The Woman in the Window
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The Commercial Ethic in Gogol’s Dead Souls

In the comparatively peaceful, tranquil and business-minded Europe of the period after the Congress of Vienna, the world suddenly appeared empty, petty, and boring and the stage was set for the Romantic critique of the bourgeois order as incredibly impoverished in relation to earlier ages—the new world seemed to lack nobility, grandeur, mystery, and, above all, passion.

—Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*

Order in the Gallery

Toward the end of part 1 of Nikolai Gogol’s 1842 novel *Dead Souls*, the town of N’s officials debate the identity of the “hero,” Pavel Ivanych Chichikov, lately arrived among them. While the possibility that he might be Napoleon in disguise is roundly dismissed, says the narrator, it was true that “when they thought about it, each examining the thing for himself, they found Chichikov’s face, if he were to turn and stand in profile, was very similar to the portrait of Napoleon.” This noted resemblance harkens back to Alexander Pushkin’s portrayal of Hermann in his 1834 story “Queen of Spades.” Hermann’s similarity to Napoleon is noted, appropriately, thrice. First, Tomsky comments to Liza, “He has the profile of Napoleon and the soul of Mephistopheles.” Then the narrator, indirectly through Liza’s eyes: “He was sitting on the window sill, frowning fiercely, his arms folded. In this attitude he bore a striking resemblance to the portrait of Napoleon.” Finally, for apparent emphasis: “This resemblance struck even Lizaveta Ivanovna.”

Such references suggest an implied similarity of theme and tone: Hermann is the “Napoleonic hero, the man of will, obsession and dream,” the man of Fate, whose ambitious aims accord with cosmic forces, raising him
and those who follow him to glorious exploits and power. In a slightly more ambiguous vein, Hermann resembles Napoleon the manipulator, who reduces others to the means of achieving his own ends. Pushkin’s use of this comparison in the story, as Iurii Lotman has shown, plays on the distinction between partner and instrument. Hermann offers the old countess a partnership in several social “games”: he appeals to her “feelings as wife, lover, mother,” all while attempting to use her as an instrument for making his fortune. Lotman has called this notion—that we may each be the instrument of another’s ends—“the essence of Bonapartism.” In this version of his story, Napoleon assumes the place of both historical marker and generational inspiration, as Pushkin’s narrator laments in Eugene Onegin:

But even friendships like our heroes’
Exist no more; for we’ve outgrown
All sentiments and deem men zeroes—
Except of course ourselves alone.
We all take on Napoleon’s features,
And millions of our fellow creatures
Are nothing more to us than tools...
Since feelings are for freaks and fools.⁶

Here I want to build upon this latter aspect of Bonapartism by adding to its mix of attributes the entrepreneurial: this is Napoleon as a self-made man who ceases to be who he was and becomes someone new, even if only—or perhaps especially—in the eyes of society. Such sociopolitical and socioeconomic advancement amounts to an overthrow of the old aristocratic system of landed wealth and title, passed on from generation to generation, which fixed the future position of a man in society as rigidly as did fate.⁷ In this new Bonaparte-inflected world, the means by which one advances oneself include deceit, magic, gambling, albeit with the near certainty of outcome provided by magic and, of course, money. Pushkin’s Hermann, like Napoleon, will transform himself into a new man through will and wealth.

Gogol’s allusion to “The Queen of Spades” via the suggested resemblance of Chichikov to Napoleon is strengthened by numerous parallel themes: deceit or false representation (Hermann pretends to be in love with Liza), social and economic climbing achieved by criminal means, and the subjection of questions of value to the measure of money. Dead Souls, moreover, carries on where Pushkin left off, presenting a complex, politically conservative reaction to a perceived loss of social value as the result of the rise of commercial culture among the post-Napoleonic gentry. This loss of value, which
is represented as a gradual and complete disintegration, appears most clearly in the sequence of landowners encountered by Chichikov as depicted in chapters 2 through 6. Each landowner exhibits a varied, historically specific, and morally significant reaction to Chichikov’s commercial proposal, while the sequence as a whole represents the progress of commercialism and its—for Gogol—spiritually inflationary consequences. Behind this progression lurks the concept of the soul: the great soul, the meager soul, the living soul, and the dead.

My argument is not for reading the landowners sequence in Dead Souls as an economic allegory, which would follow the trends of contemporary “disciplinolatry” and separate economic from broadly moral, ethical, and historical issues. Such a separation was rarely if ever performed by Europeans, let alone European Russians, of the early nineteenth century. It would be shortsighted of us to do so in reading their works. It is worth recalling that in Eugene Onegin’s knowledge of the world political economy figures importantly, and financial factors were certainly among the most pressing facing the Russian state of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Gogol’s depiction is more broadly significant. That he thought about credit in the form of moneylending is evident from its treatment in his 1835 short story “The Portrait.” There, moreover, he invokes the commercial ethic by focusing on the auction as a space for the transmission of art, culture, and hence, in a Romantic understanding, spirit. The commercial engagement of Dead Souls may be read as a raising of the stakes—from trading in the product of the spirit to trading in the spirit itself. Or, in the conceptual frame developed in this study: from virtue to virtuality.

**A Commercial Catalogue**

The enterprise begins amid the mannered atmosphere of Manilov’s estate, with its discussion of solitude, “spiritual bliss” (29), true friendship, and the beauties of nature in the countryside—a checklist, in short, for moralizing Sentimentalist fiction. On approaching the manor, Chichikov’s carriage passes a summerhouse with the sign, “Temple of Solitary Reflection” (23). Manilov’s children have vaguely foreign-sounding names—Alkid and Femistoklius—further suggesting, and parodying, names such as Erast and Aris in works of Russian Sentimentalist fiction. The language in which the encounter takes place is peppered with turn-of-the-century words and phrases like *delicates* (28), *mikstura* (29), and *v nature* (32). Chichikov refuses additional food with the formulaic, “Thank you kindly, I am satisfied. A pleasant conversation is
better than any dish” (31). Both the sense and the style of speech are characteristic of precious gentry etiquette.

Chichikov’s proposal has every chance of succeeding here, for where the notion of commerce is concerned, Manilov lives in a state of ignorance, perhaps, denial. He appears to belong, by manner, language, and understanding of the world, to a pre-Napoleonic era, in which commercial transactions are given little attention by the truly refined. Such dealings are not suitable for gentlemen, being subordinate to the greater concerns of friendship, love, and heartfelt intercourse. All this, of course, is treated ironically. Even if Gogol believed that such a past existed, his portrayal of Manilov’s association with it could hardly be called laudatory. But as Manilov’s concern for feelings and propriety clearly eclipses his business sense, Chichikov does not appear to be overly troubled about the form of his proposition. He presents what he wants bluntly, assuming, it seems, that his interlocutor will agree out of pure good form or embarrassment.

“It’s not really quite that I’d like peasants,” said Chichikov. “I want to have the dead . . .”

“Pardon? Excuse me, but . . . I’m a little hard of hearing. I heard quite a strange word.”

