“This is Paris Itself!”: Gogol in the Town of N

Art has the provinces in its blood. Art is provincial in principle, preserving for itself a naïve, external, astonished and envious look.
— Andrei Sinyavsky, 1976

Wandering these backwaters, I’ve seen such dreary things that it was hard for me to believe there somewhere exists magnificent Moscow, art, et cetera. And yet it seems to me that genuine art and thought can in fact only appear in such a backwater.
— Andrei Platonov, 1927

Pronouncements like Platonov’s and Sinyavsky’s are made possible by Nikolai Gogol, in whose work the provincial backwater becomes not just a recurring image but a governing trope of Russian literature. Sinyavsky and Platonov both connect their vision of the provinces to the fictional world that Gogol created: it is in a study of Gogol that Sinyavsky argues for art’s essentially provincial nature, and Platonov describes his experience in the Tambov region as a “crushing dream” of immersion in a “Gogolian province.” In Gogol’s imagination the category of provintsiiia accrues meanings well beyond narrowness, distortion, and deathly stasis, tipping over into something more mysterious and darkly resonant than what we have seen in the writers addressed so far. Thanks to Gogol the provinces became symbolically central to Russian identity, a touchstone without which it would be difficult to imagine works as diverse as Dostoevsky’s Demons, Shchedrin’s The Golovlyov Family, Chekhov’s “Ward No. Six,” Sologub’s Petty Demon, and Dobychin’s The Town of N. Even for writers who were to depart
from Gogol's symbolic geography in various ways, his work established the centrality of the trope itself, and engagement with the trope was unavoidable. After *Dead Souls* and *The Inspector General*, the Russian provincial town would always risk being characterized by the adjective “Gogolian.”

The “Gogolian province” is epitomized by *Dead Souls*’ Town of N, a place defined almost wholly by absence and lack. In his working notes to the novel’s first chapter, Gogol conjures up his provincial city in the following terms: “The idea of the city. The highest degree of Emptiness. Empty talk . . . How the emptiness and impotent idleness of life are replaced by a turbid and meaningless death [mutnoiu, nichego ne govoriashcheiu smerti’iu].” A bit later he continues, “The reader must be struck by the dead insensibility of life” in the provincial town. “The highest degree of Emptiness,” “the dead insensibility of life”: this is a somewhat more mystifying vision of provintsiia than what we have seen in other texts of the 1830s and 1840s. Sollogub and Herzen may describe provintsiia as being plagued by bad taste, motley culture, repetition, and status anxiety, but they are less likely to go so far as to equate provincial life with “turbid and meaningless death.”

Gogol’s provinces are not just philistine, not just behind the times, but seem instead to represent an unfillable cultural and psychic void. This chapter examines the historically shaped (but aesthetically transformed) meanings of “the provinces” that inform Gogol’s thought, particularly in *Dead Souls*, *The Inspector General*, and *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*—texts that span much of his career but share almost identical concerns when it comes to provintsiia and its meanings. (Indeed, there is little “development” in this particular set of ideas, which is why I do not address Gogol’s works in strictly chronological order.) Provintsiia here takes on a function it is not consistently called upon to fulfill in the works of other authors I have considered. In Gogol’s works the concept very clearly serves as a way of raising questions about Russian identity more broadly. We begin to understand why provinciality is more deeply worrisome in Gogol’s Russia than elsewhere: Gogol capitalizes on the painful fact that in Russia, the provinciality of the provinces can be seen to reflect the provinciality and perhaps even the “inauthenticity” of the nation as a whole.

**An Aside on Ukraine**

As I discuss in chapter 1 of this book, the provinces are provincial because they are not something else; they are defined by what they lack. One thing the Russian provinces are not, at least for Gogol, is Ukrainian. Before discussing the significance of Russian provintsiia in Gogol’s work, we would do well to examine, even if briefly, how he conceived of the relationship between Russia and (the) Ukraine,
as well as the vocabulary he used to write about them. While somewhat tangential to this chapter’s main argument, a clarification is essential—particularly since it has been argued that for Gogol, Ukrainian national or folk identity represented a standard of organic culture against which Russia, an imperial power thought to be plagued by a fundamental lack of narodnost’ (national identity), could be judged and found lacking.\(^3\)

The status of both Ukrainianness and Russianness is, I would argue, unstable in Gogol’s oeuvre, a fact that should not be surprising given the complexity of the Russia-Ukraine relationship both in his time and ours. Gogol was born and raised in Ukraine’s Poltava region, and his life spanned a period when Ukraine was almost universally seen as an integral part of the Russian empire, when it was unproblematically referred to as “Little Russia” (Malorossiia, a term that “Great Russian” nationalists still use on occasion but that Ukrainians now find offensive).

His family had the kind of mixed background that was not at all unusual for the Ukrainian gentry: their heritage was partly Polish; they usually spoke Russian at home but at times they spoke Ukrainian; they corresponded in Russian but read in Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish; Gogol’s father wrote comedies in Ukrainian, but Gogol himself wrote only in Russian. The family did not experience their Ukrainianness as being in conflict with their status as loyal subjects and at times servitors of the Russian empire—much as Ivan Dolgorukov (whose travel writing is analyzed in chapter 3) waxes poetic about Mazeppa, Khmelnitsky, and watermelons as he approaches Ukraine, even as he expects the educated state servitors there to be “cosmopolitans” with whom he has a “shared language,” people who serve “the same empire [derzhava].”\(^4\)

In Gogol’s day, “Great” Russians (or those who identified with an imperial version of Russian culture, including some Ukrainian elites) could choose to see “Little” Russian identity as simply, and benignly, a variant of Russianness, or even as a quaint version of the Ur-Slavic soul. Thus Faddei Bulgarin could interpret *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* as a reflection of the national (i.e., Russian) spirit, thanks to the fact that Ukrainians had supposedly preserved a pure form of Slavicness.\(^5\) As Bulgarin’s interpretation suggests, at times it seems to have been possible to locate (or imagine) a purer version of “Russianness” on the margins of the empire, in a place that was not in reality straightforwardly Russian, than it was to locate this sort of national purity in the (Russian) provinces. Certain other liminal or outlying regions also proved capable of accommodating the national imaginary in this way: in Aksakov’s *Family Chronicle* and Turgenev’s *King Lear of the Steppes*, for example, the steppes— in reality an ethnically mixed space where Russians were relative latecomers—are depicted as repositories of Russianness, much as Siberia would be treated in later texts. (And here we note a parallel with British literary history, in which, as Katie Trumpener has shown, the “Celtic
“fringe” was not only incorporated into “English” literature but also reimagined as central to that “English” tradition.)

