“GOD, WHAT A MARVELOUS DREAM”: OPIUM-TAKING IN GOGOL’S “NEVSKY PROSPEKT” AND POE’S “LIGEIA”

NATALIYA SHPYLOVA-SAEED *

Summary

This paper aims to emphasize the structuring and organizing potential of the episodes that focus on opium taking. The current analysis argues that the protagonists of the two stories make a conscious decision to take opium to escape pain and anxiety. On this level, opium taking is presented as healing: the protagonists seem to be granted an opportunity to re-construct their shattered worlds. On the other hand, opium-taking signals some fundamental disconnection with self and others, which reveals the individual’s fragility and inherent fragmentation. In the context of the latter, the two stories engage in the exploration of the individual’s response to the world which appears to be highly disrupted and fragmented.

Key Words: Opium, Disintegration, Fragmentation, Hybridized consciousness.

The opening of Nikolai Gogol’s “Nevsky Prospekt” (1835) undoubtedly evokes images of a beautiful city: in addition, it also encodes duality and bifurcation that Gogol seems to further explore as the story unfolds. “There is nowhere finer than Nevsky Prospekt—at least, not in Petersburg. It is its very life blood” (Gogol, 2005: 78). The first sentence that delivers the narrator’s fascination with the city contains an interplay of a part and a whole: the narrator enthusiastically describes Nevsky Prospekt, which is presented as a constituent of Saint Petersburg. The subsequent passages, presenting the heterogeneous city that includes citizens of various classes and professions, introduce changeability and movement as inherent characteristics of Nevsky Prospekt.

This sense of constant flux and movement is disrupted by two story-lines involving Piskarev and Pirogov. The disruption seems to be introduced to emphasize duality and bifurcation which are
cunningly introduced in the beginning of the story. Duality, as well as fragmentation, in Gogol’s works has received much discussion in critical literature[1]: I would like to draw attention to how the individual responds when they are confronted with a world which appears to be highly disrupted and fragmented. To pursue these lines, I will focus on the episodes highlighting Piskarev’s attempts to navigate the world of fragmentations. The purpose of this focus is to discuss the fragility of the individual who appears to be submerged in a fragmented and disrupted world. This exploration will be focused on a specific element that is integrated in “Nevsky Prospekt”—opium taking. Discovering that the woman he is in love with is a prostitute, Piskarev turns to opium. In this essay, I will argue that opium taking episodes are integrated into a structural narrative bifurcation to augment the disintegration of a linear worldview. I will start with the discussion of fragmentation and heterogeneity that the cityscape of “Nevsky Prospekt” evokes; these observations will be followed by the analysis of the opium line that involves Piskarev. In the context of the latter, I will mention Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia,” a story of a heart-broken narrator who struggles to accept the fact that his beloved wife, Ligeia, died. Although marrying another woman, he dreams about his deceased wife. In order to instigate his hallucinatory reveries, he takes opium. Poe, as his Ukrainian-Russian counterpart, also includes the experience of opium-taking into the discovery of the individual’s fragility, on the one hand, and of the fragmented consciousness, on the other.

The conversation about opium taking as presented in “Nevsky Prospekt” aligns with critical works emphasizing Gogol’s fragmented artistic consciousness.[2] Additionally, it is outlined to further explore influences that the acknowledgement of inherent fragmentation entails. Here I draw on the argument suggested by Michael R. Kelly that Gogol’s characters, including Piskarev, “are unable to reconcile with life. The very nature of their characters precludes the possibility of such reconciliation” (Kelley, 2006: 16). Summarizing these observations, Kelly goes on to assert, “Gogol saw reconciliation not as a passive acceptance, but as appositive call to introspection and moral change” (Kelley, 2006: 17). Building on these lines insinuating that Piskarev appears incapable of adjusting to changes, I suggest that opium signals not only the desire to escape the environment that seems hostile to the individual, but also the collapse of the attempt to gain control of the desired world. Can this attempt be considered a failure? Answering this question, I would like to emphasize the in-between status, which Gogol seems to embrace and which signals discomfort of belongingness that includes literary and existential domains. As the proliferation of international Gogol studies demonstrates, attempts to confine the Ukrainian-born Russian writer’s oeuvre within particular aesthetic frameworks—ranging from Baroque and Romanticism to existentialism and onward—have proved futile.[3] In this light, opium taking episodes contribute to the delineation of hybridized consciousness and to resistance against order and systematization, which involves the issues of power and control.

