

Title: The Stomach for Writing: Understanding the Connection between Digestion and Writing in Nikolai Gogol

Author: Esther Peters, University of Chicago

In a letter Nikolai Gogol once compared his troubles with writing with ‘mental constipation.’ Given Gogol’s preoccupation with food and digestive disorders it is not necessarily surprising that he would choose such a description for writer’s block. His short stories, plays, and novel are filled with detailed descriptions of feasts. Despite his own love of cooking and eating, he ended up starving himself to death. The literary and biographical instances of food and digestion suggest that food was a constant concern for him. Yet, simply attributing this rather vulgar description of an inability to write to yet another example of Gogol’s preoccupation with food does not take into account the unusual status that this description would seem to give to writing and the connection it forges between writing and the body. In particular it is fascinating that Gogol chooses to compare writing to a bodily process and not a specific body part or even the body as a whole. In other words Gogol is making a connection between the activity of the body and the activity of writing.

This paper seeks to explicate that relationship between activity of writing and the activity the body. In order to accomplish this aim the paper first plans to describe constipated or digestive writing through a close reading of two of Gogol’s most famous short stories: “The Nose” and “Diary of a Madman.” The concept of digestive writing is particular useful for these two stories because of how the narrative and narrator in each story is constantly breaking down and restarting. The paper also aims to posit that the notion of digestive writing has value beyond the descriptive or metaphorical. Out of the descriptive potential of digestive writing it becomes possible to understand how the body impacts writing and writing impacts the body. In this way the paper hopes to offer a means of understanding not just some of the more idiosyncratic features of Gogol’s prose, but to possibly to understand why he made the connection between writing and digestion in the first place.