

Nikolai Gogol, The Troika,
from *Dead Souls* (1842)

This is one of the most celebrated and quoted passages in Russian literature, and has become part of the Russian consciousness and self-image.

Gogol was born and grew up in Ukraine. Both Ukraine and Russia claim him.

For what Russian does not love to drive fast? Which of us does not at times yearn to give his horses their head, and to let them go, and to cry, "To the Devil with the world!"? At such moments a great force seems to uplift one as on wings; and one flies, and everything else flies, but contrariwise--both the milestones, and traders riding on the shafts of their wagons, and the forest with dark lines of spruce and fir amid which may be heard the axe of the woodcutter and the croaking of the raven. Yes, out of a dim, remote distance the road comes towards one, and while nothing save the sky and the light clouds through which the moon is cleaving her way seem halted, the brief glimpses wherein one can discern nothing clearly have in them a pervading touch of mystery. Ah, troika, troika, swift as a bird, who was it first invented you? Only among a hardy race of folk can you have come to birth--only in a land which, though poor and rough, lies spread over half the world, and spans miles the counting whereof would leave one with aching eyes. Nor are you a modishly-fashioned vehicle of the road--a thing of clamps and iron. Rather, you are a vehicle but shaped and fitted with the axe or chisel of some handy peasant of Yaroslav. Nor are you driven by a coachman clothed in German livery, but by a man bearded and mittened. See him as he mounts, and flourishes his whip, and breaks into a long-drawn song! Away like the wind go the horses, and the wheels, with their spokes, become transparent circles, and the road seems to quiver beneath them, and a pedestrian, with a cry of astonishment, halts to watch the vehicle as it flies, flies, flies on its way until it becomes lost on the ultimate horizon--a speck amid a cloud of dust!

And you, Russia of mine--are not you also speeding like a troika which nothing can overtake? Is not the road smoking beneath your wheels, and the bridges thundering as you cross them, and everything being left in the rear, and the spectators, struck with the portent, halting to wonder whether you be not a thunderbolt launched from heaven? What does that awe-inspiring progress of yours foretell? What is the unknown force which lies within your mysterious steeds? Surely the winds themselves must abide in their manes, and every vein in their bodies be an ear stretched to catch the celestial message which bids them, with iron-girded breasts, and hooves which barely touch the earth as they gallop, fly forward on a mission of God? Whither, then, are you speeding, O Russia of mine? Whither? Answer me! But no answer comes--only the weird sound of your collar-bells. Rent into a thousand shreds, the air roars past you, for you are overtaking the whole world, and shall one day force all nations, all empires to stand aside, to give you way!