As Andrei Bely reminds us, Gogol borrowed his opium addict from Thomas De Quincey’s Confessions of an English Opium Eater (1821), which detailed the experience of drug addiction (Bely, 1934: 167). Overall, the nineteenth century was marked by an extensive debate about opium taking. In Europe in particular, this discussion was gradually entering a professional sphere of doctors and researchers: Gogol’s gesturing toward De Quincey signals that the Russian Empire did not stay aloof from the Western explorations of substance usage. Although in the Russian Empire opium was rather widely used for medical reasons, it was not as much exploited as an object of aestheticization. In this regard, “Nevsky Prospekt” can be considered innovative in terms of Russian aesthetic exploration of altered states of consciousness, induced by substance usage.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the debates that opium taking instigated were marked with controversy. While some were pointing to beneficial effects, others were concerned
about consequences opium abuse could entail. In Great Britain, for example, *The British Medical Journal* in 1867 published a brief letter written by an employee of the Bethlem Hospital, who was concerned about the increasing amount of young people taking opium: he expressed his hope that this case would be studied (Harmer, 1867: 140). Some decades later, the same journal published a report, which would argue for the use of opium. In 1894, Surgeon-Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Lawrie, describing his observations of those taking opium, concluded that “the opium habit may be consistently recommended on the ground that opium is the only stimulant which does no harm whatever and at the same time may possibly do a great deal of good” (“Opium in Hyderabad State,” 1894: 200). While taking this responsibility to recommend opium for medical purposes, Lawrie was also aware of misrepresentations his opinion might involve. For the medical sphere, opium taking in the nineteenth century was new and controversial. Although this paper does not intend to discuss the controversy of opium taking, it pursues to highlight what impulses opium-taking helps to reveal.\[4\]

As Lawrie’s report indicates, opium taking involves transformative effects: in addition to the regularity of meal, sleep, digestion, it keeps opium eaters “cheerful, contended, happy, and well” (“Opium in Hyderabad State,” 1894: 200). While influencing an individual physically, opium also contributes to the change of emotional state and, on a large scale, psychological conditions. Gogol employs opium episodes to capture not only multifacetedness but splitness that human nature inherently contains. Piskarev is challenged by the disruptiveness of being, which is represented via the gap between actual experiences and desired realities. In this regard, opium taking reveals attempts to assemble shattered worlds.

As mentioned above, “Nevsky Prospekt” includes at least two stories, which can function independently: one story focuses on Piskarev and another one on Pirogov. Analyzing the two narratives, Yuriy Mann hints that these lines represent different levels: *bolee dostoiniy* (more elevated) and *menee dostoinyi* (less elevated) (Mann, 1988: 28). Thus, Piskarev represents, using Mann’s terminology, a more elevated level and Pirogov – a less elevated one. While Mann prioritizes hierarchical terminology, he acutely notes that the story after Piskarev dies does not end: in fact, it develops in a new intriguing way. But this shift form one story line to another is not, as Mann puts it, “carnivalesque ambivalence of life and death” (28). In the critic’s opinion, this shift marks “the lowering of the level” and entails “sad irony” (48). This story’s ability to continue when one of the characters vanishes is rather eloquent and it generates thematic proliferations that take the story to the realm of existential search. But Gogol’s penchant is to juxtapose opposites that reveal the individual’s inherent ambivalence: good is inseparable from evil and the organized is inseparable from the chaotic. In this light, Mann’s terminology that is based on oppositions seems to reduce the ambivalence, which Gogol strives to confront and embrace.

Considering Gogol’s preoccupation with duality, it is worth mentioning that Piskarev and Pirogov are first introduced amidst the hustle-bustle of Nevsky Prospekt. They seem to be caught unexpectedly:

“Stop!” cried Lieutenant Pirogov on such an evening, tugging a young man who was walking beside him in a tail-cloat and cloak. “Did you see her?”

