Introduction

«Вечера на хуторе близ Диканьки» (Nights on a Khutor near Dikanka) was Nikolai Gogol’s first published work (the first volume was published in 1831, the second one - in 1832). The book consists of eight short stories which were arguably collected and edited by a bee-keeper Ginger Panko. This short stories collection brought literary fame to young Gogol. The genre of the «Nights…» is a combination of gothic, mysticism, horror, comedy and folklore. However, the mood prevailing over all the stories is rather romantic, lyrical and humorous than gothic. The stories are full of folk beliefs, legends and fantastic events, but they also carry moral lessons: in the end love always triumphs over devilry and the vices are punished. There are also a lot of ethnographic and folklore materials in Gogol’s work.

Gogol’s debut as a writer provoked increased public interest to Ukrainian culture, as the plot of all stories is set in Ukraine, and the Ukrainians are the main characters. «Nights…» can be named a literary phenomenon, because although Gogol was writing in Russian (as it was more prestigious than Ukrainian), he constantly used Ukrainian dialectisms, idioms and vernacularisms in his texts.   
  
In this essay I am going to analyze the translation of Gogol’s work by Christopher English[[1]](#footnote-1) concentrating on the problems that a translator may face when interpreting Gogol’s text.   
  
Various Russian writers and literary critics stated that Gogol cannot and should not be translated, because of his unique style and tendency to highlight specific Russian cultural aspects in his work. For example, Vladimir Nabokov advised the translators to stay away from Gogol: « If you expect to find out something about Russia, if you are eager to know why the blistered Germans bungled their blitz, if you are interested in «ideas» and «facts» and «messages», keep away from Gogol. The awful trouble of learning Russian in order to read him will not be repaid in your kind of hard cash. Keep away, keep away. He has nothing to tell you»[[2]](#footnote-2). Russian writer Alexander Kabakov in his book about another Russian writer, Aksyonov, stated that «Gogol… is almost untranslatable in the way that he sounds in Russian! Being one of the greatest Russian authors, Gogol is undoubtedly a part of the world literature, but he is not a global writer. Translating him is hard not because he wrote something that a Western mind is unable to understand. […] Gogol … should not be translated. It does not make any sense. I am not saying that the translation will be of poor quality. But no one else in the world is concerned with these matters. It is our own business».[[3]](#footnote-3)  
  
So is Gogol translatable? It can be said that «Nights…» is the work that can cause many difficulties during the process of translation, due to the specific language, cultural realia and narrative style which sometimes can be confusing for an English-speaking audience. But Gogol is famous and read outside Russia, and is one of the most well-known Russian authors abroad. In the present essay I aim at examining, what is lost in translation and what can still be interpreted for English-speaking readers. I am going to analyze if (and to what extent) Gogol is translatable and whether it makes any sense to translate his works.   
  
The essay consists of two chapters. In the first chapter I am going to examine peculiar stylistic features used by Gogol in the «Nights…». The second chapter is dedicated to the particular translation problems and the overall question of Gogol’s translatability.

Chapter 1. Peculiarities of Gogol’s style in the Dikanka stories.  
  
To begin with, it may be useful to analyze how the title of the book was translated, as the title itself is rather interesting. As it was already mentioned in the introduction, literal translation of Gogol’s book is «Nights on a Khutor near Dikanka». However, Christopher English chose another variant - «Village evenings near Dikanka». I believe the literal translation to be more preferable. Ukrainian «khutor» is not just a village or a farmyard, it is a culturally specific term. Even in Russian the title sounds complicated, and I think that literal translation would convey the original meaning better.  
  
In the foreword to the book the reader finds out that these stories were collected and edited by a Ukrainian bee-keeper Ginger Panko. The style of the foreword alone implies that this bee-keeper is not well-educated, his language is very simple and full of various vernacularisms and Ukrainian dialectisms.   
  
The plot of the stories is set in Ukrainian province of Russian Empire. Christopher English translated it literally - «Little Russia». Indeed, the Russian name of this territory - Malorossiya - has two roots which mean «little» and «Russia» correspondingly. It must be acknowledged that the canonical translation for «Malorossiya» is «Little Russia», but I would suggest just transliterating the Russian word. The term «Little Russia» may not be familiar to broad English-speaking audience, and it also gives a wrong impression of Russia in miniature. On the contrary, Malorossia was famous for its own unique culture and traditions, which differed totally from the Russian ones. Thus, I suggest transliterating the word and putting a footnote explaining the meaning of this term (one of the three major parts of the Russian Empire together with Belorossiya («White Russia») and Velikorossiya («Great Russia»).  
  