“I propose to obtain dead ones,” said Chichikov, “which, by the way, according the census would be marked as living.” (34)

When Manilov hesitates, Chichikov asks him directly: “It seems to me you’re troubled?” and “Do you perhaps have some doubts?” (35), an approach in sharp contrast to his later dealings with Sobakevich. Manilov is at last utterly reassured by Chichikov when the latter states simply, “I believe it will be good [for the state]” (35), though he does not quite explain why.

This first landowner’s generosity in giving the serfs to Chichikov free of charge indicates the chasm that separates the two characters. Chichikov approaches the encounter in the manner of a businessman, finding what Manilov cares about and connecting to those cares by adopting an outward attitude that appears to match that of his interlocutor. As Orville Dewey might put it, his “self” is one of the parties to the exchange, and he adjusts it to the needs of the moment. In the slightly more contemporary idiom of Dale Carnegie, he is a good listener, talks in terms of the other person’s interests, makes the other person feel important, and appears to do so sincerely. Manilov, for his part, understands very well that the serfs are dead, a thought he expresses as their having “in some manner completed their existence” (36). He does not, however, appear to comprehend their use as a commercial object.
The association of Manilov with a previous age and his inability to comprehend the commercial transaction to which he has just been a party are brought into sharp relief in the chapter's final lines. Chichikov's carriage has disappeared, and Manilov, having settled in his study, begins to ruminate.

He thought about the well-being of a life of friendship . . . then he started to build his bridge across the river, then an enormous house with a belvedere so tall you could see Moscow from it, and you would drink tea there in the evening . . . Then he imagined how he and Chichikov would be going into society somewhere, in a good carriage . . . Chichikov's strange proposal suddenly cut short his musings. The idea of it couldn't quite get through to his head: no matter how he turned it over, he couldn't explain it to himself. (38; emphasis added)

The sequence of Manilov's thoughts repeats the events of the previous few scenes: the pleasantries of the Sentimentalist encounter are cut short by the "strange proposal" Manilov cannot quite fathom. Into the fantastical realm where Manilov erects bridges and is made into a general by the tsar comes Chichikov, both in the flesh and in Manilov's musings. Viewed in this manner, Chichikov's entrance into Manilovian, Sentimentalist space is equivalent to Napoleon's crossing of the Niemen as it serves to shock the Russian gentry into the modern age, the age, that is, of universal commerce. If it is true that the word commerce long denoted a kind of polite social intercourse, then in this first encounter commerce of souls can be said to meet commerce in souls.

Korobochka's main concern is that Chichikov, this "merchant [who's] come from God only knows where and at night to boot" (50), might try to trick her. She's ready to grant that there is no value in the dead serfs themselves and admits she has never had occasion to sell anything of the like before, but she still fears being taken in, suggesting, in one of the many classic statements of the work, "They might somehow be worth more" (51). If Manilov gives the impression of belonging to a pre-Napoleonic a-commercial state, Korobochka must be seen as a later development. The sensibilities of her generation are hinted at in the portraits Chichikov observes hanging in his room: Kutuzov, the hero of Russia's war against Napoleon, and "some old man with red shirt cuffs, the kind they used to wear under Pavel Petrovich" (46, emphasis added). As Korobochka's description makes clear, in her Chichikov has to do with a representative of the Russian provincial nobility reared in a previous age, perhaps, as the latter portrait suggests, that of Tsar Paul I, who died in 1801, but which arrived in present-day Russia, as the former portrait hints, with the Age of Napoleon.
Her physical age and status as widow further serve to locate her in a transitional moment. This moment is highlighted by her use of language, which contrasts sharply with Manilov’s Gallic idiom. For instance, such words and phrases as *chai* (perhaps), *otets moi* (sir; literally, “father mine”), *neshto* (something), *manen’ko* (a little), and *avos’* (in case) are all stylistically marked as rustic and archaic. The tendency toward rusticity extends to what she talks about, too. She asks Chichikov whether he wouldn’t be interested in buying her chicken feathers and hog fat, and whether he wouldn’t like his feet scratched before bed.

Why, however, with her archaic speech patterns and her Old Russian ways, does Korobochka come after Manilov in the sequence of landowners? Why might she not be associated with a period of Russian life before Manilov, before the onset of French-inspired gentry preciousness in Russia? The best answer, it seems to me, lies in her acceptance and acknowledgment of the serf as an object of commerce. “Goodness me,” she says, “the merchandise [tovar’] is so strange, so unheard of!” (52). Where Manilov could not fathom the notion of the serf as a commodity, Korobochka accepts the idea, albeit with uncertainty and suspicion. And in later venturing out to discover whether she might not have been cheated, she makes clear her definitive complicity in what Gogol represents as both the temporal and spiritual transition to the commercial age in Russia.

Korobochka’s transitional status is further indicated in her tendency to waver between addressing Chichikov familiarly (*na ty*) and formally (*na vy*). She begins with *ty*; adjusts to *vy* as she asks who he is; changes over to *ty* as she wishes him good-night and offers to scratch his feet; goes back to *vy* the next morning; changes over to *ty* again in the midst of Chichikov’s famous proposal; returns to *vy* during their negotiations, when proposing to sell Chichikov her hemp instead of her deceased serfs, then immediately reverts to *ty* after Chichikov invokes the devil’s name; goes once again to *vy* in asking Chichikov why he must hurry off and wouldn’t he like to buy her hog fat; and at last reverts once more to *ty* in announcing to Chichikov that his carriage is not yet ready (42–56). While the specific twists and turns of their dialogue might yield a separate sociolinguistic study, what is worth emphasizing here is the degree to which Korobochka’s manner of address places her squarely between the world of fashionable, self-effacing *politesse* of Manilov’s estate, where *vy* is the exclusive rule, and the social free-for-all that is the estate of Nozdryov, who always and only addresses Chichikov with *na ty*.

With the visit to Nozdryov’s estate, Chichikov’s travels, and the commercial ethic that motivates them, reach a crucial turning point. Scruples, doubts, or suspicions about the appropriateness of the object of exchange have been
utterly obliterated, as have, in general, all scruples or doubts about the appropriateness of any object of exchange, not to mention any means of exchanging it. The idea that anything might be traded has been accepted in principle and with enthusiasm. Nozdryov enacts it with blind abandon. “A gun, a dog, a horse—everything was an object of exchange [for him], but not at all so he could come out ahead; it just happened out of some implacable briskness and liveliness of character” (69). Nozdryov’s compulsive commerce extends to everything; he engages in trade for its own sake, it appears, unconsciously. His passion for acquisition is equaled only by the ease with which he loses what he has just acquired.

