. Petersburg, the famed Nevsky Prospekt where Piskarev's encounter with the streetwalker happens, is the location that stimulates such incessant dreaming. In this altered world, as Gogol writes, appearances will often mislead you: "It lies all the time, this Nevsky Prospect, but most of all at the time when night heaves its dense mass upon it and sets off the white and pale-yellow walls of the houses, when the whole city turns into a rumbling and brilliance...and the devil himself lights the lamps only so as to show everything not as it really looks".<sup>43</sup> Since Nevsky Prospect is the "universal communication of Petersburg", it is a metonymy of the city and its intrinsic strangeness. Instead of letting its passers-by trust what they see as reality, Gogol insists that it serves as an underlying unsettling and sinister force which governs the city. It is not accidental that the devil himself lights the street lamps on Nevsky, as Gogol explains: "Oh, do

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<sup>43</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". p. 278

not believe this Nevsky Prospect...Everything is deception, everything is a dream, everything is not what it seems to be! You think this gentleman who goes about in a finely tailored frock coat is very rich? Not a bit of it: he consists entirely of his frock coat".<sup>44</sup> This systematic and, in essence, metaphysical deception is what makes St. Petersburg so dangerous for an individual's peace of mind, according to Gogol. But there's more to the delusions on which St. Petersburg was founded and which it breeds. In a city so audaciously constructed for Peter I's new government and political visions to flourish, citizens get stuck in a bureaucratic system too rigid and vast to conquer, often lacking the resources to succeed. Nevsky Prospect embodies St. Petersburg's economic and social hierarchies, promises more than it can deliver, and thus culminates all of the deception the city has to offer.

## I.

With this in mind, we can see that Gogol sets the blame for Piskarev's downfall more on the city than on the artist himself. Gogol's character tries to survive within this nefarious environment while knowing that he doesn't fit in. In "Nevsky Prospect," Gogol attempts an experiment of sorts: if the artist follows his – artistic – vision, will he be able to withstand the seduction by the city which is designed to make individuals rise up from the very bottom by all means, even when they may have to resort to immoral means or indignity? Can Piskarev endure the seduction of the infamous boulevard? Gogol chooses his sensitive character to suffer the deceptive, maddening nature of Nevsky Prospect, because it is a place that leads the likes of him

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<sup>44</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". p. 277

away from the goodness of their souls to the harsh facts of other people's fight for existence (the girl he loves sells herself; she can't imagine a "honest" life and wants to earn hard cash with her "beauty"). The result of that experiment is tragic: unable to accept the hard truth, Piskarev is destroyed from within and without. To underline the nature of his protagonist's downfall, Gogol juxtaposes him with a more rugged and less sensitive person, Pirogov, who later sets off on a more comical and befitting journey to seduce a married German woman. While Piskarev dies, Pirogov is merely spurned in his advances by the pretty housewife. After many attempts to woo her, he is beaten up by her drunk husband and two of his friends, the humiliation of which merely causes him to flee. While planning on denouncing the man to "the general", "general headquarters", or even "the sovereign himself",<sup>45</sup> Pirogov gets distracted and ends up forgetting about the affair entirely. This not only casts the two men in contrasting light, but also effectively juxtaposes their sensibilities and life philosophies. While the artist, Piskarev, is so overcome with anguish at the thought of his dreams being crushed that he ends his own life, the more vulgar Pirogov, a military man, is so unfazed by his own situation that he is able to happily dance the mazarca only hours after his abasement.

Unlike other streets in St. Petersburg, such as Morskaya Street or Liteiny Prospect, Nevsky Prospect is a destination itself, where people "are not driven by the need and mercantile interest that envelop the whole of Petersburg" and where you are "sure to forget all business" as soon as you enter it.<sup>46</sup> Instead of being an austere and rigid neighborhood, Gogol's Nevsky Prospect takes on more of a performative role, where people flock to simply be there, rather than carry out any specific business. Unlike more unambiguous places, such as Kazansky Street where Pirogov's German love interest lives, Nevsky Prospect is founded on mendacity and

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<sup>45</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". p. 276

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 245



ungodly duplicity. This is especially true at night when the appearances change and Piskarev's story begins. The trick to navigating such an environment would be to do as Gogol says and wrap yourself tighter in your cloak, ignoring everything that goes by. Piskarev, of course, does the opposite. Metaphorically speaking, he unbuttons his soul and falls victim to the St. Petersburg illusions which prevent him from seeing the world as is.

The crux of Piskarev's tragedy is his inability or refusal to reckon himself with what is staring him in the face. Unlike Golyadkin, who is known for his outbursts and insistent ravings about the supposed "double", Piskarev deals with his issues deep within his tormented soul. After returning home from learning the truth about the prostitute he had followed home, he gets stuck in a reverie:

The beauty who had so bewitched poor Piskarev was in fact a marvelous, extraordinary phenomenon. Her presence in that despicable circle seemed still more extraordinary. Her features were all so purely formed, the whole expression of her beautiful face was marked by such nobility, that it was simply impossible to think that depravity had stretched out its horrible claws over her...But, alas! by the terrible will of some infernal spirit who wishes to destroy the harmony of life, she had been flung, with a loud laugh, into the abyss.<sup>47</sup>

Piskarev's lamentation about the love he doesn't think he'll experience also pushes the idea that his feelings have some link to "depravity": a dark external force on Nevsky Prospect holds the beautiful woman hostage and causes Piskarev's fatal infatuation to occur. Reading this passage, we begin to think that Piskarev taking the prostitute for a sublime being came at an instigation from beyond his own imagination. It is as if Gogol suggests that Piskarev has been led astray by the woman's alluring beauty, which, forming a striking contrast with her surroundings, is of a demonic nature. Since in Piskarev's mind beauty is irreconcilable with an environment as dishonorable as a brothel, the first "solution" to this irreconcilable dilemma he imagines is that his beloved is captured by the terrible "claws" of vice acting outside of her will. Instead of

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<sup>47</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". Pp. 256-257

accepting the truth about prostitution as being a widespread practice in the city, Piskarev clings to his fantasy and vision for requited love until all reason escapes him.

Both symbolically and structurally, Nevsky Prospect plays a part in Piskarev's transition from reality to delusion. Gogol's description of people who walk along the street and his marking times of day when all of the changes take place, does not include a time for artists to enter the famous thoroughfare. We see government officials strolling by in their tidy uniforms, shopkeepers getting ready for their days, high-born ladies parading around in their elegant dresses, but the artists are not represented. Piskarev, however, does not have a timeslot on Nevsky allocated for the likes of him. Living outside of St. Petersburg's hierarchies, the artist is no match for such an unforgiving and prosaic city, where everything is meant to fit into neat categories and everything one encounters on Nevsky Prospect is somehow regimented. To amend this situation and to create a place for himself in the city, Gogol's character begins to carve an imaginary space of his own. He wants his dream companion to inhabit it, too, but the woman he loves only laughs at his naivete and lack of understanding of how things are done in St. Petersburg.

One lens through which we can analyze Piskarev and his internal conflict is his opium-inflamed dreams. In "The Birth of Tragedy," Friedrich Nietzsche writes that "the aesthetically sensitive man stands in the same relation to the reality of his dreams as the philosopher does to the reality of existence; he is a close and willing observer, for these images afford him an interpretation of life, and by reflecting on these processes he trains himself for life."<sup>48</sup> According to Nietzsche's theory, Piskarev trains himself for an existence in St. Petersburg simply by dreaming. When he becomes attached to the images he sees in his dreams, the artist tries to apply them to real life because for an "aesthetically sensitive" man that is the right way of

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<sup>48</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Basic Writings of Nietzsche (The Birth of Tragedy)*. New York: Modern Library, 2000. P. 34

viewing the world. But at this point, Gogol points out the city of outward appearances and order, placing it in stark opposition to Piskarev's futile attempt to escape into dreams. Unable or unwilling to accept the pragmatic and often corrupting nature of St. Petersburg, Piskarev cannot snap out of his delirium. So, he opts to continue the visions he has of bliss alongside his beloved by altering the reality he views as un conducive to his artistic nature through drug-induced reverie. "Interpretation," a key word used by Nietzsche, allows us to understand that what Piskarev is creating is merely an altered version of actual reality, and thus a vision that might be ruinous for his mental health. In his already shaken mental state, Piskarev is liable to fall into the trap of choosing dreams over reality, or of falsely interpreting his dreams and applying the lessons he "learns" through them to his pursuit of a very real goal – the affection of the woman he loves.

The first dream occurs the night after Piskarev meets the prostitute, falls in love with her, and follows her home. Gogol decides to introduce the dream scene as if it were a strange "reality". Instead of making it clear from the beginning that Piskarev is asleep, he forces the artist's vision to enter his domestic space: "Drowsiness...was gradually beginning to come over him, the room was already beginning to disappear, only the light of the candle penetrated the reveries that were coming over him, when suddenly a knock at the door made him start and come to his senses..."<sup>49</sup> The fact that Gogol makes the room begin to "disappear" and have Piskarev "come to his senses" out of the lovesick reverie he was stuck in challenges the reader's perception of the scene even more. We are invited to contemplate a series of authentic emotions the character experiences, which Gogol makes no effort to estrange or mark as unreal. When the knock on the door "wakes up" the artist, we trust that it is actually happening. But another delusion follows: the trip to the ballroom where the beauty greets Gogol's hero is also a

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<sup>49</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". p. 257

deceptive phantom of his imagination.

