A Historical Vignette (24)
“Be proud of yourself: you have a History!”

The Ear and the Nose in literary parodies. The “Hymn of Deafness” by Du Bellay and “The Nose” by Gogol

J. Tainmont
Winston Churchill Avenue 172, P.O. Box 9, 1180 Brussels, Belgium

Key-words. Deafness; Nose; Du Bellay; Gogol; Chostakovitch

Abstract. The Ear and the Nose in literary parodies. The “Hymne de la surdité” (The Hymne of Deafness) by Du Bellay and “The Nose” by Gogol. Literary parody is a mode of expression characterized by irony. Every people, every language showcases its own genius in it. Du Bellay practices self-mockery. Gogol opts for a comic marked by the fantastic. Nevertheless, in both cases, parody is but a means to hide misery: behind its mask, human suffering is hinted at (Figures 1,2).

Figure 1. Artificial ear according to Paré in “De l’oreille perdue”, chapter 7, book 17, volume 2, “Oeuvres complètes”, assembled by Malgaigne, facsimile from the 1840 edition.

Figure 2. Illustration by Gennadij Spirin from “Nose”, by Gogol; Sorbier editions.
1. “L’hymne de la surdité”, to Pierre de Ronsard Vendômois (Figures 3-5)

• Joachim Du Bellay is a French poet (1522-1560). According to some, his deafness occurred following a painful disease that kept him bedridden for two years, from 1550 until 1552. At that time, he was about 28 or 30 years old. Supposedly, he suffered from pulmonary tuberculosis. In 1560, the year of his death, he had gone completely deaf.

It so happened that his contemporary, colleague and friend, Pierre de Ronsard, who was born near Vendôme (1524-1585), suffered from the same infirmity. Upon returning from a journey that he made in the Alsace in 1540, at the age of 16, he reported the first symptoms of an infectious disease accompanied by a strong fever, which left him half deaf. The two men who had envisioned a career in the military had to give up that idea because of their disease, a fact of which Poetry certainly benefited.

Other versions of the story of Du Bellay’s deafness exist. Jacques Veilliard de Chartres, who gave his eulogy, declared that Du Bellay cherished Ronsard to such an extent, that he tried to imitate him in everything, “jusques à vouloir passer pour sourdaud aussi bien que lui” (literal: until he could pass as a deaf man just like him). Similarly, Veilliard continues, Plato’s best disciples found it amusing to walk bent over like him, and Aristotle’s disciples tried to talk hesitantly and with a stutter to match his example. On the other hand, Sainte-Beuve thought Du Bellay’s deafness was very much real, but he believed it merely preceded an apoplexy, of which the deafness, then, was a symptom.

• The poem in questions consists of 250 verses. It was written in alexandrines (twelve feet), which was unusual at a time in which verses generally consisted of 10 feet. It was composed in 1556 and published in 1558. It inscribes itself in the paradoxical tradition of the eulogy of diseases, a literary genre that was quite widely spread in the Renaissance. Blindness is another example of this. Consider also the “Eulogy of Madness” by Erasmus (1469-1536), and the “Eulogy of the Plague”, by Berni (1497-1535). Perhaps Du Bellay was moved by the meaning of the following verses, which are also of his hand:

**Et ne vaut-il pas mieux quelque orage endurer, Que d’avoir toujours peur de la mer importune? Par la bonne fortune on se trouve abusé, Par la fortune adverse on devient plus rusé.**

(Would it not be better to suffer some storm, Than to always be afraid of the unforgiving sea? Good luck often leaves one duped, Bad luck makes one more cunning.)

• Du Bellay begins his hymn, as if he wanted to make us trust him, by referencing to the anatomy of the ear, as it was described by Ambroise Paré in his book on Anatomy, chapter X “about ears and parotid glands”. Du Bellay summarizes it as such:

**Nature aux animaux a cinq sens ordonné Le goûter, le toucher, l’œil, l’oreille et le nez,***

(Nature has given animals five senses
Taste, touch, sight, hearing and smell...)

