

[Kupensky on Ilchuk, 'Nikolai Gogol: Performing Hybrid Identity'](#)

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Nicholas Kupensky on Nikolai Gogol: Performing Hybrid Identity

Is Nikolai Gogol a Russian or Ukrainian writer? One hopes that this stubbornly persistent question will finally be put to rest with the appearance of Yuliya Ilchuk's brilliant monograph, *Nikolai Gogol: Performing Hybrid Identity*, a true example of multidisciplinary scholarship whose argument is that Gogol should be considered first and foremost a hybrid in life and literature.

A scholar with an encyclopedic command of many theoretical traditions and interpretive methods, Ilchuk recently has become one of the most compelling voices in both Russian and Ukrainian studies, interrogating the many fraught fields of contact between them, including the ongoing war in Donbas and the memory of the Soviet past in post-Maidan Ukraine.[1] Her debut monograph takes up the contested cultural totem *par excellence*, that is, the identity of the writer known as Nikolai Gogol' in Russian and Mykola Hohol' in Ukrainian.

The book's subtitle signals the three conceptual frameworks that are important to Ilchuk's central thesis: performativity, hybridity, and identity. First, rather than searching, likely in vain, for Gogol's "authentic" inner self, Ilchuk instead explores how Gogol's selves—imperial, national, regional—are performatively constituted, extending Judith Butler's concept of the performativity of gender to ethnonational self-identification.[2] Second, the conscious performance of self is intimately linked to Gogol's hybridity, the book's core concern that comes from the work of postcolonial scholars such as Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha who analyzed the multiplicity of identities in colonial contexts. Finally, this study is also about who Gogol was as a historical subject and meticulously documents how his hybrid identity manifested itself in his behavior, correspondence, and writing.

For these reasons, the book naturally is called *Nikolai Gogol*, for it paints a new, convincing image of its main subject. In many ways, Ilchuk's sensibilities echo and build upon those of Edyta Bojanowska's *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism* (2007); however, while Bojanowska positions Gogol as contributing to "the discourses of both Russian and Ukrainian nationalism," Ilchuk demonstrates how it is precisely this space between them that was the source of his creativity and success.[3] Thus, her theory of Gogol's hybridity is distinct from postcolonial assessments for it emphasizes, even while questioning, the liberatory power of hybridity. "I dispute the idea that Gogol had internalized a colonial mode of behavior," she argues. Instead, his "dialectical worldview" facilitates his "subtle, implicit resistance to imperial homogenization," even if during his

life Gogol was perceived as “neither unusual nor threatening to the empire” (p. 4).

Nikolai Gogol puts forth its concept of Gogol’s performance of his hybrid identity as it manifested itself in “his unconventional cultural behavior,” “visual self-fashioning,” “multi-ethnic narrative performance,” and “hybrid Russian-Ukrainian language” (p. 4). Its fast-paced narrative is both telescopic and microscopic and unfurls across a theoretically rich introduction, six captivating chapters, and an afterword. The work also includes four tables and four appendices that reveal the fruits of Ilchuk’s apt use of methods and tools from the digital humanities.

Chapter 1 is a history of Russian imperial and Ukrainian national manifestations of identity, and Ilchuk explores how Ukrainian intellectuals cultivated different strategies of “ethnic defense, disguise, and resistance” (p. 19). She demonstrates how Gogol’s predecessors and contemporaries—such as Vasyly’ Narizhnyi (1780-1825), Orest Somov (1793-1833), Taras Shevchenko (1814-61), Nikolai Kostomarov (1817-85), and Panteleimon Kulish (1819-97)—easily integrated into the empire due to their ability to “pass” as Russians while nonetheless retaining their otherness in covert ways often invisible to outsiders. She defines the strategy of Gogol’s generation of Ukrainian writers as that of “mongrelization.” Here, Gogol emerges as a temporal hybrid of sorts, for he sits between the “colonial” identity of *malorossiistvo* adopted by his older contemporaries and the “federalist” approach of his younger ones. This mongrel identity viewed Little Russians as separate from Great Russians but also perceived the imperial identity as a creation of both peoples.

Chapter 2 analyzes how Gogol constructed his public identity in St. Petersburg. Here, Ilchuk develops her concepts of his cultural performativity—what she calls the “leitmotif” of his early years in St. Petersburg—by drawing upon Stephen Greenblatt’s theory of self-fashioning and Homi Bhabha’s idea of mimicry. Gogol’s behavior, she argues, satisfied “Russian society’s need for a cultural *other*” (p. 42), for he played upon the set of signs he created around the babbling beekeeper Rudy Pan’ko in his first major work, the collection *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1830-31). Using the “camouflage” or “mask” of a Ukrainian who cannot quite learn the cultural codes of the Russian imperial world, Gogol drew attention to his own otherness by openly mocking the snobbish, stiff manners in vogue in St. Petersburg’s salon culture, cultivating a democratic, irreverent Ukrainian diaspora, carefully curating a public image characterized by his exaggerated dress, haircut, and mustache that made him “look like a rooster,” and acquiring the reputation of a “jester” by being risqué, vulgar, and untameable (pp. 52, 57, 65).