As Gogol makes clear throughout the story, Piskarev does not fit into any specific category of St. Petersburg citizens. He isn't a high ranking official in the civil service or military, he is not an artisan employed by a business, he's not even remotely a part of the aristocracy. But his vision of the prostitute he fell in love with places her inside the upper echelons of St. Petersburg society, where French and English are being spoken with ease and the men in the room are so well cultured that they know how to gracefully display their hands while adjusting their ties. When he finally is able to talk to the woman, she says something very surprising: "You're here...I'll be frank with you: you must have thought the circumstances of our meeting strange. Could you really think that I belong to that despicable class of creatures among whom you met me?"<sup>50</sup> Although, at this point we still do not know that Piskarev is dreaming, his question can serve as a clue. After all, this is exactly what Piskarev *wants* to hear. Earlier in the day he couldn't believe his eyes, and now (at least in his mind) he is having all of his initial presuppositions about the woman confirmed. At this moment, Gogol plays with his character rather cruelly by letting him believe that the woman really is the "saint" that he thought she was. But after losing her in the crowd again, Piskarev wakes up. He sees his own bedroom slowly form around him, quickly realizing he is no longer in a brightly lit ballroom. Seeing that it had all been a dream, and that nothing had changed about his situation, he begins to resent what he has and long for the unattainable: "Oh, how repulsive reality is! What is it compared with dreams?"<sup>51</sup> Once he is no longer dreaming, all of Piskarev's hope that he had been right about the woman vanishes. Nevertheless, despite seeing her for who she truly is earlier that very day, he refuses to believe she is not a saintly aristocrat, tracks her down, and proposes marriage. In

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<sup>50</sup> Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect". p. 260

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 261

Nietzschean terms, his “interpretation” turned out to be false, but in terms of Gogol’s terrible city, Piskarev’s downfall perfectly aligns with the city’s destructive nature.

## II.

Many low-ranking employees of St. Petersburg offices and ministries were subjected to harsh treatment – the predicament such Russian writers of Gogol’s time as Alexander Pushkin and Vladimir Odoevsky turned into stories of oppression and hopelessness. Such inhabitants of Gogol’s dream-like portrayal of St. Petersburg as Akaky Akakievich (“The Overcoat”), Kovalyov (“The Nose”), or Pirogov (“Nevsky Prospect”), work in the civil service or are commissioned officers in the military, constituting what is known as the Table of Ranks, which was established by Peter the Great in 1722. Given the scope of the civil service, it was easy to get lost in the ranks if you made up the lower echelons. The lower one fell, the easier it became for that person to become angry, despondent, or delusional, and even, as it happened to Eugene in Pushkin’s narrative poem “The Bronze Horseman,” turn into a social outcast or a wandering madman. Following the Pushkinian tradition, Gogol took this idea of losing touch with reality and began to weave stories out of it. But instead of focusing only on individuals and their struggles, Gogol places characters within the carnivalesque environment of St. Petersburg. Faced with the impossible task of being promoted enough times to reach one of the top ranks, poor wretches like Akaky Akakievich oftentimes get lost both literally and metaphorically. Gogol’s stories about their lives thus focus mainly on their fervent quests for items of great personal importance, but no societal significance.

In his article “Gogol’s Petersburg”, Sergei Davydov details the two kinds of civil servants that early nineteenth century Russian literature represents most often: “...the notorious Russian clerk was... either a petty dictator toward his underlings ... or alternatively a downtrodden, meek, miserable, inarticulate, subhuman creature, the quintessential underdog who incited in Gogol’s reader pity and laughter...”<sup>52</sup> This dichotomy, for Gogol, means that such a system was inherently broken, as it allowed some officials to enjoy immense power and influence while countless others got lost within the labyrinth of an unforgiving hierarchy. To emphasize the mercilessness of the existing order, Gogol splits his artistic reality into the upper and lower echelons. Akaky and the “Important Person” in “The Overcoat” represent the two extreme ends of Davydov’s proposed spectrum: Akaky starves and goes without candles at nighttime to afford a warm garment for the winter, while the Important Person enjoys the luxuries of an aristocratic lifestyle while serving as the “petty dictator” who delivers the final blow to his already ailing and miserable employee. By juxtaposing Akaky with the heartless man in power, Gogol solidifies the presence of such conflicts within St. Petersburg bureaucracy at the time, while also raising the question: where could the path carved out for the “subhuman” functionaries within the civil service actually lead? Akaky does not gradually go mad and thus, his life’s end is not exactly that of Pushkin’s Eugene, who roams the streets of the city in dejection and anger. Nevertheless, “The Overcoat” still teaches us much about the disturbing nature of St. Petersburg’s bureaucratic system by making it seem largely uncondusive to happiness for its lower-ranking employees.

The idea of government service in St. Petersburg making people “subhuman” encapsulates much of the experience of Gogol’s characters. Even those who are not slowly climbing the table of ranks are affected by the city’s hierarchies: Kovalev becomes more obsessed with the social – rather than “physical” – ramifications of not having a nose; Pirogov

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<sup>52</sup> Davydov, Sergei. “Gogol’s Petersburg.” In *New England Review (1990-)* 27, no. 1 (2006). P 123.

sees his being beaten by the German artisans as no loss to his honor; and Akaky gets his revenge, but only after becoming a ghost.. Being principally focused on the social implications of a Major going about without the most important facial “appendage,” Kovalev loses a part of his humanity: he becomes a lampoon, the talk of the town, but not the kind of high-ranked official he wishes to be. Eventually, we learn that Kovalev considers dating young girls according to the rank of their fathers and lists among his acquaintances the women who are defined by their husbands’ ranks: Madame Podtochina, wife of a staff officer, Madame Chekhtaryova, whose husband is a Councilor of State. While waiting his turn at the newspaper office, Kovalev thinks of what he is, rather than of who he needs to or should be. Talking to an ad-taker, he invokes his social connections, saying “Consider for yourself, how indeed can I do without such a conspicuous part of the body?...On Thursdays I call on the state councillor Checkhtarev; Palageya Grigorievna Podtochina, a state officer’s wife—and she has a very pretty daughter—they, too, are my very good acquaintances, and consider for yourself, now, how can I...I can’t go to them now”.<sup>53</sup> His own self is hiding behind the ranks of others, and the social weight that such acquaintances carry for him.

The need to keep appearances in order to preserve one’s social status and position pervades the other St. Petersburg tales as well. The meek Akaky Akakievich in “The Overcoat” and Gogol’s delusional, brazen Poprishchin from “The Diary of a Madman,” both similarly believe that their entire life is related to service. As Gogol shows by describing their respective downfalls, St. Petersburg uses a person solely for the purpose of advancing the government’s agenda, so that only a shell of their individuality remains. Instead of highlighting their more tangible and personalized traits, the city breeds a “quintessential underdog” – a “little person” who is so downtrodden that they no longer know what it means to stand up for themselves.

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<sup>53</sup> Gogol, “The Nose”. p. 312

Akaky is an epitome of Gogol's grotesque view of St. Petersburg. Not only does he embody the trope of a common clerk who eventually loses touch with reality, but he also transforms into a martyr for poor folk in the afterlife. This "eternal titular councillor" had worked in the same department and in the same role for so long that his colleagues "became convinced that he must simply have been born into the world ready-made in a uniform, and with a balding head".<sup>54</sup> In suggesting that copying documents is the sole purpose of his character's existence, Gogol makes him a "copy" of the city's strict adherence to the law and bureaucratic meticulousness. Unlike Piskarev – the artist dreaming of Italianesque beauty and marrying the perfect muse – Akaky does not at all appear or feel out of place in St. Petersburg. In fact, as Gogol explains, he's quite content working a job that may drive others mad: "It would hardly be possible to find a man who lived so much in his work. It is not enough to say he served zealously—no, he served with love. There, in that copying, he saw some varied and pleasant world of his own...outside this copying nothing seemed to exist for him."<sup>55</sup> That said, even Akaky cannot endure in the world of rigid cold and inhumane order. Although he differs from the dissatisfied Piskarev by accepting his place in St. Petersburg society as the only role he can play in life, the two characters have something in common. Both live in their own delusional worlds, which in turn destroys each of them. Piskarev resorts to opium in order to transcend his meager existence, and Akaky, who never seeks to escape his work, ends up mentally isolated from the world around him, so much so that "even if he looked at something, saw in everything his own neat lines, written in an even hand, and only when a horse's muzzle, coming out of nowhere, placed itself on his shoulder and blew real wind from its nostrils onto his cheek".<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Gogol, "The Overcoat". p. 296

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 397

<sup>56</sup> Gogol, "The Overcoat". P. 398



The episode with the horse speaks strongly to the solitary nature of Gogol's hero who withdraws into himself to the point of oblivion. While his coworkers are rushing around town for appointments and social engagements, each day Akaky goes home after work, eats his (sometimes fly-filled) cabbage soup, and works on copying documents he has brought with him. In this way, his imaginary world directly resembles his real life. Instead of seeking any sort of diversion, the "eternal titular councillor" copies and thinks of letters during every waking moment. That single-minded commitment makes him similar to the "subhuman" clerks who sacrifice their humanity for the sake of advancing their careers. By ignoring other joys of life, Gogol's hero acts more like a copying machine than a human being. A career beyond scribbling would be unthinkable for him, because he is incapable of original thoughts and when he speaks, he often mumbles. Even when one task required nothing more than "changing the heading and changing some verbs from first to third person", Akaky is incapable of completing it, saying to his director "No, better let me copy something".<sup>57</sup> The only illusion Akaky may share with Gogol's other distracted characters is an illusion of self-sufficiency, of his fitness for being left peacefully alone.

