

Magical Realism in the Tales of Nikolai Gogol

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There is a story about St. Serafim of Sarov (1759-1833). One day, four sisters from the Diveyevo Convent saw him across a field of ripe, brown grain. The sisters were on a road through the field, and their feet were on the ground. But as Serafim approached, they suddenly realized that the saint was “walking two foot above the ground, not even touching the grass.” Well attested by four nuns of unimpeachable character and faith, the event was duly recorded in the annals of St. Serafim and the convent; the truth it conveys is therefore beyond doubt. But walking above the grass, even by a saint of such holiness that the Tsar and Autocrat of All the Russias sought him out as a confidant and spiritual father, is not encountered every day, and, it might even be suggested, cannot occur at all.¹

This incident of faith illustrates both the nature of magical realism generally – the realistic and quotidian consequences of an impossible action – and the two varieties of magical realism employed in the tales of Nikolai Gogol. The first involves the direct and physical intervention of the divine or the demonic in an otherwise unexceptional flow of events. The second characteristic of Gogol’s magical realism implies the unexpected violation of the laws of nature without a divine or demonic explanation. Gogol treated the divine, the demonic, or the supernatural event as entirely real, in a context no less Aristotelian than Platonic. For Gogol,

who was deeply religious (but not clerical) in his habits of thought and outlook, the overlapping of the ordinary with the supernatural and magical was a simply a fact of Russian life. It was neither rare nor remarkable.

For Gogol, the (usually) demonic intervention into ordinary reality followed distinct patterns based on the location of the tale. Those set in the vast Russian countryside treated the Devil as a menacing though still ordinary part of life, but in that rural setting the Devil still had a playful as well as horrific quality. He could be bargained with and occasionally bested, and, while the Devil was dangerous, the blows he struck were rarely altogether fatal. Furthermore, the Devil could be seen; his disguises were rarely sufficient to fool the peasants and Cossacks who were always on the alert for him. In St. Petersburg, the Devil was an invisible and brooding presence who aimed to seduce souls to evil and often succeeded. In “the northern capital of our spacious empire,” the Devil had a fearful psychological edge to him; there was no playfulness about him, he could not be bested, and your soul was at stake.

In “The Fair at Sorochintsy,” the opening tale in the first volume of *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831), it is no surprise that the Devil, like the Cossacks and gypsies, has come to the fair. He is seen by a reliable witness, a drunken old woman (who better to be on the lookout for the Devil dressed in a red jacket and “in the shape of a pig”?).² The Devil steals the moon in “Christmas Eve,” a tale in the second volume of *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1832), but is captured by the hero, who uses him as transportation to St. Petersburg to obtain the Czarina’s slippers for his sweetheart. In the last tale in the second *Dikanka* volume, “A Bewitched Place,” the Devil inhabits a plot of ground where nothing would grow, and a respectable Christian grandfather could never finish his dance. In “St. John’s Eve,” in the first *Dikanka* volume, the Devil appears in human form as Basavriuk, to ruin the lives of two lovers. The Devil is “an enemy of the Church of Christ and of the human race,” but he is also familiar; with care and grace, he can be avoided (36).

St. Petersburg was a different place. Here the Devil hid, occasionally to be spotted by a policeman, as in a terrifying encounter in “The Overcoat” (1842). Most terrible of all, the Devil inhabited a painting of a man in an Asiatic robe, a man who came alive filled with evil, as if in a

dream, but it was no dream. “The Portrait” (1835, 1842) depicted the perdition of a soul, with substantial collateral damage to art, which to Gogol was a sacred thing. In St. Petersburg, more than elsewhere in the Russian world, “the devil himself lights the street lamps to show everything in false colors” (452). Metonymy and a comic touch could alone indicate the seriousness and finality of the Devil in St. Petersburg.