Regarding the anatomy of the ear, he continues:

**Le pertuy de l’ouye, et les trois petits os Qui sont à cet effet en nos temples enclos.**

(The hole of the ear and the three little bones that are included in our temples for this purpose.)

and

**… ce nerf sinuex Qui par le labyrin’t d’un chemin tortueux…**

(... this sinuous nerve that through the labyrinth in a tortuous way...)

• The paradoxical eulogy of deafness proper starts after said passage. The argumentation of deafness was already well known at the time. In Italy, the painter Bronzino composed a poem against excessive noise, *Cápitolo de Rumori*, and in France, the poet Remi Belleau wrote a poem *Sur l’importunité d’une cloche*. In order to be credible, Du Bellay takes the precaution of recognizing the fact that deafness implies a certain handicap, but this does not weigh up to the advantages that being deaf creates:

**Et, s’il ne peut goûter le plaisir délectable Qu’on a d’un bon propos qui se tient à la table, Aussi est-il privé de sentir maintes fois L’ennui d’un faux accord, une mauvaise voix Un fâcheux instrument, un bruit, une tempête, Une cloche, une forge, un rompement de tête,**
Le bruit d’une charrette et la douce chanson
D’un âne qui se plaint en effroyable son.
(And, if he can’t enjoy the delectable pleasure
One has because of a good connection that happens at the table,
He is also deprived of experiencing so many times
The displeasure of a false chord, a bad voice,
An unpleasant instrument, a noise, a storm,
A clock, a blacksmith, an ear-splitting noise,
The sound of a cart and the sweet song
Of a donkey that is complaining in a horrible tone.)

Among the other sonorous disasters that deafness permits us to escape, there are also the sounds that men make, the Roman society and the Pope’s entourage in particular. Here, we have to remember that Du Bellay spent some years of his short life in Rome:

Aussi n’est-il sujet à l’importun caquet
D’un indocte prêcheur ou d’un fâcheux parquet
Au babil d’une femme, au long prône d’un prêtre
Au gronder d’un valet, aux injures d’un maître
Au causer d’un bouffon, aux broquards d’une cour
Qui font cent fois le jour désirer d’être sourd.
(He is also not submitted to the unwelcome cackle
Of an unlearned preacher or of an annoying prosecutor,
To a woman’s prattle, to the long sermon of a priest,
To the grumbling of a lackey, to the insults of a master,
To the jabbering of a fool, to the mockeries of the court
That make one long for deafness one hundred times a day.)

In the wake, he even complains about having to hear the defamations that circulate on the subject of the Pope. Unfortunately, he is not deaf enough to escape those:

Et n’ouïrais dire mal de ce bon Père Saint
Dont ores sans raison tout Rome se plaint
Blâmant sa cruauté et sa grand’ convoitise
Qui ne craint (disent-ils) aux dépens de l’Église
Enrichir ses neveux et troubler sans propos
De la Chrétienté le public repos.
(And I would not hear talk badly about this Holy father
Of whom now without reason the whole of Rome complains
Blaming his cruelty and his great greed)
Who does not fear – so they say – to
Enrich his nephews at the expense of the Church
And to disturb the public rest of Christianity without regard)

Du Bellay continues, envying Ronsard, who supposedly was even more deaf than him. His friend can communicate with Nature in peace, sitting on the river bank. By escaping the noises of the earthly world, he becomes able to hear "the music of the spheres" (Pythagoras’s concept based on the harmony between the notes of the range and the distance between the stars).

The author ends, following the tradition of the Hymn, with an invocation. He implores Deafness, that has been raised to the status of a Goddess:

> Je te salue, ô sainte et calme Surdité!

