

[The Hunger Artist: Feasting and Fasting with Gogol](http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-hunger-artist-feasting-and-fasting-with-gogol/) (<http://wordswithoutborders.org/article/the-hunger-artist-feasting-and-fasting-with-gogol/>)

"And bake us a four-cornered fish pie," he said, sucking the air through his teeth and inhaling deeply. "In one corner I want you to put the sturgeon cheeks and the gristle cooked soft, in another throw in some buckwheat, and then some mushrooms and onions, and some sweet milt, and the brains, and whatever else, you know the sort of thing. And make sure that on the one side it's a nice golden brown, but not so much on the other side. And the pastry make sure it's baked through, till it just crumbles away, so that the juices soak right through, do you see, so that you don't even feel it in your mouth so it just melts like snow." As he said all this, Petukh kept smacking and sucking his lips.

That Nikolai Gogol, the author of *Dead Souls*, suffered from severe stomach problems is well documented. He was convinced that his stomach was malformed upside down, in fact, a position he claims the "renowned doctors" in Paris had discovered. His letters to friends are filled with descriptions of his gastric distress, as, for instance, when he complains to Mikhail Pogodin that "My hemorrhoidal illness has spread to my stomach. It's an intolerable illness. It exhausts me. It never leaves me in peace for a moment and interferes with my work"; or when he writes to his friend Nikolai Prokopovich that "I'd be more intoxicated with Italy if I were completely healthy; but I am ill in the most noble part of the body in my stomach. Acting like a demon, it hardly digests at all anymore, and constipation is so persistent, that I just don't know what to do." Because Gogol's constipation alternated with frequent bouts of diarrhea, his preoccupation with digestion is not surprising. As he wrote to his confidant Alexander Danilevsky: "...in my internal house so much washing, cleaning and all kinds of trouble is going on that the [landlord] can't begin to explain it even to his closest friend."

Critics have had a field day with the copious references to food in Gogol's work, commenting on the semiotics of eating in his fiction or postulating that the writer's sublimated desire for his mother found satisfaction in food, rather than sex. Indeed, Gogol's exuberant gustatory images encourage this kind of analysis. As he himself remarked on his four-cornered fish pie, it's one that could make "a dead man's mouth... water." The gastronomic Gogol uses language as textured and rich as the foods he so lovingly describes. After reveling in his prose for years, I have discovered a different kind of sublimation, one less psychosexual. It doesn't have to do with the author's mother or with his nose—the organ that famously parades through the streets of Saint Petersburg in his brilliant short story "The Nose." Rather, I find Gogol's writings full of instances that emphasize the stomach and the processes of digestion, literary manifestations of the troubles that plagued the writer throughout his life. Though I delight in the gastronomic Gogol, I'm even more intrigued by the *gastric* Gogol.

Gogol's stomach, his "most noble part," was at least as great an obsession as his much talked-about nose. The two are, of course, closely related, since the nose enables the sense of taste. Without the ability to smell, there would be no appetite, no desire to fill the stomach. When we smell something good, we start to salivate, triggering the release of juices that aid in digestion. Because the stomach is the receptacle of pleasures that the nose only anticipates, its failure to function properly caused him no end of distress, both physical and emotional. The official cause of his death—*gastroenteritis ex inanitione* (inflammation of the stomach and intestines from inanition, a lack of food and water)—hardly reveals its attendant torments, not to mention Gogol's deep ambivalence about appetite itself. His

literary characterizations in *Dead Souls* make clear that even as he celebrated hearty eaters like Sobakevich (whose surname derives from the word for *dog*) and Petukh (from the word *cock*), he portrayed them as neither deep nor soulful personalities.

In a letter to Count A.P. Tolstoy, published as "The Meaning of Sickness" in *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends*, Gogol wrote: "I cannot find words to thank Divine Providence for my sickness. So do you too submissively accept your ailment, believing henceforth that it is necessary. Only pray to God that its wonderful meaning and all the profundity of its sublime import may be revealed to you." Such avowal of illness as useful may seem disingenuous, but Gogol was sincere in his suffering as both a sensitive artist and as an individual plagued by a raging appetite that not even near-constant gastric distress could diminish. To Tolstoy he continued: "...were it not for these ailments I would have thought that I was already as I ought to be. I am not speaking of that good health which incessantly urges Russians to cut capers and to the desire to show themselves off to others, and would have pushed me too to commit a thousand indecencies."

