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Back to the Future of Irish Studies

Festschrift for Tadhg Foley



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Noses and Monotheism

MAUD ELLMANN

Molly Bloom, musing on Blazes Boylan's 'big red brute of a thing', wonders why 'his nose is not so big'.¹ Her association between these male protuberances has a venerable history: in ancient Rome, both women and men followed long-nosed men into the baths to observe Ovid's precept, 'noscitur e naso quanta sit hast viro'.² This practice of judging 'a cock by his comb' has persisted to the present day. Yet if popular culture identifies the nose with phallic prowess, Freud identifies it with the feminine, the animal, and the primitive. James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, invest the nose with the power to disturb the boundaries between male and female, human and animal, evolution and degeneration. Beginning with a brief excursion into the nineteenth-century science of nasology, the present essay examines the repression of the nose in Freudian psychoanalysis, and concludes with an analysis of Joyce and Woolf's attempts to reinvigorate the denigrated 'world of smell'.³

The cock is usually hidden, whereas the comb is usually exposed, and has therefore become a byword for the obvious – 'as plain as the nose on your face'. The nose sticks out, but it is visible only to others, not to its owner. In this sense the nose epitomizes Lacan's axiom that 'the subject is a subject only by virtue of his subjection to the field of the Other'.⁴ Another mark of this subjection to the Other is the sense of shame, which is often

1 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1986), 145–6. Further references to this edition will be cited in the text.

2 Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (London: Routledge, 1991), 188.

3 Virginia Woolf, *Flush: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 86.

4 Quoted in Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 196.

associated with the nose: in the 'Proteus' episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus reminds himself, 'You prayed to the Blessed Virgin that you might not have a red nose' (129–30). This red nose could be interpreted as a cause, symptom, or metaphor of shame. Reddening, bulging, oozing, snuffling, the nose combines the most embarrassing traits of both male and female genitalia, forever needing to be wiped, blown, picked, and powdered in order to elude the shame of self-exposure.

The shameful nose has inspired a rich comic tradition, prolific as the 'schnoz factory' featured in *Saturday Night Live*, an Asian sweatshop where exploited workers manufacture silly noses by the millions. John Kerrigan has traced 'a train of highly verbal comedy' which delights in the nose's 'linguistic brio, its capacity to detach itself from the visage and wander about as a quibbling signifier'.⁵ One of the most famous schnozzes in English literature is Tristram Shandy's, crushed at birth by Dr Slop's new-fangled forceps. To forestall lewd inferences, Tristram insists that 'by the word *Nose*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work where the word *Nose* occurs, I declare by that word I mean a *Nose*, and nothing more nor less'.⁶ Sometimes a nose is just a nose – but Tristram's insistence only makes the reader more suspicious of this organ's innocence.

Always verging on the comic, the grotesque, and the obscene, noses prove acceptable only when they can be 'overlooked'. A noticeable nose, whatever its proportions, tends to be regarded as a blemish. Sander Gilman's *Making the Body Beautiful*, a study of plastic surgery, focuses on the nose because this organ 'provides a basic history of aesthetic procedures across time and space', and also reveals the underlying motivation of aesthetic surgery – 'the desire to "pass"'.⁷ According to Gilman, the history

5 John Kerrigan, 'A Complete History of Comic Noses' in *English Comedy*, ed. Michael Corder, Peter Holland, and John Kerrigan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 242.

6 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 197.

7 Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), xviii.

of the Western European nose divides into two overlapping periods, in which the too-short nose was eventually succeeded by the too-long nose as a locus of anxiety and surgical intervention. In both periods, the nose has been surgically altered to conform to the shape associated with the dominant class. The purpose of rhinoplasty is not to make the nose invisible (an absent nose is even more conspicuous than an eccentric one, as Kovaliov discovers when he wakes up noseless in Gogol's famous story named after this missing organ), but to prevent this protuberance from drawing attention to itself.