If he was fortunate enough to come upon some simpleton at a market and fleece him, he would build up a pile of stuff that had previously flashed before his eyes in the stalls: horse collars, tapers, kerchiefs for the nurse, a stallion, raisins . . . as long as his money held out. Still, it was rare that all this would make it home; almost that very day everything would be lost to another, more fortunate gambler, sometimes along with Nozdryov’s own pipe and his tobacco pouch and holder. (69)

Just as Nozdryov is a compulsive trader, so is he a compulsive gambler, liar, and cheat. All these are treated in equivalent terms, and so Nozdryov’s commerce is linked to his gambling and his dishonesty. One quality is never isolated from the others, and Nozdryov is equally impulsive and spontaneous in the practice of each. He buys goods because he has money, which he has won or stolen; he then trades his acquisitions or gambles them away. There is never any net gain involved, only the activity of exchange.

Such, then, is the face of emerging Russian commerce: energetic, impulsive, inexperienced but simultaneously unstable, treacherous, and potentially violent. (I am referring to the 1840s.) All of the exchange activity at Nozdryov’s is, moreover, arbitrary. Just as he has no reason to buy the goods he finds at market, he has no reason to suggest to Chichikov any of the items in his various counterproposals. It is significant that in refusing them, Chichikov indicates professions or activities in which the objects in question might be used: he does not want the stallion because he has no stud farm (76); he does not want a dog because he is not a hunter (77); he does not want the barrel organ because he is not a German “to go dragging it along the roads and asking for money” (77). For Chichikov, these objects are connected to well-defined social roles, just as his acquisition of the dead serfs is linked with his desire to attain a certain socioeconomic and class status. For Nozdryov, on the other hand, the objects are socially neutral, free-floating, as it were, in a
helter-skelter trading world in which it is essential merely that things change hands, one way or another.

Chichikov's final refusal, in which he says simply, “What am I, some kind of idiot? See here, why should I acquire something I have absolutely no use for?” (78) puts an end to Nozdryov's commercial propositions and spurs a seemingly effortless transition to gambling. “Well, then,” says Nozdryov, “please don’t say that. Now I know you very well indeed. Such a rascal! Listen, if you want, we'll make a little wager. I'll put all the dead on a card, the barrel organ too” (78). In Nozdryov the shift from trade to gambling (and rigged gambling at that) is made explicit and effortless. His statement, “I’ll put all the dead on a card,” represents in shorthand form a new stage in the advancement of commercial intercourse: Russian commerce in its purest, most uninhibited Nozdryovian form is equated with gambling, lying, and cheating, while notions of personal dignity and propriety, let alone any moral or ethical considerations, are set aside. The wholehearted acceptance of the commercial ethic, as shown in Nozdryov, points toward social corruption. As such, his depiction harkens back to the long-standing European contrast between trade's morally corrosive core and the moral and social health embodied in the virtuous ideal. I shall return to this thread below.

While Nozdryov's brand of trade might be seen as an impulsive and, in some measure, unconscious phenomenon, Sobakevich's is all too deliberate. It is true that Nozdryov is guilty of complicity in the commerce of serfs/souls: he is first willing to sell them, provided Chichikov will pay well; then he wishes to trade them; and finally he proposes gambling them away. But the spontaneity of his character is a mitigating circumstance. After all, as the narrator emphasizes several times, he can't help it. Even Chichikov remarks to himself, “Oh my, some indefatigable demon’s taken hold of him!” (77). With Sobakevich, however, no such mitigating circumstance can be found. He is the first—and this is his most essential role in the sequence—to understand fully the nature of the transaction he engages in with Chichikov. Just as at Korobochka’s, Chichikov notes the portraits on Sobakevich's walls.

The pictures were all of heroes, engravings of Greek military leaders in all their stature: Mavrokordato in red trousers and a uniform dress coat, glasses on his nose, Kolokotronis, Miaoulis, Kanaris. All these heroes had such thick thighs and unheard of mustaches that a shiver ran down one's spine. In the midst of the strong Greeks, who knows how or why, Bagration was situated, gaunt, skinny, with little banners and cannon balls in the foreground and in the tiniest of frames. Then followed the Greek heroine
Bouboulina, just one of whose legs seemed bigger than the entire torso of any of the dandies that fill the hotels of today. (90)

The ostensible reason for the narrator’s surprise at finding the Russian amid the Greeks is that he is not large and does not appear to be physically strong. Yet the oppositions Gogol has set up fall together along other, more suggestive, lines as well. By placing the Russian hero in the ranks of the Greeks and implying that he somehow does not belong, Gogol invites skepticism as to his legitimacy as a great leader of a great people in a great cause. The Greeks, after all, represent a noble struggle for liberation from the Turkish yoke, which conjures images of the glories of their ancient heritage as a great European nation. They are solid and substantial, with their thick thighs and the enormous leg of Bouboulina to support them. What, by contrast, do the Russians have to stand on? The bodies of today’s hotel dandies are puny in comparison. Bagration is skinny and sickly. The “small flags and cannon balls in the foreground” of his portrait suggest empty symbols of military pretense. Read in this way, the scene suggests Sobakevich’s girth may, like the small flags and cannonballs before the Russian general, have little or nothing behind it.

But there is another, more startling line of thought suggested by Bagration’s unusual placement in the panoply. The suggestion of his weakness contrasts sharply with the traditional strength of the Russian military, at least since the time of Peter the Great, a strength made possible, as mentioned above, by the soul tax around which Chichikov’s exploits circulate. Indeed, it was that strength Napoleon wished to subdue, as it was in the cause of maintaining it that Bagration achieved both fame and martyrdom. On the one hand, then, the placement of Bagration in the role of Russian exemplary hero, defender of the Russian land, indeed, martyr to the cause of its defense, makes him a particularly poignant witness to the deal that is about to be done. On the other, Chichikov’s supposed resemblance to Napoleon suggests the continued encroachment of “foreign” ways—in this case a progressive commercial ethic—into Russian life. The weakness of the Russian military to prevent such an encroachment even while defeating Napoleon himself is no surprise, for it was in the decline of the centuries-old aristocratic ideal of glory that commerce is thought to have gained its great foothold in the modern world. This is the reason that, through Gogol’s ironic lens, Chichikov wears “armor” (46); this is why “in these days, even in Rus’ giants have begun to make themselves scarce” (18); and this is why great generals look on as Chichikov and Sobakevich haggle over humans.

Of all Chichikov’s clients, Sobakevich is by far the best businessman. He is the best bargainer and the biggest stickler for the details of their transaction. He is also the most aware of what it’s all about. At the end of Chichikov’s dog-
and-pony-show introduction of his theme, which touches, as the narrator puts it, “on the entire Russian state,” and during which it is not always clear Sobakevich is awake, let alone listening, Chichikov forms the least direct of his propositions with the words “And so . . . ?” Sobakevich's reply, “You need dead souls?” uttered “without the slightest surprise, as if they had been talking about bread” makes not only his attention but his understanding quite clear (96). Manilov does not understand the concept of the serf as a commodity; Korobochka accepts it, though with trepidation; Nozdryov is willing not only to sell serfs but also to trade them and gamble them away—but all, seemingly, without any conscious understanding of such transactions. Sobakevich, however, cuts immediately through Chichikov’s obfuscation and circumlocution to the essence of the matter. His sole concern becomes getting the best deal he can.

