

Title: Bumpkins, Bullshitters and Me: Character-Narrators and Narrator-Characters in the Short Fiction of Nikolai Gogol

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“Who is telling this story?” is an easy enough question to answer when considering most literary works narrated in the first person. However, the identities of the narrators who populate Gogol’s fiction have challenged generations of scholars. There are those who attempt to forcibly wrestle the hybrid language used by these narrators into the guise of a single character. There are those who read this verbal chaos as the voice of Gogol himself. And there are those who prefer to view the protean character of Gogol’s narrators as simply an assertion of the “primacy of play” (Fanger 92).

The proposed paper will attempt to answer the question of who is speaking in Gogol’s stories by tracing the image of his “speakers” from the *Dikanka* tales through the publication of “The Overcoat.” While Gogol begins his career with a series of well-defined character-narrators, he ultimately finds that the most advantageous verbal setting for his famously digressive discourse is a deconstructed first-person presence that lays bare his own leering existence as the ultimate “speaker.” Gogol’s mature narrator is not one character, but a series of stylized verbal masks, all of which are animated by “the mirthful and ever-playful spirit of the artist himself” (Eichenbaum 275). Although Eichenbaum’s conception of literary “skaz” will be a significant touchstone for this investigation, this paper will extend Eichenbaum’s work by describing how Gogol creates his multi-layered narrative presence, the perception of the speaker that emerges from this performance, and the relationship between skaz narration and Gogol’s ultimate literary aims.

Eichenbaum, Boris. “How Gogol’s ‘Overcoat’ Is Made,” in Robert Maguire, ed., *Gogol from the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1974.

Fanger, Donald. *The Creation of Nikolai Gogol*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1979.