Continuing the topic of transliteration, it is necessary to mention the list of words provided by Gogol at the beginning of the book. Mostly these are Ukrainian words, and an average Russian reader would not know their meaning. In order to keep the Gogol’s «ukrainisation» the translator can only transliterate these words without translating them (so that the reader is able to refer to the list provided by Gogol). In many cases English used this strategy when translating the Dikanka stories, however, if a word had a full English equivalent, he preferred to use it. For instance, he uses transliterated Ukrainian words to describe some titles («pan», «hetman»), but translates other words, such as «kavun» - «watermelon». I think that Gogol’s unique style demands the strategy of foreignisation, so the translator’s task here is to «move» the reader towards the writer.

As it was mentioned above, the manner of speech of Gogol’s characters is rather simple - they are all villagers from Ukrainian countryside. It is interesting, how skillfully Gogol manages to depict this specific dialect. For instance, he often uses double prefixes, which is nit common in standard Russian: instead of *nagnut’sya* (to bend) he says *prinagnut’sya,* instead of *otdokhnut’* (to rest) - *priotdokhnut’* etc. To a native Russian speaker it sounds like a countryside dialect, and it is a real challenge for the translator, as Gogol just uses affixes to modify standard Russian words. It may be an option to simplify the English language by using non-standard register or deliberately making grammatical and orthographic mistakes. However, sometimes Gogol also does that: the most obvious example is the narrator, bee-keeper Ginger Panko. «Bee-keeper» in Russian is «pasechnik», but Gogol’s character calls himself «pasichnik», which implies his illiteracy. Christopher English in his version of the Dikanka stories gives preference to standard English vocabulary and grammar (sometimes changing the register to make characters sound more countryfied).  
  
Russian poet and writer Andrey Bely in his book «Gogol’s Mastery» points out Gogol’s intentional use of linguistic inaccuracies.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Dikanka cycle is the most «Ukrainian» work of Gogol, and hence it includes a lot of Ukrainian and Polish words, although the language of the book is Russian. This can be illustrated by the ethnic nicknames used by Gogol’s characters (ethnic Ukrainians) towards other nationalities. Christopher English in his translation noticeably neutralizes the original meaning of ethnonyms used by Gogol. There are three major examples in the text.

* When talking about Jewish people Gogol uses the word «жид» (*zhid*). This word was rather common in Russian vocabulary before the Revolution of 1917, but afterwards it has been bearing an antisemitic meaning. However, in later publications the editors decided not to change it for a more neutral «evrey» (Jew) in order to maintain Gogol’s *coleur locale*. Anyway, even in Gogol’s times the word «zhid» was used in a negative connotation, especially in Ukraine which had significant Jewish population during the times of tsars (and consequently - much antisemitism). That is why I believe English’s variant «Jews» does not work here. I think the better option would be some slang historical word (which does not sound offensive), like «Yid» or «jude».
* The Polish in Gogol’s work are referred to as «ляхи» (*lyakhi*). Originally this word was used by Old Russian chroniclers to describe some Slavic tribes. Later this term was used for the Polish state. Nowadays it is very offensive to call a Polish person with this word, but, presumably, in Gogol’s time it was a common term for Polish people. However, the standard word «поляки» (*polyaki*) also existed at that time, but of course, Gogol’s characters would use the rude and substandard word *lyakhi*. Christopher English translated it as «Poles», as there are no other words in English that can be used when referring to Polish people. Arguably, a possible version would be transliteration of the Russian word with a footnote explaining its meaning and difference from the standard «Poles».
* The most interesting «ethnic nickname» is «москали» (*moskali*). According to Ushakov’s dictionary, «moskal» means «a chauvinistic nickname used by people of Ukraine and Belarus to refer to Russians, Muscovites or Russian military or civil servants». In his translation, English uses various epithets to convey the pejorative connotation: «thieving Russians», «stupid Russians», «scurvy Russians», «lying Russians», «Russian rascals», «Russian vagrants» or simply «Russians». Saying «moskali» with a footnote would be a good choice too, as well as using the word «Russki», which is certainly familiar to the English-speaking audience.

There are much more examples of swear words in Gogol’s text, which can be a subject for further research. The point relevant for my analysis is that in this case the translator opted for neutralization and «softening» of Gogol’s vocabulary, whereas in the source text they convey ironical disdain and despisal.