“Oh yes—wonderful! The image of Bianca of Perugino.”

“But which one do you mean?”

“Why, the one with the dark hair . . . And what eyes! God, what eyes! Her whole demeanor, her figure and the cast of her face . . . miraculous!” (Gogol, 2005: 212).

The narrator chooses to follow Piskarev first, as if anticipating some initiation story. By turning to Piskarev, the narrator also shifts focus from the chaos and multiplicity that Nevsky Prospekt evokes to the single and homogenous. Readers are introduced to Piskarev’s world, which
alludes, according to Mann, to a more elevated consciousness. However, this elevated sophistication bears some tint of irony. Piskarev is presented not only as a pursuer of elevated sophistication but also as an ironic portrayal of the St. Petersburg “stuffy” bohemian community and a parody of artistic aspirations: “To such a class belonged our young man, the artist Piskarev, so shy and withdrawn, but harbouring sparks of feeling in his heart that were ready to burst into flame—given the chance” (Gogol, 2005: 85). This line echoes Walter Pater’s “gemlike flame,” which brings forth creative vitality and energy. The narrator’s remark signals Piskarev’s artistic potential, the development of which, however, depends on the outside circumstances. Timidity appears the most prominent feature of the St. Petersburg artist: he has ambitions, which are checked by rationale and, it would probably be fair to say, fear to sabotage his comfort. By distancing himself from society, by creating his own world of creative inspiration, which is, nevertheless, based on self-indulgence, Piskarev exposes his difference; however, he does not push the boundaries of the normative to the very extreme. Piskarev’s attempt to construct his life around his aspirations and priorities, while excluding aspects and experiences that do not coincide with his beliefs, contrasts with the dominance of fragmentation and heterogeneity, which are introduced for the description of Nevsky Prospekt. Ironically, Piskarev finds himself in the midst of incongruities.

The moment when Piskarev discovers that his brunette is a prostitute can be presented as a moment when his world shatters. Commenting on this episode, Sven Spieker suggests that the staircase that Piskarev climbs when following the woman functions “as profanation of the lofty ascent of the soul to heaven” (Spieker, 1995: 453). Discreet irony insinuates the subversion of clearly defined hierarchies, which extend not only to literary conventions but to an orthodox system of values and morals. As Spieker observes, Gogol’s Arabeski tales, including “Nevsky Prospekt,” signal the impossibility of “any distinction between right and wrong, authentic and inauthentic, immanent and transcendent” (453).

Having found himself in a brothel, Piskarev seems to struggle to coordinate his prior experience and the current exposure to the surrounding. In his imagination, the brunette woman is (was) an embodiment of beauty and purity. Even when realizing that she is a prostitute, he is still overwhelmed with his initial impressions and the woman in his imagination is associated with the divine: “But she stood there before him, as lovely as before; her hair was just as beautiful, her eyes still looked heavenly” (Gogol, 2005: 89). However, Piskarev’s holistic perception of the woman bifurcates and his imagination is challenged by the ambivalence. Now the woman represents not only beauty but vulgarity as well:

It was a den of iniquity, where man sacrilegiously tramples and mocks all that is pure and holy, all that enhances life, where woman, the beauty of this world, the crown of creation, is transformed into some strange, equivocal being, where she loses all purity of soul, all that is womanly and where she adopts the loathsome habits of the male and had ceased to be the delicate, beautiful creature that differs from us so much (Gogol, 2005: 88-89).

This episode introduces the discrepancy between the appearance and content (which is harmonious not only for Romanticism but for Renaissance and Classicism as well) and the process of disintegration and fragmentation: as with the city, beauty, which seems to be constant and eternal, loses its clearly defined contours. Overtly parodying Romantic and pre-Renaissance clichés, Gogol introduces a disruption of aesthetic traditions, which ricochets with ethical reconsiderations. Does beauty include vulgarity? In “Nevsky Prospekt,” Gogol insinuates the subversion of the conventional standards of the beautiful and ugly; however, he does not indulge in questioning the relevance of concepts that introduce opposing entities. The individual’s challenge is to find a balance between the
opposites, to put those into dialogue.

