

CORRUPTION, FUTILITY AND MADNESS: RELATING GOGOL'S PORTRAYAL OF BUREAUPATHOLOGY TO AN ACCOUNTABILITY ERA

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Abstract

This paper explores the insights literature can bring to administrative and bureaucratic critique, focusing on the work of Nikolai Gogol. Gogol's satire of bureaucracy presages many subsequent social science analyses, presenting a severe indictment of bureaucracy as a rigid and impersonal state machine producing meaninglessness, absurdity, and tragedy. These encompass the institutional level and fundamental ruptures in society caused by a surfeit of bureaucracy in "The Nose." On a more psychological level, "The Overcoat" explores the effects of bureaucratization on the individual, portraying the alienation, futile activity and servility caused in lower level functionaries through problems of loss of identity, the absence of meaningful work, and a lack of separation between public and private life. This paper uses Gogol's work to intensify and sharpen an exploration of the pathological responses of educational administrators and policy makers to an accountability era of burgeoning bureaucracy.

Keywords

Educational administration, leadership, bureaucracy, aesthetic critique

Introduction

Literature has always engaged with social policy, used to heighten awareness of and provoke resistance to injustice, including oppression of individuals and groups through public administration. Examples include Dickens' novels attacking child labour laws and Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*, racial discrimination. Russian literature has played a

relatively strong socio-political role, serving as a source of thought and means of critical expression even under strict censorship during Tsarist and Soviet periods. This article explores the insights in Gogol's critiques to illuminate the effects of bureaucracy on public servants and systems, focussing on what numerous commentators have analysed as the tensions and pathologies in the administration of education (Ball, 2003; 2008; Bottery, 2004). As educational administrators are increasingly 'overlooked - in the double sense of social surveillance and psychic disavowal - and, at the same time, [are] over determined' (Bhaba, 2005, p.13), this study demonstrates how literature can provide a visceral experience of nuances, culture, and relationships, engaging not just the intellect but also the emotions, and provide a means of understanding the effects of bureaucracy, including those that dehumanise and potentially result in maladministration or pathological behaviour. This application adopts as axiomatic the primacy of the human, and human rights and responsibilities.

Russian literature is notable for a long preoccupation with administrative systems and bureaucrats including work of the well known such as Chekov and Tolstoy but also lesser known writers such as Bek and Platonov. During the 1830s, Gogol joined this tradition. Controversy over his writing only surfaced in 1836 when *The Inspector General* was performed resulting in many protests against his satirical portrayal of "provincial mismanagement and corruption" (Terras, 1991, p. 255) His writing is still considered a potent source of subversive expression.

Among the many themes he covered, a critique of bureaucracy and the bureaucratic mentality appears in a number of his writings, two of which are discussed in this paper. Gogol had authoritative experience from which to write, having served for a short time as a minor civil servant (Terras, 1985, p. 174). His critique of the bureaucratic reflects a concern for the "little man" and the sordid work environments they inhabited. Gogol often wrote in a comic mode leading towards either the fantastic or the grotesque, using the external world to represent characters' inner and psychological life, for example, the overcoat as a

metaphor (Peace, 1992, pp. 198-9) of the perspective, values, and tragedy of the main character. Gogol's frequent use of clothing for comic emphasis and thematic representation is most suitable for administrative studies corresponding to aesthetic critiques of status in conveying organisational authority and rank. Gogolian devices also include descriptive names, characterisation through speech habits, and extended similes (Peace, 1992, p. 212). The literary text has to be handled differently than social science writings, given such rhetorical devices as symbolism and metaphor, and particularly applicable to Gogol, the role of satire and the grotesque. The two stories selected here are allegories of bureaucratic life, much like Kafka's writings, and equally relevant to educational bureaucracies.