Gogol’s narratology also requires detailed examination. All eight stories are collected and edited by the bee-keeper Panko, but each of the stories is told by a different narrator, meaning that Ginger Panko is just a re-teller6 not an author or a witness of the stories. However, all of the narrators have something in common: the language of the narrator is rarely standard Russian, it is usually a form of Ukrainian dialect, which sounds simple and country like (as though the storyteller lacks proper education or is semi-illiterate). Such narratological manner is a reference to medieval Russian and Ukrainian traditions of oral folk arts. The image of the collector of the stories, Ginger Panko, unites all the stories, symbolizing simple unsophisticated perception of the world typical for Gogol’s characters and for Russian countryside in general. But at the same time their simplicity and naivety is combined with irony, which makes the stories more vivid and literary colourful. Two stories («The Lost Dispatch» and «The Bewitched place») are told by the same narrator - Foma Grigorievich, the verger of St. N’s. His speech is full of vernacularisms, colloquialisms and comical metaphors.

Gogol as author does not seem to have much feelings towards his characters. Specialist on Gogol’s works Richard Peace states that Gogol’s protagonists «are presented simply, often starkly, and without authorial sympathy».[[5]](#footnote-5) This makes the reader’s perception quite indifferent as well - it is more interesting to find out the end of the story than to share the protagonist's feelings.

Undoubtedly, Gogol’s style is unique and is really different from other great Russian writers. It is especially noticeable in the Dikanka cycle, which brought literary acclaim to Gogol. Russian classical literature of the 19th century is famous for its psychoanalytical approach and psychologic insight. However, Gogol avoids any deep exploration of inner feelings of his characters, the soul is not as important to him as the action (thus, we know that it is love to Oksana that makes Vakula go to Petersburg for tsarina’s shoes, but Gogol does not describe his feelings, he just states Vakula’s affection). Unlike traditional Russian realism and sentimentalism, Gogol’s work can be described as romantic grotesque, even farce. Gogol does not aim at deeper understanding of the human soul - a tendency which was typical for many other Russian writers of the time.   
  
Moreover, Gogol’s syntax is noticeably different. Tolstoy, Turgenev, even Pushkin - they all tended to write in quite simple phrases without any syntactical overload. Unlike them, Gogol asks rhetorical questions, uses long, syntactically difficult sentences, his vocabulary often includes substandard expressions. According to Nabokov, «it is not easy to render the curves of this life-generating syntax in plain English».[[6]](#footnote-6)   
  
Arguably, Gogol’s style has no analogues in Western literary tradition. His language is inimitable (he artistically inserts Ukrainian words into the Russian text making it sound more vivid and culturally specific). However, it is this cultural specificity that makes translation of Gogol such a complicated process.  
  
  
Chapter 2. The Question Of Gogol’s Translatability.

The majority of words (in any language) has several meanings, hence there are several possible translations for one word. The meaning depends on the context. It is well known that the sense of a sentence (or of a text) is not a combination of the meanings of the words comprising it. Translating Gogol means translating his individuality as an author, because he uses a lot of cultural associations which cannot be found in any dictionaries. Thus, translator’s task is to look for, compare, analyze different variants and choose the most suitable ones.  
  
There is no doubt that the «ukrainised» stylistics of Gogol’s language is hard to translate. Translator has to present the Ukrainian village life to European audience which presumably is not really well familiar with Ukrainian culture and traditions. But the specific cultural concepts can be explained with the help of footnotes, references and Western analogues, whereas the Ukrainian manner of speaking is practically impossible to convey.  
  
The elements of Gogol’s text that are especially difficult to translate (or that create particular challenges for the translator) can be divided into the following four categories:

* Names. In English’s version all the characters’ names are, unfortunately, completely lost in translation. Gogol uses many charactonyms - names that describe the character’s personality. The only three names that were translated (domesticated) by English were Ginger Panko, Peter the Orphan and Paunchy Patsyuk. All the other names were just transliterated, although they are extremely meaningful. For instance, the blacksmith’s name from «The Christmas Eve» - Vakula - according to Dahl’s Explanatory dictionary means «rogue», «trickster» - and it perfectly fits the character who managed to ride a devil. In the same story, Cossack Chub’s name means «forelock», «scalplock» - a traditional Cossack hairstyle. Thus the name implies that this character is a vintage Cossack with classical Cossack perception of the world. Minor characters’ names often sounds ridiculous and odd in Russian, but their transliteration makes them too complex and impossible to read properly for an English-speaking reader (for example, Kozma Derkach-Drishpanovsky, Zakhar Kirilovich Chukhopupenko, Stepan Ivanovich Kurochka, Kharlampy Kirilovich Khlosta etc.). A possible solution for the translator could be leaving the first name of the character (without patronym) and domesticating the surname to make it sound as ridiculous as it does in Russian.
* Cultural concepts. There are a lot of specific words in Gogol’s text which are certainly not familiar to the English-speaking audience (sometimes they are not even familiar to the Russian audience due to temporal and cultural gap). For instance, the mentioned above *khutor,* or *vechernitsy* (late night parties, translated by English as «evening get-togethers»), or traditional Russian (and Ukrainian) drink *kvas* which was translated both as «kvass» and «pear juice». A very common gesture of that time - putting a thumb between middle and first finger (*dat’ dulyu*) had to be explanatory translated as «arranging his fingers and thumb into a rude sign), which gives readers a perfect understanding but lacks original simplicity. Ukrainian *parubki* (young men) were translated as «chaps», «lads», and «youngsters», which completely destroys the all-Ukrainian atmosphere created by Gogol (this word could be left in transliteration with a footnote). As it was already said, English transliterated some titles such as «pan», but he decided to translate the female title (*panna*, *pannochka*) as «young lady» or «princess», which does not directly correspond with the original meaning. If the male title is transliterated, it seems logical to transliterate the female version as well. And the word *panich* (young man of gentle birth) also as not transliterated by English, but translated as «chap» or «twit». The biggest loss in English’s translation, is, hoverer, the word *cherevichki*. This old Russian word actually means «leather shoes», but taking into account the ethnographic aspects of Gogol’s work it seems inappropriate to translate this word simply as «shoes». Russian children learn this word from Gogol when reading «Christmas Eve», moreover, people never use it in daily life. Thus I think it would be more preferable to transliterate this word with a footnote than to translate it literally (given that Gogol provides this word in the glossary in the foreword).
* Vernacularisms. Of course, speech of simple Ukrainian villagers is full of vernacularisms, dialectisms, colloquialisms and substandard expressions, which can create additional difficulties during the process of translation. The speech of the characters shows their low social status and lack of education: in order to achieve that Gogol uses various literary techniques mentioned in the first chapter. It is interesting how Christopher English managed to maintain the style of Gogol’s narratology. He uses idioms equivalent to those present in the source text (e.g. Russian «each and every» was translated as «the world and his wife»), so the translator here prefers sense-by-sense equivalence rather than word-by word. But on the other hand, he literally translates swearing of the characters («You watch your tongue, you good-for-nothing lout! May your father be struck on the head by a pot! May he fall on his back on the ice, the cursed Antichrist! May the devil singe his beard in hell!»). It it impossible not to mention brilliance and richness of Gogol’s cursing. The translator generally managed to convey the colloquial manner of speaking of Gogol’s characters by using colloquial English expressions or making deliberate mistakes where possible (for instance, «dabble in painting», «big city, aren’t it?», «bamboozle» etc.). Sometimes, however, such strategy was not possible: for example, when in «Christmas Eve» Vakula orders the devil to go to St.Petersburg, he uses a modified word *Petemburg* (which means he probably never saw it written or is not able to read in general), but in English’s translation it is still «St Petersburg». Another illustration of translator’s failure to convey the meaning of the original text can be found in «The Bewitched Place». Literally, the narrator says the following: *At that time my grandfather was still alive and - I hope he hiccups with relief in the afterlife - his feet were quite strong*. Christopher English understood it literally and translated the parenthesis as «may he have less trouble with his hiccups in the afterlife». It is obviously a wrong translation, although this part is extremely difficult to translate. In Russian and Ukrainian culture there is a belief that when you think of someone, he starts having hiccups (and on the contrary - if you are having hiccups, it means that someone is thinking of you). So what Gogol meant was not the wish that the grandfather was finally released from his hiccup sufferings, he meant that the grandson thinks of his dead grandfather with love. However, it is the only major discrepancy I noticed in English’s translation.
* Epighraphs and poems. Some of the Dikanka stories include epigraphs and poems. Some of them are originally presented by Gogol in Ukrainian language, some are in Russian. The important question is how to translate the Ukrainian insertions? Christopher English in his version decided just to translate them in English without making any distinction between Russian and Ukrainian text, which is a possible solution (however, then the English-speaking reader does not realize that this or that piece was originally in Ukrainian). Another possible variant can be to translate the Ukrainian texts into English with a reference that originally it was Ukrainian (or translate it with some dialect, e.g. Scottish or Irish, which, however, would not be quite clear for Irish or Scottish audience). There is one more option - leave the epigraphs and poems as they are in Ukrainian (in Cyrillic alphabet), then put a footnote and present a translation (either poetic or literal). It it noteworthy that a Russian reader will understand almost everything from the Ukrainian texts (with some exceptions), but it is the matter of the Ukrainian atmosphere which Gogol tried to depict in his stories. This is why I believe they should not be simply translated into English without reflecting their «Ukrainianness».

