

Title: “Dreadful Documents”: Language and Being in Two Copyist Tales by Nikolai Gogol
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The fate of copy clerks in the nineteenth century is particularly cruel. Not only do they slave with the rest of their chinovnik brethren in numerous Russian “poor clerk” tales, hungry and oppressed and propping up the lowest tiers of the table of ranks, but they begin to die off, all across Europe, in dreadful and mysterious ways. They turn to ghosts in Russia (Gogol), starve themselves in America (Melville), and overdose on opium in England (Dickens) – typically leaving behind only forlorn scraps of paper, the detritus of their trade. I propose to investigate the pathology of the copy clerk as a function of his peculiar relationship to language and to text, focusing on two case studies from the works of Nikolai Gogol: “The Overcoat” and “The Diary of a Madman.” These stories illustrate opposite reactions to a single problem: that the obedient copy clerk must have an entirely passive relationship with language. Committed to reproducing someone else’s words, his language production lacks vitality, meaning. The copyist does not engage in active social negotiations of language, with their potential for human conflict and for error. Gogol’s copyist-protagonists both feel this restriction against creative, personal language use: Akakii Akakievich is barely capable of independent speech, while Poprishchin rebels in authoring his diary, but reacts so strongly against linguistic conventions that he becomes incomprehensible. Their relationships with language correlate with their relationships with the physical world, as the passive Akakii Akakievich ends up a ghost, and the idiomat Poprishchin a mad man. Starting from these two examples, one can read nineteenth-century copyist fiction in part as an international investigation of the connection between language and being, and the empty language of the copyist (Melville’s “dead letters”) as the mechanism of their bizarre deaths.