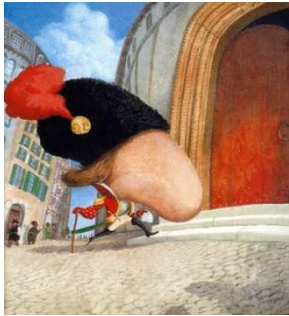


## On the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Birth of Nikolai Gogol 1809-2009



A carriage stopped at the house entrance. Its door opened. A uniformed gentleman appeared. Stooping, he jumped out of the carriage, ran up to the steps and entered the house. A combination of horror and amazement swept over Kovaliev when he recognized the stranger as his own nose.

-*The Nose* by Nikolai Gogol

Gogol is 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia's greatest comic writer, and is also widely regarded as one of the supreme masters of Russian prose. His fame in Russia was established early in his career and his reputation has shown remarkably few fluctuations, though changing cultural viewpoints have produced radically differing interpretations of his enigmatic art. The force and originality of his imagination came to be appreciated at home and abroad, influencing many generations of writers. As Dostoevsky (or Turgenev?) is purportedly to have said—"We have all come out from under Gogol's overcoat". Kafka, for example, drew on Gogol's story "The Nose" to produce his own "Metamorphosis" and in so doing provided new terms for the understanding of his Russian predecessor.

Born in Sorochintsy in the Mirgorod district of the Ukraine, Gogol was the child of a small landowner. His formal education began in 1818 and concluded with his graduation from the gymnasium in 1828. There, Gogol nourished a sense of apartness from his fellows (his nickname was "the mysterious dwarf"), and he seems to have taken pleasure in appearing to be a different person to each of them... In December 1828 he moved to St. Petersburg, where the largest part of Gogol's energy in this initial and most productive period of his career (which ended in July 1836 with his departure for Rome and 13 years of expatriation) was devoted to sustained experimentation in almost all the forms of authorship then current, and to cultivating acquaintance with leading literary figures, the poets Pushkin and Zhukovsky chief among them. Both lent encouragement, publically and privately, to the young author, in whom they quickly recognized a unique and exceptional phenomenon. Gogol was later to credit Pushkin with "ceding" him the ideas for two of his supreme masterpieces, *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*. (Donald Fanger, *Handbook of Russian Literature*, 1985).

Gogol published no significant works after 1842. The last decade of his life was devoted to revisions of earlier works, working on drafts and sketches, and most

importantly, the second of three projected parts of *Dead Souls*. In 1847 he produced *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, a collection of homilies and personal confessions which was an abject failure with critics and the public alike. "Gradually he became almost obsessed by the idea that God no longer needed his services... and he was now entirely at the mercy of his own moral hypochondria, his fears of divine wrath and his peculiar *angoise*, which he tried to relieve by praying and fasting..." (Janko Lavrin, *Nikolai: A Centenary Survey*. London: 1951). In February 1852, fasting and weak, he woke his servant and instructed him to burn the unpublished manuscripts of his novel. Ten days later, he—who had said that writing was tantamount to living and breathing for him—died, in the words of a contemporary, an "artist-monk, Christian-satirist, ascetic and humorist, martyr of the exalted ideal and the unsolved riddle." (Fanger).

Featured in this exhibit are illustrations of characters and scenes from several of Gogol's greatest works—stories from *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* and *Mirgorod*, *The Nose*, *The Inspector General*, *The Overcoat* and *Dead Souls*. The exhibit, located in the Second Floor Reading Room of Regenstein Library, will run through June 2009.

June Pachuta Farris  
Bibliographer for Slavic, East  
European and Eurasian Studies