I

An echo of this seriousness can be seen in the comic masterpiece “The Nose” (1836, 1842), where magical realism takes the form of an abrupt abrogation of natural law, for no discernible reason and to no clear purpose. The disruption of the natural order happens, and then the natural order is restored as if nothing had happened. There is no explanation for all of this, of course, and there could be no explanation, but at the same time no one could doubt the veracity of the reportage, even if nothing in “The Nose” could be considered as useful “for the benefit of youth,” though such unusual occurrences as a break in the natural order ought to be of benefit to someone, since an author writes to benefit his nation, and yet . . . “The Nose,” with its comic treatment of the seriousness of life in St. Petersburg, is a remarkable tale about the ordinary.

In “The Nose,” Gogol inverts the typical dynamic of modern magical realism. In magical realism, a supernatural or inexplicable event gives rise to a series of realistic consequences; but the realistic detail of life in St. Petersburg could be satisfactorily explained only by reference to fantastic and sur-real stories. If canonical modern magical realism expects the fantastic to precede and give rise to the real, in Gogol the real gives rise to the fantastic, the unnatural explains the real and quotidian.

While Gogol inverts the dynamic of magical realism, making the real the matrix of the fantastic, he does not diverge from the standard narrative structure. The inexplicable is an event that occurs suddenly and surprisingly, while realistic consequences play out as a narrative of funny, pathetic, and *outré* events. “The Nose,” therefore, exists on three interlocking and circular levels of magical realism. At the base, the inherently surreal quality of daily life in St. Petersburg, so different from the daily life of all other Russian places, made the ordinary itself appear fantastic.

As a later author put it:

Petersburg, seat of the Czars and their officers, mistress of a hundred million human beings inhabiting a sixth of the globe, absorbed daily thousands and tens of thousands of people drawn from the remotest corners of the whole breadth of Russia, pilgrim to this European Mecca in search of justice, safety and protection, concessions and privileges; for all the affairs concerning the boundlessly great and rich empire of Russia were decided in Petersburg alone.³

In such a place nothing could be quite as it was elsewhere. Indeed, the intrinsic oddity of the ordinary in St. Petersburg somehow engendered the magical moment when all the laws of nature dissolved into a dew. And beyond that, on yet another level of reality, the appearance of the everyday can be regarded as not only the narrative consequence of the magical moment, but also its cause.

“The Nose” begins with “an extraordinarily strange incident,” an incident so unusual as to draw official attention. A barber, Ivan Yakovlevich, who was, naturally, a drunken lout, cut open his breakfast loaf the morning of the twenty-fifth of March, and:

to his amazement saw something there that looked white. Ivan Yakovlevich probed at it carefully with his knife and felt it with his finger ...

He thrust in his fingers and pulled it out and – it was a nose! (475)

Astonishment and dread nearly overcame Ivan Yakovlevich, while his wife, Praskovia Osipovna, reacted with horror, not so much at the errant nose as at the obvious culpability and incompetence of her husband. “Where have you cut that nose off, you monster?” she cried wrathfully. “You scoundrel, you drunkard, I’ll go to the police myself to report you!” This was an idle threat, perhaps, displaying the expected and inevitable wifely distaste for her husband more than any desire to interact with the

always threatening authorities, but it was far from the most serious of Ivan Yakovlevich's troubles. He sat there, stunned, "more dead than alive: he recognized that the nose belonged to none other than Kovaliov, the collegiate assessor whom he shaved every Wednesday and every Sunday."⁴ His world had collapsed around him.

All must assume, of course, that if Major Kovaliov's nose was in the barber's bread, it could not also be on the Major's face. And the Major himself discovered the truth of this natural law against bilocation (suspended only for the benefit of saints) when he awoke and discovered that "to his great astonishment there was a completely flat space where his nose should have been" (477). Naturally this was disconcerting, even frightening, and certainly a matter for the police. But it was actually worse than that. It was the end of everything; at least it was the end of collegiate assessor Kovaliov's efforts to find a plush post in the capital and to marry a woman with a fortune of at least two hundred thousand. He had, after all, made his rank in the provinces, being "a collegiate assessor from the Caucasus," and he had neither the education nor the connections to advance his career. And, now, without his nose . . .