Chapter 3 reveals the contours of Gogol’s specific idiolect in granular detail. Ilchuk uses contemporaries’ descriptions of Gogol’s speech patterns to reveal their hybrid elements, such as the absence of vowel reduction, the fricative *h* instead of *g*, and Ukrainian syntax and morphological patterns. She argues that Gogol creates “his own variant of Russian,” which he saw as a “marker of his own uniqueness” (pp. 70, 71). Using methods from the digital humanities, Ilchuk also analyzes the “lexical and morphological loans” (p. 74) from Ukrainian in Gogol’s stories in *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* and produces a fascinating table of his calques (table 1). Then she uses speech-act theory to illuminate the varied linguistic hybridity among the collection’s narrators: Rudy Pan’ko, Foma Grigorievich, Makar Nazarovich, several anonymous narrators, and, most importantly, the blind bandura player, “Gogol’s ideal narrating subject” (p. 89), who uses his rhetoric to bridge ethnic and imperial identities.

Chapter 4 analyzes Gogol's own conception of his linguistic hybridity—what he called “heterology” (*raznogolositsa*)—and how it continued to evolve after his Ukrainian discourse became more difficult to cultivate in print. Ilchuk positions Gogol's theory of language within a tradition of Romantic writers, such as Friedrich Schleiermacher and Johann Gottfried Herder, and shows its influence on Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of polyphony and proximity to Julia Kristeva's sense of “the *other* within us” (p. 94). To illustrate this, she analyzes how Gogol incorporates Yiddish and German discourse in his texts, especially that of the Jewish character Yankel in *Taras Bulba*. However, after Russian minister of education Sergei Uvarov introduced his doctrine of “Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality” in 1832, Gogol's ability to cultivate hybrid discourse meaningfully changed. By the 1840s, Gogol faced increased criticism of the language in his Ukrainian tales, which ultimately persuaded him to write in standard literary Russian.

While the Ukrainian elements begin to wane in Gogol's late discourse, his hybridized language did not. Ilchuk distance reads his 1,350 letters to 107 correspondents, and, again, her use of tools from the digital humanities leads to a number of fruitful observations. She uncovers later manifestations of his hybrid discourse, such as how Gogol creatively distorts, misuses, or transforms Russian idioms. Her comparison of standard Russian and Gogol's modified idioms (table 2) is among the most interesting moments of the monograph. Elsewhere, when analyzing Gogol's early letters, Ilchuk notes that he produced long catalogues of acquaintances, a technique, she argues, he “fully realized in *Dead Souls*” (p. 106).

Chapter 5 surveys the evolution of the drafts and editions of Gogol's early texts, *Taras Bulba* (1835/1842), and *Dead Souls* (1842). Highlighting that his work is often a palimpsest, Ilchuk chronicles how Gogol and his editors strove to reign in the unwieldy, hybrid discourse of his first drafts. In fact, his classmate Mykola Prokopovych, who prepared a new edition of his *Complete Works* (1842), at one point was making nearly four corrections per page. Gogol's often discussed revisions of *Taras Bulba* are especially revealing, and Ilchuk uses an *n*-gram model to show that only about 31 percent of the 1835 edition is shared by the 1842 one. While most scholars have described the 1842 edition as the Russified text, Ilchuk's comparison of the redactions reveals that Gogol also increased the prevalence of Cossack and Zaporizhian elements. These countervailing forces reach their apotheosis in *Taras Bulba*'s final speech where he predicts that “one's own czar will spring forth from the Rus'ian land,” which many scholars have viewed as Gogol's belated support for the empire. However, Ilchuk also shows how the future appearance of their “own” czar can be read as *Bulba*'s hope for an independent Cossack state. Thus, she argues, the 1842 edition is a “hybrid text par excellence,” for its ambiguity resonated with both Russian imperial and Ukrainian nationalist readers (p. 141).

Even after his death, Gogol's texts continued to transform. Chapter 6 analyzes the posthumous editions of his work and their Ukrainian translations. One of the writers who significantly shaped Gogol's modern legacy was his biographer Panteleimon Kulish, who prepared a highly redacted edition of Gogol's letters. Kulish omitted the names of the addressees to protect their privacy; deleted passages about quotidian matters, criticism of the empire, and vulgar language; wrote in phrases that amplify Gogol's asceticism, piety, and religiosity; and replaced *Rus'* and *ruskii* with *Rossia* and *rossiiskii*. Most interestingly, Kulish eliminated Gogol's claim that Kyiv “is ours, not theirs” and cleaned up an especially critical passage where Gogol calls Petersburg and Muscovite writers “c***s” and “b****s” (pp. 155-156). Many Ukrainian translations, however, paired down Gogol's hybrid