It made perfect sense that when Gogol wanted to make a name for himself, he set off for the Russian imperial capital of St. Petersburg: this was where you went to make a career, any career. His departure did not suggest a renunciation of Ukrainianness; rather, it signaled ambition. Though the analogy is imperfect, think of an Indian writer today who chooses to write in English: because the English language is backed by an empire (or by multiple empires), it promises a more direct pathway to membership in “Great Literature” (always a concern for Gogol, who was nothing if not ambitious) than would a more “minor” language. It was in Petersburg that Gogol became famous as a Russian writer—but he did so by making canny use of his “Little Russian” identity. As soon as he arrived in the imperial capital he recognized that things Ukrainian happened to be in vogue, and he immediately wrote to his mother back home, asking her to send him anecdotes, vocabulary, folklore—whatever might be useful for capitalizing on the trend. The result was his first successful publication, a story cycle set in a “Little Russian” village, written in Russian but full of folksy Ukrainianisms and bits of local color. (Indeed the tales’ attention to what is emphatically local calls to mind Russian Romantics’ interest in the realia of imperial borderlands: Dikanka glosses unfamiliar regional vocabulary, just as Pushkin did in his notes to Prisoner of the Caucasus.)

For the rest of his life—including in his most famous texts, which are set not in Ukraine but in Russia—Gogol’s perspective was informed by his Ukrainian origins. But exactly how these origins shaped his views of Russian culture, empire, and language—none of this is at all straightforward. Some of his Russian contemporaries took offense at works like Dead Souls, The Inspector General, and “The Overcoat,” in which they discerned an anti-Russian bias that they attributed to his Ukrainianness; others read his work as a sincere if anguished paean to the “Russian soul.” Both readings are plausible, and each satisfies a constituency; in fact, “the Gogol wars,” which started in his time, are still going on today. One version of the fight pits Gogol against his more uncompromisingly Ukrainian contemporary Taras Shevchenko, who not only wrote in Ukrainian at a time when the tsarist authorities had forbidden it, but even suffered exile for his impassioned defense of Ukrainian language and culture. In this reading—Gogol as the anti-Shevchenko—Gogol becomes a sell-out to the imperial overlords. But on the other side, there are ongoing attempts to represent Gogol as a passionate Ukrainian nationalist, even as rabidly anti-Russian. In this interpretation, Gogol becomes a sort of fifth-column presence in the literature of the Russian empire, subverting imperial culture from within (and here the analogy would be Kafka, a Czech Jew writing in and thereby “infiltrating” German).
For my purposes, it is sufficient to note that the rural Ukraine of Gogol’s early tales (in particular the folksy stories collected in *Dikanka* and *Mirgorod*) has little in common with the barren *provintsia* of “Great” Russia as it is represented in the texts I consider here. And even if one believes that Gogol saw Ukraine as symbolically opposed to Russia proper (in which case the symbolic fullness of Ukraine might be seen as a condition of the symbolic emptiness of Russia), the opposition seems only to have encouraged him to collapse the diverse regions of Russia into the category of “the provinces,” thereby freighting this ill-defined category with even more significance than it carries in the work of his contemporaries. The Russian provinces—their slippery meaning, their suggestive emptiness—are virtually an obsession for Gogol, who returns to them again and again, often in an interrogative mode, asking questions that will never be answered.

**Places, Named and Ranked**

Where exactly are Gogol’s provinces located? *Dead Souls* is set in a *gubernskii gorod*, the capital of a *guberniia* (administrative region). *The Inspector General* is set in a smaller “district town” (perhaps the very rough equivalent of an American county seat), designated by *gorod* and *gorodok* (sometimes modified by *uezdnyi* and *malen’kii*, “district” and “small”) as well as by *v glushi* and *v derevne* (roughly, in the countryside). Gogol uses vocabulary similar to that found in Zagoskin’s 1835 “Three Suitors” (see chapter 3), but unlike Zagoskin, who attempts to distinguish among such terms, Gogol collapses them into the same conceptual category. And indeed, as I have discussed elsewhere, the terminology used to refer to provincial places in the 1830s and 1840s was not consistent. As noted in the previous chapter, this fluidity is especially apparent in the almost interchangeable use of *provintsial’nyi* and *gubernskii*. Gogol uses *guberniia* constantly and forms of *provintsia* rarely: In *Dead Souls* the adjective *provintsial’nyi* never occurs (though the construction *v nashikh provintsiiakh* is used twice, 6:18, 577), while forms of *guberniia* and *gubernskii* appear over and over. In *The Inspector General* various forms of *provintsia* recur alongside the occasional *guberniia*, as when stage notes describe the mayor’s wife as a *provintsial’naia koketka* (“provincial coquette,” 4:9) and Khlestakov disparages yokels as *provintsial’nye gusi* (“provincial geese,” 4:61).

While these lexical distinctions carry little meaning in Gogol’s work, what does signify is the provincials’ acute awareness of the fact that Russian towns were ranked by law. Under Catherine, as I discuss in this book’s introductory chapter, every city was assigned a place in an official hierarchy, and every town center, depending on its place in the hierarchy, was supposed to contain the same combination of public buildings. Such regulations reflected not only an Enlightenment desire for symmetry and the state’s determination to manifest its power in the
provinces, but also the imperative to look like Petersburg, which in turn looked, or aimed to look, like Europe: ideally, every Russian city was to model itself on cities the next level up.

Just as Gogol’s bureaucrats in the Petersburg tales are ever aware of the Table of Ranks that determines their possibilities in life, so everyone in the world of Dead Souls is implicitly aware of this spatial hierarchy, and as a result, there is nothing in this world that does not aspire to be something else, something on the next level “up.” The young son of the landowner Manilov (“Themistoclius,” a name suggesting acute cultural confusion) has already internalized the system. To the question “which is the finest city in France?” little Themistoclius answers, Paris; and then to the questions “What is our finest city?” and “What’s another fine city?” he answers readily, St. Petersburg and Moscow (6:30). As a gubernskii gorod, N itself functions as a kind of capital in relationship to the smaller towns lower down in the hierarchy (such as, for example, the “poor little district town” with its “rural tedium” (bednyi uezdnyi gorodishka, uezdnaia skuka) that is mentioned in passing; 6:110). And for the governor’s ball, everyone from miles around (from the local district towns, villages, and estates) converges on N, thus reinforcing its place as a gubernskii gorod (provincial capital) in the ranking system (provinces → capitals → Europe) that structures provincial lives.