Major Kovaliov's nose had not abandoned its owner merely to reappear in the morning bread of a drunken barber. The nose had grander ambitions than that. It wished to become an independent personage, and a personage of significance. While the now preposterous major walked on Nevsky Prospekt muffled in his cloak to conceal the "extremely absurd flat space" where his nose had once been, the nose was busy acquiring a persona. As Kovaliov watched,

a carriage door flew open; a gentleman in uniform, bending down, sprang out and ran up the steps. What was the horror and at the same time amazement of Kovaliov when he recognized that this was his own nose! (479)

The nose outranked the rest of Kovaliov.

He [the nose] was in a gold-braided uniform with a high collar; he had on buckskin trousers and at his side was a sword. From his

plumed hat it might be inferred that he was of the rank of civil councilor.

It is not given to everyone to be visibly inferior to one's nose, and Kovaliov reacted as any sane man would:

[He] almost went out of his mind; he did not know what to think of such a strange occurrence. How was it possible for a nose – which had only yesterday been on his face and could neither drive nor walk – to be in uniform!

Kovaliov followed his nose (his nose, but no longer completely his nose) into the Kazansky Cathedral, and, “inwardly forcing himself to speak confidently,” addressed the elegantly uniformed nose. After some false starts, Kovaliov stated his case bluntly: “Why you are my own nose!” (481). But the civil councilor, *né* nose, was equally forthright:

“You are mistaken, sir. I am an independent individual. Moreover, there can be no sort of close relations between us. I see, sir, from the buttons of your uniform, you must be serving in a different department.”

The nose was even more of a snob than the rest of Kovaliov.

By the time Kovaliov's nose has dismissed the rest of the Major, the laws of physics and nature seem to be dissolving progressively away. The nose initially appears in the loutish barber's hot bread, not damaged and quite recognizable, having detached itself from Kovaliov's face; subsequently the nose escapes from Ivan Yakovlevich's grimy grasp and emerges as a starched and uniformed civil councilor and an “independent individual.” Multiple and continuing violations of the laws of nature inform Gogol's narrative, and they are all treated seriously, but as events, not as miracles or drift toward insanity. Such events are merely unusual. The line between the natural and the usually-regarded-as-unnatural has begun to blur.

Major Kovaliov responded to this gap in the ordinary by resorting to

the ordinary. He took a cab to the police commissioner's house, but that august official was out. From the police Kovaliov moved to the press. He would advertise for the lost nose, in the ordinary way, both to alert the public and to prevent the now independent nose from slipping out of town. Arriving at the newspaper office, Kovaliov found that virtually everything was either lost, wanted, or for sale. He told the clerk: "my nose ... has run away from me ... my own nose" (485). The clerk, when he understood the extraordinary nature of this advertisement, was neither surprised nor disconcerted. He treated it as the ordinary course of events: "No, I can't put an advertisement like that in the paper... The newspaper might lose its reputation." The clerk advised Kovaliov to see a doctor. The paper could, of course, print the advertisement, but, the clerk concluded, "I do not foresee any advantage to you from it. If you do want to, ... describe it as a rare freak of nature ... for the benefit of youth ... or anyway as a matter of general interest" (486).

There would be no advertisement.

Close to despair, Kovaliov returned home, where, that very evening, deliverance from an unexpected source appeared suddenly. A police officer called on Kovaliov, asking if the major had lost his nose, just as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, which, in St. Petersburg, it might well be. The nose, he reported, had been discovered by

extraordinary luck: he was caught almost on the road. He had already taken his seat in the stagecoach and was intending to go to Riga, and had already taken a passport in the name of a government clerk. And the strange thing is that I myself took him for a gentleman at first, but ... I soon saw that it was a nose. (489)

Whereupon, to Kovaliov's indescribable joy, the officer put his hand in his pocket and drew out Kovaliov's nose.