As Gilman and other scholars have demonstrated, the history of the nose is bound up with ideologies of race, class, nationality, and gender. The locus classicus of nasology, Eden Warwick's *Notes on Noses* of 1852 (a treatise first brought to my attention by Tadhg Foley), ranks six types of noses in descending order from the Roman through the Greek, Cogitative, Jewish, Snub, and Celestial.⁸ As a general principle, Warwick regards the longer of these noses as superior to the shorter, but he concedes that the Cogitative nose, characterized by wide nostrils, can relieve the sharpness of an aquiline nose. For this reason Falstaff's nose, 'as sharp as a pen,' might have benefited from a course of cogitation.⁹ At the bottom of the scale, the Celestial or upturned nose, despite its heavenward tilt, signifies a moral movement in the opposite direction, indicating 'natural weakness' and a 'mean, disagreeable character' marked by 'petty insolence' (Warwick, 11). Only the Snub nose is more despicable than the Celestial. 'Perhaps the reader expects that we are going to be very funny on the subject of these noses,' Warwick warns. 'But we are not; – far from it. A Snub Nose is to us a subject of most melancholy contemplation. We behold in it a proof of the degeneracy of the human race' (98). According to Warwick:

8 Eden Warwick [George Jabet], *Notes on Noses* (London: Richard Bentley, 1852) [Originally published as *Nasology, or, Hints towards a Classification of Noses*. London: Richard Bentley, 1848], 1. Further references to this edition will be cited in the text.

9 William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, 2:3.

the most highly-organized and intellectual races possess the highest forms of Noses, and those which are more barbarous and uncivilized possess Noses proportionately snub and depressed, approaching the form of the snouts of the lower animals, which seldom or ever project beyond the jaws. Thus the Caucasian races ... which comprise decidedly the most perfect specimens of the human race, are characterized by a Nose Roman or Greek, while the lower divisions, the Mongolian or Pyramidal-headed, and the Negro or Prognathous (protruding-jawed) – than among whom no lower or more debased specimens of humanity subsist – have noses Celestial or Snub, as in the Tartar and Chinese, the Negro and Hottentot nations. (121)

Warwick devotes several pages to the Irish nose, which he ranks midway between the noblest and the most degraded specimens.¹⁰ Although ‘depressed’ by centuries of thralldom, the Irish nose boasts a distinguished pedigree, and still retains potential for amelioration. Warwick therefore recommends that ‘the study of the British Legislature should be “How to get Ireland a Cogitative Nose ...”’ (132). Even though ‘no man can alter the profile of his nose’, he may be able to ‘increase its latitudinal diameter’, thereby developing the flared nostrils characteristic of the thinking man. Milton, for instance, succeeding in broadening his nose by cogitating on the ways on God (61). His example proves that ‘the Mind forms the Nose, and not the Nose the Mind’ (4). For this reason the British should concentrate on cultivating a ‘Cogitative Mind’ among the Irish, which will improve their condition ‘whether or not the attempt succeed in developing their probosces’ (132).

Warwick’s nasal hierarchy, which privileges longer noses over shorter ones, is built entirely on male models, as Lene Østermark-Johansen has observed.¹¹ In the case of women, this hierarchy overturns: a chapter

10 Joseph Orlando Roe, a surgeon in Rochester, New York, used the same classification system in the 1880s, when he developed a procedure for correcting the ‘snub-nose’, which was associated with the Irish profile in this period. Such a nose, Roe argued, was ‘proof of the degeneracy of the human race’, but Roe’s nose-jobs turned the Irish nose into a ‘thing of beauty’, Gilman, *The Jew’s Body*, 185.

11 Lene Østermark-Johansen, ‘The Tragedy of Recession: Broken, Simian and Syphilitic Noses in Nineteenth-Century Art and Physiognomy’ in *Nose Book: Representations of the Nose in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Victoria de Rijke, et al. (London: Middlesex University Press, 1999), 210.

devoted to the ticklish subject of the female nose concedes that Snub and Celestial noses, which are indices of weakness and therefore deplorable in men, may be 'excusable and rather lovable', in women (Warwick, 116). Just as no man would choose a wife who was his intellectual superior, nor would he marry a woman whose nose was larger than his own. Since women are controlled by volatile passions, their eyes and mouths are more expressive than their noses, whose fixity forbids hypocrisy or any kind of artificial feelings (Warwick, 6). In Warwick's view, the steadfastness of men is embodied in their noses, whereas the inconstancy of women is embodied in their lips and eyes.