To live in St. Petersburg, one needs a warm coat, and Akaky's is threadbare and insufficient for his needs. Fixing it requires paying a visit to his tailor, Petrovich, who poses unique challenges for the poor titular councillor. During their meeting we are able to see that Akaky fares miserably when he attempts any real-life task, or anything that puts him in touch with other humans. We can also see that the people who relate to Akaky in this bewildering tale are fighting small battles of their own against the rigidity and maddening inhumanity of St. Petersburg. Petrovich, for example, is proud of himself for remaining steadfast in his meeting with Akaky when he demands that Akaky orders a new overcoat: "And Petrovich, on his

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<sup>57</sup> Gogol, "The Overcoat". p. 398

departure, stood for a long time, his lips pressed together meaningfully, without going back to work, feeling pleased that he had not lowered himself or betrayed the art of tailoring”.<sup>58</sup> Gogol mentions that Akaky regularly sees Petrovich for his tailoring needs, but the tailor is not satisfied with simply fulfilling a professional role. Even towards innocent Akaky, the tailor feels he has something to prove. Like others drawn into the hierarchical system of Russia’s new capital city, he needs to demonstrate that he is meaningful, and that he plays an important role in St. Petersburg as a maker of overcoats. Obviously, just like there are many titular councilors besides Akaky, there must be plenty of other tailors for these councilors to go see besides Petrovich. Petrovich, however, does not think about this. He feels that he has to defend the noble art of tailoring in order to display his own worth.

Akaky encourages Petrovich’s delusions of grandeur by ordering a new overcoat from him at a huge personal sacrifice. But he does not share such delusions. He begins to display his desire for proudly asserting himself not during his own life, but as a ghost. After Akaky dies, an encounter occurs between him and the “Important Person”, during which the formerly miserable and insignificant clerk challenges his former offender. Previously, Gogol told us that the “Important Person” “was a kind man at heart, good to his comrades, obliging, but the rank of general had completely bewildered him...he had somehow become confused, thrown off, and did not know how to behave at all”.<sup>59</sup> When the “confused” superior meets another “confused” man, such as Akaky who has just been robbed of his new precious overcoat, it is impossible to believe that our hero will be treated fairly in his office. Instead of giving Akaky a respectful response to his problem, the Important Person interprets his plea for help as an insult:

Akaky Akakievich, who had been feeling the appropriate timidity for a good while

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<sup>58</sup> Gogol, “The Overcoat”. p. 404

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p 416

already, became somewhat flustered and explained as well as he could, so far as the freedom of his tongue permitted, adding the words “sort of” even more often than at other times, that the overcoat was perfectly new and he had been robbed in a brutal fashion...For some reason, the general took this to be familiar treatment.

‘Do you know to whom you are saying this? Do you realize who is standing before you? Do you realize that? Do you realize, I ask you?’<sup>60</sup>

Although Gogol gives the Important Person many more lines of actual monologue than Akaky ever gets, his dominating the conversation generates neither a solution nor sympathy. Akaky is barely given an opportunity to reply to the man, whereas his interlocutor makes sure that Akaky knows exactly what is happening: Only very recently appointed to his new rank and offended by Akaky’s idea to appeal directly to him, instead of invoking the system that has been set in place to do so, the Important Person commits the metaphorical act of annihilation of the “inferior” colleague. Akaky wasn’t trying to break any rules, and certainly did not approach the man disrespectfully, but because of their difference in rank and the overwhelming importance, with which the Important Person enshrines his promotion, Akaky is made feel like a criminal rather than a victim of crime. Whereas all complaints are drowned out by the gulf of officialdom separating him from the Important Person, the meaning of Akaky’s is also voided. The Important Person can relate to a subordinate only when they respect his absolute existential “superiority”, but the stumbling, preoccupied, and grieving Akaky cannot provide such respect.

After Akaky’s death, his ghost returns to St. Petersburg to exact his revenge on the Important Person. While the latter is riding home in his carriage one night, the clerk’s former boss suddenly feels “someone seize him quite firmly by the collar”, and sees “a short man in an old, worn-out uniform, in whom, not without horror, he recognized Akaky Akakievich”. Akaky still resembles the man he was while alive, but his power over the Important Person has changed. During their first interaction Akaky was his quiet and downtrodden self, having to be helped out

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<sup>60</sup> Gogol, “The Overcoat”. Pp. 417-418

of the office by the caretakers after being yelled at. When he comes back in ghostly form, his voice booms in the ear of the Important Person: “Ah! here you are at last! At last I’ve sort of got you by the collar! It’s your overcoat I need! You didn’t solicit about mine, and roasted me besides—now give me yours!”<sup>61</sup> In this scene, the roles are reversed: the Important Person is cowering; we no longer hear his booming voice or observe his crippling assertiveness. Out of his element in the presence of a transcendental being, he feels “such fear that he even became apprehensive, not without reason, of some morbid fit”.<sup>62</sup> Akaky has become completely transformed in death: he is confident, able to interact with others, and has a voice. Freed from the constraints of his implacable role in St. Petersburg society, and also free to roam around as he likes, Akaky is much taller than in life; possesses a fist of the kind that is “not to be found among the living”; and wears a mustache. Thus, once Gogol allows his character to step out of the bounds of St. Petersburg's harsh social conditions, that formerly pathetic creature expands in size and turns into a transgressor of social norms. Akaky becomes capable of breathing free air, addressing others, and even committing crimes.

### III.

As a novella about a madman told from the first-person perspective, Gogol’s “The Diary of a Madman” differs from the other St. Petersburg tales. In “Nevsky Prospect” and “The Overcoat”, Gogol uses a detached point of view to tell a story of two city dwellers whose downfall is precipitated by their conflict with the city’s strict social hierarchies. In “The Diary of

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<sup>61</sup> Gogol, “The Overcoat”. p. 423

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

a Madman,” however, Poprishchin’s gradually progressing mental illness places him slightly outside of that grid. Due to his choice of the first-person narrative form, Gogol is also able to move beyond the storyline of a perilous environment swallowing a vulnerable individual within it. Instead, he lets a St. Petersburg mental patient convey his history, fears, and delusions through a diary – thus introducing the readers to a more intimate and cohesive portrayal of one’s mental state.

The initial evidence of the disintegration of Poprishchin’s mind is given in his diary’s first entry:

I wouldn’t have gone to the office at all, knowing beforehand what a sour face the section chief would make. He has long been saying to me: ‘Why is it you’ve got such a hotchpotch in your head, brother? You rush frantically, you sometimes confuse a case so much the devil himself couldn’t sort it out...’<sup>63</sup>

Similarly to Mr. Golyadkin, Poprishchin’s story starts after his madness has begun to show itself. Also, like Piskarev and Akaky, Poprishchin is unaware of how his life in St. Petersburg slowly makes him unhinged. While the diary gives us no evidence of Poprishchin doing anything out of the ordinary or even destructive prior to the first entry, we can still infer a history of delusional behavior: Poprishchin admits that the section chief has “long been saying” things about his confused state. A few pages later, the hero’s willingness to listen to a conversation between two dogs again lets us assume that he has already begun his descent into madness. In St. Petersburg, bosses do embarrass their staff, and all kinds of “demonic” mischief happens, but can dogs really talk there?

Shortly after noticing his director’s daughter, Sophie, enter a shop, Poprishcin hears a “piping little voice”, and quickly deduces that it’s coming not from a person, but from Sophie’s dog, Medji. Ruling out the possibility of being impaired somehow, he says: “‘Oh-ho,’ I said to

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<sup>63</sup> Gogol, “The Diary of a Madman”. p. 279

myself, 'what, am I drunk or something? Only that seldom seems to happen with me.' No, Fidele, you shouldn't think so,' I myself saw Medji say it...I confess, I was very surprised to hear her speak in human language. But later...I at once ceased to be surprised. Actually, there have been many such examples in the world".<sup>64</sup> Since the story is in a diaristic form, Poprishchin's "reporting" on an absurd situation immediately seems suspicious to the reader. Is this a fantastic tale along the lines of "The Nose," perhaps? The dogs' "chat" signals that something is amiss in the story not because Gogol would not want to invent an improbable situation, but because Poprishchin's choice of wording in this entry and his hesitant, ellipses-laden syntax, we are given a rhetorical clue to the character's warped mental state. When Poprishchin rules out the possibility of his being drunk by saying that it never "seems to happen with him," his words indirectly communicate to readers the truth of the hero's condition. Gogol is pointing us to the fact that this is not the first instance where Poprishchin has found himself in such a situation and, therefore, we must rule out the possibility of our seeing the absurdity as a fib of his (disturbed) imagination. Moreover, the diary grants the civil servant an opportunity to rant about other mysterious events he has heard of taking place around the world, such as a cow walking into a grocer's to order a pound of tea. Soon Gogol's hero confirms that the dogs are not only speaking together on the street, but have also been exchanging letters with each other. These improbable episodes clinch Poprishchin's status as a "madman" not because Gogol cannot invent such things, but because his narrator, a civil servant in a rigid St. Petersburg office, claims he had witnessed them.