For humanity, suffering is long and joy is brief. However delicious had been the moment of recovery, doubts and discomfort set in almost at once. Would the recovered nose stick to his face? Kovaliov made the experiment. No. The nose fell off at once. Again near despair, Kovaliov sent for a doctor, who arrived almost at once, evincing the air of general

self-satisfaction that is a hallmark of medical men. But the doctor could do nothing, even after Kovaliov offered to pay handsomely.

“Believe me,” said the doctor . . . “that I never work for mercenary motives; that is opposed to my principles and my science. It is true that I accept a fee for my visits, but that is simply to avoid wounding my patients by refusing it” (492)

– thus exhibiting the disdain for money that is another hallmark of medical men.

So there things stood. The ordinary had failed to repair/mitigate the exceptional, and Kovaliov’s nose remained resolutely, perhaps defiantly, perhaps even petulantly apart from his face. Of course there was talk. It was publicly rumored that the nose of one Major Kovaliov had been seen here, no, it was there, or certainly elsewhere, walking independently around St. Petersburg. People flocked to the indicated locations, hoping to glimpse this wonder. All were disappointed [however], and not a few ended their quest by denouncing the whole story as preposterous and out of harmony with the present state of enlightenment.

And then, for no reason and with no warning, and in some mysterious way, on the morning of the seventh of April, Kovaliov’s nose reappeared on Kovaliov’s face, where, one might even say, it had always belonged. And there it remained. Kovaliov could reappear in public, continue his search for an appropriate position and a wealthy wife, and resume his accustomed place on the Nevsky Prospect. He even went so far as to buy himself the ribbon of some order, though he belonged to none. The rent in the natural law had repaired itself, which does not always happen, and had done so precisely as it had appeared: for no reason, with no notice, for no cause, and with no explanation. As must always occur, the ordinary had triumphed and the laws of nature were entirely restored.

Gogol concludes his tale with comment about place and the relationships between the ordinary and the supernatural.

So this is the strange event that occurred in the northern capital of our spacious empire! Only now, on thinking it all over, we perceive

that there is a great deal that is improbable in it. Apart from the fact that it certainly is strange for a nose supernaturally to leave its place and to appear in various places in the guise of a civil councilor – how was it that Kovaliov did not grasp that he could not advertise about his nose in a newspaper office? (497)

How indeed? Here Gogol baldly states his opinion, implicit throughout the tale, that all is reversed in St. Petersburg. In “the northern capital of our spacious empire” the things that required explanation were the ordinary and the everyday, while the wondrous, the supernatural, the incomprehensible could be expected to occur as a matter of course. In St. Petersburg, the wondrous and the supernatural *is* the ordinary, while the truly incomprehensible is what happens to everyone every day. Reversal of the magical into the ordinary was the realism of St. Petersburg alone.

And yet, in spite of it all . . . are there not absurd things everywhere? – and yet, when you think it over, there really is something in it. Despite what anyone may say, such things do happen – not often, but they do happen.

II

“The Nose” was the exception; most of Gogol’s magical realism, both for St. Petersburg and the provinces, involved divine or, more usually, demonic intervention. Demonic intervention in the ordinary course of the natural world appears on three levels in “A Bewitched Place,” the short concluding tale in the second *Dikanka* volume. Presented as “a true story told by the Sexton,” and thus, one must suppose, hardly open to doubt, at least on the existential level, it recounted both the ordinary and the exceptional in the life of the narrator’s grandfather. “Grandad” planted a patch of vegetables and melons by the roadway so he could sell them to wagon drivers and converse with them about the news of the day. The merchants with their wagons were “people, you know, who have seen life: if one of them wants to tell you anything, you would do well to perk up your ears, and to Grandad it was like dumplings to a hungry man” (199).

The news of the outside world, however enticing or strange it might have been, was as nothing compared to the wonders of the small patch of bare land next to the garden of melons and cucumbers. The bare patch proved to be the antithesis of joy. While the boys danced during a visit by some wagoners, Grandad's "legs wouldn't keep still; it was as though something was tugging at them" (200). The old man wanted to dance, to impress the merchants and draymen.

Well, there is no denying that he did dance; he couldn't have danced better if it had been with the Hetman's wife.