Qui, pour trône et palais de ta grande majesté,

T’es cavée bien avant sous une roche dure,

Un antre tapissé de mousse et de verdure,

Faisant d’un fort hallier son effroyable tour,

Où les chutes du Nil tempêtent à l’entour...

...je te supplie Déesse...

De m’être favorable, et si quelqu’un enrage

De vouloir par envie à ton nom faire outrage

Qu’il puisse un jour sentir ta grande déité

Pour savoir comme moi que c’est de surdité.

(I salute you, oh holy and calm Deafness!

Who, for a throne and a palace of your great majesty,

Was well before time caved under a hard rock,

A cave covered with mousse and foliage,

Making of a strong thicket your terrible tower,

Around which the falls of the Nile churn...

...I beg you, Goddess...

Be favourable to me, and if someone

By desire wants to insult your name;

That he may one day feel your great deity

And know, like me, what is Deafness.)


Nicolas Gogol is a Russian novelist and playwright (1809-1852). He mainly wrote short stories, of which “The Nose” is an example. The work was written from 1832 until 1835. It was first refused, as it was deemed “dirty and trivial”. Finally, it was published in 1836 with an introduction by Pouchkin, and was about twenty pages long. Nearly a century later, in 1930, a twenty-four-year-old Russian musician named Dimitri Chostakovitch (1906-1975) composed an opera that was inspired by Gogol’s short story, and that had the same title. Curiously, the musician had the same difficulties as the writer. His work was deemed too elitist by an artistic committee put in place by Stalin, and was quickly withdrawn from the scene. It was only in 1974 that the piece could be enjoyed again in its country of origin.

• The story of “Nose” (Figures 6-11)

Here we describe the plot based on the booklet of Chostakovitch’s opera. The action takes place at St. Petersburg.

Act I.

Introduction.

In his barbershop, a barber named Yakovlevitch, who on occasion also does bloodlettings, is shaving major Kovaliov. The latter, despite his pompous title, is in fact but a simple assistant of a teaching corps in a college. He complains about his barber because his hands smell badly.

First scene.

In the morning, the barber’s wife wakes up her husband and presents him with his breakfast. The barber discovers, to his horror, a nose in his bread! His spouse then accuses him of having amputated the nose off one of his patients during drunkenness and tells him to go out and get rid of the nose.

Second scene.

The barber tries to get rid of the nose on the riverbanks of St Petersburg. He finally succeeds to throw it in a canal, but a suspicious policeman spots him and takes him with him for an interrogation.

Third scene.

We are in Kovaliov’s bedroom. He wakes up and notices with bewilderment that his nose is no longer there! His servant lays out his clothes, and he hurries to the police station.

Fourth scene.

In the cathedral of Kazan in St Petersburg, The Nose, in his grand uniform of State Councillor, is praying fervently. Kovaliov decides to approach him and begs him to reassume his natural place. But The Nose wants nothing to do with a person who is inferior to his rank. Kovaliov’s attention is then drawn to the arrival of a beautiful woman, and The Nose takes advantage of this to sneak away.
**Act II**

*Fifth and sixth scene.*

In the editing room of a newspaper. The employee responsible for the announcements refuses Kovaliov’s request to include an announcement about the nose’s disappearance, because he believes it might seem like a message in code. Kovaliov undergoes the mockeries of the audience and is advised to see a doctor.

**Act III**

*Seventh scene.*

We are in the suburbs of St Petersburg. An empty coach. The policeman is on the Nose’s tail. He orders his men to look carefully at the people who try to take the coach. The Nose appears and falls into the ambush. He is hit, which causes him to turn back into his primitive appearance! This gives the policeman the chance to wrap it in a piece of paper and bring it back to Kovaliov.

*Eighth scene.*

Kovaliov receives the nose from the policeman. He is visited by the doctor, who advises him to keep the nose in a jar filled with alcohol, vodka and vinegar, for the curiosity of posterity’s sake. A friend of Kovaliov intervenes and reveals his suspicions regarding the origins of the entire affair: a certain lady called Podtotchine supposedly cast a spell to make him marry her daughter. But in the end, the lady is exonerated.