At first even Poprishchin – a titular councillor with a meaningless office job, – simply cannot believe that the dogs' verbal exchanges could be taking place: "May my salary be withheld! Never yet in my life have I heard of a dog being able to write. Only a gentleman can

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<sup>64</sup> Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman". p. 281

write correctly”.<sup>65</sup> Why is he unable to reconcile himself with the fact that a dog could do something as esteemed as writing? It takes the reader a split second to realize that Poprishchin’s acceptance of a cow who can order tea and his wonder at “witnessing” the dogs’ speech and letter-writing are strange, since the two phenomena are events of the same magnitude. Just like Golaydkin’s seeing double is a sign of his mental unraveling, Poprishchin’s faith in one oddity and dismissal of another are indicative of a warped world view. Although he can still write coherently, the early signs of his being mad begin to appear.

Poprishchin’s principal task is to sharpen quills for his director, whom he respectfully addresses as “His Excellency”. In this role, the petty clerk exemplifies the common trope of a desk jockey that Davydov discusses.<sup>66</sup> Poprishchin knows his place in the hierarchy and is, thus, vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy or a desire for something far beyond his humble rank. For example, when he admires His Excellency’s collection of foreign books, he denigrates his own intelligence: “It’s all learning, such as our kind can’t even come close to”.<sup>67</sup> Unlike Kovalyov or Pirogov, he is humble, unambitious, and happy to occupy a menial role.

That said, Poprishchin’s delusion stems from a subconscious desire to cross the boundaries of his very limited social circle and advance to the next hierarchical level. This advancement is linked to a romantic attachment. Like delusional Pirogov before him and brazen Golyadkin much later, he is infatuated with an upper-class woman – in his case, a pretty daughter of his director. He is so much in love that others around him take notice. The first entry where Poprishchin mentions working in his director’s office and interacting with Sophie is dated October 4. That night, he loiters outside of “Her Excellency’s” home in order to catch a glimpse of her, but never does. In an entry dated over a month later, November 6, Poprishchin admits to receiving an

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<sup>65</sup> Gogol, “The Diary of a Madman”. p. 281

<sup>66</sup> Davydov, Sergei. “Gogol’s Petersburg.” *New England Review (1990-)* 27, no. 1 (2006). p. 122-127

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282

admonition from his section chief because of his interest in marrying Sophie. Would an interference in one's romantic love from a senior colleague happen to a man who is not a civil servant in St. Petersburg? Why is his loving this girl also a sign of madness?

In Gogol's view, Poprishchin's troubles are rooted in his being a nobody, a very insignificant cog in the city machine. A detailed account of how he appears to others is given in the November 6 diary entry. The self-addressed monologue reveals a life full of indignities and rejections:

You're over forty—it's time you got smart. What are you dreaming of? Do you think I don't know all your pranks? You're dangling after the director's daughter! Well, take a look at yourself, only think, what are you? You're a zero, nothing more. You haven't got a kopeck to your name. Just look at yourself in the mirror, how can you even think of it!<sup>68</sup>

With Poprishchin, the problem isn't his lack of self-analysis, but, rather, the internal conflict between the realization of his social insignificance and his grandiose sense of self. He believes that as a nobleman he is entitled to treatment befitting his class, not his rank, even if that means being able to court a woman half his age. Despite his high birth, Poprishchin occupies a very average position in the civil service. Unable to reconcile himself with the futility of his courtship, Poprishchin suffers a breakdown. Moreover, when his mental state takes a turn for the worse, he begins to see not a civil servant in the mirror, but the rightful King of Spain.

Poprishchin himself admits that he has been feeling off recently. He does so after discussing how Medji and Fidele had been exchanging letters on top of speaking to each other in person. Poprishchin writes: "This surprised me. I confess, lately I had begun sometimes to hear and see things no one had ever seen or heard before. 'I'll just follow that little dog,' I thought to myself, 'and find out what she is and what she thinks'".<sup>69</sup> He determines that Medji's friend, Fidele, lives in "Zherkov's building", and on November 11, five days after his section chief

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<sup>68</sup> Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman". p. 283

<sup>69</sup> Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman". p. 281



berated him for trying to court Sophie, Poprishchin has an idea that he is sure will lead him in the right direction. He writes: “Today, however, it dawned on me clear as daylight: I recalled the conversation between the two dogs on Nevsky Prospect. ‘Very well,’ I thought to myself, ‘I’ll find out everything now. I must get hold of the correspondence those rotten little dogs have exchanged. I’ll learn a thing or two from it’”.<sup>70</sup> At the time of the first conversation between Medji and Fidele, Poprishchin was in disbelief at the idea of the two dogs being able to communicate with each other, as well as write letters just like humans do. But over a month later, not only has he accepted the idea of it but he is now ready to act on a plan to steal the letters and read them, hoping to find out more about the correspondence and, ultimately, the impression his director and Sophie have of him. The next day, November 12, he knocks on the door of the apartment where Fidele lives, rushes in, steals the letters from a basket, and then leaves just as quickly. “I suppose the girl took me for a madman,” he admits, “because she was extremely frightened”.<sup>71</sup> This is ironic because as the madman himself, Poprishchin’s view of what is happening around him is severely skewed. He himself admits that when he reaches into Fidele’s basket, he pulls out a “small bundle of little papers”, but if they were really letters written by two dogs then he would probably be able to notice and let the readers know what exactly those papers were.

But more important are the implications the letters bear on Poprishchin’s mental state. After reading in a letter that “Sophie can never help laughing when she looks at him [Poprishchin]”,<sup>72</sup> and discovering that the director “absolutely wants to see Sophie married to a general, or a kammerjunker, or an army colonel”,<sup>73</sup> on November 13, Gogol’s character reaches a

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 285

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 286

<sup>72</sup> Gogol, “The Diary of a Madman”. p. 291

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 292

breaking point. His next entry is made twenty days later, on December 3. Lamenting his position in life, Poprishchin wonders what makes him as a civil servant such a bad option for Sophie, and why in his section chief's eyes he's nothing more than a "zero". This means that similar to Akaky, whose life takes place in the realm of letters, Poprishchin is only a number in the bureaucratic system of St. Petersburg. Despite his professed noble birth, Gogol's madman remains a copy clerk in his department. The result of this self-realization is both ridiculous and pathetic, and Poprishchin begins to project his own identity onto a larger scale: "What makes me a titular councillor, and why on earth am I a titular councillor? Maybe I'm some sort of count or general and only seem to be a titular councillor? Maybe I myself don't know who I am. There are so many examples in history: some simple fellow...and it's suddenly revealed that he's some sort of dignitary, or sometimes even an emperor".<sup>74</sup> This is the beginning of the "King of Spain" era, which ends in Poprishchin's relocation to an insane asylum. Whereas for Akaky, his anchor was the overcoat, an item denoting the kind of normal lifestyle the poor scribe could never afford, for Poprishchin the king's mantle spelled a dream of a heightened position in life he could never occupy.

The three diary entries in which Poprishchin relates the "strange doings in Spain" concerning himself are dated December 3, December 5, and December 8. From the narrative perspective, they are still fairly "normal": their dates are logical, the stories they tell make a modicum of sense. The entry dated "The Year 2000, 43rd of April", however, is where Poprishchin's madness not only becomes apparent, but also a reason for the reader to worry about the character's health.. We have no idea how much time has really passed since December 8's entry and this one. In this indeterminate amount of time, Poprishchin has become convinced in his complete transformation, which is confirmed in the entry marked "The Year 2000":

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

This day—is a day of the greatest solemnity! Spain has a king. He has been found. I am that king. Only this very day did I learn of it. I confess, it came to me suddenly in a flash of lightning. I don't understand how I could have thought and imagined that I was a titular councillor. How could such a wild notion enter my head? It's a good thing no one thought of putting me in an insane asylum.<sup>75</sup>

After his hope of marrying Sophie was crushed, and his sense of self deteriorated enough, Poprishchin's madness leads him to fully believe that his being a copy clerk is simply a "wild notion." he had stuck in his head. Poprishchin also appears to have no idea that he has gone mad, instead becoming brazen in his opinions towards his peers: "I didn't go to the office...To hell with it! No, friends, you won't lure me there now; I'm not going to copy your vile papers!" (294).<sup>76</sup> In his next entry, dated "The 86th of Martober. Between day and night," he describes going into the office "as a joke." There, Poprishchin signs a document as "Ferdinand VIII", and then goes to Sophie in order to tell her that "such happiness awaited her as she could not even imagine" and that they would be together "despite the machinations of enemies." Finally, in an entry dated "Madrid. Thirtieth Februarius," Poprishchin claims he has arrived in Spain.