...

But as soon as he had got halfway through the dance and wanted to do his best and cut some more capers, his feet wouldn't lift from the ground, no matter what he did!

...

Whatever he did – he couldn't do it, and he didn't do it! His legs were stiff as though made of wood. (200-201)

Grandad knew immediately the nature of the problem: "Look, the place is bewitched, look it is a spell of Satan! The enemy of mankind has a hand in it!"

Perhaps this was said to avoid disgrace in front of the merchants, dealers, and drayers, nothing unreasonable in that. But, no sooner had Grandad offered his explanation, and heard someone laugh, than, right in the middle of daylight, everything changed. The daylight, the garden, the merchants were all gone, and Grandad was in a nighttime landscape, partly familiar and partly composed of trees and buildings from other places. Wandering through recognized shapes arranged in a surreal manner, Grandad found a grave, and the Devil's treasure. He marked the place, and when dawn came, Grandad started out to find the treasure. He found the copse of trees, the parth, the priest's dovecote, but lost the barn. Then he found the barn but lost the dovecote. "'You damned Satan, may you never live to see your children!' he cried. And the rain came down in buckets" (202). The next day he returned to the bare patch and plunged his spade into it, cursing the place as he did. Again the

familiar shapes shifted, again he found barn, dovecote, and the path, as well as a branch he had left to mark the treasure. He began to dig, saw a cauldron, and muttered: “Ah, you darling, here you are!” (204). First a bird, then a sheep, and lastly a bear repeated Grandad’s comment. Terrified, Grandad turned and saw the Devil himself: snout, lips, red eyes and all. He almost fled, but did not. He worked the heavy cauldron out of the earth and hauled it home. “Well now, it wasn’t gold – it was filth, slop, I am ashamed to say what it was” (205).

Who could explain that? Grandad never did, but merely cursed the Devil. Skeptics might blame the whole episode on vodka, but, if that is one’s opinion, consider this. The land was later leased to some Cossacks, who grew wonderful melons, but not on the bare patch: “They may sow it properly, but there’s no saying what it is that comes up: not a melon – not a pumpkin – not a cucumber, the Devil only knows what to make of it” (206).

For Gogol, the rent in the natural law and order that could reasonably be attributed to the Devil never really closed. The memory of horror and confusion always remained as a souvenir of the genuinely real world, the magical world of cause rather than the ordinary, seemingly real world of mere effect. And Grandad, a genuine folk hero, understood the relationship between the two worlds. He held to the faith, and remained always alert to the wiles of the Devil. The Devil always lies, he told his grandsons, and can never be trusted. When the crisis came, and the Devil scrambled the natural world, Grandad received cosmic justice, an occasion so unusual that a parable, such as this one, was told about it. Grandad received the reward from the “enemy of mankind” that the honest ought, a cauldron of filth, for such are the Devil’s gifts. For Chartkov, the painter in Gogol’s “The Portrait” (1835, 1842), who loved neither God nor his art, the Devil’s reward was far worse; it was gold, and the Devil’s gold is never free.

“A Bewitched Place,” therefore, falls into the chronologically early and substantially religious form of magical realism, where the fundamental reality is the Devil, and the natural law is merely a veil over truth. We recall the second book of the *Aeneid*, where Aeneas can suddenly see *all* of reality, and discovers that it is not men but the gods who are destroying

Troy. So it is with Gogol's tales; the magical realism itself is clear enough, but what is the realism and what is the magic is always the question.

III

As its name so artlessly shows, the critical concept of magical realism is exemplary of a modern analytical and secular culture, which, at its core, is essentially Aristotelian. The form is in the thing itself, the sum of its attributes and functions. Reality, while often complex and not easily understood, is still quotidian, lawful, and repetitive. Purpose is occluded, increasingly so as the ordinary describes reality. Departures from the ordinary, when used as literary device in magical realism, acquire two related and salient characteristics. The ordinary is extended in time and remains physically and existentially dominant, while departures into the realm of magic are irregular, exceptional, and to be understood as contrast, functioning in the Horatian capacity of *utile*.⁵ Secondly, the nature of magic, as indicated by a name usually reserved for the fanciful, is unimportant, perhaps even irrelevant, since only the ordinary is "real" and the didactic thrust of the tale is toward illustrating the nature of the ordinary.