Thus Warwick associates big noses with manly virtues, equating smaller noses with racial and sexual inferiority. Freud, on the other hand, attributes the rise of patriarchy to the triumph of the eye over the nose. Adopting Darwin's view that the cultural dominance of vision stems from 'man's adoption of an upright posture',¹² Freud argues that the erect male forfeited the sexual stimulus of scent, best appreciated on all fours, in favour of the vertical stimulus of vision.¹³ Standing upright exposed the genitals to view, requiring them to be protected and concealed. As a result of this verticality, the periodic sexual stimulus of smell was gradually subordinated to the constant stimulus of sight. According to Freud, 'the deepest root of the sexual repression that advances along with civilization is the organic defence of the new form of life achieved with man's erect gait against his earlier animal existence'.¹⁴ One consequence of this repression is the taboo against menstruation; another is a general depreciation of the sense of smell, extending to an embargo against all bodily odours. It could be argued that this evolutionary process is recapitulated in childhood when the infant learns to walk, rising from a crawling to an upright posture. At the same time, toilet-training reinforces the denigration of the world of odours by association with the taboo smell of excrement.

12 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (London: John Murray, 1871), 17–18.

13 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, ed. James Strachey, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 21 (London: Vintage, 2001), 99n1.

14 *Ibid.*, 106n3.

Freud also proposes that this process of repression and defence 'is repeated on another level when the gods of a superseded period of civilization turn into demons'.¹⁵ The example he probably has in mind is the Furies, relics of a prior matriarchal order suppressed by the cult of Apollo. This suppression laid the foundations of monotheism, a development attributed by Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* to the rise of imperialism in the ancient world, which established the hierarchy of oneness over multiplicity by banishing the plural spirits of the pagan universe. This argument, extended over two astonishing footnotes to *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), implies a chain of equivalences whereby standing upright = vision = patriarchy = monotheism = oneness = separation = homogeneity, as opposed to the subordinate chain in which four-footedness = smell = matriarchy = polytheism = multiplicity = merger = heterogeneity.

As David Howes has pointed out, the idea that olfaction is animal whereas vision is human, or that men look whereas women smell, is based on ideology rather than biology. Furthermore Freud's 'denial of nasality' may be traced back to his falling-out with Wilhelm Fliess, their friendship having come to grief over a nose. In a book entitled *The Relationship between the Nose and the Female Sexual Organs* (1897), Fliess published his notorious theory that the nose contains genital spots, which swell up with sexual substances that course around the body in periods of twenty-three days for men and twenty-eight days for women. Masturbation, condoms, and coitus interruptus cause these substances to circulate too furiously, producing hysterical disorders. The only permanent cure for hysteria therefore consists of an operation on the turbinate bones on the nose, reinforced by abstention from masturbation.

Freud was sufficiently convinced by Fliess's theory of the naso-genital relationship to become obsessed with his own nose, filling his letters to Fliess with details of its inflammation and discharge. He also embraced Fliess's 'laws of periodicity' to the extent that he worried himself sick about the forecast date of his own death, and other 'critical periods' predicted by Fliess's numerological calculations. In 1895 Freud arranged for Fliess to

15 Ibid., 99n1.

perform his trademark nasal operation on Emma Eckstein, a patient suffering from stomach pains and menstrual problems that Freud attributed to excessive masturbation. Some days after the operation the patient suffered a massive nasal haemorrhage, filling two bowls with pus, and her nose began to emit a fetid odour. The wound continued to haemorrhage until another specialist pulled out of her nose a long string of purulent gauze, which Fliess, in an egregious act of medical negligence, had forgotten to remove. This episode inspired Freud's famous dream of 'Irma's Injection', with its strange scene of Freud and another doctor 'Otto' gazing down a female patient's throat in a laryngeal/gynaecological examination. The Eckstein debacle compelled Freud to detach himself from Fliess, and to reject his collaborator's fanciful theories about periodicity and the nasal aetiology of hysteria. The famous footnotes to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which connect the rise of man to the suppression of the nasal and the periodic, project onto the evolution of the human species Freud's own rejection of Fliess's naso-genital hypothesis.

