

*Back to Documents in Russian History*

## V. G. Belinskii

### Letter to N. V. Gogol'



*Gogol', born in Ukraine, became Russia's most famous writer of prose in the 1830s. Belinskii, Russia's most influential literary critic, praised Gogol's work extravagantly, reading such satirical works as *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls* as exposés of Russia's social and political ills and thus as blows struck for liberation. Gogol's personal views were extremely conservative, however. He made them plain in a weird book called *Selected Excerpts from Correspondence with Friends*, in which he praised autocracy and orthodoxy and instructed serfholders how to run their estates. Belinskii's published review of *Selected Excerpts* was unfavorable, but subdued by the pressure of censorship. Gogol' was nonetheless moved to complain. Belinskii wrote this letter in reply. It circulated in hundreds of manuscript copies and is one of the fundamental texts of Russian radicalism. It was published in Russia only in 1906*

You are only partly right in regarding my article as that of an *angered* man: that epithet is too mild and inadequate to express the state to which I was reduced on reading your book. But you are entirely wrong in ascribing that state to your indeed none too flattering references to the admirers of your talent. No, there was a more important reason for this. One could endure an outraged sense of self-esteem, and I should have had sense enough to let the matter pass in silence were that the whole gist of the matter; but one cannot endure an outraged sense of truth and human dignity; one cannot keep silent when lies and immorality are preached as truth and virtue under the guise of religion and the protection of the knout.

Yes, I loved you with all the passion with which a man, bound by ties of blood to his native country, can love its hope, its honor, its glory, one of its great leaders on the path toward consciousness, development, and progress. And you had sound reason for losing your equanimity at least momentarily when you forfeited that love. I say that not because I believe my love to be an adequate reward for a great talent, but because I do not represent a single person in this respect but a multitude of men, most of whom neither you nor I have ever set eyes on, and who, in their turn, have never set eyes on you. I find myself at a loss to give you an adequate idea of the indignation your book has aroused in all noble hearts, and of the wild shouts of joy that were set up on its appearance by all your enemies, both the nonliterary -- the Chichikovs, the Nozdrevs, and the mayors[1]--and by the literary, whose names are well known to you. You see yourself that even those people who are of one mind with your book have disowned it. Even if it had been written as a result of deep and sincere conviction, it could not have created any impression on the public other than the one it did. And it is nobody's fault but your own if everyone (except the few who must be seen and known in order not to derive pleasure from their approval) received it as an ingenious but all too unceremonious artifice for achieving a purely earthly aim by celestial means.

Nor is that in any way surprising; what is surprising is that you find it surprising. I believe that is so because your profound knowledge of Russia is only that of an artist, but not of a thinker, whose role you have so ineffectually tried to play in your fantastic book. Not that you are not a thinker, but that you have been accustomed for so many years to look at Russia from your *beautiful far-away*;<sup>[2]</sup> and who does not know that there is nothing easier than seeing things from a distance the way we want to see them: for in that *beautiful far-away* you live a life that is entirely alien to it: you live in and

within yourself or within a circle of the same mentality as your own that is powerless to resist your influence on it.

Therefore you failed to realize that Russia sees her salvation not in mysticism or asceticism or pietism, but in the successes of civilization, enlightenment, and humanity. What she needs is not sermons (she has heard enough of them!) or prayers (she has repeated them too often!), but the awakening in the people of a sense of their human dignity lost for so many centuries amid dirt and refuse; she needs rights and laws conforming not to the preaching of the church but to common sense and justice, and their strictest possible observance. Instead of which she presents the dire spectacle of a country where men traffic in men, without even having the excuse so insidiously exploited by the American plantation owners who claim that the Negro is not a man; a country where people call themselves not by names but by nicknames such as Vanka, Vaska, Steshka, Palashka; a country where there are not only no guarantees for individuality, honor and property, but even no police order, and where there is nothing but vast corporations of official thieves and robbers of various descriptions. The most vital national problems in Russia today are the abolition of serfdom and corporal punishment and the strictest possible observance of at least those laws that already exist. This is even realized by the government itself (which is well aware of how the landowners treat their peasants and how many of the former are annually done away with by the latter), as is proved by its timid and abortive half-measures for the relief of the white Negroes and the comical substitution of the single-lash knout by a cat-o-three tails.