Bureaucracy, Pathology, and Performativity

There is a long history of humanistic bureaucratic critique, beginning with Weber's characterisation of a "lifeless machine" of "congealed spirit" (1994, p. 158) and for whom modern society is characterised by 'disenchantment,' meaning the retreat and displacement of ultimate values from public life, and a rationalisation of all intellectual, political, economic, social, and cultural activities. They generally centre on the degree to which bureaucracy inevitably creates a range of pathologies, irrespective of the individuals functioning within them (Bozeman & Rainey, 1998). Caiden (1991) identifies 175 in the most comprehensive listing. While pathologies may result from bureaucratic systems, there is also recognition that bureaucracies are human constructions, resulting from certain types of interaction (see Weber 1968), the recruitment and support of particular personalities, and their consequent effect on new members. Some pathologies produce a slavish and compulsive adherence to regulations, obsessive defence of physical space and personal status, increasing distance from colleagues as a means of disguising anxiety about processes outside the individual's understanding or competence (Thompson, 1961), increasingly futile attempts at control by heavy insistence on receiving proliferating information to no end (Grumet, 1991; Hood, 1995), an existentialist loss of any sense of public meaning, and a catastrophic destruction of relationships with others. What remains is 'alienation, anomie

and insecurity, and pessimism and distrust' (Bozeman & Rainey, 1998, p. 172). 'Predator interests' (Hood, 1995, p. 95) intensify and feed off the spiralling distress, for example, demanding or providing ever more detailed verbal and written accounts of actions and outcomes.

Numerous commentators have identified some pathologies as linked to global trends in education in recent decades (Avis, 2003; Ball, 2003; Deem, 1998). Taking the UK as an example, Bush (2008) depicts the classic bureaucratic position embodied in the 1998 Education Reform Act by quoting management consultants, Coopers and Lybrand, who advised the national government on how to implement site based management of schools:

Good management requires the identification of management units for which objectives can be set and resources allocated; the unit is then required to manage itself within those resources in a way which seeks to achieve the objectives; the performance of the unit is monitored and the unit is held to account for its performance and for its use of funds. (1988, para 1.5)

The results of such bureaucratic rationality promoted through the New Public Management ideology have been examined in academic literature ever since, evident in research exploring the second and third of Ball's (2008, p. 215) three '*policy technologies*: the market, managerialism and performativity'. The intention may have been to reduce incompetence, maladministration, and waste (Karl, 1963); however, the cost includes, amongst much else, growing public distrust of policy and public servants, previously unthinkable levels of surveillance of educators and educational organisations, burgeoning stress and anxiety, and a large rise in technological roles to nurture the bureaucratic processes of education (Ball, 2003). Making sense has been replaced with making rules (Simkins, 2005). As Ball argues, all this 'does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are' (2003, p. 215). It is to Gogol we turn for an understanding of who we

are and who we have become, uniting through the use of literature, the personal and experiential, the emotional and the spiritual

The Nose

Gogol (1995) deliberately opens his story with a situation that is grotesque, implausible, and unexplained. A barber, taking breakfast with his wife, cuts open a roll and finds within it a human nose. His wife immediately assumes that he is in some sense responsible. The intrusion of the extraordinary into a mundane process of everyday life is met not by a rational reflection on the causes of the phenomenon, or a considered admission or rejection of the barber's complicity, but an assumption of guilt as a convenient shortcut to begin immediate planning to avert disastrous punishment. The nose is identified as belonging to Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov, a senior member of the local bureaucracy. There is a complete dissociation from feeling which might connect events to other human beings. The owner of the nose is not pitied and there is no concern about the meaning of a lost nose to the nose's owner. He is viewed only as a holder of senior status, and as such, a potential dispenser of retribution.

The absence of causality is accepted unquestioningly; human responsibility is irrelevant. Rather, the intention is to find means to avoid consequences. The nose is to be hidden somewhere 'perhaps stuffing it behind the curbstone by the gates or inadvertently dropping it as he walked along' (1998, p. 38). The narrator also confines himself to describing events, thoughts, and feelings as if the individual and in some sense the surrounding world are amoral, instinctive, and unconnected to society or social rules. Only avoidance of responsibility and punishment and the acquisition of symbolic or material advantage drive human activity. Here there is no negative avoidance of morality, or a positive decision to act wrongly. The world in which a nose can be found in a roll is one where the rules of causality and responsibility have ceased to exist. The current dilemma floats free of any preceding action or relevance to others. One might interpret events as dream like, borne of

fears, yet the story is rooted in the detail of everyday life and apart from the central implausible event, seems rather to communicate a sense of normality. However, there is also irony as the apparent normality is in tension with the reader's expectations of what constitutes normal social behaviour. It is through this vehicle of satiric allegory that Gogol demonstrates the illusion created by bureaucracy by behaviour which is a perverted and inverted construction of normal social reality and yet is accepted as proper.

