

Title: Vladimir Nabokov and the Idea in Nikolai Gogol

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In the conclusion to his monograph on Gogol, Nabokov writes that its purpose “amounts to the following;... if you are interested in ‘ideas,’ ‘facts’ and ‘messages,’ keep away from Gogol... His work, as all great literary achievements, is a phenomenon of language and not one of ideas.” (Nabokov: 149-150) This statement has the ring of policy; thanks to it and others like it in *Nikolai Gogol* it has become a commonplace of contemporary criticism to say that Nabokov aims to “liberate” Gogol from “ideological interpretations” or “referentiality” (Vikulova: 91, 149), and this has in turn made it all too easy for hermeneutically-minded investigators to dismiss Nabokov’s book as mere “aestheticism.” (Vaiskopf: 11) However, the “right sort” of reader will resist this reductionism and note that in the very wording of his rejection of ideas Nabokov quite plainly commits himself—and Gogol—to an “idea”: specifically, to an idea of literature of which Gogol’s work would be individual realization. Proceeding from this apparent contradiction, the current paper examines how the category of the idea functions in Nabokov’s argument (its negative sense can be said to derive from Flaubert, its positive, unacknowledged one, from Plato) and how Nabokov’s analyses and translations of various passages from Gogol consistently fail to purge themselves of ideation. The result, however, is not necessarily a vindication of the hermeneutic turn in Gogol studies (such a turn is after all unavoidable in any reading, formalist or otherwise) for Nabokov’s interpretation of “Overcoat” points toward an understanding of Gogol in which the relation between language and idea becomes at once absolutely necessary and irreducibly indeterminate.

Nabokov, Vladimir. *Nikolai Gogol*. New York: New Directions, 1961.

Vaiskopf, Mikhail. *Siuzhet Gogolia*. Moscow: RGGU, 2002.

Vikulova, V. P. ed. *N. V. Gogol’ i russkoe zarubezh’e. Piatie Gogolevskie chteniia*. Moscow: KDU, 2006.