discourse to different ends. To inspire pride in Ukraine's heroic past, Mykola Lobodovs'kyi's 1874 translation of *Taras Bulba* replaced "Russian" with "Ukrainian" whenever Gogol used ethnonyms and national modifiers. Mykola Sadovs'kyi's 1918 translation of *Taras Bulba* went a step further and completely eliminated the passage about the future czar. In post-Soviet Ukraine, Ivan Malkovych published a highly revised edition of Sadovs'kyi's translation. When Russian prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin complained that "Gogol could have never written this text," Malkovych responded that the "de-Russification" of Gogol was necessary to counteract Gogol's forced Russification in the 1840s (p. 162). In highlighting the anticolonial approach to Gogol, Ilchuk uncovers how many in Ukraine have viewed hybridity as a threat. Indeed, post-Maidan Ukraine tragically has seen how a hybrid conflict in the Donbas can metastasize into a full-blown interstate war at a moment's notice. In her afterword, Ilchuk nonetheless views Gogol's hybridity as a source of strength, concluding that "the dense, interlayered structure of Gogol's text and identity" shows that "the ethnic communitarian and civil liberal traditions" are not opposed but "inseparable phenomena in modern nation-building" (p. 172).

The book's appendices clearly and concisely walk readers through the results of Ilchuk's work with digital approaches to literature. Her use of the digital humanities is not only harmoniously incorporated into the larger narrative but serves as a roadmap for other scholars interested in using these methods of distant reading. Appendix 1, a stylometric analysis of Gogol's letters, includes three dendrograms of his early (1820-35), midlife (1836-46), and late (1847-52) periods. Appendix 2 is a very useful summary of the changes to the plot in the 1842 redaction of *Taras Bulba*. In appendix 3, though, the pagination of the Beyond Compare table renders the text in too small a font and in columns of uneven width, which makes it difficult to compare the 1842 redaction with its earlier draft.

What is also especially impressive is that Ilchuk manages to meaningfully engage both Russian and Ukrainian scholarship throughout the book. Her bibliography is truly comprehensive, and she puts scholars we may generally categorize as being in the Russian tradition (Mikhail Bakhtin, Andrei Bely, Edyta Bojanowska, Boris Eikhenbaum, Mikhail Epshtein, Victor Erlich, Alexander Etkind, Boris Groys, Michael Holquist, Simon Karlinsky, Marcus Levitt, Yuri Lotman, Anne Lounsbury, Yuri Mann, Hugh MacLean, Vladimir Nabokov, Riccardo Picchio, Andrei Siniavskii, William Mills Todd, Nikolai Trubetskoi, Viktor Vinogradov, Victor Zhivov) in dialogue with writers central to Ukrainian studies (Iurii Barabash, Serhiy Bilenky, George Grabowicz, Yaroslav Hrytsak, Mykhailo Hrushevsky, Tamara Hundorova, Oleh Ilnytskyj, Roman Koropecyk, Svitlana Krysa, Taras Koznarsky, George Luckyj, Pavlo Mykhed, Marko Pavlyshyn, Serhii Plokhii, Mykola Riabchuk, Robert Romanchuk, David Saunders, Myroslav Shkandrij, Tatiana Tairova-Iakovleva, Oleksii Tolochko).

Furthermore, Ilchuk illuminates the blind spots and limitations of the existing scholarship by placing her arguments in an intellectual genealogy of gender studies, neo-Marxism, new historicism, postcolonial theory, poststructuralism, and speech-act theory. In other words, her conclusions about Gogol will appeal to scholars interested in the work of Louis Althusser, John Austin, Homi Bhabha, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Terry Eagleton, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Stephen Greenblatt, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Johann Gottfried Herder, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, J. Hillis Miller, Satoshi Mizutani, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Barbara Smith, Terry Threadgood, Tzvetan Todorov, and Saera Yoon. This catalogue of scholarly voices is a testament to the range and reach of Ilchuk's thought.

In the final analysis, what most highly recommends this work is that Ilchuk's approach is exemplary of the new Ukrainian studies, which itself is hybrid, multiple, transnational, cosmopolitan but rooted, inclusive, and unencumbered by the typically binary, often parochial, at times simply dull debates of the national-patriotic traditions. Indeed, Andrii Portnov in his programmatic article on the subject calls for the study of "Ukrainian hybridity as a distinctive and autonomous subjectivity." [4] While Portnov imagined that this model would be found most clearly articulated in post-Maidan Ukraine, Ilchuk shows its imperial roots. Her approach is necessarily and wonderfully multidisciplinary, and one fully expects that *Nikolai Gogol* will appeal to scholars of Russian and Ukrainian literature, ethnicity and nationalism, and critical theory and the digital humanities in Slavic studies for years to come.

Notes

[1]. See Yuliya Ilchuk, "Hearing the Voice of Donbas: Art and Literature as Forms of Cultural Protest during War," *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 2 (2017): 256-73, and "Memory as Forgetting in the Prose Fiction of Serhiy Zhadan and Volodymyr Rafieienko," *Slavic & East European Journal* 65, no. 2 (Summer 2021): 334-53.

[2]. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 33.

[3]. Edyta Bojanowska, *Nikolai Gogol: Between Ukrainian and Nationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 6.

[4]. Andrii Portnov, "Post-Maidan Europe and the New Ukrainian Studies," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 723-31.

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