Kovalyov, on discovering 'instead of a not unbecoming nose of moderate proportions, a ridiculous, empty smooth space' (1998, p. 41) is concerned only that this might lose him a potential bride who represents not love, but capital. The nose, however, is spotted, having metamorphosed into a person of higher rank. When confronted, the nose denies the possibility of belonging to Kovalyov on the grounds that he is hierarchically junior. In despair, Kovalyov attempts to advertise in the local newspaper asking whoever catches the nose to return it to him. The newspaper clerk refuses on the grounds that he would become a laughing stock. A more rational response intrudes into the grotesque. The nose, once again in the shape of a nose, is captured and returned to Kovalyov but cannot be reattached to his face. Some time later, and, as inexplicably as it had appeared in the roll, the nose reappears on the Kovalyov's face.

How does one respond to the implausibility, lack of causality, the irrationality of both the central event and the response of both the barber and Kovalyov? On the face of it the situation appears rather like absurd drama, where logic is that of dreams and objects fill the space of psychological or moral void. Here this does not seem to be the case: the absurdity of the situation is used to underpin and emphasise the seemingly mundane and everyday reactions of the human beings in a moral vacuum, the propensity of status to attach itself to anything, however unlikely, and the primary motivation of the protagonists to maintain a position that avoids punishment and continues to accrue reward. Relationships with others are based on value exchange and avoidance of emotional connection.

Gogol's symbolic story has resonance with experience of educators currently struggling with bureaucratic systems. The emotional dislocation from the real world where events may hurt others and people are more than ciphers symbolic of advantage or disadvantage to be gained, is evident in the story. Blackmore has explored how Australian principals are driven to do anything required to maintain advantage or sometimes survival for their school. One believed 'I will do anything I have to to save my school' (2004, p. 452), even where this meant inflicting harm on other schools in the area. This was translated into a willingness, if necessary, to pass detriment to children 'they stamp on us so we stamp on kids' (2004, p. 453). Jeffery (2002) also depicts relations between teachers and children resulting from inspection and their bureaucratic processes, where creativity and mutual dependency have been replaced with a necessity to be seen to perform, and where supplying whatever is necessary to children as correct matters most. It is not the implications of a missing nose that count but the imperative to restore it and so present, literally, the right face. The destruction of meaningful relations is also depicted:

... [a teacher is] not working *with* the children any more, I'm working *at* the children and it's not a very pleasant experience. There is this feeling of being alienated from it all, divorced from it all. (p. 454)

Jeffrey also presents evidence of the demise of collegial and equitable relationships between staff and between staff and local authority or district personnel. Status differentials are heightened and interchange is reduced to giving an account, conformity to expectations, standards and outcomes. Mutual sense making has departed in favour of hierarchically driven account giving.

Gogol's story distils such experiences in a single narrative, pathologies of bureaucracy, communicating the anguish of a morally decentred world, not through the communication of emotion, but by a demonstration of its erasure.

The Overcoat

'The Overcoat' (1842), one of the greatest short stories in literary history, focuses on two interdependent levels of administrative systems: the corruption of higher echelons whose interests and power are reflected in the perks of privilege, and the dehumanisation of functionaries through mindless drudgery.

The main character, Akaky Akakyevich Bashmachkin, has served as a copying clerk for thirty years, whose life and identity are circumscribed by the tedious and numbingly routine work he has performed. This 'hero' type, the copying clerk, became emblematic for many writers critical of modernising societies in which the majority of its workers are reduced to a lumpenproletarian existence, a theme explored by Dickens, Balzac, and Dostoevsky. For many Russian interpreters, 'The Overcoat' is a "study in human existence as it approaches nonexistence" (Terras 1991: 259). All of the major themes in the modernity critique appear: 'urban impersonality, rigid bureaucracy, thwarted desire'.

