Norm, Deviation, and Statistical Thinking in Gogol’s Fiction

At the end of “The Nose,” Gogol’s narrator claims that “such things do happen—rarely, but they do happen.” The justification seems almost as strange as the story itself, since in fact noses don’t ever detach from their owners and walk around on their own. In fact, Gogol’s closing statement brings to maximum tension two distinct notions of narrative representation, as pertaining to either 1) an essence, or 2) observable phenomena. “The Nose” may hitherto have seemed to fall under the first rubric, as representing (perhaps in the manner of an allegory) something about human confusion, ambition or lust; the story’s last sentence seems to put it under the second rubric, along with exotic tales and urban physiological sketches—that is, in the strange-but-true category, where it does not fit in any ordinary sense.

In *Dead Souls* one also encounters many qualifiers of the type “rare,” “unusually large/small,” “there are few like him these days,” or on the contrary, “as often happens,” “one of those sorts of people,” “there are many such.” One can reasonably consider such expressions quasi-statistical, as they invite the reader to conjure a kind of data-set in which to place whatever has just been narrated or described. Statistical studies were already being done in Russia, and by the time of *Dead Souls* Gogol was trying to study them for his own literary purposes.

However, Gogol and his successors also wanted to preserve and depict a kind of inner essence that is precisely *not* captured, and not capturable, by any merely empirical reckoning. Statistical thinking thus has the capacity both to reveal and to distract; this paper will explore that tension as manifested in Gogol’s writings.