And where exactly is N? The town is introduced and described in the very first lines of Dead Souls, but of course it will never be named. The nameless backwater is then reduced almost to placelessness as well when the narrator describes it as “not far from both capitals” (6:206): one glance at a map reveals that it is impossible to be simultaneously “not far” from Petersburg and Moscow, two cities that are four hundred miles apart. Perhaps the most intelligible geographic message we can take away from this statement is a confirmation that N is located within European Russia, maybe somewhere in between Moscow and Petersburg; that is, it is not located in Ukraine or on the steppes or in any of the other border regions. “Not far from Petersburg and Moscow,” then, actually evokes both “no place” and “in the very middle of the undifferentiated space that is (European) Russia.” In The Inspector General, too, we are never told where the play is set, though the mayor scoffs at another character’s surmise that the central authorities may be trying to sniff out traitors “in a little district town”: “What is this, the borderlands or something? From here you could gallop three years and not get to a border” (4:12). Again, we do not know exactly where we are, but we know we are far from any border—that is, we are in the heart of European Russia.

Given the extreme homogeneity Gogol attributes to provincial places, is this not all we need to know? We are not invited to think about exactly where these works might be set, considering the uniformity and repetition that characterize
Gogol’s provincial world. In *Dead Souls* many passages suggest that any provincial town can stand in for any other, and the city of N is above all just like all other provincial cities. In fact, almost no trait is attributed to it that is not also attributed to “all provincial cities.” Chichikov’s room at the inn is familiar (*izvestnogo roda*), the inn itself is also familiar (again *izvestnogo roda*, and *kak byvaiut gostinitsy v gubernskikh gorodakh*), the town’s architecture is familiar (*izvestnoi*), the men in the town are “like they are everywhere, of two types” (i.e., fat and thin), the paint on the buildings is “that eternal yellow color”—the examples could easily be multiplied (6:8, 14).

In a paragraph describing the inn’s common room, forms of the construction *to zhe* (the same) recur six times, summed up with the words, “in a word, everything the same as everywhere” (*slovom, vse to zhe, chto i vezde*, 6:9). The outlying landscape is described with a similar emphasis on familiarity and sameness: the landscape unfolds “as always with us” (*po nashemu obychaiu*); a few peasants are said to be yawning “as usual” (*po obyknoveniiu*); and finally, the narrator sums it all up with “in a word, the familiar sights” (*slovom, vidy izvestnye*, 6:21–22). Such uniformity suggests that even a provincial place about which one knows nothing is in effect always already known, since the provincial admits of no real variation, no individuality.

However, this seemingly implausible degree of uniformity points to social and historical realities of which Gogol was well aware. As I have explained in the introduction, Russia’s provincial towns generally did look the same, a regularity that was the intentional result of urban planning practices that had been in effect since the time of Peter and especially Catherine. The autocratic state sought to ensure that Russian cities appeared orderly and rational, characterized by a symmetry meant to convey stability and *paradnost’* (grandeur), rational, orderly, regular, symmetrical, and permanent, with an emphasis on façades and *paradnost’* (grandeur).14 Hence the real-life standardization Gogol describes in his essay “On Present-Day Architecture,” published in the 1835 collection *Arabesques*, which notes that provincial cities feature avenues “so regular, so straight, so monotonous, that having crossed a street, one feels such boredom that one lacks all desire to look at another one” (8:61–62).

*Dead Souls’* Town of N exemplifies what “On Present-Day Architecture” describes as “the latest architecture of our European cities,” whose deadening repetition made Gogol long for something—anything—*exceptional*: the essay calls for “majestic and colossal” buildings, “looming monuments,” structures “so awful in their enormousness” that “the mind freezes before them in shock” (8:62, 66–67). Elsewhere in *Arabesques* (in an essay on teaching geography to children), Gogol suggests that when it comes to places of such numbing uniformity as N, there is literally *nothing to say*: 
Let the pupil learn what Rome is, and Paris, and Petersburg. . . . Everything that is common to all cities should be excluded from the description of each individual one. In many of our geography textbooks it is still common to note in descriptions of every provincial town [gubernskogo goroda] that there is a gymnasium, a church. . . . But why? It is sufficient to tell the pupil from the start that we have gymnasiums in every provincial town, and churches too. But the Kremlin, the Vatican, the Palais Royale, Falconet’s monument to Peter, the Kiev Monastery of the Caves, and the Court of King’s Bench—these are unique in all the world. (8:104, emphasis mine)

“Only what distinguishes a city from the mass of other cities” is worthy of attention, and whatever repeats itself, whatever is not singular, should be ignored altogether (8:104). But if we apply these standards to Dead Souls’ provincial setting, what, then, could there possibly be to say about the place?

A few years after Dead Souls, as we will see in the following chapter, Ivan Goncharov’s An Ordinary Story (1846) will approach the problem of ordinariness and repetition by insisting that ordinariness and repetition are defining traits of urban modernity, and as such are to be embraced. In fact Goncharov represents the tendency to value what is singular and extraordinary as a specifically provincial delusion, one that can be dispelled by moving to the capital and submitting to its discipline. But Gogol’s solution to the problem of N’s ordinariness is to exaggerate this ordinariness to the point of absurdity, making the town’s lack of defining features its defining feature.