From the writer's correspondence and the accounts of his friends we know that Gogol not only loved to eat but also enjoyed cooking. In Italy he had learned how to make Italian-style macaroni, which he often prepared for his friends. Pogodin recalls how Gogol's spirits would rise whenever he had a chance to serve macaroni:

...right at dinner he would make the macaroni, not trusting anyone else to do it. He demanded a large bowl, and with the artistry of a true gastronome began to sort through the individual pieces of macaroni; he put into the steaming bowl some butter and grated cheese and mixed them together. Opening the lid, with an especially bright smile for everyone at the table he'd exclaim: "Now fight over this, people!"

When traveling, Gogol would sometimes buy fresh milk at the coach stops, skim off the cream, and churn his own butter. His passion for rich dairy products is further evident in his favorite dish of boiled goat's milk mixed with rum, which he jokingly called *gogol-mogol* (the whimsical name of an egg-rich milk shake beloved by Russian children). But Gogol's ability to digest all that he ingested was a constant concern. The writer Sergei Aksakov relates that whenever Gogol made his famous hot punch, a brew of rum and champagne, a blue flame would rise over the melting lumps of sugar on the grate, at which point Gogol would invariably "repeat his old joke about its being Benkendorf [the blue-uniformed head of the secret police], who had come to bring order into [everyone's] stomachs." If only someone could regulate his bowels, even, if necessary, the despised symbol of tsarist repression!

Yet it's unlikely that anyone could have helped. As we know from Gogol's letters, he frequently gorged to the point of discomfort, both at home and abroad. His sister Elizaveta recalls that

After his lessons at the [Patriotic] Institute, he always used to bring us sweets. But he had a sweet tooth himself, and sometimes consumed a whole jar of jam alone, and if I happened to ask him for some he used to say, 'Wait, I'd better show you how a friend of mine eats itólook, like this, and another friend of mine eats it like that,' and so on. And while I laughed at his imitations, he'd finish the whole jar.

Gogol's friend Ivan Zolotaryov, in writing of the author's "extraordinary appetite," reports that in Italy, when he and Gogol would go to a trattoria for dinner, Gogol would eat heartily, cleaning his plate. But no sooner would a new patron enter the trattoria and order something to eat, than Gogol's appetite would become newly inflamed, and despite the fact that he'd just finished eating, he would order another dinner, either the same meal or something else.

Here it's useful to recall that Chichikov, in *Dead Souls*, exhibits similar behavior. Having polished off zakuski and a dozen blini dipped in butter at the widow Korobochka's house, he heads to a tavern and immediately orders suckling pig with horseradish and sour cream. This action prompts the narrator's famous digression about the healthy appetites of "middle-estate" Russians, which opens Chapter 4 of *Dead Souls*:

The author is obliged to confess that he is most envious of the appetite and digestion of such people. He has no time at all for all the grand folk of St. Petersburg and Moscow, who spend an age deliberating what they would like to eat tomorrow and what they might fancy for dinner the day after tomorrow, never embarking on these dinners without first swallowing a pill, after which they gobble down their oysters, sea spiders, and other horrors and then go off to Karlsbad or the Caucasus for a cure. No, these gentlemen have never excited his envy. But people of the middle estate, who at one post-house order ham, at the next, sucking pig, at the third, a collop of sturgeon or a spiced sausage fried with onions, and then, quite as if they had not eaten all day, will sit down at any time you like and tuck into a bowl of sterlet soup with burbot and soft roe, which hisses and sizzles between their teeth, followed by kedgereee pie or a sheat-fish pastry—just to watch them makes your mouth water. These people are truly blessed with a most enviable gift from heaven! Many a gentleman of quality would, without a moment's hesitation, sacrifice half his serfs and half his estates, mortgaged and unmortgaged, complete with all improvements in the foreign and the Russian manner, to have a digestion such as that of his less exalted brethren, but the sad truth is that no amount of money, nor estates, with or without improvements, can buy the kind of digestion generally enjoyed by people of the middle estate.