For Piskarev, the world is divided into opposing parts: good and evil, divine and infernal. Evoking linear worldviews that appear to connect antiquity and contemporaneity, “Nevsky Prospekt” questions the relevance of “the whole harmony of life,” which falls apart under the influence of modern society. St. Petersburg is depicted as a multi-dimensional city encompassing a variety of elements. Piskarev’s “whole” vision of being contrasts with the heterogeneity that his outside environment includes and produces. When submerged into the alien world of a brothel, Piskarev’s world collapses; but he does maintain his strong desire for “the whole harmony of life,” which is now transported into a fragile world of dreams.

Piskarev’s dream becomes a space where his desires are satisfied; however, this dream-reality is fragile and evanescent:

So he had been sleeping! God, what a marvelous dream! But why had he woken up? Why could that dream not have lasted one more minute—surely she would have reappeared? Unwelcome daybreak was peering through his windows with its unpleasant, dull light. His room was in terrible, gray, murky chaos. Oh, how repulsive reality was! What was it compared to dreams? (Gogol, 2005: 95).

After meeting the brunette woman, Piskarev’s world splits into “reality” and “dream.” This sense of divided self develops throughout Gogol’s oeuvre. Analyzing “Rome,” Michael Kelly writes: “. . . Gogol stands on artistic threshold between his caricatured world of comic fragmentation and an idealized world of harmonious beauty between the diverse tendencies and tonal registers of his fictional and non-fictional works” (Kelley, 2003: 25). Gogol is intrigued by the ruptures which emerge when the incompleteness of seemingly complete entities is revealed. Piskarev’s endeavor to indulge in the world of dreams strengthen the subversion of the Romantic idea of duality that prioritizes the separation of multiplicities rather than the overlapping. For Gogol, multiplicities constitute a complex network of connections which function “here and now” and an attempt to sort out diverse strands and threads will most likely fail.

Out of the two dimensions that Piskarev is exposed to, he chooses the one where he feels safe and comfortable—his dream. This vehemence to pre-program his dream signals both Gogol’s irony toward the individual’s naïve belief that they can control life and Gogol’s split consciousness balancing between seemingly opposing dimensions, which, however, constitute a multilayered universe of life where oppositions collapse. Piskarev becomes dependent on his dream-life: “In the end he lived only for dreams and from that time his whole life took a strange turn: he could be said to sleep while waking and was awake only when sleeping” (Gogol, 2005: 95). The line between “reality” and “dream” becomes more blurry. Although Piskarev chooses his dream-existence, he is not situated entirely in one dimension: he navigates between the inside and the outside. Instead of devising alternative worlds (which does take place, to some extent, in “Nevsky Prospekt”), Gogol mixes those, blurring the boundaries which are set up by linearity-based worldviews, thus ironizing literary and philosophical edifices which are grounded in some solid belief of discovering the ultimate truth. For Gogol, truth acquires haziness.

Gogol’s irony toward rigid systems augments when Piskarev decides to take opium to secure his desired dream. Opium discloses Piskarev’s shattered world: the artist wants to reconstruct his “old reality”—coherent, harmonious, and convenient. The same technique is employed by Edgar Poe in “Ligeia” (1838). The narrator takes opium to soothe his pain after Ligeia dies and to maintain her image in his memory: “In the excitement of my opium dreams . . . I would call aloud upon her name . . . as if . . . I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned—ah, could it be forever?—upon the earth” (Poe, 1966: 104). For the American narrator, opium taking turns into the
addiction that helps him reconcile with the reality; or at least to bring some temporary relief.

In “Ligeia,” the narrator chooses his secluded moments to indulge in the illusory presence of Ligeia, forgetting about his new wife, Rowena. However, his dream reality gradually takes over his actual life. While developing intolerance toward Rowena, the narrator seems to transplant by the power of his imagination Ligeia back to, so to speak, real life: “‘Here then, at least,’ I shrieked aloud, ‘can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the Lady Ligeia’” (Poe, 1966: 108). Is it a hallucination triggered by opium? Or does the reader witness the narrator’s mental disintegration? While the two possibilities can be feasible, what seems to be important in this episode is the moment of colliding of the two dimensions, of opium-free and opium-triggered worlds. In “Ligeia,” Poe brings attention to the experiences that expose inherent splitness of the human psyche and consciousness. In this regard, opium facilitates the entrance not only into the world of harmony and coherence (although illusory), but also into the multileveled complexity of human existence that can hardly be systematized and structured. Poe’s narrator seems to celebrate the resurrection of Ligeia; this reaction also entails the celebration of his personal efforts to construct and re-construct his life according to his own desires. In spite of the fact that the end of the story implicates the narrator’s success in terms of pursuing his dream, it raises a number of questions. One the central questions is whether the narrator’s words and sanity are reliable.

