

Dead Souls...

By Adam King

Andre sat reading *Dead Souls* at the rickety old round table upon a rickety old chair upon bare, rotten wooden floors. It was beside the bed in his room--the only furniture in the place. He began reading Gogol on Wednesday before three stars had emerged, and finished it on Saturday morning as the sun was rising--almost without sleeping--only grabbing little naps. And yet he felt regenerated.

He had been late with his rent. He had no food in the place, and the rags upon his back were tattered and filled with holes as were his shoes. As he walked he felt the wetness of the ground, yet in his soul he felt at peace and warm--a sensation which had eluded him for a long while due to the drudgery of his existence. But good reading invigorated and inspired him, and gave him new life. He strolled like a wealthy man along the avenue until he came to a pretty little used bookshop which he loved, traded back *Dead Souls* and took Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*. He was surprised and pleased to find a copy in the German.

"I have been coming here ten years now," he said to the bookseller. "I come and buy a book, and I treat it like something precious and make certain there are no oils on my fingertips before I turn the pages. I never make a mark. I treat it like the shroud itself. Then, after having read it, I return it to you as good as the day I bought it and for ten years you sell me a book and you purchase the book back from me and you always charge me the full amount possible and you never waiver in that. I look at you. You wear fine clothing. You live above this shop in a well-furnished place. You once confided in me. You said that your lovely wife had money when you married and so you were able to buy this entire building and that you pay no rent. God bless you. I see that you are happy and prosperous in business. It is bustling, and I respect the quality of the folios here. You have a keen eye for good literature. And for that I am grateful to you. I appreciate your abilities and so I make it my habit to walk many blocks to purchase my books here.

"Well, now perhaps you have no sentimentality regarding our history--nevertheless, for ten years we have been doing business. I must tell you that I'm pretty well down on my luck. In fact,

nothing is going my way. So now, for the sake of our history and due to the fact that this is the last of my funds, could I perhaps persuade you to cut your profits just a little this time, my friend, in order that I might have a little left over to eat something tonight as I read? For old time's sake--after all, what good will my soul be to you if I'm dead? So you see, it's simply good business to cut your profits a little this time for my sake--please."

The man only smiled and shook his head and began to unwrap the book. "Why don't you go and buy some food? The book will be waiting. I will hold it for you here."

"You're still going to make money on this purchase, and then when I bring it back, and then again when I purchase the next one as I have always done. I am only asking for a little mercy."

"I'm not in the business of mercy, sir," said the man. "I buy and sell books."

He held the money tight in his hand and his face became desperate and ashamed. "Listen, if you don't help me this time, I swear to you--I'll never return."

But without flinching and without any change in his contented expression, the bookseller replied, "Please, sir, go and buy yourself some food and you'll feel better. And then, when you can afford the book, return here and it will be waiting for you just as I said."

I require it more than food. He thought. It's sustaining my soul. It's responsible now for my existence. For the spirit guides the man and what good is a well-fed body and a dead spirit? He put the money down on the table. He had nothing left; he took the book and went out from the store without saying a word. But he was wondering how it was that men like that had the right to create their own sort of currencies. And then he realized that it was poor men like himself who gave them that privilege. The seller would purchase the books back again, but he would not pay with money--that burgher would only take a little off the price of another book! So that was the way he ruled the peasants, and everyone who bought and sold from him. What a smug and satisfied look he held on his face. He's never starved--and he has the confidence of the protestant ethic to bolster his conscience and to condemn men like myself. Desperate, begging little man that I've become! Nevertheless, it is a fine, elegant bookstore, he thought, and he knows very well that I'll return. It's not required of a bookseller to show mercy to a pauper like myself. The profit is sacred, he thought. Men will share anything except money. He loathed the ways of humanity in regards to money. Every man is a little banker--how smugly and how tightly they hold every penny! Then even when they have something to share instead they parcel it out with

interest. How contemptuous of humanity we are! How undignified we perceive our fellow man--unworthy of a coat even if we have two.

Every high and mighty idea can be spoken of and shared with ease, great theories and philosophical concepts and religion can all be shared with open minds and willing hearts. Every man is welcome to the table of knowledge--but then, you can put starving children in the streets, crying, naked, and homeless and not a passer-by will lift a finger or turn his head. Nothing seems to shake money's sacred structure--we compact men, women, and children into crumbling tenements. Diseased, festering wormholes! And still, the economists are not shaken. The intellectuals' philosophies are not damaged. He still bows at the applause as he finishes his eloquent lecture. He still reaps the rewards and praises and honors of his peers, but when a hungry man asks him for something he shrugs his shoulders and brushes him aside. He is too preoccupied with lofty matters.

He once saw a desperate woman screaming in the street, intruding upon a public meeting of deep thinkers and important men of honor all continually honoring themselves, complimenting each other upon their publications and declarations--a circle of the elite. She disturbed them. She was begging for anything to feed her starving children, and yet no one had even turned to look at her. Not one of those honored and esteemed gentlemen lifted a finger--only some one came and took her away from annoying them.

The poor are not included in politics or in policies. Their destitution is rarely pitied and often mocked. They have no barristers and they lack a physician--so go to the jail and see if you can find a rich man and then go into a hospital and see if you can find a poor man. If you can, it's because he was dying in the street, a public nuisance--but it is certain that his bed will be swiftly taken away in favor of a paying customer. He was thinking, also, of his friend Jacob--an old man he worked with on the docks who was dying, growing thinner and paler from the disease called poverty.

It is never named as a cause; it is never denounced or cursed by rhetoricians--and yet it grinds humankind's bones into dust. No plague or fever even approaches the number of its victims, but they are often poverty's accomplices. From the conception of the world until this very hour--this very second--its children and mothers wail in wretched agony--their death cries. This moment,

guilt-torn fathers watch their infant sons pant for last breaths while other fathers who are not willing to submit to providence are being tried and hanged for stealing loaves of bread. He thought of Jacob because Jacob always managed to keep a lot of tobacco on him, and while reading on an empty stomach was not ideal, it was bearable. However, reading without a cigarette was impossible. To aid him in traveling past the boundaries into the forbidden zones, he did not just sit and read the pages--but a single line could transport him into an entire universe and this took plenty of tightly rolled cigarettes and no one rolled them more perfectly than Jacob. The book felt good in his hand now as he hurried along. The cover was well-crafted--covered in quality cloth and supported by a solid, clean leather binding. He stopped and examined it more closely. It had a rich, unfamiliar feel to it--and after further examination he became excited, and then he began to laugh heartily with the feeling of great satisfaction for now he was certain that he had paid much too little for the book.

Yes indeed--the great burgher had let one slip by! Yes, I'm certain, he gasped. This is a first edition. He knew the publisher's markings. It required an expert eye, and unless one looks closely at publishing notes, they could be easily misread. His greed blinded him this time! His lovely wife, his soft bed, his big, plush apartment, his rent-free building--they had all conspired against him.

Perhaps he was in a quandary about it and was about to take a closer look, but then he smelled the roast in the oven--but whatever it was, he missed it. This was worth much more than Andre had paid. He could read it and then take it to an appraiser--perhaps it could be auctioned. He felt glorious! Still a pauper, he would still go hungry tonight--nevertheless, he felt glorious. Even as his stomach growled. A first-edition Nietzsche! This is remarkable--it is, in fact, the most remarkable thing which has ever happened to me. "Beyond Good and Evil" he read the title out loud, then wiped his hands with his shirt and put the book in his pants between the belt and his stomach. Promise and hope are more sustaining than food, he thought. Better than money in your pocket.