Making the Provinces Visible

The provinces, it seems, are hard to see: and Gogol’s work reveals an almost obsessive attention not just to provintsiiia itself but to the process by which it might be made legible. He was not alone in this preoccupation. Just as his 1828 arrival in Petersburg had coincided fortuitously with a moment of “Great Russian” enthusiasm for all things “Little Russian,” so his writings about provintsiiia in the 1830s and 1840s dovetailed with, and were likely encouraged by, a period of intense official engagement with the question of how best to study the provinces (see chapter 1 for more on these state efforts). Beginning in Peter’s time and intensifying in the decades following the Pugachev rebellion, the autocracy had turned its gaze outward, dispatching to Russia’s various regions not just military forces, but also researchers who were charged with transforming these far-off places into objects of knowledge.15 Such efforts took on even more urgency in the 1830s and 1840s, as the need for economic modernization motivated the central autocracy to create “provincial statistical committees” and other tools for learning about provincial places.
The goal of all these efforts was to “make the local visible to the center”: thus Gogol’s imaginative excursions into the Russian provinces formed part of a trend among elites in the capitals. In trying to collect economic, agricultural, civic, meteorological, and legal data under nearly impossible conditions, the information-seeking bureaucrats, like Gogol, were inspired by the belief that knowledge of provincial life was essential to helping Russia understand itself. In the words of the civil servant Konstantin Arsenev, commenting on information-gathering efforts in the same year that Dead Souls was published, “knowledge of one’s homeland . . . in view of our general striving for narodnost’ . . . ought to be required of every statesman, civil servant, soldier, estate owner, industrialist, merchant, and, in general, every educated patriot.” The provincial statistical committees had much work to do, or at least much work to appear to do, if they were to fulfill Petersburg’s order to “discover and catalogue the Russian people.”

The bureaucrat-researchers being dispatched to provincial cities were liable to meet a reception nearly as bizarre as Khlestakov’s in The Inspector General or Chichikov’s in Dead Souls, since their diligent efforts to compile statistical pictures of various places and institutions were met by equally diligent efforts to thwart them. Herzen’s account of the absurdity and grotesquery he encountered during his internal exile in the 1830s resonates strongly with Gogol’s imaginary provincial world, giving us a sense of how Gogol’s fanciful thinking was to some degree a response to contemporary concerns. Herzen’s description of compiling (and inventing) statistical data in a Vyatka government office might have been excerpted from Dead Souls:

The Ministry of Home Affairs [Internal Affairs] had at that time a craze for statistics: it had given orders for committees to be formed everywhere, and had issued programs which could hardly have been carried out even in Belgium or Switzerland; at the same time there were to be all sorts of elaborate tables with maxima and minima, with averages and various deductions from the totals for periods of ten years (made up of evidence which had not been collected a year before!), with moral remarks and meteorological observations. Not a farthing was assigned for the expenses of the committees and the collection of evidence; all this was to be done from love of statistics.

Herzen obligingly invented data, “[drawing] up summaries of the tables with eloquent remarks introducing foreign words, quotations, and striking deductions.” Predictably, since no extra resources were allocated for this work, the “facts” that were collected were at times as Gogolian as the process by which they were compiled. For instance, Herzen recalls reading a statistical report from “the unimportant town of Kay” that included the following entry:
“Drowned—2. Causes of drowning not known—2, and in the column of ‘total’ was set out the figure 4.”

By Herzen’s account, his fellow bureaucrats in Vyatka were relieved to accede to his superior (because stolichnyi) knowledge; his problematic status as a political exile, he writes, counted for nothing compared to the cachet associated with everything from the capital. His expertise was valued because the work of studying provintsia was not meant to be undertaken by provincials on their own: provincials were not deemed capable of making sense even of themselves. Implicit in the state’s project was the assumption that only the capital could interpret the mass of raw data to be unearthed in the provinces (as will become even clearer in chapter 8). For instance, when the Vyatka bureaucrats received instructions from Petersburg that the tsarevich’s visit required “an exhibition of the district’s various natural products and handicrafts . . . arranged according to the three natural kingdoms,” the locals were thrown into a panic by the need to establish categories of “animal, vegetable, and mineral” (“where to put honey, for instance?”)—and Herzen saved the day. As a representative of the capital’s intellectual authority, he was called upon not just to invent facts, but also to bestow order on the chaos of provintsia, an order that provincials themselves could neither perceive nor invent.

Gogol spent far less time in provincial Russia than Herzen did, and there is little to refute S. A. Vengerov’s assertion “Gogol knew absolutely nothing of real Russian life”: such is the title of a 1911 article charging that the author of Dead Souls, a text so often taken by nineteenth-century readers as an exposé of hard realities, had spent less than two weeks in the Russian countryside, and most of that inside a moving carriage. But because Gogol shared with his contemporaries the belief that you have to know the provinces if you want to know Russia, and you have to know Russia if you want to be a true patriot, he devoted a great deal of time to reading and thinking about such places, as evidenced not only by his own published works but also by various book reviews, notes, unfinished projects, etc., which span decades. As early as 1830 he was writing a geography textbook for children; in the late 1840s he composed for himself a long, detailed summary of an eighteenth-century travelogue about the Russian provinces; at the end of his life he was working on what he projected would be “a living geography of Russia” (9:277–415, 642).

Gogol’s texts often seem less concerned with the provinces themselves than with the act of looking at the provinces. At one point in the essay “On Present-Day Architecture,” he remarks that tall buildings (“huge, colossal towers”) are essential in a capital city—because how else will the capital be able to keep watch over the surrounding areas (dlia nabliudeniia nad okrestnostiami)? The capital needs to be able “to see at least a verst and a half in all directions,” he asserts, so as always to be “surveying the provinces [obozrevaia provintsii], foreseeing everything in
advance” (8:62). The probing gaze the center directs toward the periphery, and the periphery’s reaction to this gaze: this relationship structures not just “On Present-Day Architecture,” but a whole series of Gogol’s texts.

The Inspector General (1836), for example, returns again and again to the behavior of provincials who suddenly become aware that the capital has turned its eyes upon them, an awareness that leaves them feeling both gratified and deeply anxious. Petty malefactors in the anonymous provincial city fear the accusatory and unmasking gaze of Petersburg, but they long for it as well—because, it seems, their inconsequential lives might become meaningful when seen through the capital’s powerful lens. Gogol’s provincials dream of the capital not only because of its associations with power and material rewards, but also because of its ability to confer significance. One character sums up this view of the capital’s signifying power when he begs Khlestakov to inform Petersburg that he exists: “In Petersburg tell all the various bigwigs . . . that in such-and-such a town there lives Peter Ivanovich Bobchinksy” (the provincial place—“such-and-such a town”—goes unnamed even by its own inhabitants; 4:67). Thus in The Inspector General the capital looks (occasionally, and unpredictably) at the provinces in order to inspect, indict and control; the provinces look back in order to imitate, to see themselves reflected in the eyes of the powers-that-be (thereby confirming that they actually exist), and to formulate alibis as needed.