Gogol's admiration for these people is clear. But he also recognized that unalloyed good health can lead to shallowness and valued the soulfulness that illness can bestow.

Gogol's preoccupation was so great that his characters frequently suffer from indigestion, too. Sometimes the symptoms seem charming, as in "Old-World Landowners," where the remote estate with its never-ending bounty represents a kind of land of Cockaigne. A typical day of eating includes an early breakfast with coffee; a mid-morning snack of lard biscuits, poppy-seed pies, and salted mushrooms; a late-morning snack of vodka, more mushrooms, and dried fish; a dinner at noon of various porridges and stews, their juices tightly sealed in earthenware pots; an early afternoon snack of watermelon and pears; a mid-afternoon snack of fruit dumplings with berries; a late-afternoon snack of yet other delicacies from the larder; and supper at half past nine. The appearance of food on Afanasy Ivanovich's plate as if by magic reinforces this idyll. His wife, Pulkheria Ivanovna, oversees the work of a coachman cum alchemist, who incants over the homeopathic brews he produces for all sorts of ailments. I love Gogol for these images of alchemy and plenty, which evoke the wish for magic that lingers deep within us: secretly we still long for the *skatert'-samobranka*, the enchanted tablecloth that spreads itself, piling the table high with luscious delicacies. Yet even in this enchanted kingdom stomachs don't always function properly: Afanasy Ivanovich wakes up with a stomachache brought on by the excesses of the day. Pulkheria Ivanovna's cure? More food, in the form of clabbered milk and stewed dried pears.

Sobakevich in *Dead Souls* has it worse. After dining on cabbage soup and *niania* ("a well-known delicacy served with cabbage soup that consists of sheep's stomach, stuffed with buckwheat, brains, and sheep's trotters"), half a saddle of mutton with grain, *vatrushki* (curd-cheese tarts), "each one much larger than a plate, then came a turkey the size of a calf, stuffed with all manner of good things: eggs, rice, liver, and goodness knows what else," neither he nor Chichikov has any room left for the jams his wife has set out in the drawing room. He retires instead to his armchair, unable to do anything "but wheeze and mutter indistinctly, crossing himself and covering his mouth with his hand every few seconds." Indigestion, for sure. Sounds emanate from diners' bellies, too. In Gogol's story "A Bewitched Place," the narrator and his family would sometimes "eat so many cucumbers, melons, turnips, onions, and peas that I

swear, you would have thought there were cocks crowing in our stomachs." More than just a vivid metaphor, Gogol's crowing cock accurately describes the clinical manifestations of borborygmus, a pathological rumbling of the belly often associated with faulty digestion. The characters' torments—their insatiable appetites and inability to digest easily—mirror Gogol's own and reveal his preoccupation not simply with food (as in Chekhov's famous short story "The Siren") but with eating as a physiological process.

Of course, one hundred and fifty years after Gogol's death it's impossible to know exactly what he suffered from. Many commentators, in his own time and since, have attributed his problems simply to a bad case of nerves. Gogol's somatic and psychic symptoms were so closely related that even his friends found it difficult to believe that his physical ailments were real, ascribing his maladies instead to an overly active imagination. My own theory is that Gogol suffered from irritable bowel syndrome, which presents itself in a number of different ways. Some people endure constipation; others diarrhea; some, like Gogol, suffer from both. In all cases, IBS causes great discomfort and distress and can be disabling. Emotional conflict or stress is often believed to trigger the condition, though most likely IBS results from both stress and improper diet. Material from the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse explains that "Many people report that their symptoms occur following a meal or when they are under stress. The strength of the response—the colonic spasm—is often related to the number of calories in a meal and especially the amount of fat in a meal. Fat in any form (animal or vegetable) is a strong stimulus of colonic contractions after a meal."