Poprishchin's last few entries are written from the asylum, where the authorities shaved his head and keep drenching him with cold water. The final confession of Gogol's madman sounds like an attempt to escape this terrible confinement through the diary: "Here is the sky billowing before me...Is that my house blue in the distance? Is that my mother sitting at the window? Dear mother, save your poor son! shed a tear on his sick head...there's no place for him in the world...And do you know that the Dey of Algiers has a bump just under his nose?".<sup>77</sup> This conclusion is abrupt and tragic in spite of its nonsensical imagery, which may take away

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<sup>75</sup> Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman". p. 294

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Gogol, "The Diary of a Madman". p. 300

much of the weight behind the character's desperate pleas for help. Instead of claiming to be a proud nobleman and spouting self-aggrandizing pronouncements, Gogol's madman admits that his head is "sick." While signaling his defeat and becoming the ultimate image of the powerless and downtrodden, Poprishchin also makes the reader realize how desperately he wanted to be taken seriously.

In this chapter, I have analyzed three "St. Petersburg Tales" and discussed how Gogol's view of St. Petersburg's rigid social hierarchies influenced the theme of madness developing in them. "Nevsky Prospekt," "The Overcoat," and "The Diary of a Madman" reveal that Gogol imagined the city's bureaucracy, social circles, and even in history as a breeding ground for insanity. Later, tales of his madmen laid the foundation for Dostoevsky's "The Double," where the archetypal "little person" of St. Petersburg literature loses his sense of selfhood while feeling deeply anxious about the appearance in his life of another man, more charismatic and successful than himself. Nabokov's "Despair", which I will discuss in the next chapter, follows this thematic thread and the plot of one's split identity, to a brutal and absurd end. Nabokov's character, Hermann, closely resembles Gogol's Poprishchin in his desire to socially and economically advance beyond his abilities and means. In order to demonstrate similarities between the two narratives, I will draw on examples from "The Diary of a Madman", as well as "The Queen of Spades" by Alexander Pushkin. My goal in the next chapter will be to prove that, just like Poprishchin's, Hermann's descent into madness is neither laughable nor easy to understand.



## CHAPTER 3

Reliability and Crime as Art in Nabokov's *Despair*

Succeeding both Gogol and Dostoevsky in the twentieth century was Vladimir Nabokov, the Russian émigré writer who published several novels about obsessed, delusional, or insane characters, some of whom are also his narrators. Among them are *The Luzhin Defense* (1928), *Lolita* (1955), and *Pale Fire* (1962)<sup>78</sup>. *Despair*<sup>79</sup> – a novel about a madman whose conception of a “perfect crime” is grounded in his misapprehension of another man as a replica of himself – was written in 1932, serialized in 1934 and came out as a hard cover in 1936. In 1965, *Despair* was published in English. The work's protagonist is Hermann, a Russian-German owner of a chocolate wholesale business. After one day meeting a wanderer named Felix, he believes the stranger to be his perfect “double”; expects others to see their likeness, and thus kills him in order to carry out an insurance scam. In this chapter, I will analyze Hermann's gamble on the life of Felix. I will address Nabokov's portrayal of Hermann's delusions of grandeur and skewed perception of both himself and the world. My goal is to demonstrate how the criminal insanity of Nabokov's character expresses itself uniquely in comparison to representations of other madmen in the Russian literary tradition, especially those whose intentions were also immoral, such as Pushkin's Hermann from “Queen of Spades.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> *The Luzhin Defense* portrays a grandmaster who takes up chess as a child, rises to the highest rank of chess player, and eventually falls victim to a madness in which the game of chess begins to supplant his view of reality. *Lolita* focuses on the obsession of an underage woman, Dolores Haze, by an older man named Humbert Humbert. *Pale Fire* takes the form of a long lyric poem written by the fictional John Spade, with comments and addendums written by Spade's mad neighbor and colleague, Dr. Charles Kinbote. Each story deals with and represents madness in a unique way, but they all nonetheless constitute Nabokov's contribution to the canon of madness in Russian literature; *Despair* is, of course, also included in this list.

<sup>79</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir. *Despair*. New York: Vintage, 1989.

<sup>80</sup> Pushkin, Aleksandr Sergeevich. *The Queen of Spades, and Other Stories*. Transl. T. Keane. New York: Courier Corporation, 1994.

I also aim to prove that, existing solely in his own self-created world, Hermann is nevertheless not unique both as a fictional murderer and a literary creation with a dark personality twist. Rather, he fits into the Russian literary tradition of portrayals of insanity by Dostoevsky's Golyadkin and Gogol's Akaky Akakievich, Poprishchin, and Piskarev. While suffering from mental afflictions which manifest in slightly different ways, they nonetheless represent a certain trend: characters who exist on the "fringe" of their worlds and develop their own illusory conception of themselves or their station in life. Subsequently, these characters go mad while trying to reconcile their distorted view of the world with reality. What makes Hermann unique is his total lack of sympathy for others. Endowed with certain social skills and a small capital, he is not trying to curry favor from a wealthy superior, like Akaky, achieve a promotion, like Golyadkin, or marry a muse, like Piskarev. Instead, Nabokov's madman more closely resembles Pushkin's Hermann, who is greedy, callous, and unable to contemplate the pain of others. Like Pushkin's young German, who unknowingly destroys the life of an old countess in exchange for three guaranteed winning numbers for him to gamble on and become rich, Nabokov's German (a chocolate producer) places a bet on the life of Felix and then gambles off his own comfort and relative prosperity.

The fact that Nabokov borrows the name of Pushkin's character in *Despair* not only makes the allusion to "The Queen of Spades" undeniable, but also turns it into an invitation for a reader to compare the two works. In Pushkin's novella, Hermann's encounter with the countess who knows the "secret" of two cards leads to her death. Nevertheless, she appears to him in a dream or as a ghost to reveal the magic combination of cards which he hopes will make him wealthy. The first two of those prompts, a three and a seven, work, but when he gambles on the last one, the ace, during his third night, the winning card turns out to be the "queen of spades," or

the card the name of which has become the old countess's nickname. This unlucky draw is enough to drive the gambler mad. "Hermann went out of his mind", writes Pushkin. "He is in Room 17 at the Obukhov Hospital, unresponsive to any questioning, merely muttering with extraordinary rapidity: 'The three, the seven, the ace! The three, the seven, the queen!...'"<sup>81</sup>

Pushkin's Hermann expresses his madness when he accosts the old countess in the most violent fashion, by entering her house at night and threatening her with a pistol. His mumbling in the hospital is another sign of insanity, which demonstrates that a fact of life he cannot accept (the drawing of the queen of spades card) is what makes him lose touch with reality. In his delirium Hermann keeps alternating the supposed final winning card, the ace, with the card which really won (but for his opponent), the queen of spades. Nabokov's Hermann is similar to Pushkin's in his fixation on an image which turns out to be different in the end. He refuses to see Felix – his "winning card" – as an individual with unique features, manners, and lifestyle. And yet Nabokov complicates Pushkin's plot and makes the theme of insanity more ethically profound in his novel. Whereas the original Hermann kills the countess accidentally (she probably had a fear-induced heart attack or fatal stroke), Nabokov's Hermann willingly murders the man he finds to be a convenient and suitable victim in order to stage his own murder and collect the money on a life insurance policy. Neither characters regret their deeds. Similarly, both suffer the consequences of their trespassing moral boundaries (gambling with the life of another human being in order to profit off it) by going fully berserk.

Unlike Pushkin's "The Queen of Spades," Nabokov's work is told from the first-person perspective, with the main voice being that of Hermann, who is an unreliable narrator. We are forced to decipher exactly what is going on through this lens of his self-aggrandizing storytelling. Nabokov makes the reader constantly dodge Hermann's incessant lying and doubt

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<sup>81</sup> Pushkin, "The Queen of Spades". p. 100



his reliance on memory clouded by self-love, arrogance, and disregard for others: Felix, his own wife Lydia, and the wife's cousin, Ardalion, who turns out to be Lydia's illicit lover. At first, we are inclined to believe what Hermann wants us to think, for example, that he and Felix really are identical and that his crime is well planned-out and bound for success. Nevertheless, eventually Nabokov reveals to the reader that Hermann and Felix share no visible resemblance. This becomes clear through two letters and, at the end, Hermann's citing the news about the crime in the narrative.