A similar preoccupation with looking and studying is evident in the last work Gogol published in his lifetime, Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends (1847). Selected Passages is a bizarre mix of religious homily and reactionary diatribe posing as a series of personal letters. These letters imagine the provinces as the object of the capital’s gaze and as a field of inquiry, a blank space yet to be filled in on Russia’s conceptual map. Like the provincial statistical committees, this text quite clearly takes part in the effort to “make the local visible to the center.” Gogol counsels his readers to approach provincial Russia “as a new land, hitherto unknown to you,” with the explicit goal of collecting information about provincial life. He returns again and again to the idea that “we”—that is, presumably, we residents of the capitals—know nothing of Russia: “Great is the ignorance of Russia within Russia, since everyone lives in foreign journals and newspapers, not in his own land” (8:303, 308). Gogol includes himself among the ignorant—“I know absolutely nothing of what is inside [Russia],” he laments (8:311; thus he more or less pleads guilty in advance to the charge Vengerov would later level against him).

The solution lies in the assiduous compiling of data: “In the same way that a Russian traveler arriving in some celebrated European city hurries to see all the antiquities and famous sights, in exactly the same way, and with even greater curiosity, after you have arrived in the chief town of a [Russian] district or province,
strive to get to know the sights. They are not in architectural works or antiquities but in people” (8:303). Again and again Gogol insists upon the need to gather information directly from the provincial source, as when he addresses the wife of a provincial governor who must become acquainted with the town where her husband is posted: “In the brief time you have spent in the town of K__ you have come to know Russia better than in all your previous life” (8:311). One chapter of Selected Passages bears the title “It is Necessary to Travel around Russia” (Nuzhno proezditi'sia po Rossi, 8:301), an exhortation that is constantly repeated over the course of the letter and throughout Selected Passages as a whole. Gogol urges his audience to travel around the country with the goal of bringing back intelligence that will reveal “Russia in its true aspect” (v istinnom vide Rossiia, 8:302). Having previously suggested (in Dead Souls) that people in the provinces are all more or less the same, conforming to a few basic types, here he seems to try to convince himself that if one looks hard enough, essential truths will be revealed.

But looking at provincial Russia will not be easy. For one thing, if you are from one of the capitals, then convincing yourself that the locals are anything like you is going to require a heroic act of imagination. A striking example of the elite outsider’s alienation in provintsiia occurs in the letter “The Russian Landowner” (Russkoi pomeshchik). (Note, too, the typical and suggestive Gogolian pleonasm of the title, for in this context what could the pomeshchik possibly be if not russkoi?) In this letter’s opening line, Gogol assumes that the first challenge facing the Russian pomeshchik recently arrived in the countryside is, in effect, to believe himself to be a Russian pomeshchik. Rather bizarrely, he asserts that “the most important thing is that you have arrived in the countryside and that you set yourself to being a pomeshchik” (Glavnoe to, chto ty priekhal v derevniu i polozhil sebe nepremenno byt’ pomeshchikom, 8:321, emphasis mine). Here the relationship to what should be one’s native place is represented as anything but natural: one cannot imagine, say, an English baronet arriving at his ancestral home and having to convince himself that he really is an English baronet who really does live and belong in this particular place. (The same holds true for the provincial governor and his wife: Gogol urges them to try to think of the provincial city in which they have just arrived as their “native town,” thereby conceding that it may be a rough go.)

Advice like this suggests that being a member of the Russian landowning class was one thing, but for the richest and most sophisticated landowners, actually living on one’s provincial estate and fulfilling the duties of a pomeshchik, and feeling oneself to be at home while doing so, was a different thing altogether. In fact it was a challenge that seems here to require a degree of grim determination. Selected Passages’ advice to the russkoi pomeshchik reflects the historical situation of the landowning class as I outlined it in this book’s first chapter: the ties binding wealthy Russian noblemen to their provincial estates were often weak (compared
to those that bound European nobles or American planters to theirs), and Russia’s most cultured noblemen were unlikely to view provincial regions as their “native” places. As Peter Kolchin writes, the wealthiest Russian noblemen, far from feeling at home on their estates, “typically felt trapped or isolated” when they were there. Thus in Selected Passages, when Gogol assumes that a highbrow nobleman who lands in the provinces will feel deracinated, even bewildered, this assumption reflects certain realities.

To the provincial governor’s wife who is facing this challenge, Gogol offers the following helpful advice: look at your whole provincial town as a doctor looks at an infirmary (как лекарь глядит на lazaret), and try to “convince yourself that all the sick people in the infirmary are in fact your kinsmen . . . then everything will change before you: you will be reconciled with people and will be at war only with their illnesses” (8:310). The image of provincial city as sick ward is repeated and developed a few pages later, when Gogol urges the governor’s wife to lay out all the town’s problems for the bishop: “Show him your entire infirmary [lazaret] and display before him all the illnesses of your patients. . . . Inform him constantly of all the fits, symptoms, and manifestations of the illness” (8:316). Here we recall the improbable images used by Sollogub and Zagoskin to emphasize provincial alienness (albinos, “Aleutian savages,” “wild men of Australia”). Clearly, in Gogol’s day members of educated society in the capitals were becoming accustomed to reading about the “animal instinct and self-debasement by which the life of the provincial outback was distinguished” (in the words of a memoirist writing about the Decembrists’ experience in exile), or what Herzen calls “the slough of provincial life.”

The provinces could be depicted both as horror show and as repository of true Russianness, their inhabitants both as freaks and as representative Russian types. In keeping with this tendency, Selected Passages represents the life of the provincial city as a collection of symptoms so horrific that an outsider must work to convince herself that the city’s inhabitants have anything to do with her at all, that they are in fact her “kinsmen” (ваш родные и близкие к вашему сердцу люди, 8:310); the town is so loathsome that she must be counseled on how not to avert her eyes. Compare Herzen’s description of an infamous Vyatka official as “a peculiar sort of beast that is met with in the forest, in the wild, a beast that ought to have been studied.” Gogol shares Herzen’s assumption: even if what one sees in провинция is repellent, one is morally obligated to look, with the goal of putting together an ethnography of the lazaret that is provincial Russia.

