

Title: Deformation and Restoration of the Human Image in Gogol's Art and Thought: Ascent through Descent, a Slap in the Face, and Moral Responsibility

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In contrasting Dostoevsky and Gogol, Vasilii Rozanov finds in Dostoevsky “the restoration of the dignity in the individual that he [Gogol] took from him” (23). Sergei Bocharov echoes Rozanov when he suggests that, “in the teleology of Russian literature,” Gogol’s deformation of the human image and “Dostoevsky’s subsequent ‘restoration’” formed “its main path” (142). For all the debased images in his art, Gogol nonetheless asserts in *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* that the individual is “a representative of the image of God” (PSS 8:240). Bocharov contends that the later Gogol, by means of the abasement of the face, “now wants to heal and save the individual; the evil of the desecration of the human face should now directly serve the good and salvation” (131). In this paper I propose to explore this paradox of salvation through desecration and the seeming incongruity between the marred visages and moral vacuity of his characters and his lofty conception of humankind.

Within a framework of Orthodox thought, I will examine two Gogolian concepts that shed light on the reclaiming role of deformation. The first is “ascent through descent,” or the idea that the depiction of a negative ideal can give rise to a countervailing positive one. The second is the controversial notion of a slap in the face (*opleukha*), or the idea that harsh reproofs and desecrating depictions of the human image can morally arouse his addressees. Finally, I will suggest that Gogol additionally strives to outline a positive program of restoration. In his ideas on moral responsibility, Gogol shows himself to be a key forerunner of the position espoused by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ultimately, the aim of his art and thought is not just to envision humanity’s lost dignity and evoke a restorative response in other writers, but to outline a philosophy that can restore the marred image.

References

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