Nabokov's portrayal of madness includes a juxtaposition of the reader's gradual awareness of Hermann's mental disintegration and the delusional abyss into which the character unknowingly chases himself. After killing Felix, Hermann spends his time on the run mulling over the crime. He does it not with guilt, but with selfish regret. Hermann regrets forgetting Felix's stick at the crime scene (which listed his name and address) and also the crime not being the artistic feat which lives up to his supposed genius: "Not the fact of their finding his stick and so discovering our common name, which would now unavoidably lead to my capture—oh, no, not *that* galled me—but the thought that the whole of my masterpiece, which I had devised and worked out with such minute care, was now destroyed intrinsically..."<sup>82</sup> Even when it is absolutely clear to the reader that Hermann's murder of Felix has nothing to do with the other man's being his own "double," Nabokov's narrator-character remains unconvinced that he and his victim were not identical.<sup>83</sup> Even as he is being arrested, Hermann treats his capture by the police as a farcical performance, possibly a filming of a crime scene, in order to keep up his charade.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 203

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218

Hermann's failure to recognize reality is the most obvious link between *Despair* and "The Queen of Spades." Another similarity between the two texts lies in the social standing of the two characters. Pushkin's and Nabokov's Hermanns are not social misfits like Mr. Golyadkin or Gogol's civil servants. They defy moral boundaries and eventually kill because of a desire for a better life and their delusions of grandeur. In "The Queen of Spades" Hermann is a military engineer whose madness unfolds when he imagines cards as a path to quickly becoming rich. Pushkin's Hermann begins seeing the three, seven, and ace everywhere he looks, never being able to pay attention to the people who could have made him happy without the gamble, such as the ward of the countess, Lisa, who is in love with him. In short, Pushkin treats the mental affliction of his hero not as a pitiable character trait, but rather as an unavoidable consequence of his gamble of the lives of others: the countess and, partially, Lisa. Nabokov takes this idea even further. His Hermann forces Lydia, his wife, to be involved in his murder and insurance scheme while promising to share his accrued wealth with her, without realizing the mental and emotional burden it would force upon her.<sup>85</sup>

Pushkin's Hermann lives in the same city as Gogol's madmen, but his suffering comes only from his own moral blindness – greed and the lack of ability to love or commiserate. Nabokov's Hermann is an heir to Pushkin's because he is closer to that personality rather than to the poor wretches mentally destroyed by the monstrous city of St. Petersburg in Gogol's and Dostoevsky's works. Thanks to their view of St. Petersburg as a cold, unforgiving, nearly demonic city, Gogol and Dostoevsky treat their madmen – the victims of poor city planning and harsh social hierarchies – much more sympathetically. Piskarev, Poprishchin, and Akaky Akakievich each receive sympathy from Gogol's narrators, since it is Gogol's placing of these

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<sup>85</sup> For conversation between Hermann and Lydia, see pp. 152-154; for the letter from Ardalion to Hermann, see p. 205.

men in absurd settings and predicaments that causes their madness to develop in the first place. In a similar vein, Dostoevsky's narrator in *The Double* stands right beside Mr. Golyadkin, their two voices sometimes blending together. Moreover, Dostoevsky's St. Petersburg shares a similar hyperfixation on rank and status that Gogol's does, but Dostoevsky's portrayal of the city is not as fantastical. At the end of "The Double," Golyadkin's exits with his doctor, Krestyan Ivanovich, and the narrator can still be found right beside them. This modified third-person narrator, who often speaks as if he is Golyadkin himself, makes the reader accept both the inevitability of the character's demise and the possibility of his bouncing back, restored. Nabokov deprives his Hermann from any sympathetic treatment by another narrative presence. By crafting *Despair* to be from the point of view of Hermann, as the murderer supposedly writes the book "Despair" himself, Nabokov allows his madman to serve as his own narrator – the one who initially deceives the reader but ultimately composes his own, unforgiving, verdict.

## I.

Hermann wants "Despair" to be his own literary work, because, in addition to being convinced of the existence of his double, his delusions of greatness include an unmerited faith in his own literary talent. Thus the novel begins with a bold claim on behalf of its supposed author: "If I were not perfectly sure of my power to write and of my marvelous ability to express ideas with the utmost grace and vividness...So, more or less, I had thought of beginning my tale".<sup>86</sup> Hermann entertains the idea that he should open the story with an assertion that he is the perfect person to write such a book, because it would serve not only as a justification of his crime, but also as a glorification of its artistic merit. Nevertheless, the totally facetious narrative meant by

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<sup>86</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 3

Hermann to be convincing and aesthetically pleasing places him as its author in a satirical light. For example, while Hermann actually does believe that his literary talent is unsurpassable, Nabokov has him actively try out different beginnings for his book because he does not know how to launch a tale. This introductory scene makes the first chapter of *Despair* comparable to the opening of “The Diary of a Madman,” in that both stories advertise a feat of storytelling which is quickly rebuffed. Gogol’s story features an entry made by Poprishchin detailing an “extraordinary event” – which, as we find out, amounts only to Poprishchin imagining he hears two dogs talking to each other on the sidewalk on his way to work. Just like Gogol’s madman, Hermann’s writing slips into a chaotic, diaristic form while he entertains hopes of turning his experience (and the delusions which underlie it) into a novel. Both characters fail, only Gogol needs his less time (and space) to convince the reader of Poprishchin’s being completely unhinged and drastically incoherent.

The work of Nabokov’s Hermann is not intended to be diaristic, but given the digressing nature of his speech and his insistence on finding the perfect way to start this “tale,” further parallels with “The Diary of a Madman” present themselves. Consider the use of ellipses in the opening pages of *Despair*. They indicate that, while still trying to figure out what to write, Hermann solicits the reader’s help in filling in the blanks of his narrative:

My hands tremble, I want to shriek or to smash something with a bang... This mood is hardly suitable for the bland unfolding of a leisurely tale. My heart is itching, a horrible sensation. Must be calm, must keep my head. No good going on otherwise. Quite calm. Chocolate, as everybody knows... (let the reader imagine here a description of its making).<sup>87</sup>

Just like the monologues of Poprishchin, who constantly rambles and philosophizes about the most bewildering things, the novel that Hermann is trying to write is being hastily put together right before our eyes. Instead of an “unfolding of a leisurely tale,” we are given the narrator’s

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<sup>87</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. Pp. 4-5

confession that he is not in his right mind, as he is so worked up that wants to “shriek or smash something with a bang.” Hermann’s storytelling, like Poprishchin, relies heavily on the reader’s imagination. Whereas Gogol’s madman wants the reader to imagine two talking and corresponding dogs, Nabokov’s suggests that we think of the process of chocolate-making, as if it has anything to do with the criminal plot within his narrative.

Unlike the more distant and reliable narrators in “The Overcoat” and “Nevsky Prospect,” who are able to recount the stories of Gogol’s characters without much palpable bias, Nabokov’s madman is given *carte blanche* to share his story and thus mislead his audience in his own way. This gives him relative freedom to digress and contradict himself. As Hermann himself admits, he is not to be trusted: “A slight digression: that bit about my mother was a deliberate lie...I could, of course, have crossed it out, but I purposely leave it there as a sample of one of my essential traits: my light-hearted, inspired lying”.<sup>88</sup> Questions about how much we can really believe Nabokov’s first-person narrator are unavoidable for the readers already familiar with *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Look at the Harlequins!* In these novels the storytellers’ aim is to deceive, partially because they are insane or insanely obsessed, and partially because they are trying to exonerate themselves. What interests me in Hermann’s case, though, is that his “deliberate” lying sets him apart from the madmen in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literary canon to which Nabokov alludes in this particular work. Mr. Golyadkin and Gogol’s Poprishchin inevitably reach the same moment of complete loss of coherence as Hermann does. Other common ground in their madness is seeing “double” and self-destructive tendencies. Nevertheless, Hermann is the first one in this line of succession whom the author allows to purposefully toy with his readers. This is because he is trying to convince the readers of his innocence. It is also a defense mechanism allowing Hermann to present himself as somebody he is not – an intellectual, a strategic genius,

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<sup>88</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 4

an artist. Either way, Hermann is aware of his audience and feels the need to manipulate them, exactly as he tries to manipulate Felix when planning and executing his crime.

In the spirit of being in control of what his readers think about him, Hermann prefaces his first meeting with Felix by explaining how he is, of course, not insane:

A clever Lett...said to me once that the clouds of brooding which occasionally and without any reason came over me were a sure sign of my ending in a madhouse. He was exaggerating, of course...Frolics of the intuition, artistic vision, inspiration, all the grand things which have lent my life such beauty may, I expect, strike the layman, clever though he may be, as the preface of mild lunacy. But don't you worry; my health is perfect...<sup>89</sup>

Thanks to his control over the narrative, Hermann is able to try and brush off any accusations of his being mad in one short passage, only to return right back to his story. We do not know much yet about his “clouds of brooding”, but in this aside we can clearly see Hermann’s grandiose sense of self at work. Referring to the “clever Lett” or others who accuse him of being mad automatically as “laymen”, Hermann pretends to stand on a higher pedestal than others. This is another attempt at self-preservation by Hermann, and it is especially important in an analysis of him as both a character and a narrator since it takes place immediately after he meets Felix. An assertion of sanity by Hermann serves to solidify his narrative reliability, as he is sure whoever reads his story will find it impossible to believe. “How I long to convince you!” Hermann says, “And I will, I will convince you! I will force you all, you rogues, to believe”,<sup>90</sup> but given what we know about his lack of integrity, it is clear from the beginning that Hermann’s madness has already taken over at the time of his writing. The writing itself takes place after all of his plans unfold, but because Hermann aims for the story to become a grand work of art, he makes a concerted effort to convince us that no matter what narrative choice he makes, it is a sign of his “genius.” He even goes so far as to actively disparage Felix both out loud and through his

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<sup>89</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 8

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16

internal monologue in an attempt to convince us of the likeness, both physical and personal, he sees between himself and Felix as early on as during their first encounter.