“Such is the Nature of the Provincial City”

When we first see Dead Souls’ Town of N in the novel’s opening paragraphs, we are made to feel nearly as disoriented as Selected Passages’ bewildered addressees
who have recently been deposited in the provinces (the landowner who must convince himself that his estate is in fact his home or the governor’s wife who can only understand her town as a pest-house). *Dead Souls*’ setting consists of a few structures (the Administrative Office, a sentry box, some cabstands) scattered randomly throughout a bleakly unintelligible pseudo-public space: the effect is one of overwhelming cultural incoherence (6:141). About half the novel recounts events that take place in the town itself; the rest of the narrative traces the movements of the hero, Chichikov, through five outlying provincial estates. All these estates are close to N, and we see all the landowners but one in town as well as in their homes: clearly, in *Dead Souls* provincial estate and provincial city occupy the same symbolic space. If, as I have noted before, the estate can be either provincial or cosmopolitan, the estates in *Dead Souls* are as unambiguously provincial as the town; in both these places, even the latest modes will partake of their setting’s essential provinciality.

The governor’s ball represents a crescendo of provinciality, a climax that occurs at the moment when all the townspeople deny their provinciality most vigorously: we are told that everything and everyone at the ball seems to be saying, “No, this is not the provinces, this is the capital, this is Paris itself!” (*net,eto ne guberniia, eto stolitsa, eto sam Parizh!*, 6:163). But here all efforts to be unprovincial are doomed. These people are provincial in their essence, and this essence will inevitably expose itself. At the very moment when everyone in N can agree that “this is not the provinces,” there will appear, say, a strange hat that violates every rule of fashion. There is no getting around it: “This is unavoidable, such is the nature of the provincial city: somewhere it will inevitably reveal itself” (*no uzh bez etogo nel’zia, takovo svoistvo gubernskogo goroda: gde-nibud’ on nepremenno oborvetsia, 6:163–64).

Like the Town of N, each landowner’s home contains a few vestigial and fragmentary bits of imported “culture,” seemingly the flotsam and jetsam of a distant civilization. Manilov’s garden, for instance, reveals inept attempts at English landscape design: a ramshackle arbor, dubbed the “Temple for Solitary Meditation,” is surrounded by peasants’ log huts. And inside his house, what is described as “an exceedingly elegant candlestick of darkened bronze, with the three Graces of antiquity and an elegant mother-of-pearl escutcheon” stands alongside another candlestick, one that is broken, ugly, home-made, jerry-built (6:22, 25). Here as elsewhere, Gogol uses incongruity and juxtaposition—the Three Graces alongside tallow-covered rags—to convey the incoherent and derivative nature of what passes for culture in the provinces.

Similarly, the prints that adorn the landowners’ walls are a sort of cultural detritus washed up on the provincial shore. They depict everything from watermelons and a boar’s head (at Plushkin’s house) to Greek military leaders (at Sobakevich’s),
and none of them seems to bear a coherent relationship to its current location (6:95, 115). As the narrator says of one such picture, “there was no way of knowing how or why [it] had gotten there” (6:95). The estates’ furnishings attest to both the meagerness and the illegibility of provincial culture. The same goes for the vulgar painting of decidedly unknown provenance that has somehow ended up on the wall of the town inn: the narrator speculates that this image of “a nymph with breasts so large that the reader has probably never seen the like” was “brought back to us in Russia” by “one of our grandees, art lovers who buy [such things] in Italy on the advice of their couriers” (6:9).

Passages that highlight such incoherence draw attention to the threat of meaninglessness that haunts a syncretic culture like that of nineteenth-century Russia, a culture that borrowed freely and conspicuously. In Manilov’s estate and Sobakevich’s paintings, we see Gogol’s aesthetically self-conscious version of what we saw in Sologub’s grotesque provincial mansion (in “Serezha,” a house resulting from decades of random accretion) and Herzen’s provincial church (in Who Is to Blame?, a structure combining Byzantine, classical, and Gothic elements). In each case, the authors highlight objects and styles that have been shorn of context and promiscuously mixed together, thus signaling a fear that Russian culture had not yet done the work of imbuing these objects with significance.

Of course, Russia’s cultural syncretism was a source of great creativity and strength for artists, as Monika Greenleaf and many others have noted. But this syncretism and cultural borrowing also generated anxiety—a fact that helps explain not only Russian literature’s preoccupation with provintsia and provintsial’nost’, but also Gogol’s frequent hints that in Russia, provinciality cannot be confined to the provinces. In Dead Souls and The Inspector General, in which characters insist tirelessly on the essential and absolute difference between capitals and provinces, such assertions are often cast in doubt by the works as a whole, both of which open up the possibility that there is in fact no genuine standard of stolichnost’ against which the provincial might be judged.

For instance, Khlestakov and the townspeople in The Inspector General expatiate at length on the wonders of the capital that are lacking in the provincial town, but in the end what Khlestakov tells the locals about the capital is what they themselves already “know.” He simply responds to their image of Petersburg, an image that is quite capable of accommodating the idea of, say, a 700-ruble melon. Khlestakov tells stories of being “taken for” an important official in Petersburg, and the mayor’s wife is duly impressed (4:48): in a world where being “taken for” a VIP is just as good as being one, a belief in the capital’s essential superiority is merely what we might call these characters’ foundational mirage, the delusion that generates all their other delusions. There is nothing to suggest that this conviction has any more basis in reality than does Khlestakov’s fantastic melon.
Thus Petersburg and the very idea of *stolichnost’*, along with the absolute standard that this idea implies, begin to resemble floating signifiers. Khlestakov’s ecstatic riff to the postmaster suggests as much: “Of course there aren’t many people here [in this little town], but why should there be? After all it’s not the capital [*ved’ eto ne stolitsa*]. Am I right—after all, it’s not the capital? . . . After all only in the capital is there real *bon ton*, none of your provincial boors . . .” (4:60–61). *Ved’ eto ne stolitsa*: just as forms of the word “province” (*guberniia*) recur constantly in *Dead Souls* and *Selected Passages*, in *The Inspector General* “capital” and “Petersburg” are so often repeated that they stop sounding like geographic labels and start sounding more like talismanic invocations. Petersburg is a quasi-magical animating idea behind both Khlestakov and the townspeople’s response to him: it is a “conferring power,” “seat of authority, ground of judgment.” And yet in the end it is an *empty* idea, functioning only as “a powerful absence in the play.”