Talking about translating Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov says: «I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity».[[7]](#footnote-7) I believe it to be applicable to translating Gogol as well, because there is no other way to fully interpret all the subtle features that make Gogol’s stories so culturally and ethnically special, but to explain these *gogolisms* to the foreign readers by using footnotes.

Talking about Nabokov, it is impossible to resist the temptation to comment on his saying regarding the translation of Gogol’s *The Government Inspector*: «None but an Irishman should ever try tackling Gogol».[[8]](#footnote-8) I would totally agree with this assertion, but I think that it is more relevant when talking about the Dikanka stories. One can draw some political and historical parallels between Ukraine and Ireland (being «the small brother» of a great empire, oppressed culture, specific language etc.). Thus, these two nations may share the same mentality and the view of life (formed by similar course of history). Maybe Nabokov is right, and only an Irishman is able to convey the distinctive fascinating Ukrainian culture described by Gogol.

Conclusion  
Despite being ethnically Ukrainian, Gogol is considered to be one of the main figures in Russian classical literature of the 19th century. Gogol as an artist made use of the vast opportunities provided by the rich Russian language, constantly broadening its boundaries and making it more vivid with the colourful insertions of colloquial speech. However, in spite of frequent references to the words of Ukrainian origin, Russian was Gogol’s main language. The translator faces an extremely difficult task to interpret all the elements of the source text which can be described as «language deviances». But it is necessary to bear in mind that these «deviances» create the author’s own personal style, Gogol’s distinctive manner of narratology, which can cause troubles during the process of translating.  
  
Gogol was a true artist. With the means of language he managed to precisely describe his characters, their personalities, occupations and social status. Gogol was undoubtedly gifted with a talent to create interesting characters and their tempers. It is noticeable not only in the Dikanka stories, but also in other Gogol’s works (for instance, *Taras Bulba*, or *The Tale Of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled With Ivan Nikiforovich*). Each of Gogol’s characters is unique and inimitable, even the Dikanka tales are a concentration of memorable characters, be it a promiscuous witch Solokha or her son - a brave blacksmith Vakula.   
  
It goes without saying that an interest in a foreign culture implies interest in foreign literature. Gogol’s works are popular outside Russia, but it seems that there are different reasons for Gogol’s popularity in Russia (and Ukraine) and abroad. Russian audience, above all, appreciates Gogol’s narratology and language. For a foreign audience it may be difficult to enjoy the beauty of Gogol’s language, as it it inevitably deformed in the process of translation (regardless of its quality). Gogol’s works also lack fundamental political and social ideas typical for other great Russian writers such as Tolstoy or Dostoevsky. But Gogol skillfully discloses typical Slavic personalities and daily businesses, together with traditional Eastern European customs and beliefs. Gogol’s writings give another way to understand the «mysterious Russian soul».   
  
A lack of some equivalent terms in the target language doesn't mean that there isn't such a concept in this language. However, it may become a barrier to clear and full understanding of the term present in the source language. This problem is one of the central challenges faced when translating Gogol. A possible solution which could help render all the typically Ukrainian cultural concepts would be to provide various illustrations in the English versions. Thus, instead of «It’s a neck, with a coin necklace on it» (English’s version) it would be possible to say «It’s a neck, with a *monisto* on it» and present a colourful illustration of the verger flirting with Solokha wearing the mentioned *monisto.* The same method could be applied to explain the Cossack hairstyle (*chub*) or a doughnut-shaped bread (*bublik*) to the foreign audience.  
  
In his article «The Art of Translation» Nabokov talks about what makes a good translator. «First of all he must have as much talent, or at least the same kind of talent, as the author he chooses. … Second, he must know thoroughly the two nations and the two languages involved and be perfectly acquainted with all details relating to his author’s manner and methods; also, with the social background of words, their fashions, history and period associations. This leads to the third point: while having genius and knowledge he must possess the gift of mimicry and be able to act, as it were, the real author’s part by impersonating his tricks of demeanor and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of verisimilitude».[[9]](#footnote-9) Although Nabokov severely criticized all the existing Gogol’s translations, having analyzed the version by Christopher English it can be said that it generally satisfies Nabokov’s requirements and basically proves that Gogol actually *is* translatable (although this essay contains some suggestions how to improve some minor flaws present in this translation).  
  
Referring to Nabokov for the last time, «Gogol’s work, as all great literary achievements, is a phenomenon of language and not one of ideas». At all times the mankind produced innovators in all spheres of human life. Arguably, there has been no innovator in the field of translating Gogol. But the deeper we examine his works and their translations, the more translation difficulties we try to resolve - the more stable is the platform for a faithful and authentic translation of Gogol into English and other European languages.

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6. Nabokov, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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