As Piskarev, the American narrator chooses the world of dreams over the real world that shatters. However, for both Piskarev and Poe’s narrator this choice entails some creative and constructive effort: they produce worlds while being guided by their imagination. But these new worlds are not entirely detached from their actual experiences: they stem from the overlapping of dream and reality. Piskarev brings the brunette to his “ideal” world, and the American narrator—his beloved Ligeia. In the two stories, opium taking introduces the idea of balancing between the worlds which mitigates isolation. It is peculiar that when imagination seems to intrude into the reality, opium motifs, supported by a delicate Oriental accompaniment, are given some emphasis.

The description of the American narrator’s chamber abounds with Oriental ornaments. Ottomans and golden candelabra of Eastern figures, the bridal couch of an Indian model, arabesque patterns of the carpets and draperies add to the mysterious atmosphere of the chamber, which seems to be a space where reality and imagination collide:

Alas, I feel how much even of incipient madness might have been discovered in the gorgeous and fantastic draperies, in the solemn carvings of Egypt, in the wild cornices and furniture, in the Bedlam patterns of the carpets of tufted gold! I have become a bounded slave in the trammels of opium, and my labors and my orders had taken a coloring from my dreams (Poe, 1966: 103).

The boundary between dream and reality is blurred to the extent where it is hard to tell in what space the narrator situates himself.

To “fix” his world and to mend the chaos that was caused by the outside surrounding, Piskarev goes to a Persian seller to buy some opium. In lieu of paying for the opium, a male Persian asks Piskarev to draw a picture of a beautiful woman

“Хорошо, я дам тебе опиуму, только нарисуй мне красавицу. Чтобы хорошая была красавица! чтобы брови были черные и очи большие, как маслины; я сама чтобы лежала возле нее и курила трубку! слышнишь? чтобы хорошая была! чтобы была красавица!” (Gogol, 2009: 24) [“All right, I’ll give you some, but you must paint me a beautiful woman. She must be very beautiful, with black eyebrows and eyes as large as olives! And paint me lying beside her, smoking my pipe! Do you
To describe his actions, the male seller uses inflections of the feminine gender (the detail lost in the English translation). This humorous episode that includes cultural and linguistic specifics points toward the combination and overlapping of diverse cultures and imaginations, of, broadly speaking, East and West. Oriental connotations add texture to the story, taking it to the realm of not only cultural interactions but also to the dialogue of various textual layers. One of the most prominent effects in this context is ornamentation and fragmentation that Oriental allusions reveal. This episode intensifies the breaking of, so to speak, straight lines which are imposed and kept through the perseverance of ideological and aesthetic systems. The linguistic dimension is manipulated to create narrative shadows that intrude into the textual construction, which, at first glance, seems profound and unshakeable. In this regard, Gogol takes a step away from the traditions of constructed and polished narratives that were venerated by, for example, Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov: Gogol’s narrative becomes more open to arabesque-like movement and vignette painting, where multiple lines intertwine, turning conventional beginnings and endings into a figment of imagination.

As his American counterpart, by taking opium Piskarev reconstructs his lost paradise, shaping his world—whole and harmonious—according to his desires. While losing control over his non-dream life, he orchestrates the world where he exercises the power of his desires and imagination:

He thought of nothing, hardly ate, and with the impatience and eagerness of a lover waited for nightfall and those longed-for dreams. This constant concentration on one and the same object finally took such a hold on his whole existence and imagination that the desired imaged appeared almost every day, always the very opposite of reality, since his thoughts were as pure as a child’s. Through these dreams the object itself became somehow purer and was completely transformed (Gogol, 2005: 97).