**Interlude.**

The rumours do not include the fact that the nose has been returned to its owner. Time and time again, crowds hurry to every place where the Nose is said to have been spotted. Jubilation, excitement and excesses ensue, and the fire brigade has to intervene, driving people away with their fire hoses.

**Epilogue**

*Ninth scene.*

Kovaliov wakes up and discovers his nose has returned to its normal place! The daily routine starts again. The barber returns to shave Kovaliov. His hands still smell as badly as before.

*Tenth scene.*

“Nevsky Prospekt”. Kovaliov parades around town, proving his nose is well in its place. As he is now completely confident because of his recovered faculties, he refuses the hand of Madame Podtotchine’s daughter in marriage, and starts wooing a saleswoman…

### Analysis of the work

- The nose in itself is but a *pre-text to the fantastic* for Gogol. The writer could easily have picked a pinna... Gogol uses the nose, but he is not really that interested in it, there are only a few allusions to smell. It is a bit deceiving for us, otorhinolaryngologists, but it has to be admitted. What he seeks is a form of surrealism that consists of taking objective, real objects – here a nose that is not even monstrous - and then putting them in a surreal situation. A completely normal body part leaves that body, and empowers itself, while taunting the mores
of the time. He strides on St Petersburg’s avenues in his stately uniform of State Councillor, and realizes Kovaliov’s ambitions for himself: he shows himself in all his splendour and woos the women. He ostentatiously prays in the city’s cathedral, but he also hides in the bread Kovaliov is about to eat, thus making a trivial allusion to Christ’s body in the sacramental bread, at which Gogol thumbs his... nose at. It is there that the writer is delirious (in the proper sense of that which comes out of the plowman’s furrow, lira in Latin). And as the story’s characters, apart from the Nose, behave in a logical way when faced with this extravagance, the produced effect is a shift to what we can indeed qualify as surrealism. Here, we do not find the traditional arsenal of the fantastic—fairies, dragons, sorcerers—but an ordinary nose. This creates a certain metaphysical discomfort. A sombre wave of uneasiness washes over the story. The rules of the game have been changed, but even though we do not know by who, the game continues, as if nothing has happened. This is where the anxiety and suspense are involved in the fantastic. Except for the Nose, everything seems normal, but in reality, everything is wrong. There is substantial collateral damage.

The comical aspect of the collateral damages is the cloak that covers the fantastic. Superficially, at the first level, we are dealing with an amusing story in which the grain of sand, the elopement of the nose, breaks down the social machine of the Empire’s capital, which before was untouchable. This goes from the most humble of citizens to the most important characters. The barber is accused of drunkenness by his wife; it is he who has cut off his client’s nose because he was being inattentive. The police commissioner is intrigued by an individual who is disposing of himself of a piece of human flesh by throwing it into a river. The newspaper employee refuses to publish an ad that is suspected to be a message in code, for security reasons. A young girl’s mother finds herself accused of having put a spell on Kovaliov to make him marry her daughter. The police think they have captured the mysterious character about whom everybody is talking, but in that very same moment, he transforms into a simple... nose. The
Historical Vignette

The notion of the dream. It is on the subject of the hidden meaning of the title of the short story that I would be more inclined to follow the interpretation of the psychiatrists. In English, the title has just one meaning. In Russian, it’s a different case. The nose is called HOC, which is the title of the short story by Gogol and that of Chostakovitch’s opera. It is interesting to note that HOC is the anagram of COH, which means “dream” in Russian. Indeed, everything is similar to the dream in this story; not only its improbability but also the brutality of the end and the absence of any moral or conclusion. Everything happens as if Kovaliov abruptly wakes up from a nightmare that entails no consequences.