Akakyevich is unremarkable as a civil servant: as a 'perpetual titular councillor' he is located in the middle ranks of the bureaucracy (1965: 234-5). His arrival in the department is not remembered, he sits in his position as others come and go, and is not noticed - he is literally the anonymous civil servant. He is used by his colleagues as a source of humour, who exercise as rife a petty brutality and inhumanity as in 'The Nose', however, he remains passive in the face of such bullying. To his superiors, his existence is acknowledged only in a 'frigidly despotic' manner (1965: 235). Akakyevich's humanity is so reduced that his only source of pride comes from the shape of certain letters he endlessly produces. His work is a labour of love, but he cannot rise above copying functions. Even his home life is an extension of work: he continues copying there out of habit or self-satisfaction.

From an existential perspective, virtually meaningless work is done in which the contents appear to be irrelevant and only the status of the worker matters. It is difficult not to regard

Akakyevich as self-debased, engendering pity in his colleagues rather than respect - the ultimate conquest of the bureaucratic over the human spirit. The effects of a top-down bureaucratic authority, including the educational, have little to offer apart from a rigid adherence to technical means that have substituted for end values, not far removed from current conditions under the accountability regime of the New Public Management.

Akakyevich's only love, other than meticulous copying, is expressed for a new overcoat, a love for an object instead of a person representing his inner deadness (Peace 1992: 219). The details of his acquisition and loss of the coat, causing the heartbreak that kills him, are significant in portraying many of the bureaupathologies indicative of dehumanisation. Salaries are barely above subsistence level, requiring humiliating daily sacrifices in order to make any kind of major purchase, or even carry on an active social life. 'Left utterly defenceless' against bitter winter (1965: 240), these petty functionaries must do with threadbare coats, a dramaturgical indication of their relatively low ranking, in Akakyevich's case, so rotten that even patching is impossible. Only in dehumanised condition can a man, like Akakyevich, transform sacrifices of food for a coat into an enrichment: 'His whole existence indeed seemed now somehow to have become fuller, as though he had got married' (1965: 249), eventually serving as the object of an obsessive compulsion.

Akakyevich is robbed of his coat late on the day he received it, forcing him to avail himself of the only existing remedy: useless appeals to bureaucratic authority. His first encounter, with the district police commissioner, is not unlike that one can experience in a school district or senior university administrative office where officials wield a petty use of power by forcing one to wait upon their inclination and an inattention to the central problem, instead occupying themselves with trivial details and demands for proof of ownership that are nonexistent, essentially techniques for avoiding responsibilities. The only recourse for Akakyevich is a 'Very Important Person', who could effect a solution through the influence network. This personage is devoted to increasing his importance - instituting protocols that impose servility on his staff and complex procedures for admittance by visitors - 'anxious to

ape every one else and ... imitate his superior' in order to project a grand and impressive presence (1965: 260). Akakyevich's attempts simply leave him embarrassed, despondent, and demeaned. Shaken by the experience, he falls into a fever, hallucinates, raves, dies, and is buried, leaving no trace of his existence, apart from stories that the ghost of a government clerk haunted the Kalinkin Bridge, intent on recovering overcoats and ceasing only when it was able to strip the Very Important Person of his. In tragic form, Akakyevich pursues a value external to himself that proves to be a phantom for which the price is his loss of identity to a ghostly impression of a human being.

'The Overcoat' and The Nose examine a bureaucratic world of alienation and mystification in which there is no personal value and logic beyond survival at the lower end and self-interest at the top. They portray the human cost for the individual of many of the bureaucratic and bureaupathological traits that can infect administration, when individual identity is lost through the mechanical carrying out of tasks and immoral and amoral response to bureaucratic demands. Gogol's stories shock us by demanding visceral recognition that his world and ours is as new where political and social values are reduced to illusion.

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