This sense of transformation that is, however, centered on Piskarev’s dream life, is transported to the reality, where the brunette works in a brothel. Imagination is presented as empowering; but a distance between the imaginary and the desired, on the one hand, and the factual and the trivial, on the other, still presents a challenge to the individual. Piskarev naively follows his impulse to make his dream a reality. His courageous decision is prompted by the sense of power he discovered while indulging in opium eating.

Having isolated himself from the outside world and having indulged in the opium-stimulated dreams, Piskarev attempts to bridge the inside and outside worlds. Addressing himself, Piskarev narrates his “new” reality where he acquires strength and power to approach the brunette with a marriage proposal. Before realizing this plan, however, he re-constructs his world, that was shattered and reassembled, through his imagination and language. Comforting dreams, the coherence of which is strengthened through opium, are transported into a linguistic dimension, which on this level appears to be a tool to materialize the imaginary. Piskarev convinces himself that the brunette young woman is a victim of “dreadful circumstances” and he can save her by holding out a hand (Gogol, 2005: 98). He goes further, orchestrating his new reality: “I must marry her. That way I would be acting far better than many who marry their housekeepers—and even the most despicable creatures. But my course of action will be disinterested and might even be noble. I shall return to the world its finest embellishments” (Gogol, 2005: 98). On the one hand, these noble ambitions indicate Piskarev’s renovated world, which, again, acquires unity and harmony. On the other hand, they ironize corrective programs promoted by linearity-based ideologies. Gogol engages in doubting if the individual can be “saved” when a noble ordeal is initiated not by a “sinner” but by a “righteous”
believer.

Gogol’s doubt regarding the “savior’s” ambitions reaches its climax and transforms into an existential constituent when the brunette in a cruel manner rejects Piskarev’s noble proposal. Piskarev’s ideal world rooted in unity and harmony disintegrates again while a sense of emptiness and lostness intensifies: “He rushed out of the room, seeing nothing, feeling nothing, hearing nothing... The whole day was spent stupidly, aimlessly—and he did not hear or feel a thing” (Gogol, 2005: 100). The painter kills himself by cutting the throat: “From his convulsively parted hands and his terrifyingly distorted expression one could infer that his hand faltered and that he had suffered for a long time before his sinful soul left his body” (Gogol, 2005: 100). The painter who prioritized beauty and righteousness, accompanied by the aspiration to “save” brunette’s “sinful soul,” takes his own life, committing, according to the Eastern Orthodox Church, a sin. In addition to the irony that this episode may evoke, it also intensifies the mixing of diversities and multiplicities. Sin is inseparable from righteousness, as well as the beautiful goes hand in hand with the ugly.

“Nevsky Prospekt,” as well “Ligeia,” includes an attempt to not only bridge dream and reality but also to mend splitness that is revealed in the process of negotiation between the two spaces. The American narrator strives to resurrect his beloved Ligeia; Piskarev is driven by his desire to “save” the beautiful brunette. Can splitness be mended? Poe gestures toward the possibility of reconciliation: a new vision of Ligeia that becomes part of the narrator’s imagination marks some balancing between different dimensions. This balance, however, is fragile. For Gogol, splitness becomes more than just an episode that shapes the individual’s perception of self and others. Piskarev’s world that falls apart after his harmonious vision of beauty, which excludes vulgarity and ugliness, is shattered. This shattered world reflects a fragmented, mosaic-like, multilayered depiction of St. Petersburg, which is emphasized in the beginning of the story: both Piskarev and the city are endowed with texture and fractures that include heterogeneous elements. In this context, Gogol moves away from his Romantic counterparts: splitness is not an area for experimental exploration, it is an inherent condition of mind and soul. Gogol moves toward the understanding of ruptures that are inevitable: being and existence embrace and are exposed to discontinuities which make up ontological mosaics.