If Freud denigrates the nose, Joyce restores it to the prominence that it deserves. *A Portrait of the Artist* and *Ulysses* map out a smellscape of the Irish capital, documenting both the foul and the fragrant in loving detail: 'Smells on all sides, bunched together. Each street different smell' (*Ulysses*, 1121–2). In the *Portrait* Stephen Dedalus, chastening his senses in order to expiate his sins, finds it almost impossible to mortify his nose, 'as he found in himself no instinctive repugnance to bad odours whether they were the odours of the outdoor world, such as those of dung or tar, or the odours of his own person among which he had made many curious comparisons and experiments'.¹⁶ Early critics of the *Portrait* deplored its 'preoccupation with the olfactory', objecting in particular to Stephen's 'passion for foul-smelling things'.¹⁷ One reviewer complained that Stephen has 'no continuum, no personality', and that 'thoughts pass through his mind like good or bad

16 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin, 1992), 151.

17 Robert H. Deming, *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage*, vol. 1. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 100, 93.

smells. He has no control of them.' The character is too 'thin-skinned' to keep good thoughts in, or bad thoughts out.¹⁸

Value judgments aside, these critics are correct to point out that Stephen's character is inconsistent, porous, plural. Stephen is a sponge – as his literary and financial debts imply – and his nostrils are particularly prone to infiltration by the other. Smell dissolves the distance between subject and object, since the nose absorbs the very substance of the smelt, and the smell rubs off on the smeller, causing him or her to smell in turn. As an intimate two-way exchange, smell differs markedly from vision, in which the seer and the seen supposedly remain discrete and uninfected by each other. Not so the smeller and the smelt, because the nose cannot breathe without imbibing the aromas of the world around it. In *Ulysses* Stephen thinks about the 'dead breaths I living breathe', the phrase implying that his nostrils are invaded by the exhalations of the past, just as his poems are invaded by influence of his precursors. If Stephen's eyelids have the power to blink the visible away, he has no nose-lids to defend himself against the smellable.

Ulysses opens with Buck Mulligan's memorable image of the snotgreen sea, inspired by Stephen's soiled noserag. This image launches Stephen on a Proustian reverie, in which the snotgreen sea – hailed by Mulligan as 'our mighty mother' – conjures up the bowl of green bile that Stephen's dying mother coughed up from her rotting lungs (85). This train of reminiscence, linking snot with mothers, hints that Stephen – like Freud and Fliess – connects the nasal with the feminine. A similar inference might be drawn from the 'Nausicaa' episode, to which Joyce assigned the organs nose and eye. The first half of the episode, which focuses on Gerty MacDowell, contains twelve references to noses, whereas Bloom's subsequent monologue contains only two. These statistics seem to confirm the Freudian association of the nose with the recumbent female ('she was trembling in every limb from being bent so far back' [727–8]), and the eye with the upright male who ogles her.

18 Quoted in *ibid.*, 110, 90, 97.

But Joyce complicates this opposition, since it is Bloom who does the sniffing in this episode, inhaling his ‘mansmell’ of ‘celery sauce’ after he masturbates (1037, 1041). Gerty, on the other hand, regards the nose as an object of desire, fetishizing its visual appearance as opposed to its capacity to smell. The boy with the bicycle, for instance, has an ‘exquisite nose’ (241), which makes up for having Protestants in his family. Eyeing Bloom’s nose across the beach, Gerty can’t be sure if it is ‘aquiline’ or ‘slightly *retroussé*’ (420). Gerty’s interest in the male nose may stem from the same superstition revealed by Molly when she wonders why Boylan’s nose is ‘not so big’ – but the ‘drawersy’ euphemisms of ‘Nausicaa’ figleaf such innuendos.

In the ‘Proteus’ episode, Stephen concludes his walk on Sandymount Strand by depositing his ‘dry snot’ on a rock, his noserag having been usurped by Mulligan (500). Before depositing this mucous autograph, Stephen glances round ‘rere regardant’ in case his nose-picking has been overseen (503). This gesture indicates that despite his earlier experiment with solipsism, Stephen still believes in other minds enough to be susceptible to nasal shame. At the beginning of the episode, when Stephen meditates the modalities of the visible and the audible, he notably leaves out the smellable, the tasteable, and the touchable. But his snotty post-script redresses this earlier omission, suggesting a belated recognition of the ineluctable modality of the smellable.