The degree to which Sobakevich is consciously engaged in a commercial transaction, the object of which is the human being, is underlined by his careful enumeration of the serfs to be sold. He knows them all by name, elaborates on their personalities, strengths, and skills (97–98). Yet it is only with Sobakevich that the issue of price becomes central. His interaction with Chichikov may be reduced essentially to the process of dickering over the price—read: value—of the dead serfs. The questioning of price, the attempt by each party to raise or lower it to his advantage, rests upon a more fundamental questioning of value beneath it.

Gogol toys with the play of price upon value through the characters’ use of words. Chichikov asks for a “little list” (spisochek, 100); Sobakevich requests a “small-ish advance” (zadotochek, 101); Chichikov asks for a “small-ish receipt” (raspisochka, 101); and Sobakevich comments that the money is “oldish” (bumazhka-to staren’kaia, 102). The diminutives, particularly striking in the mouth of the bearish Sobakevich, play up the question of worth—of things and persons—at the heart of their conversation, which prepares the sharp contrast that will emerge in Gogol’s panegyric to the Russian word in the immediately following passage.

During their business, all considerations are subordinated to the deal. It is no accident that only here is the connection between the dusha as serf and the dusha as soul made explicit. “Truly,” says Sobakevich, “to you the human soul is worth no more than a stewed turnip” (100). But coming from Sobakevich in this context, the phrase, with all its potential depth of meaning, is only a bargaining tool. This is why it is Sobakevich who, among all the landowners, is described as soul-less or with a misplaced soul. “In that body there seemed to be no soul at all, or else there was one, only not where it ought to have been but rather, as with Koshchei the Immortal, somewhere beyond the mountains and concealed by such a thick shell that whatever might happen in its depths produced not the slightest tremor on its surface” (96). In Sobakevich
the sequence of landowners peaks and begins its descent. Here the distinction between serf and soul rises to the narrative’s surface, pointing to the questionable status of Russia’s own soul beneath it. This qualitative shift indicates a modulation in the narrative as a whole.

Metaphors and symbols of emptiness, a Gogolian trademark, are associated with each landowner. Where Manilov is described as having no object of zeal or fervor (zador) and indeed “nothing at all” (25), the intimation of emptiness or lack is indicated by the names of both Korobochka (literally, “little box”) and Nozdryov (from nozdria, “nostril”). In Sobakevich it is his head, shaped like a Moldavian pumpkin, the kind out of which balalaikas are made, thus suggesting a pumpkin emptied of its contents. All alone, however, such details of depiction do not make clear the notion of progression inherent in Gogol’s meticulous sequence. Just as Korobochka’s acceptance of the serf as commodity represents a developmental advance over the previous, Manilovian, state, Sobakevich’s relegation of all considerations to that of the commercial represents an advance over Nozdryov, in whom various and sundry forms of “trade” can be said to be vying for supremacy. Sobakevich has become a “man-kulak” (100).

The qualitative shift in the depiction of landowners may also be discerned in Sobakevich’s insistence on the real, living value of his dead serfs. Manilov admits the serfs have “in some manner completed their existence” and gives them away. Sobakevich, however, while attempting to get as much for them as he can, appears to think of the serfs as still in some manner alive. He reacts strongly to Chichikov’s proposal that they are, in being dead, but a dream.

“Well, no, not a dream! I’ll prove to you what kind [of a man] Mikheyev was, you won’t find such people anywhere: such an enormous machine that he couldn’t get inside this room—no, no, that’s no dream! And in his great shoulders there was more strength than in a horse. You just tell me where you could find that kind of a dream anywhere!” He pronounced these last words after turning to the portraits of Bagration and Kolokotronis hanging on the wall, as usually happens with people in a conversation when one of them suddenly, for some reason, turns away from the person to whom his words are being addressed toward some other, even completely unknown, person who happened to appear, from whom he knows he will hear neither a response, nor an opinion, nor a corroboration, but at whom he directs such a significant glance that he seems to be asking for mediation. (98)

Despite, or perhaps thanks to, his treating the serfs as still living, Sobakevich’s
central aim is to translate their value into monetary terms. This speech, like
his invocation of the immortal soul noted previously, serves to increase the
market value of his wares. Such a function is clearly indicated in Chichikov's
response, when, after Sobakevich's long outburst, he says simply, "No, I can't
give you more than two rubles [each]" (98). Sobakevich's inclusion of Koloko-
tronis and Bagration in the conversation, which Gogol suggests as accidental
or arbitrary, is not that. They are called to witness, as it were, the accuracy
of Sobakevich's assertion, his claims that the dead serfs are something more
than a dream, and their presence, as silent observers to the transaction, high-
lights both its outlandishness in their eyes and its essential pusillanimity. The
projected point of view implied by the inclusion of the two leaders is crucial
to the scene's thematic development.

At the climactic moment of their haggling, Chichikov and Sobakevich
break off, each firm in maintaining his price, and for the last time the wall
paintings enter the scene: "Sobakevich grew silent. Chichikov also grew silent.
A few minutes passed in silence. From the wall Bagration with his aquiline
nose looked extremely attentively on this purchase" (na etu pokupku, 100;
emphasis added). Where the scene begins with all the Greek heroes along
with Bagration and Bouboulina in attendance, the focus then narrows to
Kolokotronis and Bagration, and finally leaves Bagration all alone, thus sug-
gesting that, in fact, he has been the most important witness all along. As
a martyr for the cause of defending Holy Russia against Western invasion,
Bagration watches the progress of Bonaparte's advance into Russian culture
still, now in the form of "Bonapartism." The new order, the upstart, Europe
and Russia, the confidence man, the post-Napoleonic bourgeois, commercial
age—all these themes come together in this description, as Bagration looks
on. And the center of them all is the purchase.

The encounter with Sobakevich is the narrative's center point, both spa-
tially—the middle of the fifth chapter out of eleven—and thematically. The
marked decay of Plyushkin's estate is shown as the immediate consequence of
Sobakevich's conscious commercial ethic and the resulting loss of soul. The
worth of things has been thrown into disarray, a notion symbolized in Ply-
ushkin's enormous collection of odds and ends on his bureau and the g reat
heap in the corner of his living room (108).30

The modulation is gradual but unmistakable. At the conclusion of his
business with Sobakevich, Chichikov departs for Plyushkin's estate and is
brought, en route, into contact with "the pure Russian word," in the form of
the peasant's obscene sobriquet for Plyushkin. The word is rich and fresh,
uncontaminated by outside influences. Gogol describes its uniqueness in the
most lush and expressive of terms.
Just as the countless multitudes of churches and monasteries with cupolas, domes, and crosses strewn throughout holy pious Rus', so also the countless multitude of tribes, generations, and peoples crowd, color, and race across the face of the earth. And every people, bearing the pledge of its own powers within, filled with the creative potentials of the soul, its own brilliant particularity, and other gifts of God, has each differed uniquely according to its own word, which, in depicting any object whatsoever, reflects in such expression a part of its own character. . . . But there is no word so sweeping and lively, no word that tears itself so from the heart, that so boils and pulsates, as the aptly spoken Russian word. (103)