Nikolai Gogol, when he employed the usual and supernatural, stood apart from these two consequences of an Aristotelian and secular magical realism. For Gogol, the "magical" occurrences, while irregular, are also infrequent, and need to be understood as important in themselves, rather than functioning as mere contrast to, and illustration of, the dominant ordinary. Further, Gogol, being deeply religious, participated in a Platonic world view that regarded the spiritual, the inexplicable by nature, and the distorted, hence "magical," as the primary and significant reality, while the ordinary and routine was held to be of lesser importance, both to God and humanity. What has been considered as magic by moderns was a glimpse of the divine or the demonic for Gogol.

The consequences in this reversal of polarity of the two basic elements in magical realism, the ordinary and the violation of natural law, may be seen in the structure of Gogol's fiction. Since for Gogol the divine or demonic, the hidden but powerful world of the eternal (*kairos*), was primary, the tales revolved around the exceptional. Occasionally, the

rent in the natural law, which was always subordinate to the hidden world, repaired itself and vanished. Major Kovaliov's nose would remain on his face. Most often, the rent in the natural law only receded from present vision; the divine and demonic was always there and would always reappear. The enchanted place remained forever possessed, though that fact would be made manifest to different people in different ways. The lights of St. Petersburg would never show things as they really were, though Akaky Akakievich and Lieutenant Pirogov understood the falsehood differently. Eternity stood behind Gogol's tales and tied them together, sometimes by implication, often by description. The readers, like Kovaliov and Piskarev, would, of course, see different aspects of this underlying reality.

The primacy of the eternal (*kairos*) over the visible and ordinary (*chronos*) gives Gogol's tales an oblique relationship to modern magical realism. Modern magical realism is designed and understood to give insight and perspective on the changing world of the ordinary by adding distance that can come in no way other than by piercing the natural law. Gogol's magical realism, we suggest, ought to be understood as placing the ordinary world of change and shadow within its necessary divine and/or demonic context. The actions are human but the context is eternal, and it is the eternal rather than the human that must be understood. Gogol's world is never far from that of Saint Serafim of Sarov.

Notes

¹ The story of the levitation over the grass is told in E[lena] Kontsevich. *Prep.[odobnyi] Serafim Sarovskii Chudotvorets*. Forestville, Calif., St. Elias Publications, 1981: 37. Czar Alexander I's visit to Serafim is told in Louis-Albert Lassus o.p. *Le staretz Séraphim de Sarov. Joie et Lumière*. Paris, O.E.I.L., 1984: 44-46.

The appellation Tsar of All Russia was first applied to Ivan the Terrible. Tsar "of all the Russias" is, in truth, a mistranslation propagated in English by translators who mistook the medieval Russian singular for the plural. Alexander I, a modern tsar, was by title Emperor by the grace of God of all Russia, Moscow, Kiev, Vladimir, and Novgorod, Tsar of Kazan,

Astrakhan, Poland, and Siberia, etc.; thus, the plural “of all the Russias” includes Great, Little, and White Russias. It is a happy accident, and we welcome it.

² Nikolai Gogol, *The Collected Tales and Plays of Nikolai Gogol*, trans. Constance Garnett, ed. Leonard J. Kent (New York: Pantheon, 1964), 20. Further references to Gogol’s works will be given parenthetically in the text as page numbers to this edition.

³ Sholem Asch, *Three Cities*, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (N.Y.: Putnam, 1933), 4-5. Mikhail Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita* attributed the same psychic consequences to the new capital, Moscow.

⁴ A collegiate assessor was eighth on the Table of Ranks, the civil-service equivalent of a major in the army. Kovaliov was lower middle management.

⁵ Horace, *Ars poetica*, l. 343.