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Review: “The Nose”: A Stylistic and Critical Companion to Nikolai Gogol’s Story

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pronunciation of Russian words using free online programs. I agree with the author that students can check their pronunciation with free online programs and imitate difficult sounds from the internet. However, audio material is more than just listening and imitating. The textbook would benefit from listening comprehension and dictation exercises.

In "Preface for Teachers," the author does not specify the audience. Instead, she states that the textbook has a flexible format and enough material for twenty lessons. The book can be used as a required textbook, or instructors can "pick and mix" some material from it. Indeed, the book contains explanations, exercises, and activities that instructors can use at the beginning of university-level courses to help students learn the alphabet and master reading in Russian. However, using the entire textbook in a North American university seems problematic because of the shortage of contact hours and the fast pace of Russian programs. For example, some programs have as few as forty-two contact hours per term. Given the limited time, it appears this book will not produce similar proficiency outcomes compared to other books after twenty lessons. However, the textbook would be a great addition for supplemental or noncredit Russian language classes that focus on reading and conversation skills.

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Blank, Ksana. 2021. "The Nose": A Stylistic and Critical Companion to Nikolai Gogol's Story. Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press. 238 pages.

Ksana Blank's companion to Gogol's "The Nose" is an excellent new resource for students of Russian language and literature. The book consists of two sections: the first, a series of annotations to the story's text, and the second, several short essays on a wide range of related topics. Finally, readers are provided with a carefully selected bibliography of secondary sources, which will be particularly valuable for those new to Gogol research and criticism.

Blank's book truly shines in its first section. The annotations to the text are remarkably thorough and identify allusions, irony, and colloquialisms that the casual reader may miss and the second-language

student may struggle with even while paying great attention. These annotations are informed by a deep understanding of the historical and social context of the work; they not only identify interesting linguistic moments, but also point out ways in which the nineteenth-century Russian reader would have understood Gogol's text. For example, the first annotation to part two of "The Nose" notes that not only does Gogol play with the double meaning of the verb *vskochit'* in his phrase "*pryshchik, kotoryi vcherashnego vchera vskochil u nego na nosu,*" but that in mentioning a pimple on the nose, Gogol calls to mind syphilis's ubiquitous presence in nineteenth-century European society and the disease's tendency to destroy the nose (Blank, 63). These thorough annotations are supported by the best of the book's essays, "Language Game as the Engine of the Plot," which is the concluding section of part one.

In this essay, Blank argues that Wittgenstein's "language game" is a key concept in understanding "The Nose" and that it is Gogol's play with idiom that drives the short story's narrative. After a short introduction to the idea of a "language game," Blank proceeds to separate the idioms found in "The Nose" into five groups, ranging from those expressions directly pertaining to the body part itself to the most complex aspect of Gogol's language game, his use of "literalized collocations." This section is an extraordinarily detailed look at Gogol's language. It illuminates new aspects of "The Nose" and also provides a model for future scholarship on Gogol. In it, Blank provides a reading that is as valuable to a Gogol scholar as it is to a new student of his works.

In part two, Blank steps away from part one's focus on Gogol's language, and explores other ways of understanding his text. She pays special attention to the various forms of humor that can be seen in "The Nose," devoting sections to joke, satire, mockery, and the absurd. Along with these sections are examinations of folk superstitions, castration anxiety, and receptions and adaptations of story. While Blank states in her note "Instead of a Conclusion" that in writing about these interpretations she has tried to "present them impartially," she has not shrunk from providing evaluations of their merits (Blank, 219). In her section on castration anxiety, for example, she writes that "the psychoanalytic approach to 'The Nose' is long outdated" and further argues that "the psychoanalytic method draws our attention to the author's private life and the caches of his psyche. With Gogol, who had such a complex

personality, this task is hardly feasible, however” (Blank, 167). The moments where Blank gives her own opinions of these arguments are among the most interesting of part two and will, hopefully, be expanded in further writing.

“*The Nose*”: *A Stylistic and Critical Companion* could benefit from a minor improvement, which will hopefully be made in future works in the Companions to Russian Literature series. The work includes a full text copy of the story in question. As Blank notes, this text is included so as to “make the use of annotations more convenient” (Blank, 9). Moreover, her analysis of the text’s idioms will be most valuable to the English-speaking reader. This being the case, it would be helpful either to orient the text directly toward the second-language student, and thus include accent marks and other aids in reading, or to provide a facing-page translation or gloss. For the Russianist, the text as given is more than adequate; for the new student of Gogol’s language, it is opaque.

Blank’s work could, as mentioned above, benefit from elaboration. This companion provides tantalizing glimpses into a wider Gogol analysis, one focusing on idiomatic *skaz*. It would be fascinating to see how Blank’s own argument that the manipulation of idiomatic expressions drives the plot of “*The Nose*” interacts with the other interpretations she provides in part two. Her argument itself could also be expanded, and readers of this companion will, no doubt, appreciate that further work.¹

On the whole, “*The Nose*”: *A Stylistic and Critical Companion* is a helpful resource for students of Russian literature as well as for scholars new to Gogol criticism. Its attention to style and language is especially refreshing. It provides a much-needed close reading of the story that will hopefully inspire other, similarly detailed analyses of Gogol’s works. It will be a valuable source for teachers of literature as well as for language teachers hoping to introduce upper-year students (especially those at the Advanced and Superior proficiency levels) to colloquialisms, proverbs, and, broadly, idiomatic speech.

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¹ This expansion would also allow more thorough support of some of the interesting claims in “Language Game as the Engine of the Plot” that are not fully explored in this work, such as when Blank argues that in the doctor’s examination of Kovalev, a double entendre implies that the doctor “examines Kovalev as if he is not a human being but an animal, thus behaving very unprofessionally” (Blank, 91).