The thought is Romantic: the word is a national phenomenon and expresses the soul of a people. The tone is lofty, nearly oratorical, and irony has disappeared. Moreover, the transition to the subsequent chapter (chapter 6) is achieved by continuing the stylistic distinctness of this panegyric, thereby maintaining the elevated, devotional tone, while thematically juxtaposing the uniqueness and freshness of the Russian word with the loss of such freshness in the narrator’s vision of the world: “Before, long ago, in the years of my youth, in the years of my childhood that irretrievably flashed by, it gave me joy to come upon an unknown place . . . . Now I approach with indifference every strange village and gaze with indifference on its vulgar exterior” (104). The dilapidation of the narrator’s vision of the world corresponds to the subsequently described dilapidation of Plyushkin’s estate, onto which Chichikov wanders while still thinking and laughing about the rich sobriquet applied by the peasant to Plyushkin. The re-entry of Chichikov’s thoughts thus allows a reprise of the passage’s central antithesis. In other words, Chichikov serves initially as the perceiver of the sobriquet, giving occasion to the narrator’s panegyric; the panegyric then contrasts to the narrator’s disillusionment, his loss of “youth” and “freshness,” which is then interrupted by Chichikov’s continued musings on the (fresh, pure, etc.) sobriquet and his simultaneous arrival at Plyushkin’s dilapidated estate. The combined points of view of Chichikov and the narrator work together, therefore, to achieve the transition from Sobakevich’s loss of soul to the utter degradation of Plyushkin.

From Plyushkin Chichikov obtains not only dead but also runaway serfs. As at Manilov’s, he pays nothing for them, but the reason has now been reversed. Manilov is willing to give Chichikov his dead serfs out of friendship and because he does not see them as an object of commerce; they are worthless because they are dead. Nor does he see them as a liability. They are simply outside the system or “algorithm” according to which he lives and thinks.
Their value as commodity grows in the course of Chichikov’s travels, reaching its height at Sobakevich’s, where, consequently, Chichikov pays his greatest price. After this there is a break, a qualitative shift. Their market price falls, as it were, and Chichikov obtains both dead serfs and runaways at Plyushkin’s without paying a kopeck. The commodity has suddenly and dramatically lost all value.

The continuously dubious (dead souls/dead serfs) basis of the narrative provides more than one explanation for this development. On a primary level, the laws of supply and demand suggest a glut; Sobakevich confirms this by his assertion that at Plyushkin’s peasants die “like flies” (94). The names of dead serfs that clog Plyushkin’s account books are thus a financial liability, and he is glad to be rid of them. Their value, which was nil at Manilov’s, questionable at Korobockhka’s and Nozdryov’s, and firmly equated with price at Sobakevich’s, has now sunk to a point below zero, that is, a negative value, a liability or debt. On another level, that on which the pun of the book’s title relies, the serfs have been rendered worthless by the effective equation of human value and price, by reducing persons to both the most materialist of terms and, simultaneously, the most secular and consensual—an agreement among men. This is not the first instance of such an operation in the novel. Chichikov’s initial chance encounter with the governor’s daughter on his way to Sobakevich’s prompts him to wonder who her father might be and whether he is rich. “Really,” he thinks, “if, say, the girl had some two hundred thousand worth of dowry, she would make a very tasty morsel” (89). Chichikov thus translates the “vision” that “anywhere a man might encounter but once on his road” into a price. Her value is how much she is worth. And then he translates her into a piece of food, taking the almost inevitable step from commodification to consumption.

The progressive order in which the landowners are arranged is punctuated by the inclusion of Plyushkin’s biography. Plyushkin’s life history stands out conspicuously as the only history given. Coming last, it functions as an echo of the whole transformation that Gogol’s sequence implies. The technique is similar to the synopsis of the encounter between Chichikov and Manilov that is contained in Manilov’s musings after Chichikov’s departure. There as well, no explicit reason is given for the qualitative change at the sequence’s center, when Manilov mentally runs up against the riddle of Chichikov’s proposition. In the case of Plyushkin, all we know is that “the good housewife died; the share of the keys, and with them, of the small cares, passed to him” (112). Plyushkin’s biography hints at a notion of sequence and summary in the process by which his attention turned from the “main shares of the household” to “the little papers and features he collected in his bedroom” (113), making
the suggestion of gradual change explicit, but without answering the riddle of what lies behind it.

Finally, the purchase at Plyushkin’s marks a shift in the transformation of the serfs’ value from past-based—at Sobakevich’s, where they are, in Chichikov’s words, “but a dream”—to future-based, in Chichikov’s wild musings of the subsequent chapter, where he fantasizes to such a degree as even to create dialogue for his imaginary purchases. The implication is clear: value in the commercial world is both contingent and conventional. It is as much a product of men’s agreements with one another as their speculations concerning the future. It is, in this sense, as rootless and wandering as the runaway serf himself—a promise of worldly value to a state and its army supported only by millions upon millions of other such promises existing in the minds of men.

In the end, Chichikov’s speculation in the value of dead serfs is based on the same sort of fantasy as the state’s speculation in the value of living ones. They are both a form of borrowing: Chichikov’s from the earthly city, the state’s from the divine.

The Advent of Refined Avarice

It is practically a general rule that wherever there is commerce there are refined manners, and wherever there are refined manners there is commerce.

—Montesquieu, De l’esprit des lois

To recap the argument thus far, with the notion of the serf as commercial object functioning as a measure, the sequence of landowners appears as a progression. The effect resembles the rhetorical figure of asyndeton so often employed by Gogol elsewhere, reinforcing the impression of a tonal movement across part 1, a gradual rise in intensity as each new key is introduced and explored, until the narrative changes qualitatively. At its center—the encounter with Sobakevich—the novel turns: before that point Chichikov’s identity is unnecessary and virtually unmentioned; after it, the question of who he is gradually becomes so essential that it must be answered. This need motivates the penultimate scene’s biographical account of his life and adventures up to the moment of the book’s opening.