Such are the problems that prey on the mind of Russia in her apathetic slumber! And at such a time a great writer, whose astonishingly artistic and deeply truthful works have so powerfully contributed toward Russia's awareness of herself, enabling her as they did to take a look at herself as though in a mirror—publishes a book in which he teaches the barbarian landowner to make still greater profits out of the peasants and to abuse them still more in the name of Christ and Church....[3] And would you expect me not to become indignant?... Why, if you had made an attempt on my life I could not have hated you more than I do for these disgraceful lines.... And after this, you expect people to believe the sincerity of your book's intent! No! Had you really been inspired by the truth of Christ and not by the teaching of the devil you would certainly have written something entirely different in your new book. You would have told the landowner that since his peasants are his brethren in Christ, and since a brother cannot be a slave to his brother, he should either give them their freedom or, at least, allow them to enjoy the fruits of their own labor to their greatest possible benefit, realizing, as he does, in the depths of his own conscience, the false relationship in which he stands toward them.

And the expression "*Oh, you unwashed snout, you!*" From what Nozdrev and Sobakevich did you overhear it, in order to present it to the world as a great discovery for the edification and benefit of the peasants, whose only reason for not washing is that they have let themselves be persuaded by their masters that they are not human beings? And your conception of the national Russian system of trial and punishment, whose ideal you have found in the foolish saying that both the guilty and innocent should be flogged alike? That, indeed, is often the case with us, though more often than not it is the man who is in the right who takes the punishment, unless he can ransom himself, and for such occasions another proverb says: *Guiltlessly guilty!* And such a book is supposed to have been the result of an arduous inner process, a lofty spiritual enlightenment! Impossible! Either you are ill—and you must hasten to take a cure, or...I am afraid to put my thought into words!...

Proponent of the knout, apostle of ignorance, champion of obscurantism and Stygian darkness, panegyrist of Tartar morals—what are you about! Look beneath your feet—you are standing on the brink of an abyss!... That you base such teaching on the Orthodox Church I can understand: it has always served as the prop of the knout and the servant of despotism; but why have you mixed Christ up in it? What have you found in common between Him and any church, least of all the Orthodox Church? He was the first to bring to people the teaching of freedom, equality, and brotherhood and to set the seal of truth to that teaching by martyrdom. And *this* teaching was men's *salvation* only

until it became organized in the Church and took the principle of Orthodoxy for its foundation. The Church, on the other hand, was a hierarchy, consequently a champion of inequality, a flatterer of authority, an enemy and persecutor of brotherhood among men—and so it has remained to this day. But the meaning of Christ's message has been revealed by the philosophical movement of the preceding century. And that is why a man like Voltaire who stamped out the fires of fanaticism and ignorance in Europe by ridicule, is, of course, more the son of Christ, flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone, than all your priests, bishops, metropolitans, and patriarchs —Eastern or Western. Do you really mean to say you do not know that! Now it is not even a novelty to a schoolboy.

Hence, can it be that you, the author of *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*, have in all sincerity, from the bottom of your heart, sung a hymn to the nefarious Russian clergy whom you rank immeasurably higher than the Catholic clergy? Let us assume that you do not know that the latter had once been something, while the former had never been anything but a servant and slave of the secular powers; but do you really mean to say you do not know that our clergy is held in universal contempt by Russian society and the Russian people? About whom do the Russian people tell dirty stories? Of the priest, the priest's wife, the priest's daughter, and the priest's farm hand. Does not the priest in Russia represent the embodiment of gluttony, avarice, servility, and shamelessness for all Russians? Do you mean to say that you do not know all this? Strange! According to you the Russian people is the most religious in the world. That is a lie! The basis of religiousness is pietism, reverence, fear of God. Whereas the Russian man utters the name of the Lord while scratching himself somewhere. He says of the icon: *If it works, pray to it; if it doesn't, it's good for covering pots.*

Take a closer look and you will see that it is by nature a profoundly atheistic people. It still retains a good deal of superstition, but not a trace of religiousness. Superstition passes with the advances of civilization, but religiousness often keeps company with them too; we have a living example of this in France, where even today there are many sincere Catholics among enlightened and educated men, and where many people who have rejected Christianity still cling stubbornly to some sort of god. The Russian people is different; mystic exaltation is not in its nature; it has too much common sense, a too lucid and positive mind, and therein, perhaps, lies the vastness of its historic destinies in the future. Religiousness has not even taken root among the clergy in it, since a few isolated and exceptional personalities distinguished for such cold ascetic contemplation prove nothing. But the majority of our clergy has always been distinguished for their fat bellies, scholastic pedantry, and savage ignorance. It is a shame to accuse it of religious intolerance and fanaticism; instead it could be praised for exemplary indifference in matters of faith. Religiosity among us appeared only in the schismatic sects who formed such a contrast in spirit to the mass of the people and who were numerically so insignificant in comparison with it.