The fattiness of Gogol's diet could likely have triggered IBS—just consider his beloved macaroni, dense with butter and cheese, or his favorite *gogol-mogol* and freshly churned butter. Even when Gogol wasn't cooking he was drawn to rich food. Pogodin reports that for Gogol's annual name-day celebration he usually asked the chef at the Merchant's Club to prepare the meal because his food was *pozhirnee*—more abundant in fats—than that prepared by the chef at the more-famous English Club. Both Gogol's correspondence and his contemporaries' memoirs provide ample evidence of the pressures his eating habits must have brought to bear on his body. And because the colon is integrally connected to the nervous system, it is not surprising that Gogol's gastric distress should have triggered nervous reactions, which themselves became unbearable. As Gogol wrote to Pogodin from Rome:

To relieve my stomach of all sorts of old and unpleasant superfluties and remainders of Moscow dinners I began drinking Marienbad waters in Viennamy nervous reawakening was suddenly transformed into nervous irritation. Everything all at once rushed to my chest. I got frightened. I myself did not understand my condition. I gave up my work, thinking that it was all because of lack of exercise while taking the waters and because of my sedentary life. I began getting exercises and I got worse. My nervous irritability increased tremendously, the heaviness in my chest, and the pressure, which I had never experienced before, became aggravated. Luckily, the doctors found that I haven't got consumption, that it was all due to a gastric disorder which interfered with my digestion and caused an unusual irritation of the nerves....I fell into a state of morbid dejection which is quite indescribable...

Severe forms of IBS can cause withdrawal from normal activities, as periodically happened with Gogol. That the spa waters didn't cure him, or that even the best doctors were unable to help, shouldn't surprise us. There is still no cure for IBS, and apart from recommended moderation in diet—something Gogol seems to have been temperamentally incapable of—there is no real treatment.

Though Gogol was a famous hypochondriac, his worries masked a deep distrust of conventional good health, which, to his mind, conduced to an unreflective way of living. Many of his most exaggeratedly drawn characters have a rather bestial approach to life, proclaiming, like the *Inspector General's* Khlestakov, "I love to eat," and exhibiting less than

refined prandial behavior. Although Gogol celebrates this unabashed appetite for life, recognizing in vitality a mode of being quite different from the reality of his own life, he nevertheless was keenly aware that healthy people are all too often blithe, unable to imagine themselves beyond their appetites and into another, more thoughtful, mode of being. In fact, Gogol's illness, his gut feelings, fed his art. His source of torment—his appetite—became his inspiration, his muse, transforming into literature the hunger that affected his whole being. His gourmandizing bespoke something beyond a mere physical urge; his hunger was existential, and not easily satisfied. It is not surprising, then, that once the characters in "Old World Landowners" have lost their appetite for life, they are unable to continue eating and subsequently die—behavior mirrored by Gogol's own death twenty years later. Plagued with self-doubt about his writing, Gogol could no longer eat. Instead, after years of gastric and psychic distress, he crafted for himself a state of spiritual grace, which he could attain only by means of starvation. By conquering appetite, his demon, Gogol enabled his spirit to triumph over the baser demands of his body.

Under the influence of Father Matvei Konstantinovsky, a zealous, ultimately malevolent figure who became his spiritual guide, Gogol began to refuse food in February 1852, during Butter Festival (the Russian Maslenitsa, or Shrovetide), an entire week of merrymaking and indulgence when Russians traditionally gorge on before the Great Lenten Fast ahead. In an attempt to cleanse body and soul, he enacted a voluntary penance, a kind of holy anorexia.

The details of Gogol's subsequent demise bring us into the realm of his most phantasmagoric stories. In their letters, notes, and memoirs, those close to the writer report that his appetite did not leave him until the very end, and because of it he suffered greatly. Gogol allowed his doctors to give him only water mixed with a few drops of wine. As he grew weaker, they tried to nourish him by diluting the liquid with soup, but he rarely agreed to swallow it. Food, which previously had been out of his control due to his voracious appetite, now became a source of control; through abstinence Gogol finally approached a mystical state, a state of grace.

Nabokov has noted "the curiously physical side of Gogol's genius. The belly is the belle of his stories, the nose is their beau." At the end of his life, Gogol's stomach was so shrunken that, when palpating it, the doctors were horrified to feel his backbone. From his nose—the organ that had incited his appetite, his inspiration—seven leeches dangled. Ice packs were placed on his head; hot mustard plasters seared his legs. Eventually his bowels ceased to function. Near the end, when his bodily temperature dropped precipitously, pitchers of hot water were placed at his feet. Hot loaves of bread nestled against his chilled body. But he could not be saved. Gogol's corpse was laid out on the dining table, following Russian custom, a symbolic end to a life that had been so viscerally lived.

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