Gogol’s male protagonist is the epitome of le parfait négociant. The over-emphasized detail of his refined and agreeable nature may be explained as a natural corollary of his commercial impetus. He is the model self-interested agent, and his activities remain balanced nearly throughout. Indeed, balance
might be his defining trait, while the narrator's initial description of him as “neither too fat nor too thin, neither this nor that” can be understood as a grotesque overapplication of the principle of moderation that underlies his protagonist's actions. Chichikov is not carried away; his passions are in accord with, and under the careful control of, calculation. Gogol thus provides the context for invoking a long-lived European debate that has often been overlooked in discussing his work. By revisiting the major points of the debate here, I hope to place Gogol's choice of a “non-virtuous” hero in sharper relief. Chichikov in fact turns out to represent a set of progressive values for his time, though in Gogol's hands whether this is good or bad is not easy to say. To understand how acquisitive behavior, or in medieval terms, avarice, came to be upheld by the middle of the eighteenth century as a primary and in essence positive motivation in the governing both of individuals and society, we must briefly review the concept's history, especially within the context of the now largely forgotten contrast of the interests to the passions. This dichotomy, which was formulated in the political discourse of the seventeenth century, finding its way subsequently into the thought of numerous eighteenth-century writers on ethics, moral psychology, and political economy, had its ultimate origins in Machiavelli's search for alternative principles to the traditional moral and religious precepts by which princes were supposed to govern, for a scientific, positive approach that would correspond more completely to the advances in knowledge of his day. His prescription of a characteristic behavior for rulers of states inspired the initially synonymous concepts of interesse (interests) and ragione di stato (reasons of state). The notion of interest, therefore, arose as a contrast to the unbridled whims of a sovereign but also to religious and moral constraints, which had been judged as failures by thinkers of the Renaissance. Interest came to be understood as a constraint on the passions of the prince, and in the same period, the notion of princely interest came to be applied more generally to the interests of various groups among the ruled and, eventually, to nonruling individuals. It was likewise in this period that interest came to be discussed more frequently in terms of economic aspirations. The ultimate reasons for such a shift in usage—from associations of honor and glory, as part of an aristocratic ideal, to those of wealth—are a matter of speculation. “Perhaps,” writes Hirschman,
eventually monopolizing the contents of the concept. . . . Perhaps no other explanation is needed for the narrowing of the meaning of the term “interests” once the beginnings of economic growth made the “augmentation of fortune” a real possibility for an increasing number of people.45

Regardless of the precise causes, economic well-being and the accumulation of wealth became the term’s primary connotation. With this development, a curious turn in the history of ideas took place. When interest, as a centrally economic consideration, was now set beside the notion of constraint, it rendered a startling thought possible, namely,

*that one set of passions, hitherto known variously as greed, avarice, or love of lucre, could be usefully employed to oppose and bridle such other passions as ambition, lust for power, or sexual lust.*46

Thus did avarice become a respected counterweight to a variety of passions considered by prominent thinkers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as the most dangerous to the well-being of society.

The interest counterweight had a number of strengths. First, the emphasis of the French *encyclopédistes* on “rehabilitating” self-love was in part a reaction to medieval Christianity. Stephen Holmes cites in particular the thought of Augustine, in which self-love was equated with hatred of God while love of God was identified with contempt for oneself. The neo-Machiavellian suggestions of *interesse* and *ragione di stato* were clear alternatives to such a tradition. Indeed, the gradual acceptance of worldly pursuits by Enlightenment political and moral theorists, particularly seeking after personal advantage, was due in part to the continued reaction against this tradition of “Augustinian misanthropy.”47 The old approach to human morality was roundly critiqued by eighteenth-century thinkers like Hume and Voltaire, both of whom, according to Holmes,

*by removing the pejorative connotations of personal advantage seeking. . . . hoped to make man appear worthy in his own eyes. At the very least, their hostility to religious self-abnegation helped reinforce their relatively welcoming attitude toward the principle of rational self-interest.*48

It was, therefore, as the result of a strange confluence of associations and arising circumstances—interest opposed to religious precepts, interest opposed to passion, interest in the lending of money, and the growth of economic well-being—that seeking after personal advantage, which is to say, moneymaking
and the acquisition of worldly goods, came to carry, in Hirschman’s words, “a positive and curative connotation.”

An additional advantage of a world ruled by self-interest was its constancy. “In the pursuit of their interests men were expected or assumed to be steadfast, single-minded, and methodical, in total contrast to the stereotyped behavior of men who are buffeted and blinded by their passions.” Interest made the world a safer place because it made men predictable. “Avarice,” wrote Samuel Johnson in *Rasselas*,

is a uniform and tractable vice. Other intellectual distempers are different in different constitutions of mind; that which soothes the pride of one will offend the pride of another; but to the favor of the covetous there is a ready way: bring money and nothing is denied.

Hume echoes the thought. “Avarice,” he writes, “or the desire of gain, is a universal passion which operates at all times, in all places, and upon all persons.” Holmes summarizes the effect of such an evaluation in the realm of eighteenth-century moral psychology in the following terms:

The self-interested agent is “cool and deliberate.” . . . It is much easier to defend oneself against enemies fretting about their interests than against opponents reeling from selfless emotions and bursting with inspiring ideals. The most difficult adversaries to outwit or buy off are probably those seized by envy.

It must strike the contemporary, post-Marxian reader as a curious fact that commerce should have once been considered not only a “harmless” but also a socially mollifying and, indeed, civilizing force. Nevertheless, such a mind-set appears to have been widespread in the thinking of Europeans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Samuel Johnson’s famous aphorism, “There are few ways in which a man can be more innocently employed than in getting money,” only scratches the surface: self-interested commerce would be the agent of both the world’s enrichment and its civilization.

Hirschman identifies the first instance of designating commerce as an especially beneficial, “gentle,” or “refined” (doux) occupation in Jacques Savary’s seventeenth-century textbook for businessmen, *Le parfait négoçiant*.

[Divine Providence] has not willed for everything that is needed for life to be found in the same spot. It has dispersed its gifts so that men would trade together and so that the mutual need which they have to help one another
would establish ties of friendship among them. *This continuous exchange of all the comforts of life constitutes commerce and this commerce makes for all the gentleness (douceur) of life.* 55

Beside its use in the domain of trade, the word *commerce* had long designated a polite interchange between educated speakers, often between two individuals of the opposite sex, and it was likely in such a context that it first acquired the epithet *doux*. 56

The staunchest and most influential advocate of *le doux commerce* was Montesquieu. “Wherever manners are refined [moeurs douces],” he states in *De l'esprit des lois*, “there is commerce; and wherever there is commerce, manners are refined. . . . Commerce . . . softens [adoucit] barbarian ways.” 57

Such notions were widely held throughout Europe by the middle of the eighteenth century, giving rise to the distinction, commonly made in England and Scotland in the second half of the century, between the “polished” and the “rude and barbarous nations” of the world, that is, between the countries of Western Europe, where increasing wealth was perceived in combination with the expanded role of commerce, and the as yet underdeveloped, “a-commercial” remainder. The phrase *le doux commerce*, thanks primarily to Montesquieu, had become a commonplace by the eve of the nineteenth century; it served as a point of ridicule for Marx in *Das Kapital* and was apparently a private joke between Marx and Engels as well. 58

My aim in this brief history is not to trace any direct connections between individual political or moral theorists and the work of Gogol. The issue of what specific works Gogol may have read, long a point of contention, not to mention considerable speculation, is not relevant for my argument. 59 Essential here is the degree to which certain key notions, widespread to the point of being cultural commonplaces by the early nineteenth century, condition Gogol’s novel, furnishing an intellectual context that was largely implicit to his contemporary readers and that greatly expands the work’s meaningful potential today.

