

What is Nikolai Gogol's *The Nose* About? (Or the Smell of Law)

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One morning, Ivan Yakovlevich, resident of St. Petersburg and a popular barber, wakes up to the smell of fresh loaves of bread popping out of his wife's oven. He chooses to have a loaf of bread with some onions. He cuts it in half and sees something unusual in the loaf. Curious to find out what this shiny object is, the barber puts his finger in the bread. He extracts a nose. This is not any nose. It is the nose of one of his customers, the Collegiate Assessor, Kovalyov. Fearful of the consequences of being found with the nose, Yakovlevich rushes to the river where he proceeds to throw the nose in its moving waters.

From the very start Nikolai Gogol's short story 'The Nose' makes us feel perplexed – how could a nose be baked into a fresh loaf of bread without anyone seeing it? Why did it not burn? – curious – oh, and what happens now that the nose has been thrown in the river? Will its lawful owner ever be reunited with it and have

they even realised that their nose has gone AWOL? – and how uncomfortable would it be, feel, if I lost *my* nose? Gogol's matter of fact writing style, however, manages to transform the discomfort of losing one's nose into comedy and intrigue.

The story continues from a different point of view: we meet the owner of the nose who wakes up one morning to find that his nose is missing. Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, upon the realisation that in place of his nose 'there was nothing but an absolute flat surface!'¹ takes to the streets of St. Petersburg to find the runaway nose. Indeed, as luck has it, he encounters the nose dressed up in the coat of a Civil Councillor, an indication of it being elevated in status. As it turns out, Kovalyov's nose had outranked him. Kovalyov finds the courage to point out to the nose that 'it' belonged to him, but alas the nose briskly brushes aside his words: 'My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right. Furthermore, I don't see that we can have anything in common. Judging from your uniform buttons, I should say you're from another government department.'² As the story unfolds, we find out that the nose is found by the police and returned to Kovalyov and that it takes two weeks after its return to be attached again to his face.

The story has been analysed by law and literature scholars. We find for example the renowned scholar, Richard Weisberg, referring to it in his book *Poethics: And Other*

¹ Nikolay Gogol, 'The Nose' in *Nikolay Gogol: The Diary of a Madman, The Government Inspector and Selected Stories*, trans, Ronald Wilks (London: Penguin Books, 2005 [1836]), 113–139, 117.

² Gogol, *The Nose*, 120.

*Strategies of Law and Literature*³ and Daniel Lowenstein writing about it in *Cardozo Law Review*.⁴ For Weisberg the comic effect of the story conceals the terror that we as readers experience whilst reading *The Nose*.⁵ As Lowenstein elaborates, for Weisberg the reader may experience such terror because the characters in the story react to the loss of the nose in non-normative ways.⁶ For example, Yakovlevich's wife is concerned more with the detached nose messing up her kitchen than the horror of losing one's nose.⁷

Weisberg's interpretation – the comic effect of the story disguising the terror in readers in encountering characters that care more about kitchen order than the loss of smell – is of course a possible one. Here instead, I would like to invite you to think of the story of the detached nose as both an act of *rebellion* and a *celebration* of the non-normative (as presented by the reactions of the characters to the news of the disappearing nose). *The Nose*, I would like to suggest exposes us to the futility of status and at the same time the entrapments that ideas of status produce. Kovalyov was a man about town, trying to ensure that his good looks and relatively good social status as Collegiate Assessor (Major) would secure him the best wife. Once he loses his nose, the bodily organ that enables him to

³ Richard Weisberg, *Poethics: And Other Strategies of Law and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

⁴ Daniel H. Lowenstein, 'The Failure of the Act: Conceptions of Law in the *Merchant of Venice*, *Bleak House*, *Les Misérables*, and Richard Weisberg's *Poethics*', *Cardozo Law Review*, 15 (1993): 1139–1244.

⁵ Weisberg, *Poethics*, 13–4.

⁶ Lowenstein, 'The Failure of the Act', 1151.

⁷ Gogol, *The Nose*, 114.

smell – where is the money and status? – his access to a better world appears to be threatened. To make things worse, his nose has managed to rise to a rank higher than his own. The nose's rebellion – detachment – provokes status anxiety in its owner, but more significantly it teaches us, and Kovalyov, an important lesson: status is simultaneously contingent and futile. A man/woman's worth may – and it is a man's worth in this case – be less associated with their status and more with their being. A part (nose) can at any moment become detached from the whole, declare independence, as in the story, and destroy in this sense the wholeness of the character. Similarly, normative values that we designate as having universal validity, that we may be hold onto are exposed by this story as being contingent reminding us that the universal is made of parts.

In his book *Nikolai Gogol*, Vladimir Nabokov focuses on Gogol's life and writings and describes the peculiar relationship that Russians have to noses: they are perceived as an anomaly on one's body, not quite fitting their bearer, as well as representing masculinity.⁸ Moreover, he adds that Gogol's fascination with noses stems from having a 'long and sensitive nose that he used to discover new smells in literature'.⁹ Nabokov's analogy draws our attention to Gogol's innovative storytelling, one that uses folkloric motifs or ideas to create stories that are both humorous and critical of social norms. We can extend Nabokov's analogy to law and its institutions. Like Gogol, who used his elongated nose to sniff out a new genre in

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (London: Penguin Books, 2011), 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

literary writing, law and its institutions (i.e., the police) pride themselves in being able to 'sniff out' criminals and 'smell something fishy' about a particular situation. We can even argue that law and its institutions gain their *authority* by being able to smell out dangerous individuals and crime.

Nevertheless, noses do not just act as *executive* parts of the law. They do not only detect those that breach the law. Noses also act prejudicially. Think of the myriad times when the police harass and arrest young black men because their noses tell them that they are suspicious when in reality they are just innocently walking along a street (Reiner, 2019; Hall et al. 2002).¹⁰ Such incidents are too many to mention. Noses cause trouble as their evaluation of smell is not necessarily free from preconceived ideas and judgements. But losing them or getting rid of them, as we find out in Gogol's story, will not necessarily alleviate us from the possible prejudices that noses can create.

In the last paragraph of *The Nose* Gogol playfully writes, '... the strangest, most incredible thing of all is that authors should write about such things. That, I confess, is beyond my comprehension.'¹¹ Of course, his question is rhetorical. Gogol knows very well why noses are interesting subjects for literature. Having a nose, or rather a detached nose as the protagonist of a story, diverts our attention from the psychic struggles of other characters and focuses us on the unfolding of the story and on how characters react to

¹⁰ Robert Reiner, *The Politics of the Police* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). See also Stuart Hall et al. *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002)

¹¹ Gogol, *The Nose*, 139.

such loss, teaching us that there is no one way of being in the world or reacting to misfortune. Each reaction to the news of the detached nose reveals that there are incongruities in life. And these incongruities of life reveal what we otherwise are unable to see: our entrenched normative behaviours, attachment to status and universal values. We hold them so close that we cannot see them, just like we cannot see our own noses, too close to be able to sense anything. We can see for example that universal values are only partially such. Moreover, the story instructs us to be proud of our noses, their sense of smell and how this smell assists us in navigating the world (after all they may help us discover a new genre of writing or detect that criminal) but simultaneously to persistently question the very prejudices that our noses carry around with them. We learn not to be so hung up on status and what status can provide for us but rather to embrace the flow of life, with its ups and downs, as at any moment our world can turn topsy-turvy and we can lose the very smell of the world, as our noses may go missing.

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