When the writers who were Gogol’s contemporaries mock provincial failures of taste, they typically do so because provincials *are* failing (their dance moves are ridiculous, their fashions are behind the times, etc.). But Gogol’s indictment of provinciality is somewhat different: his Town of N can never be anything but an attempt to be something else, *even when it gets everything right*; the townspeople’s attempts at fashion will remain fruitless *even when they are successful*. The narrator concedes, for example, that the ladies of N really do rival those of Petersburg and Moscow when it comes to observing proprieties and following fashions: “When it came to such things as knowing how to behave, how to maintain good tone and conform to etiquette, as well as a great number of the most subtle proprieties and especially how to observe the dictates of fashion down to the tiniest details—in all this they surpassed even the ladies of Petersburg and Moscow” (6:158). But in the end it makes no difference; they can do nothing but try to catch up, and even their most perfect efforts will be marked by the fact that they are efforts. Similarly, when the narrator insists twice in the space of five lines that the dandies of N do everything—shave, flirt, speak French—“just like they do in Petersburg” (6:14), the reference to the capital only draws attention to the fact that some fundamental problem has not been solved.

*Dead Souls* at times implies and at times states explicitly that there is *no* difference between province and capital, no matter how much the characters and even the narrator may insist that there is. The narrator concedes, for example, that there is no difference between the provincial landowner Korobochka and her imaginary “aristocratic sister” in the capital, who yawns over novels and attends witty social gatherings (6:58). And he allows that the bear-like landowner Sobakevich, seemingly the incarnation of Russian provinciality, would have been no different had he been born in Petersburg. Sobakevich would be just the same, Chichikov muses, even if he had received a modish education and lived in the social whirl
And finally, in the novel’s last chapter, the author (by this point seemingly distinct from the narrator, and possessing greater authority) reflects significantly that one feels the same melancholy upon entering any town, “even if it’s a capital” (*khot’ dazhe v stolitsu*, 6:241). Once again we are reminded of the narrator’s claim that N is “not far from both capitals”: geographically this remains baffling, but conceptually it becomes suggestive in yet another way, hinting as it does that the differences between Russian province and Russian capital are not as essential as many think, or perhaps even that both are equally “provincial.”

Despite the characters’ intermittent insistence on the absolute difference between capital and province, the capital, too, is implicated in provinciality; or put another way, even if the provinces cannot believe themselves to be as good as the capital, the capital can be as bad as the provinces. As a result, in Gogol’s world, actually going to the capital represents no solution, any more than it would for Chekhov’s three sisters a few generations later. In his major works, rather than sharing his characters’ belief in an absolute difference between province and capital and in the capital’s incontestable primacy, Gogol comes close to imagining a world without any cultural or geographic locus of authenticity.

The meanings of province and capital begin to run together, a blurring of conceptual boundaries hinting that more is at stake in these texts than merely the provinciality of provincials. In fact, the characterization of N in the working notes to *Dead Souls* (“the dead insensibility of life”) recalls the image of the capital that emerges in his other texts.

The similarities between Gogolian province and Gogolian capital are especially evident in the Petersburg tales, with their repeated evocations of empty, death-in-life existences; both Petersburg and provinces, it seems, can stand as “locus of the negative” and “capital of illusion.” The parallel is underscored by the essay “Petersburg Notes of 1836,” in which Gogol represents the capitals much as he did the provinces in *Dead Souls*—as a place possessing virtually nothing that is native (*malo korennoi natsional’nosti*) but much that is alien and unassimilated (*mnogo inostroennogo smesheniiia, eshche ne slivshegosia v plotnuuiu massu*). He likens the city to an inn full of transients where everyone mindlessly apes European ways, a place so un-native as to be “something resembling a European-American colony.” When Gogol writes that “it’s hard to grasp a general impression of Petersburg,” he might as well be writing again about the difficulty of describing the provinces, which, as we have seen, resist being figured out (8:177–80). Despite what is supposed to be the provinces’ paradigmatic ordinariness, Gogol often hints at something indecipherable behind the seeming familiarity (hence the questions and non-answers that recur in *Dead Souls*: what does it mean when a Russian coachman scratches his head? “God knows—you won’t be able to guess. It means a great many different things when the Russian folk scratch the backs of their heads”; 6:215).
Provinces and capitals—seemingly opposed to each other and even appearing to derive their significance from this opposition—are ultimately the same: this is what renders Gogol's vision especially complex, even paradoxical. Gogol insists on what Mikhail Epstein calls, in a passage cited in this book's introduction, the “alienation from itself” that is a structural characteristic of the provinces. Here it is worth again calling attention to Epstein's diagnosis: “A province is located, as it were, not in itself; it is alien not in regard to someone or something else, but to itself, inasmuch as its own center has been taken out of itself and transferred to some other space or time.” Provincials are forever yearning for something that is somewhere else, “not here, not at this place, but 'there.'” While other authors of the era write about alienation and cultural incoherence in the provinces, Gogol refuses to confine such alienation to a geographical location, and he goes much farther in exploring its consequences; in effect, his representations of the provincial world amount to theorizing provinciality.

**Things and Thingness**

Much of this implicit theorizing occurs in Gogol's treatment of things. Dead Souls is full of ostentatiously physical objects characterized by a “‘sticking-out’ thing-ness,” with one detail after another “underlined and outlined by its absurdity.” Sometimes, as we have seen, an accumulation of pointedly unrelated items serves to draw our attention to an incoherent and dross-like “culture.” Often such objects are marked as feminine in some way, as “superfluous” details in narrative so often are. See, for example, the Pleasant Ladies’ conversation, which touches on flounces, stripes, checks, “sprigs and spots, spots and sprigs,” armholes, bodices and busks, farthingales, and cotton batting before culminating in an ecstatic paean to “little festoons.”

Some of Gogol’s lists read as critiques of a contemporary culture that he saw as marked by proliferating detail, what he called “broken-up trivia,” “atoms” and “component parts,” pettiness and dispersion (8:74, 66, 107). (Hence his intermittent interest throughout his life in the overpowering force of the sublime, which promised an antidote to multiplicity and triviality.) Some of these lists pointedly refuse to differentiate between animate and inanimate objects (as in a passage from “The Carriage” cited in the previous chapter, which inserts a peasant woman in between pretzels and a bar of soap), thereby evoking the questions raised by Dead Souls’ paradoxical title and the premise of its plot (how can a soul be dead? can a scrap of paper have value? and are these characters even alive?). In almost all these passages, we sense an intensified version of what we saw in texts by Gogol’s contemporaries, many of whom tended to associate the provinces with an especially dense version of materiality (see chapter 3). In such cases it is not
necessarily the attributes of the objects themselves that leave us queasy (though at
times it is); rather, we are often repelled—and fascinated—simply by the objects’
profusion, a copiousness that hints at uncontrolled and grotesque accretion.