**Le doux Chichikov and the Worth of a Man**

The manner in which Gogol introduces the Enlightenment pairing of the passions and the interests into *Dead Souls* implicitly places the self-interested agent in contrast to the virtuous man, commercial undertaking in contrast to virtue. In the process it simultaneously draws a parallel to the evaluation of human beings generally—not just dead serfs—in Gogol’s fiction. I would
argue that it also indicates the same fundamental anxiety over what Jean-Joseph Goux calls the “unlocatable standard” or “uncertain reserve value” of contemporary financial representation. In Gogol’s case the anxiety is generalized not around money but around property—both the land that is the supposed goal of his hero’s elaborate scheme and the “property of the person” upon which conceptions of modern liberty were founded in the late eighteenth century.

We can now turn to the essential, and thus far omitted, question that lurks behind the sequence of landowners treated above, that of the nonvirtuous Chichikov’s place in it. He is, of course, not a landowner per se, or rather, he is one only potentially, for as a serf-owner in name, he is something of a pomeshchik already, even if his serfs are only graphemes on a paper. But what role does he play in Gogol’s depiction of the progress of the commercial ethic in Russia? I have two initial responses.

First, he is a catalyst. It is Chichikov who introduces into the world and nurses into maturity the concept of the serf as commodity; in a sense, he and it travel together, bringing self-interested commercial enterprise inside Russian gentry culture. Thus, it is not so much that “social interest” is absent from the book, which Pyotr Pletnev long ago suggested, as that such social interest is framed in commercial terms.

Second, Chichikov’s actions, which are entirely self-motivated, are also the only evidence of social change the book has to offer. In other words, without Chichikov’s undertaking, the world is stagnant; it is he who provides the motivation for all the action, suggesting an ambiguity of attitude in Gogol’s representation of commercial behavior: it is not necessarily the excessive or passionate expression of blind avarice, and thus degradation, of a Plyushkin.

But these provide just part of an answer. The crucial discussion of Chichikov’s nature in *Dead Souls* takes place within the frame of the hero’s biography. Let us read the passage again with this larger context in mind. “It is very doubtful,” says the narrator, in prefacing that discussion,
turned into a workhorse, and there isn't any writer who wouldn't go out riding on him, urging him on with a whip and whatever else might turn up; because the virtuous man has been so worn down that there isn't even a shadow of virtue in him anymore, and all that's left is ribs and skin in place of a body; because the virtuous man is invoked hypocritically; because the virtuous man is not respected. (210)

The conceit is masterfully developed to the point that the quality of virtue becomes the occasion for lack of respect, expressed in the final line. “No,” concludes the narrator, preparing the biography of the next nineteen pages, “it’s time to hitch up a scoundrel. So let’s hitch up a scoundrel!” (211). The subsequent life history may be read, then, as an exposition on the hero’s status as scoundrel, on his absence of virtue.

The conclusion, “Acquisition was the cause of everything” (Priobretenie—vina vsego, 227), not only makes clear the central antithesis of the entire biography—virtue to self-interested acquisition—but introduces the work’s only explicit discussion of the passions that, in the context of contemporaneous West European social theory, served to contextualize interest, particularly commercial self-interest.

Everything transforms quickly in a man; you don’t have time to look around before a horrible worm has grown up inside, despotically drawing all the living juices to itself. And many a time has not only a great passion but a worthless passionette for some insignificant thing dispersed in someone born for better deeds, forcing him to forget his great and holy obligations and to see the great and holy in paltry trinkets. Numberless as grains of ocean sand are the human passions, and none resembles another, and all, the base and the beautiful, are at first obedient to man but then become his frightening masters. Blessed is he who has chosen for himself the most beautiful of passions; his measureless bliss grows tenfold with every hour and minute, and he enters ever deeper into the boundless paradise of his own soul. But there are passions whose selection does not issue from man. They were born with him at the moment of his entry into the world, and he is not given the strength to turn from them. They are guided by designs from above, and there is something in them that is eternally calling, implacable throughout life. They are destined to accomplish a great earthly deed: it matters not whether as a dark image or as a bright vision that flashes by, making the world rejoice, equally are they called upon for a blessing [blago] unknown to man. And perhaps in this very Chichikov the passion leading him forth is not from him [ne ot nego] and
in his cold existence is contained that which will later throw man onto his knees in the dust before the wisdom of the heavens. And it is still a mystery why such an image has come forth in this *poema* now appearing in the world. (227–28)

Perhaps the most initially striking feature of the passage is the image of various and sundry human passions, “as numberless as grains of ocean sand,” in search of a principle of constraint. In Chichikov, it would seem that acquisition, “the cause of everything,” has become the passion that is his “frightening master.” Why it is not as devastating in Chichikov as it is in Plyushkin, I think, can best be answered by reference to the genealogy of self-interest in West European social discourse. In effect, Chichikov is driven by modern self-interest, Plyushkin by medieval avarice: we find ourselves thus at a crucial turning point in Russian social development, the turn from the medieval world to the modern. The fact that Gogol chooses to contextualize his hero’s guiding motivation as part of the eighteenth-century passions-versus-interests debate indicates at the very least a familiarity with the fundamental claim of early capitalist apologists: namely, that self-interest was a tractable vice that could function as a positive and curative constraint on lust, envy, pride, and all the other socially detrimental passions—or, in other words, that one passion could be a counterweight to all the rest, for the benefit of society. But here too we have only breached the surface.

The passage marks the end of the biographical oasis in which Chichikov’s background is divulged. The frame is evident in the sentence immediately following that quoted above, in which the narrator returns to the subject of the readers’ displeasure with his choice of a hero, returning, in essence, to the subject that gave rise to the biography in the first place—the fact of the hero’s absence of virtue. The shape of the oasis can be imagined in the following manner.

First, Gogol’s narrator invokes his readers’ displeasure with Chichikov’s lack of virtue, throws out the virtuous man as a possible hero, and “hitches up” the scoundrel. Second, the scoundrel’s biography is recounted, at the conclusion of which the subject of his absence of virtue is implicitly renewed by suggesting “acquisition,” from among the “numberless passions,” as “the cause of everything.” And third, the narrator returns to his readers’ displeasure: “But the fact that readers will be displeased with the hero is not what’s difficult” (228), echoing, in the very next sentence, the same construction he used at the beginning of the biography. The Russian is explicit. The first phrase, from before the biography, reads, “*Kak gluboko ni zagliani avtor emu v dushu*” (“No matter how deeply the author might look into his soul”; 210); the
second reads, “Ne zagliani avtor poglubzhe emu v dushu” (“Should the author look still deeper into his soul”; 228). The discussion of Chichikov’s essential character flaw thus continues, as if in mid-sentence, across the hero’s entire nineteen pages of inserted biography. It is not unusual, therefore, that readers might not at first see the continuation of the discussion as organically connected to its introduction.