- The particular place of the doctor in “The Nose” (Figures 12,13)
  - Portrait of a “salon” doctor
  - The Indian method

The sexual meaning of the nose has already been highlighted by psychiatrists for a long time. They consider this story about a nose, imagined by Gogol, as a trace left by a cultural shock. Thanks to the trace, they can track the culprit down. They tell us that the nose, a protruding and odd organ, true, a bit highly located, has all the characteristics to be seen as a second sexual organ. They concluded that Gogol was either impotent, or feared to be impotent... Perhaps it is true, but in the end, it does not concern us. What is important for us is to dream and laugh about this story that Gogol tells so nicely, like the real Russian he is.

- The particular place of the doctor in “The Nose” (Figures 12,13)
  - Portrait of a “salon” doctor
  - The Indian method

- Of the two principal techniques for restorative rhinoplasty, the Italian method or tubulated graft popularized by TAGLIA-COZZI (1545-1599) dates back to the 16th century. This technique then loses its authority but was still practiced by some surgeons such as VON GRAEFFE of Berlin (1787-1840). It regained its credit thanks to GILLIÈS (1882-1960) during the first world war.
  - The Indian method was practiced more frequently in Gogol’s time, and should have been proposed to Kovaliov. It uses a skin flap from the forehead. This technique was imported from India by an English surgeon called Colley Lyon LUCAS (1730-1797). It was also applied in the begin-
ning of the 19th century by another English surgeon, Joseph Constantine CARPUE (1764-1846), and by the German surgeon Johan Friedrich DIEFFENBACH (1792-1847). In the 20th century, the Indian method kept its recognition.

-- Other solution: immediate reimplantation. It was cited in an anecdotal way. In the 16th century, a doctor, FIORAVANTI of Naples (around 1520-1588), reports that he immediately picked up a soldier’s nose that was still covered in sand, urinated on it to disinfect it, and fixed it on with a bandage for eight days, after which the nose attached itself again. In the 18th century, a certain Galin, a trader, witnessed a nose being amputated from a soldier. He quickly replaced it after having it disinfected in lukewarm wine, and fixed it on by means of a cast. In another case, the nose that was almost completely cut off after an attack was successfully sown back on thanks to the swifter of the intervention.

-- To the credit of Kovaliov’s doctor, we certainly have to present the opinion of those who were not favourable of surgery. Among them, some recommended a prosthesis, such as Ambroise PARÉ (Figure 7). Even though he was a military surgeon, and used to trauma’s, he wrote: “He who has lost his nose must have another one made artificially, either out of gold or silver, or out of paper and glued-together cloth, in the same shape and colour as his was: this should then be attached by certain threads behind the occiput, or to a bonnet.”. His opinion was supported over time by several doctors and patients such as the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) who had a nasal prosthesis made out of gold. Among the doctors favourable to prosthesis PARÉ, RICHTER of Gottingen (1742-1812), CHOPART of Paris (1743-1795) and DESAULT of Paris (1738-1795) can be cited.

-- Finally, there were those who refrained from everything, judging that the case was hopeless. FALLOPE (1523-1562) was one of those people. It is this attitude that Kovaliov’s doctor adopted, a method of which little examples can be found in surgical writings...

Conclusion

We have presented to you two writers, one of which is socially incompetent, and the other of which has been recently traumatized. The first treats his infirmity with lightheartedness, the second tells an improbably story.
Historical Vignette

In both cases, the classical rules of private consultation are distorted: the first patient conceals the importance of his condition, he even jokes about it. It reminds us of the deaf man who is taken along by his family, against his will, to the doctor. He thinks that “things are not that bad”. The second patient is, frankly, delirious: he has lost the perception of one of his body parts and begs to have it restored.

What can we conclude from these two character’s bizarre behaviour? Behind the literary parody, as if behind the mask of a clown, the human tragedy of sickness is hidden: the fear of admitting one’s sickness, and the loss of contact with reality.

References