Throughout this initial conversation, Hermann exhibits both his grandiose sense of self and his desire for control of how he is perceived by the reader. Similarly to Poprishchin referring to his section chief as a “Cursed Stork” in his first diary entry, Hermann takes every opportunity to establish himself as a being superior to his “double”:

At the back of his muddled brain there lurked, maybe, the reflection that I ought to be thankful to him for his generously granting me, by the mere fact of his own existence, the occasion of looking like him...I wish to lay stress, however, on the dimness of those ideas of his. He would certainly not have understood my comments upon them, the dullard.<sup>91</sup>

Immediately placing himself above the other man due to their different social classes and his double’s lack of ability to acknowledge their resemblance, Hermann believes that he is justified in degrading Felix. Unlike a third-person narrator who would have been able to accurately say whether or not the two men were identical, Hermann says what he believes himself and wants us to believe, for he has the most prominent voice in the story. Similarly, when we see Hermann treating Felix poorly, we must remember that he is lashing out in order to preserve his own disproportionate sense of self. After all, in spite of Hermann’s dressing and acting like a dandy, tiny details related to his appearance and behavior he lets slip reveal a middle-class businessman who only dresses the part of an artist and intellectual. Again, an attempt to shed a less desirable identity and take on that of someone else is also seen in “The Diary of a Madman,” where Poprishchin begins to believe that he is the King of Spain. Gogol’s character even goes as far as to sew a “mantle”<sup>92</sup> for himself in order to fully look the part. Hermann and Poprishchin thus both wrongfully believe that their identity is something as easily changeable as a suit. We may

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<sup>91</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 13

<sup>92</sup> Gogol, “The Diary of a Madman”. p. 296

even say that, by speaking down on Felix, Hermann is creating his own uniform of reliability to wear before the reader in an attempt to make himself more of a desirable figure. Casting negative light on Felix – revealing his poor man’s garb, oafishness, “simple” desires – is meant to convince the reader that the unworthiness Hermann detects in his “double” is completely true, regardless of whether or not we are able to compare the two physically and cognitively. Just like the madmen of Gogol’s St. Petersburg tales, Hermann’s maddening fixation on himself in a world where he does not necessarily “fit in” renders him incapable of recognizing the line between reality and his delusions, the trait which ultimately leads to his downfall.

Besides Poprishchin, another character that Nabokov’s Hermann closely resembles is Dostoevsky’s Mr. Golyadkin. Speaking about how each character has a different place within their respective plot, Galina Patterson writes:

The two Goliadkins...bridge a split between the downtrodden clerk and the vengeful, angry, ambitious man...Whereas Dostoevskii leaves open the crucial matter of the double’s existence and his likeness to Goliadkin, Nabokov makes evident Hermann’s clearly mistaken view of his resemblance to Felix. Dostoevskii’s ambiguity on this point immeasurably enriches his text, just as Nabokov’s clarity eliminates any uncertainty about the issue of the double since no real double exists in his novel (110)<sup>93</sup>.

This passage details a crucial aspect of Nabokov’s narrative: the fact that it is proven, within the story, that Hermann and Felix are not identical, and that Hermann was merely exploiting his control over the narrative in order to convince us otherwise. In “The Double”, Dostoevsky makes it painfully unclear whether or not Mr. Golyadkin’s double really exists, utilizing a slightly distanced narrator in order to further highlight his main character’s madness. In *Despair*, contrariwise, Nabokov gives full reign of the narrative to his own madman, Hermann, so we are forced to see Felix through an already distorted lens. In “The Double”, Golyadkin’s madness is

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<sup>93</sup> Patterson, Galina. “Nabokov’s Use of Dostoevskii: Developing Goliadkin ‘Symptoms’ in Hermann as a Sign of the Artist’s End.” In *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes* 40, no. 1/2 (1998). P. 110.



exhibited through his repetitive speech, inability to see beyond his own world view, and his ultimate failure to recognize fiction vs. reality. Hermann's madness reveals itself through his treating the murder of crime as an artistic feat, his delusions of grandeur related to everyday behavior as well as writing the story of his crime as if it were a work of genius, and an inability to reconcile his own ideas with the irrefutable evidence about Felix that he is given after the murder.

The ambiguity of Dostoevsky's *The Double* transpires in *Despair*, transforming Nabokov's novel into an ironic commentary to the predecessor's work. Although Hermann's desire for control over the narrative and his feelings of superiority over Felix are already clear from how he describes the first meeting between them, there is a twinge of self-consciousness involved in his storytelling. Upon Felix waking up, Hermann notes the imperfections in their alleged likeness. He confesses that the "ripples of life" which showed on the man's face "slightly marred the marvel, but still it was there".<sup>94</sup> This uncertainty contradicts the assuredness with which Hermann prefaced this encounter earlier. Mr. Golyadkin similarly fluctuates between cockiness and timidity; sometimes he is certain that his double is undeniably there, and at other times he believes him to be a phantom.

That said, unlike Mr. Golyadkin who finds his double meddlesome and dangerous, but is unable to get rid of him, Hermann is totally convinced of the resemblance between himself and Felix, and that confidence is the foundation of his crime. As early as in the first chapter, he excitedly carries on about the crime which only an existence of a double could give reason for:

"That man, especially when he slept, when his features were motionless, showed me my own face, my mask, the flawlessly pure image of my corpse—I use the latter term merely because I wish to express it with the utmost clarity—express what? Namely this: that we had identical features, and that, in a state of perfect repose, this resemblance was

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<sup>94</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 9

strikingly evident, and what is death, if not a face at peace—its artistic perfection? Life only marred my double...<sup>95</sup>

While up to this point Hermann has been trying to write the story of the crime in a literary way, this passage exhibits his obsession with the crime as something unavoidable, destined by “life” or “fate” to be committed. While Hermann is trying to conceal his intentions under the pretext of talking about Felix as he just saw him (before he woke up), in reality he is trying to convince us of the uncanny resemblance shared between the men as well as of death befitting Felix. Brought together in this passage, sleep and death foreshadow the eventual murder of the “double” – and thus his reaching a “perfect repose.” His supposed resemblance with Felix signifies for Hermann an opportunity to remove the “double” from life while at the same time achieving “artistic perfection” and earning a hefty sum from an insurance scam.

## II.

In the process of trying to convince us of his genius and treating his narrative as an artistic triumph, the story that Hermann set out to write from the beginning ends up taking on a confessional, diaristic tone. One of the first autobiographical confessions was written by Jean-Jacques Rousseau<sup>96</sup>, and the work begins similarly to Hermann’s “leisurely tale”: “I feel my heart and I know men. I am not made like any that I have seen: I venture to believe that I was not made like any that exist. If I am not more deserving, at least I am different” (5). Just like Hermann, Rousseau believes in writing *Confessions* that he is undergoing a significant effort, that he is endowed with the ability to accomplish his goal, and that the product of his hard work

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<sup>95</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 15

<sup>96</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Confessions*. Transl. Angela Scholar, and Patrick Coleman. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. P. 5.

will be unlike anything that has been published before. Rousseau's *Confessions* features a diaristic tone, and towards the end of *Despair*, the work that Hermann desired to be a literary masterpiece devolves into a frantic diary in which he attempts to preserve his image in front of the reader. Hermann's writing taking a diaristic turn is spurred by Nabokov's reemerging as an authorial presence and forcing his narrator to face the harsh reality of his crime, as Hermann's delusions surrounding the murder clash with the truth presented by both Nabokov and Ardalion. This tension is what causes Hermann to withdraw from his role as narrator and succumb to the "lowest form of literature": diary writing.

After murdering Felix, Hermann finds himself in a French hotel near the Spanish border, forced to wait until news breaks of the murder in order to see whether or not it was an artistic success. Focusing only on how the murder will be judged, and not the implications that it will bear on his future outside of art, Hermann details his main concern: "What I feared, all along in a treacherous world of reflections, was to break down instead of holding on till a certain extraordinary, madly happy, all-solving moment which it was imperative I should attain; the moment of an artist's triumph; of pride, deliverance, bliss: was my picture a sensational success or was it a dismal flop?"<sup>97</sup> Instead of debating the consequences of his actions, Nabokov's hero is solely obsessed with the artistic reception of the murder. Without the positive reception that Hermann anticipates, he could not possibly justify his crime, or even his writing about it as if it were an artistic triumph. Through this lens, Hermann's breakdown following the murder becomes more clear. While at first he was confident in both his resemblance to Felix as well as the artistry demonstrated by the murder, as news of the crime begins to break, the logical thing for Hermann to have done is reconcile himself with the truth: he and Felix share no visible resemblance, and his "artistic feat" is nothing more than ill-considered and cold blooded murder.

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<sup>97</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 183

Faced with these facts, Hermann instead elects to further solidify himself in his own beliefs, blaming others for his own mistakes. “Thus, faced by the miracle of Felix’s resemblance to me,” Hermann says, “they hurled themselves upon such small and quite immaterial blemishes as would, given a deeper and finer attitude towards my masterpiece, pass unnoticed, the way a beautiful book is not in the least impaired by a misprint of a slip of the pen”.<sup>98</sup> By speaking this way about his “critics”, aka reporters who are writing about his senseless murder, Hermann insists even further that his resemblance to Felix is nothing short of perfect, and if everyone else understood the crime as well as he did, then he would be recognized as the great artist that he most certainly is not. Forcing Hermann to read the news on his own and form his own impressions of it, Nabokov upholds the autonomy he has allotted to his madman to this point. Despite how clear Nabokov makes it, Hermann remains steadfast in his beliefs about Felix and the murder.