Such a connected view, however, provides a means of responding to the riddle—the form of interpretive challenge—that Gogol’s final sentence in the passage quoted above thrusts into the face of his readers: Why is the admittedly dark “image” of a man ruled by the passion of self-interested acquisition appearing in the present poema? The best answer, it seems to me, appeals not to what Gogol wanted to do in the future, how he might have wished to develop his hero further, but to the discursive consequences of Gogol’s invocation of the passions-interests theme. Within that tradition of thought, as noted above, the acquisitive impulse was rationalized as a positive, indeed, socially progressive trait, both in the cultivation of personal manners and in the development of social and even national well-being. That Gogol was likely ambivalent to such an ideal need not be strenuously argued. Indeed, the designation of his hero’s passion as perhaps “not from him” (ne ot nego) and the suggestion that that very passion may perhaps “throw man onto his knees and into dust before the wisdom of the heavens” make clear the implicit cosmic dimension of the Gogolian version of the passions-interests debate, which could never be a purely civic humanist affair in this writer’s hands.

Chichikov’s is an attempt to construct, or rather reconstruct, a stable social self from the remains of a picaresque life, which will raise him in the process from obscurity and social marginality to prominent or at least respectable personhood. In other words, from the variety of personae he has played in his past, he is attempting to constitute himself as a singular character, which will also be a legal persona, as he makes of himself a pomeshchik. The principles by which he is to do this include the manipulation of an embryonic system of commercial credit and the manipulation of others through cool and deliberate calculation. In these dual manipulations, following the suggestion first made by Pushkin in Eugene Onegin and, more obliquely, in “The Queen of Spades,” he is associated with Napoleon. The resemblance, which is made to look absurd by an insistence on the character’s physical features, comes to seem rather sensible when one thinks instead of the character’s character, particularly vis-à-vis a commercial ethic that would be nothing less than revolutionary in its social and cultural impact over the next two hundred years of Russian life. Gogol’s special irony is on display when he explores the merchants’ fear at the specter of Napoleon.
The merchants were really scared [about Napoleon’s release], for they believed completely the prognostications of a certain prophet, locked up some three years before; the prophet had come from who knows where, in bast sandals and a hoodless sheepskin coat, which smelled terribly of rotten fish, and proclaimed that Napoleon was antichrist and was being held by a stone chain beyond six walls and seven seas, but afterward he would break the chain and take over the world. The prophet, as is proper, had fallen into prison for his prognostications, but nevertheless he had already done his deed, completely stirring up the merchants. For a long time after, even amid the most profitable transactions, merchants, going off to the tavern to take their tea, would talk about antichrist. (194–95)

The passage’s apocalyptic overtones should not distract anyone from the implied overthrow of the medieval system of trade at its heart. Nor is this the first instance in Dead Souls where a moment of commercial intercourse has been situated within a larger, religious or spiritual context. As noted above, Bagration, hero of the Napoleonic War and martyr to the cause of defending the country, is said to look with particular attention on the “purchase” (покупка) being transacted by Chichikov and Sobakevich. This framing of the commercial transaction suggests a standard that is in fact locatable, only not in the conditions of trade themselves, and perhaps not in earthly conditions at all. Chichikov’s brand of self-interested commercial entrepreneurship would overthrow the entire system of landed wealth were it to succeed. In effect, a different kind of revolutionary invasion is underway, with Chichikov at its head. Gogol’s fusion of the commercial and the Napoleonic here acquires a further depth of associations: there is now both a national stake, in the struggle with Napoleon, and an eschatological one, in the struggle with antichrist.

More important still, the excerpt demonstrates one of the many instances of the word as rumor breaking free from its immediate boundaries—the closed-door speculations about Chichikov’s identity among the town’s administrators—and running free in some inexplicable (or at least unexplained) manner among the population at large. Here it is not Chichikov’s identity but Napoleon’s rumored release that jumps, in an apparent digression, from the private discussion into the populace.

Many from among the government administration and well-born nobility had also involuntarily started thinking about [Napoleon and antichrist], and, infected by mysticism, which, as everyone knows, was all the fashion then, saw in every letter of which the word Napoleon was made some
special significance; many even found apocalyptic numbers in it. So there's nothing surprising in the fact that the administrators involuntarily started thinking about it. (195)

Words here, even the letters of which they are made, have taken on a strange and magical significance, suggesting an eternal otherworldly standard, even in the midst of the ephemeral, everyday, apparent nonsense of this world.

The degree to which such linguistic transformation—the life of words on their own—is integral to the image of Chichikov as a character may be found in the dramatic rise of his worth, the symbolic value with which he is equated, through the words of those he meets. From merely “well-intentioned,” “sensible,” “learned,” “respected,” “kind,” and “pleasant” (the adjectives applied to him at the end of chapter 1—none of which, it should be noted, touches on economic status), Gogol’s protagonist becomes, overnight, immensely rich.

Rumors passed all around that he was neither more nor less than a millionaire. Even without that, as we saw in the first chapter, the inhabitants of the town loved Chichikov with all their soul [dushevno poliubili Chichikova], but now, after such rumors, they loved him with even more of it [esche dushevnem]. (147)

Resorting to the same narrow pun on which the entire plot teeters, the dusha is further subordinated to a question of the monetary worth or price—the same Russian word either way—of Chichikov himself. His worth, moreover, is divorced from the notion of physical property: much to his chagrin, Chichikov owns no land, just as he owns no living peasants, not yet. This worth of his is an imaginary, consensual fantasy of the town’s populace, without rooting in earth or heaven. It gestures toward the dangers of social corruption that thinkers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in opposition to Montesquieu and his compatriots, often associated with the spread of commercial relations. Pocock summarizes the issue in this way:

Once property was seen to have a symbolic value, expressed in coin or in credit, the foundations of personality themselves appeared imaginary or at best consensual: the individual could exist, even in his own sight, only at the fluctuating value imposed upon him by his fellows, and these evaluations . . . were too irrationally performed to be seen as acts of political decision or virtue.64

Here we come full circle to the question of Gogol’s dismissal of the virtuous man. What generates the enormous value in question, Chichikov’s worth
among the town’s inhabitants, and what destroys it in the next breath is also what gives value to any form of symbolic currency, whether coin, paper, or credit: consensual fantasy, determined in part by rumor, people talking. And in a system where an individual’s worth is subject to the irrationally performed, rumor-based evaluations of his fellows, the “virtuous man” is not a cliché, it is an anachronism.

When we consider the context of the eighteenth-century notion of le doux commerce, Chichikov’s practice of a balanced, “refined,” and pleasant form of commercial intercourse appears rather humorous. His being neither too fat nor too thin, neither this nor that, makes him seem an excellent exemplar, if not a caricature, of the parfait négociant, engaged in the commerce that makes for life’s “refinement” and “softens barbarian ways.” That is a funny idea. But if it were a proper understanding of Chichikov’s business, then one would expect him to be interested in Korobochka’s chicken feathers and hog fat. Of course he is not, and this makes the implication of le doux commerce quite devastating. To invoke once again that other realm within which exchange relations are situated in Gogol’s work, the objects of Chichikov’s trade—dead souls—do not exist in this world. The worth of the serfs he has purchased is no longer dependent on the consensual fantasies of men, a realization that makes all too clear the fact that it once was.