I shall not expatiate on your panegyric to the affectionate relations existing between the Russian people and its lords and masters. I shall say point-blank that panegyric has met sympathy nowhere and has lowered you even in the eyes of people who in other respects are very close to you in their views. As far as I am concerned, I leave it to your conscience to admire the divine beauty of the autocracy (it is both safe and profitable), but continue to admire it judiciously from your *beautiful far-away*: at close quarters it is not so attractive, and not so safe.... I would remark but this: when a European, especially a Catholic, is seized with religious ardor he becomes a denouncer of iniquitous authority, similar to the Hebrew prophets who denounced the iniquities of the great ones of the earth. We do quite the contrary: no sooner is a person (even a reputable person) afflicted with the malady that is known to psychiatrists as *religiosa mania* than he begins to burn more incense to the earthly god than to the heavenly one, and so overshoots the mark in doing so that the former would fain reward him for his slavish zeal did he not perceive that he would thereby be compromising himself in society's eyes.... What a rogue our fellow the Russian is!

Another thing I remember you saying in your book, claiming it to be a great and incontrovertible truth, is that literacy is not merely useless but positively harmful to the common people. What can I

say to this? May your Byzantine God forgive you that Byzantine thought, unless, in committing it to paper, you knew not what you were saying.... But perhaps you will say: "Assuming that I have erred and that all my ideas are false, but why should I be denied the right to err and why should people doubt the sincerity of my errors?" Because, I would say in reply, such a tendency has long ceased to be a novelty in Russia. Not so very long ago it was drained to the lees by Burachok [an advocate of "official nationality"] and his fraternity. Of course, your book shows a good deal more intellect and talent (though neither of these elements is very richly represented) than their works; but then they have developed your common doctrine with greater energy and greater consistence; they have boldly reached its ultimate conclusions, have rendered all to the Byzantine God and left nothing for Satan; whereas you, wanting to light a taper to each of them, have fallen into contradiction, upholding, for example, Pushkin, literature, and the theater, all of which, in your opinion, if you were only conscientious enough to be consistent, can in no way serve the salvation of the soul but can do a lot toward its damnation.

Whose head could have digested the idea of Gogol's identity with Burachok? You have placed yourself too high in the regard of the Russian public for it to be able to believe you sincere in such convictions. What seems natural in fools cannot seem so in a man of genius. Some people have been inclined to regard your book as the result of mental derangement verging on sheer madness. But they soon rejected such a supposition, for clearly that book was not written in a single day or week or month, but very likely in one, two, or three years; it shows coherence; through its careless exposition one glimpses premeditation, and the hymn to the powers-that-be nicely arranges the earthly affairs of the devout author. That is why a rumor has been current in St. Petersburg to the effect that you have written this book with the aim of securing a position as tutor to the son of the heir apparent. Before that, your letter to [Minister of Education] Uvarov became known in St. Petersburg, wherein you say that you are grieved to find that your works about Russia are misinterpreted; then you evince dissatisfaction with your previous works and declare that you will be pleased with your own works only when the Tsar is pleased with them. Now judge for yourself. Is it to be wondered at that your book has lowered you in the eyes of the public both as a writer and still more as a man?

As far as I can see, you do not properly understand the Russian public. Its character is determined by the condition of Russian society in which fresh forces are seething and struggling for expression; but weighed down by heavy oppression, and finding no outlet, they induce merely dejection, weariness, and apathy. Only literature, despite the Tartar censorship, shows signs of life and progressive movement. That is why the title of writer is held in such esteem among us; that is why literary success is easy among us even for a writer of little talent. The title of poet and writer has long since eclipsed the tinsel of epaulets and gaudy uniforms. And that especially explains why every so-called liberal tendency, however poor in talent, is rewarded by universal notice, and why the popularity of great talents that sincerely or insincerely give themselves to the service of orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality declines so quickly. A striking example is Pushkin who had merely to write two of three verses in a loyal strain and don the *kammeriunker's* [courtier's] livery to forfeit popular affection immediately! And you are greatly mistaken if you believe in all earnest that your book has come to grief not because of its bad trend, but because of the harsh truths alleged to have been expressed by you about all and sundry. Assuming you could think that of the writing fraternity, but then how do you account for the public? Did you tell it less bitter home truths less harshly and with less truth and talent in *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*? Indeed, the old school was worked up to a furious pitch of anger against you, but *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls* were not affected by it, whereas your latest book has been an utter and disgraceful failure. And here the public is right, for it looks upon Russian writers as its only leaders, defenders, and saviors against Russian autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality, and therefore, while always prepared to forgive a writer a bad book, will never forgive him a pernicious book. This shows how much fresh and healthy intuition, albeit still in embryo, is latent in our society, and this likewise proves that it has a future. If you love Russia, rejoice with me at the failure of your book!

I would tell you, not without a certain feeling of self-satisfaction, that I believe I know the Russian public a little. Your book alarmed me by the possibility of its exercising a bad influence on the government and the censorship, but not on the public. When it was rumored in St. Petersburg that the government intended to publish your book in many thousands of copies and to sell it at an extremely low price, my friends grew despondent; but I told them then and there that the book, despite everything, would have no success and that it would soon be forgotten. In fact it is now better remembered for the articles that have been written about it than for the book itself. Yes, the Russian has a deep, though still undeveloped, instinct for truth.