Beyond his reading of the press, a key moment in Hermann’s battle with the truth and his descent into diary-writing madness is Ardalion’s letter. Aradlion beseeches Hermann to turn himself in, citing his obvious madness, guilt, and mistreatment of Lydia by involving her in the murder of Felix. But Hermann can only focus on the false logistical details surrounding the crime:

How simple it all was! How simply, said I to myself, the mysterious frenzy of that letter has now been solved. A proprietor’s frenzy! Ardalion cannot forgive my having taken *his* name for cipher and staging the murder on *his* strip of earth...And yet...how dare he?...Oh, go to the devil, go to the devil, all to the devil!<sup>99</sup>

Ardalion has sincerely implored Hermann to turn himself in, but similarly to how Hermann treats Felix as simply a “corpse” and a pawn in his larger scheme, in his madness he can only focus on

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<sup>98</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 192

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207

a surface-level interpretation of what is happening to him. In this deluded state, Hermann shows that he recognizes others in his life only as they pertain to his art, and since to this point he has not officially switched to diaristic writing, he is still trying to preserve any authorial integrity he may have left before the reader. Thus, in order to appear to still be in control of the narrative he is constructing, Hermann has no choice but to “simply” conclude that Ardalion is treating him unfairly. As readers, this is a crucial moment in the story for an analysis of Hermann’s madness and fixation on controlling the narrative. In chapter ten, while describing the effect that his crime has on the press, Hermann gives us merely a “general picture” that he has “put together”<sup>100</sup> during his reading of the newspapers. We are not given direct quotes, but summaries of the articles developed by Hermann himself, embellishing and commenting upon them as he goes. Ardalion’s letter, however, is copied out verbatim. By doing this, Nabokov forcibly regains control over the work and strips Hermann of his ability to spin the story in his own way.

Hermann even says that he could have “done perfectly without the letter”, but this is not true. In Hermann’s view, Ardalion’s letter only serves to degrade the perfect narrator of a perfect story, simply as a “fine sample of human malice”. But the real “malice” is contained not in the letter, but in Hermann’s inability and outright refusal to look in the mirror and see both himself and his crime for what they really are. With his back against the wall, Hermann cracks under the pressure of a legitimate narratorial presence, and with this added external pressure his plans for a self-generated artistic triumph are ultimately crushed.

Hermann’s narcissistic desire for his scheme to become an artistic masterpiece relies on his ability to convince others of his exact resemblance to Felix, fooling the authorities and allowing him to walk away with a considerable sum of money. But at its root, this plan is based solely on his wish to solidify his artistic legacy, something so marvelous that others will be

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<sup>100</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 190

forced to admire the artistry of it all rather than persecute him for the murder of an innocent man. In his first official diary entry of the novel, Hermann laments his failure to finish his story in a more grand and fitting manner: “Alas, my tale degenerates into a diary. There is nothing to be done, though; for I have grown so used to writing, that now I am unable to desist. A diary, I admit, is the lowest form of literature”.<sup>101</sup> This insinuates that Hermann feels contempt for the fact that he is no longer able to twist the story in any way he pleases. But beyond simply displaying Hermann’s thoughts, this shift to diary writing also forces Hermann out of his position as the primary narrator. Instead of being a part of the larger narrative, the inclusion of dates instead of chapter numbers gives the impression that somebody – the author, to be precise, – has recovered Hermann’s journal and is including it in the work to provide an honest look at him.

Hermann’s diary does not last long before he is apprehended by the authorities. In an entry dated March 31st, Hermann asks himself “What on earth have I done?”,<sup>102</sup> and at this moment, his fate is sealed. The next day, April Fool’s Day, Hermann’s diary exhibits a similar downward spiral that Poprishchin experiences in “The Diary of a Madman”. As his sanity deteriorates further, Gogol’s madman falsely believes that he has been taken to Spain to be crowned as King Ferdinand VIII, but he has really been apprehended and is being tortured for being mad. In *Despair*, Hermann willfully takes a similar approach in a last-ditch effort to be in control of the story. Noticing a crowd has gathered outside of his window, Hermann writes:

How about opening the window and making a little speech...“Frenchmen! This is a rehearsal. Hold these policemen. A famous film actor will presently come running out of this house. He is an arch-criminal but he must escape... This is a part of the plot... This is a German company, so excuse my French. *Les preneurs de vues*, my technicians and armed advisers are already among you. *Attention!* I want a clean getaway. That’s all. Thank you. I’m coming out now”.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 208

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 210

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, Pp. 211-212

Whether or not Hermann really says this is not made clear, but regardless it represents a final attempt by Hermann to both evade capture as well as remain in control over how others view him. Just like with his murder plot, Hermann treats turning himself in as a grand performance, wrongfully believing that he will be able to convince the “Frenchmen” assembled outside to let him slip by. Despite his denigration into a “lower” form of literature, Hermann still believes that we are fooled and that he will be able to continue fooling others. But since his murder of Felix and appropriation of his identity are both international news, all the authorities would have to do is confirm Hermann’s name in order to certify he is Felix’s killer. Hermann writes gaily about meeting the local, “farcical” gendarme on March 31, and the next day before he is apprehended he writes: “The danger of my tale degenerating into a lame diary is fortunately dispelled. Just now my farcical gendarme has been here...without looking into my eyes he asked to see my papers...As he was leaving, he turned in the doorway and (always in the same polite voice) asked me to remain indoors” (211).<sup>104</sup> Referring to the gendarme as “farcical” is an attempt by Hermann to continue acting as if he is still the true narrator of the story, and instead of being hailed as an artist and genius, Nabokov forcing his madman to face the truth ensures he meets the same fate as Poprishchin.

In this chapter, I have analyzed Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Despair*. Through my analysis, I argued that Hermann’s grandiose sense of self and unrealistic literary goals placed him among many madmen in Russian literature before him. Just like Alexander Pushkin’s Hermann from “The Queen of Spades”, Nabokov’s Hermann gambles on the life of another human being in an effort to become massively rich. Nabokov also draws inspiration from Gogol and the madmen he features in his St. Petersburg tales, specifically Poprishchin from “The Diary of a

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<sup>104</sup> Nabokov, *Despair*. p. 211

Madman”, as both of these men resort to frantic diary writing in a last attempt at fortifying themselves against truths that would contradict their own distorted world view. What makes Hermann unique from the rest of these madmen is his criminality and obsession over the murder of his alleged double, Felix. In his attempt to convince the reader that his crime is not depraved but rather profoundly artistic, Hermann constantly battles doubts of the truth regarding his resemblance to Felix, and towards the end of the novel, Nabokov is forced to step in and reclaim control over the story. I chose to closely analyze Hermann’s grandiose sense of self, how these notions play into his treatment of Felix, and the digression of Hermann’s masterful literary performance into a lowly diary in order to exhibit how Hermann’s madness and delusions manifest themselves uniquely in comparison to the other madmen of Russian literature. While Poprishchin believes he is the king of Spain, Golyadkin believes Golyadkin Jr. is trying to usurp his life and position, and Pushkin’s Hermann believes that he can justly sacrifice the life of the old countess in order to become rich, Nabokov’s Hermann sets a new tone of madness in Russian literature with his unfeeling criminality, inability to recognize Felix as his own person, and his insistence to the very end that he is not just another chocolate mogul, but a generational artistic talent.



## Conclusion

In this project, I have analyzed Dostoevsky's *The Double*, Gogol's "Nevsky Prospect", "The Overcoat", and "The Diary of a Madman", as well as *Despair* by Vladimir Nabokov. Through my analysis, I have explored the different ways in which each of these authors choose to represent mental illness by portraying "death by delusion" of their civil servants, artists, and businessmen alike, as well as by arguing that these characters fit into the literary canon established by European authors, such as E.T.A. Hoffman and W. von Goethe. Each character I have chosen to analyze exhibits behavior that results in their being considered "mad," whether it be rambling speech patterns, delusions of grandeur, confusion, or an inability to differentiate between reality and illusions. Apart from addressing the main characters, I also investigate what role the story's narrator plays in how the reader perceives not only the behavior and psychological traits of the characters, but also how the protagonists' deluded worldviews compare to the coherent perspective formed by a confident and trustworthy authorial presence in the narrative structure of the texts. Additionally, I detail how the environment portrayed by the Russian authors, specifically St. Petersburg in Gogol's *St. Petersburg Tales*, can have an influence on a character's state of mind or even cause their illusions to persist in a way that ultimately leads to their downfall.

I did not, however, cover much of *Despair* in my writing, such as Hermann's extensive detailing his experiences with dissociation, the forced involvement of his wife, Lydia, in the murder plot, or many of his conversations with Felix, as I was primarily focused on how Hermann's villainous intent begins to take shape in his mind as well as why his "writing" of the story disintegrates into the "lowest form of letters," or diary writing. Each of the five major

works I have analyzed in this project feature a main character, whether they be a low-level copy clerk or an artist, who remained fatally persistent in their delusions until the very end, incessantly trying to reconcile what they knew to be true with what others claim to be the “real” truth.

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