Gogol and Poe employ opium episodes to explore fragile moments of the human psyche that appears receptive and vulnerable to a variety of internal and external interinfluences. Poe, however, while outlining intriguing psychological experiences reflecting the complexity of human nature, attempts to grasp the very moment of fragile change. This attempt seems to evoke some sense of confidence: although readers are not provided with answers in the end of the story—it is not clear whom the narrator sees, Ligeia or his new wife, Rowena—they follow the voice of the story-teller, succumbing to his magical imagination. Gogol’s story leaves readers wondering, questioning, doubting. Piskarev’s story ends unexpectedly with the funeral, adding to the effect of puzzlement and frustration: it evokes a desire to fix and improve the story, to say the last finalizing word. But this effect supports the idea of fracture and splitness that cannot be fixed: these are parts of being.

Piskarev’s love story fails and he dies after fruitlessly pursuing his dream—marrying the brunette. At first glance, Piskarev’s story introduces motifs of predictability: life, as well as love, can be foreseen and pre-constructed. Piskarev’s attempts to live and love according to his beliefs illustrate the individual’s desire to choose predictability over the unknown. However, here we enter the realm of human psyche—the world is what an individual’s imagination creates in response to the outside influences. From this perspective, the outside world is a collection of fragments that the individual assembles when being driven by their imagination. In “Nevsky Prospekt,” the outside environment is presented as multileveled and fragmented and Piskarev faces a challenge not only, as
Kelly asserts, “to reconcile with life” (Kelley, 2006: 16), but also to organize fragments into a harmonious entity which reflects his striving for goodness and benevolence.

In “Nevsky Prospekt,” Gogol explores fragmentation and heterogeneity that shape the individual and their communication with the inside and outside worlds. Not only is Nevsky Prospekt portrayed as disintegrated and diverse, but also the harmonious integrity of the individual is presented as fragile: a figment of imagination that collapses when the individual opens their inner space to the outer space. However, Gogol avoids drawing a clear line between the inside and the outside. Opium taking in this regard signals the overlapping of the two: imagination becomes life and life turns into an illusion. It should also be noted that opium serves as a means to reassemble a shattered world, but the emphasis is placed not so much on how to fix disintegration but on the mere fact of fragmentation: opium induced harmony is fragile and temporary, eventually it will also disintegrate. Even when reassembled, an individual world is vulnerable to the disintegration, which appears inevitable. The story line of “Nevsky Prospekt” continues after the death of Piskarev: a tragic stance is significantly minimized. As a matter of fact, the subsequent narrative that follows Pirogov becomes more humorous, with slight lapses of the dramatic. It is not that Piskarev’s life is devalued: existence is fragmentized and it balances between life and death. But these notions are regulated by the human mind and imagination. Pirogov’s section that seems to completely disregard Piskarev’s episode, on the one hand, gestures toward the textual fragmentation: “Nevsky Prospekt” can be described as a collage of fragmented stories that are put together not only by the narrator but by readers as well. On the other hand, the two sections, while mirroring each other, introduce fragmentation as an inseparable part of existence. In this light, Gogol barely laments over the lost unity and harmony: he gestures toward disintegration as a challenge for the individual to shape their lives according to choices they are presented with. By blurring the boundaries between oppositions—good and evil, beautiful and ugly, sin and virtue—Gogol outlines a worldview that appears to be inclusive and hybrid, although puzzling and disorienting.


Gogol’s works appear to be open to a variety of influences and proliferations. In his overview of the Gogol scholarship, V.V. Vinogradov, while revealing multiple lacuna, outlines an impressively broad scope of completed and potential investigation. See V.V. Vinogradov, *Gogol and the Natural School*, translated by Debra K. Erickson and Ray Parrott, Ardis, 1987. Gogol studies of recent years also demonstrate the inexhaustibility of the writer’s narrative.


When pursuing the brunette, Piskarev bears some resemblance to Dante worshiping Beatrice or Petrarch adoring Laura. It is not that Gogol sarcastically subverts pre-Renaissance ideals, but he seems to question the relevance of artistic systematization in general.

**Bibliography**


*Nataliya Shpylova-Saeed* - PhD student at Indiana University (Bloomington, IN, USA), where she studies Slavic Literatures. Her research interests include Russian-Ukrainian literary relations, memory studies, bilingual writing, Soviet literature and culture, American literature, transculturalism. She also has a PhD in American literature email: nshpylov@iu.edu

© 2010, IJORS - INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RUSSIAN STUDIES