Your conversion may conceivably have been sincere, but your idea of bringing it to the notice of the public was a most unhappy one. The days of naive piety have long since passed, even in our society. It already understands that it makes no difference where one prays and that the only people who seek Christ and Jerusalem are those who have never carried Him in their breasts or who have lost Him. He who is capable of suffering at the sight of other people's sufferings and who is pained at the sight of other people's oppression bears Christ within his bosom and has no need to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The humility you preach is, first of all, not novel, and, second, it savors on the one hand of prodigious pride, and on the other of the most shameful degradation of one's human dignity. The idea of becoming a sort of abstract perfection, of rising above everyone else in humility, is the fruit of either pride or imbecility, and in either case leads inevitably to hypocrisy, sanctimoniousness, and incomprehensibility. Moreover, in your book you have taken the liberty of expressing yourself with gross cynicism not only of other people (that would be merely impolite) but of yourself -- and that is vile, for if a man who strikes his neighbor on the cheek evokes indignation, the sight of a man striking himself on the cheek evokes contempt. No, you are not illuminated; you are simply beclouded; you have failed to grasp either the spirit or the form of Christianity of our time. Your book breathes not the true Christian teaching but the morbid fear of death, of the devil and of hell! And what language, what phrases! "Every man hath now become trash and a rag" -- do you really believe that in saying hath instead of has you are expressing yourself biblically? How eminently true it is that when a man gives himself wholly up to lies, intelligence and talent desert him. If this book did not bear your name, who would have thought that this turgid and squalid bombast was the work of the author of *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*?

So far as I myself am concerned, I repeat: You are mistaken in taking my article to be an expression of vexation at your comment on me as one of your critics. Were this the only thing to make me angry I would have reacted with annoyance to it alone and would have dealt with all the rest with unruffled impartiality. But it is true that your criticism of your admirers is doubly bad. I understand the necessity of sometimes having to rap a silly man whose praises and ecstasies make the object of his worship look ridiculous, but even this is a painful necessity, since, humanly speaking, it is somehow awkward to reward even false affection with enmity. But you had in view men who, though not brilliantly clever, are not quite fools. These people, in their admiration of your works, have probably uttered more ejaculations than talked sense about them; still, their enthusiastic attitude toward you springs from such a pure and noble source that you ought not to have betrayed them completely to your common enemies and accused them, into the bargain, of wanting to misinterpret your works. You did that, of course, while carried away by the main idea of your book and through indiscretion, while Viazemskii, that prince in aristocracy and helot in literature, developed your idea and printed a denunciation against your admirers (and consequently mostly against me). He probably did this to show his gratitude to you for having exalted him, the poetaster, to the rank of great poet, if I remember rightly for his "pithless, dragging verse." That is all very bad. That you were merely biding your time in order to give the admirers of your talent their due as well (after having given it with proud humility to your enemies) -- I was not aware; I could not, and, I must confess, did not want to know it. It was your book that lay before me and not your intentions: I read and reread it a hundred times, but I found nothing in it that was not there, and what was there deeply offended and incensed my soul.

Were I to give free rein to my feelings this letter would probably grow into a voluminous notebook. I never thought of writing you on this subject, though I longed to do so and though you gave all and sundry printed permission to write you without ceremony with an eye to the truth alone. Were I in Russia I would not be able to do it, for the local "Shpekings" open other people's letters not merely for their own pleasure but as a matter of official duty, for the sake of informing. This summer incipient consumption has driven me abroad, and [the poet] Nekrasov has forwarded me your letter to Salzbrunn, which I am leaving today with Annenkov for Paris via Frankfort-on-Main. The unexpected receipt of your letter has enabled me to unburden my soul of what has accumulated there against you on account of your book. I cannot express myself by halves, I cannot prevaricate; it is not in my nature. Let you or time itself prove to me that I am mistaken in my conclusions. I shall be the first to rejoice in it, but I shall not repent what I have told you. This is not a question of your or my personality; it concerns a matter that is of greater importance than myself or even you; it is a matter that concerns the truth, Russian society, Russia. And this is my last concluding word: If you have had the misfortune of disowning with proud humility your truly great works, you should now disown with sincere humility your last book, and atone for the dire sin of its publication by new creations that would be reminiscent of your old ones.

SALZBRUNN

July 15, 1847

Translation and Annotations by Daniel Field

[1] These and, except as indicated, other persons named by Belinskii are characters in Gogol's fiction.

[2] A quotation from Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Gogol wrote *Selected Excerpts* while he was in Rome.

[3] Here and below, the ellipses are in the text.