

GOGOL'S MADMEN AND EUROPEAN LITERARY TRADITION

I feel that Nikolai Gogol is not only one of the most fascinating Russian authors; he stands out as a major world author. His disillusion with society and his celebration of the rogueness and incongruity of day-to-day life have universal resonance. Upon hearing the lecture on Gogol, I felt personally invested in his sorrows and struggles. His death by self starvation reveals the duty which he felt for society; he could never bear the thought of failing those in despair. Gogol's method of facing such burdens is unique, and it is to this that he would like to turn our attention. Many of Gogol's stories deal with surreal or ridiculous circumstances. By exposing ordinary characters to much extraordinary circumstances, he reveals what is ridiculous about everyday social life. Two of Gogol's stories, "A Diary of a Madman" and "The Nose", may be cited as examples of this technique.

"A Diary of a Madman" is presented as a collection of entries, written by a desperate clerk. The clerk, dissatisfied with his life and infatuated with his boss's daughter, begins to lose his grip on sanity. He begins to believe that dogs can talk and write letters, and he even names himself King of Spain! Although the clerk's mind is brimming with wild and irrational thoughts, he often considers them in a rational manner. At times, this madman seems to stumble across poetic thoughts, which would not have occurred to him in his former state of mind. One of the symptoms of his madness, is the occurrence of egalitarian thoughts. On hearing that his boss's daughter will marry a court chamberlain, he begins to ask himself "what if he is a court chamberlain". He realizes that the difference between himself and the chamberlain are superficial. He is beginning to realize that regardless of rank, he has everything that a chamberlain has and is just as valuable as a human being. To make this comparison, Gogol uses one of his favourite body parts: the nose. The madman tells himself, "After all, his nose isn't made of gold, but it's just like mine, like everyone's. By including these musings on equality in the same manuscript with talking dogs and fluctuating dates, Gogol attacks the current state of Russian civil affairs. Surely a titular counselor must be mad to equate himself with someone of a higher rank! As this counselor's illness progresses, so does the degree with which he evaluates himself. After hearing about a controversy over the succession to the Spanish throne, he exclaims, "there is a king in Spain. He is found. I am this king". After proclaiming himself king, he begins to feel on equal terms with the tsar. After signing a document "Ferdinand VIII" and proclaiming "No signs of allegiance are necessary", the others at the office realize that he is dangerously mad. At this point, he ever begins to name the dates himself; such is the authority which he feels he was. For his odd and erratic behavior, he is locked away in an insane asylum. In his closing entry, he writes "they don't listen to, don't see, don't hear me. What did I do to them? Why are they tormenting me?" This is the thing which drove him mad: seeing that he was not valued in the eyes of others, he felt it necessary to find a way to value himself. Although the story is absurd and humorous, Gogol has underscored the humor with a tragedy: a sensitive soul who wished only to be loved, only to be worthy in someone's eyes, has been locked away like a piece of inconvenient rubbish. "A Diary of a Madman" ends with the counselor's supplication to his mother and his description of seeing the world from afar. He sees Russia, Italy, and his own house. He ends by asking "And did you know that the Dey of Algiers has a bump right under his nose?" This last comment reminds us that we are all humans despite our circumstances. Even the Dey of Algiers does not have a perfect nose!

In "The Nose", Gogol once more confronts society problems through absurd circumstances, and this time he devotes the story to his favourite body part: the nose. "The Nose" focuses its satire on the system of ranks which occupied Russian social life at that time. The first part of the story focuses on a barber who finds a nose in his loaf of bread. The barber throws it off the bridge but it is

caught by a police officer. The person to whom the nose belongs is named Major Kovalyov. He is a collegiate assessor, appointed in the Caucasus. Though of provincial background he flaunts his rank and insists on being addressed "Major". On finding his nose is missing, his main concern is for his standing in society. When roaming the street in search of his nose, he is shocked to see it dressed as a state councilor. He chases it into Kazan and accosts it all denies ever having known him and leaves. Kovalyov is enraged that his nose would have a superior rank to him and guesses that the nose is lying. Kovalyov later stops in the house of the police superintendent. Kovalyov is enraged when the superintendent insults his position. Gogol says "He could forgive anything which might be said about himself, but he could not forgive it at all if it related to rank or profession". We may now see that Kovalyov only values himself in terms of his rank. Unlike "A Diary of a Madman" councilor, Kovalyov is unable to find value in himself on his own terms, he allows his placement to determine all. Later, when the officer returns the nose, we are left to wonder about the incongruities of the story. If the officer retrieved the nose after it was thrown from the bridge, when did it have time for a masquerade? If it is small enough to wrap in a napkin, how can it be mistaken for a man? We are never told how it ended up in the bread, but Gogol admits these things. After admitting this, he says "When you think about it, there is something, really, in all this. No matter what anyone says, such things happen in the world; rarely, but they happen".

Gogol's main triumph in these absurd stories is the way in which he confronts real world problems. Although the situations are ridiculous, the characters are drawn from life. They move through the real world of Kazan Cathedral, Nevsky Prospect and cafés with yesterday's coffee-spattered newspapers. Gogol saw through Nevsky Prospect's gold and glamour, into the hearts of lonely desperate people. He must have felt that laughter was the only bearable way to face these problems, but, in the end, he became a victim himself. Gogol's call for us to find value in ourselves and others is still relevant today. I feel that he is at once one of the most Russian and one of the most universal of authors.