Certain objects in Dead Souls seem to possess what we might call a hyperboli-
cally trivial quality. In the Pleasant Lady’s drawing room, for example, we encoun-
ter a pillow “with a knight embroidered on it in worsted, the way things always
are on canvas: the nose came out as a ladder, and the lips as a rectangle”—an
object that is not exactly confusing or out of place (an embroidered pillow is not
inappropriate in a drawing room), but is nonetheless vaguely puzzling. First we
are struck by the way Gogol zooms in on it, inexplicably separating it out from
whatever its surroundings might be and insisting on its physical presence. Then,
however, we are struck by the pointedly inconsequential nature of the object itself,
much as we are with the “tiny beaded pocket-case for holding a toothpick” that
Manilov’s wife has made for him (6:26). Both are obviously products of human
labor (almost all of the physical objects highlighted in Dead Souls are man-
made) and represent efforts that would have been better directed elsewhere; both make
demands on our attention that feel unreasonable or unwarranted.

Knight pillow and toothpick case both embody a kind of a mismeasuring, a
mismatching of effort with outcome that generates dissonance between grandio-
se claims (implicit or explicit) and sordid or meager realities. Such dissonance
arises often in Dead Souls, and we have seen forms of it in other writers as well (as
when the menu at a provincial inn in Tarantas advertises sup lipotazh—soupe le
potage, i.e., “soup the soup”—or when schoolchildren in Who Is to Blame? speak
“Celtic-Slavonic” or “Franco-ecclesiastical dialect”). What is notable in Gogol’s
text is that the incongruence can reside within one object: pillow and toothpick
holder invite us to feel wonder or disgust at the labored, precious aestheticization
of a trifle, the seriousness of effort devoted to something so insignificant. Such
passages touch on one reason behind the provintsiia trope’s resonance and staying
power: besides being a way for Russians to think about being cultural latecom-
ers, lingering on these objects can make palpable the vaguely nauseating contrast
between the world we live in and the world we might aspire to (often with the
nausea arising less from the lowliness of our reality than from the unworthiness
of our aspirations).

Belinsky writes that in Dead Souls, “life is encapsulated and dissected into tiny
trivialities, and these trivialities are then endowed with general significance.” The
book’s pathos derives from this tension, he continues, from the contrast between
the vaguely sordid “social forms of Russian life” and this life’s “deep substantial
source.” All of this suggests that these objects have something to teach us about
why provinciality becomes a common way of talking about problems of taste,
as well as why taste is so important. Such questions will be explored in the next
chapter in connection with Belinsky and Goncharov, both of whom recurred often to issues of proportion and disproportion, measuring and mismeasuring—issues that are, I will argue, intimately connected to provinciality.

“Art is Provincial in Principle”

Gogol’s own language is marked by the same kind of unnaturalness and distortion that afflict the provincials of Dead Souls—but his work makes masterful use of such disproportions. If Gogol himself were provincial in the way his characters are—always asking, am I getting it right?—it is unlikely that he would have been able to master these disproportions and make use of them as he did. Perhaps this helps explain why artistic originality and innovation tend not to reach full flower in provincial places: if you are straining to conform to an external standard that seems to exist chiefly to pass judgment on you, you are unlikely to do much that is intentionally new or strange. Or rather, you are unlikely to be able to master newness and strangeness and turn them to your advantage as Gogol did.

Gogol’s deliberate strangeness may help us understand why his writings, even as they established the provincial wasteland as one of Russian literature’s recurring tropes, also opened the way to the eventual revaluation of provincialism. Sinyavsky, for example, asserts that Gogol’s genius arose precisely from his provinciality. He writes that Gogol was far too “provincial” (provintsialen) to strive for anything like the naturalness and ease of a poet like Pushkin, who “whispered verses in his cradle” because poetry was his “native language.” Instead Gogol created prose that was constantly “aware of its own formation,” perpetually and often awkwardly self-conscious (eto rech’, besprestanno pamiatuiushchaia o svoem oformlenii, preispolnennaia soznaniia sobstvennogo sloga), with its artistry arising out of this very awkwardness and self-consciousness.

If Sinyavsky can assert that “art is provincial in principle,” or if Platonov can say that “genuine art and thought can in fact only appear in . . . a backwater,” then in Russia the “provincial” has come to mean something different than it does for someone like T. S. Eliot, for whom, as I discuss in chapter 1 of this book, “the provincial point of view” is quite simply inimical to high cultural achievement. Because disproportions are the stuff that provinciality is made of, mismeasuring and the absence or misapplication of standards are provinciality’s most telling marks. In “What is a Classic?” Eliot defines provinciality as a sensibility that “confound[s] the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent.” But Gogol built an entire oeuvre on “confounding the contingent with the essential, the ephemeral with the permanent,” managing to make conscious and highly sophisticated use of the disproportions that attend provinciality while being in no way provincial himself. In doing so, he created resources on which later Russians were
able to draw; a French writer, it seems, would be unlikely to echo Sinyavsky’s assertion that art is “provincial in principle, preserving for itself a naïve, external, astonished and envious look.” Gogol made claims like Sinyavsky’s possible; he is the exhilarating exception to the rules as the central authorities wish to define them.

When Turgenev’s provincial intellectual Kukshina in Fathers and Sons comes out with a jumble of disjointed cultural allusions, we know exactly where the author and we ourselves stand in relation to this material: its provinciality serves to confirm our sophistication. But in a book like Dead Souls, our pleasure must derive from very different sources, because here we can never quite define our relationship to the provincial dissonances that are put on display, both in the objects the text depicts and in the language it uses to depict them. If we are not allowed to feel complacently unimplicated in Gogolian provinciality—if we are not granted permission to regard it with the self-satisfied eye of the aesthete—this is largely because the author refuses to clarify his own stance toward his material. As we have seen, the myriad physical details that pack Dead Souls are laid out with a “flat miscellaneousness” that defies hierarchies of judgment and significance. Not only are we presented with the kind of incoherence that, as I have noted, so often characterizes provincial culture, we are also denied any standard, any point of view, from which we might judge its incongruities. Gogol’s refusal to clarify his stance toward the bizarre world he creates causes the dissonance of provintsiiia to become our problem, an indictment of our failures, aesthetic, intellectual and moral.