

Presenter: Vasily Lvov, Graduate Center CUNY

Title: Over Gogol Again: The Russian Formalists, Andrei Bely, and Mikhail Bakhtin on Gogol's Humor

Abstract:

The “convex,” palpable, and multifaceted style of Gogol had mesmerized twentieth-century literary theorists. More than most other “classics,” he was a perfect case in point for the theorists as unlike in their beliefs and values as Andrei Bely, the *Opoyaz* Formalists, and Mikhail Bakhtin.

For the Formalist Boris Eikhenbaum, Gogol’s manner was ideal to illustrate *skaz*, i.e., a special way of telling the story with the voice that is not neutral but, on contrary, is so peculiar that it constitutes another character in that story. Eikhenbaum’s aim was to show how Gogol’s special way of telling the story by merrily alternating masks, tragic and not, laid bare the fundamental playfulness of art as such. This vision of art was the reason why, while writing about the tragic and the comic as equivalent in “The Overcoat,” Eikhenbaum ultimately diminished the importance of the tragic element (which, according to him, shielded the sentimental readers from the artistic essence of the work, which had allegedly emerged from Gogol’s inner drive to wordplay). That is why Eikhenbaum and his fellow Formalists seem to have championed Gogol’s humor at the expense of the noble and humane tendency ascribed to him by others.

The Formalists’ major opponent, Mikhail Bakhtin, conversely, focused on this tendency with regard to Gogol’s humor. In emphasizing the final cause of Gogol’s humor, Bakhtin had been anticipated by Alexander Slonimsky, who, despite his use of the Formalist terms, also spoke about the butt of the joke in Gogol.

Andrei Bely, interestingly, did not want to dwell on the subject of Gogol’s humor and discussed his style instead. Yet this was not done to slight humor in Gogol; on the contrary, Bely wrote: “[I]t can be said about Gogol’s humor: it is all; it is everywhere; therefore, is it humor after all?” This leads me to a tentative conclusion. Despite Bely’s penchant for philosophy and Eikhenbaum’s principled decision to avoid it in scholarship, they have one thing in common. Gogol’s humor mattered to them structurally, and this structural understanding made the comic in Gogol’s humor less important to them. Unlike Bakhtin or Slonimsky, humor was a matter of Aristotelian formal cause for Eikhenbaum and probably for Bely as well. To what degree it was and what is at stake when formal cause is opposed to final—these are the issues tackled in my paper.