In the ‘Sirens’ episode, Bloom reenacts Stephen’s backward glance when he makes sure there is ‘no-one behind’ to hear or smell his climactic fart (1289). ‘I rererepugnosed in rererepugnant ...’ (3057), he later confesses, the stammer recalling Stephen’s ‘rere regardant’ glance in ‘Proteus’. In the dialectical structure of ‘Sirens’, Bloom’s fart enables him to steer a middle course between the modalities of the audible and the visible, which take the form of voice and writing in this episode. Throughout Bloom’s day, the modality of the audible is monopolized by noisy men: the songsters of ‘Sirens’, the orators of ‘Aeolus’, the hectoring Citizen of ‘Cyclops’ with his snarling cur and foulmouthed commentator. Time and again Bloom is lured to shipwreck by the sirensong of Dublin’s drunken vainglorious louts, who are already drowning in noise and alcohol. In ‘Sirens’ Bloom eludes the macho singers by writing a letter to his erotic penpal Martha Clifford, in which he signs his pseudonym Henry Flower with inaudible Greek E’s.

By choosing writing over voice, Bloom behaves like a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*, his Greek E's anticipating the inaudible 'a' that Derrida inserts into 'différance'. Dismissing the singers' 'fiddlefaddle about notes', which Bloom discounts as a failed 'attempt to talk', he champions writing over music (1195–6). But the heroic fart with which he crowns his getaway overrides the opposition between voice and writing, since it bypasses both mouth and pen. Transliterated as 'Ppprrpffrrppffff' (1293), the fart is a kind of rectal sneeze, whose lingering stink corresponds to Stephen's valedictory bequest of snot.

While Stephen's sense of smell predominates in the *Portrait*, Leopold and Molly Bloom provide the central nostrils of *Ulysses*. Real and imaginary odours constantly assail Bloom's nose: the perfume of 'cool waxen fruit' (207), the 'almost no smell' (260) of Martha Clifford's flower, the 'citron-lemon' smell of soap (226), the 'smell of sacred stone' that draws him to the Church (338), the 'cosy smell' of Milly's bathwater (172). To Bloom, women's perfume is 'like a fine fine veil or web they have all over the skin ... like rainbow colours without knowing it' (1019–21). Opposed to these alluring smells are the noxious 'smells of men ... reek of plug, split beer, men's beery piss, the stale of ferment', which destroy Bloom's appetite for lunch in 'Lestrygonians' (670–1).

Helping a blind stripling across the road, Bloom speculates that the blind must have a stronger sense of smell: 'Smells on all sides bunched together ... Each person too. Then the spring, the summer: smells.' (1121–3). Here Bloom's sensitivity to smell enhances his negative capability, his tendency to metamorphose into every creature that he contemplates. In this instance he identifies with the blind man's sense of smell; in 'Hades' he identifies with the sharp-nosed rat, who 'wouldn't care about the smell' of rotting bodies: 'Saltwhite crumbling mush of corpse; smell, taste like raw white turnips' (993–4). By wondering what a corpse would smell like to a rat or fly, Bloom undergoes a temporary transmigration into verminhood.

Molly's nose is even more acute than Bloom's; it is she who first detects the 'smell of burn' emanating from the frying kidney (380). Some of the most lyrical passages of 'Penelope' allude to odours: the smell of rainwater, the smell of lovers, the smell of the sea. Meanwhile Bloom's receptive nose embodies his capacity for empathy: 'yes that was why I liked [Bloom]

because I saw he felt or understood what a woman is,' Molly recalls (678–9). Despite the charms of Boylan's big red brute of a thing, Bloom's nose is more capacious than his rival's. Boylan's nose, as Molly says, 'is not so big' – not big enough to be pervaded by the other, or to incorporate the female or the animal. If smell is associated with embarrassment and shame, it also provides an avenue to intimacy, which depends upon embracing odours, as Bloom does in his 'mad crazy letters' to his wife: 'my Precious one everything connected with your glorious Body everything underlined that comes from it is a thing of beauty and of joy for ever ...' (1176–9). By identifying with his wife, as Joyce himself does in 'Penelope', Bloom noses Molly out and breathes her in. If Freud demotes the nose, along with the female and the animal, to a lower stage of human development, Bloom's nose dissolves the boundaries between male and female, self and other, human and animal, enabling him to travel up and down the scale of evolution.

'They haven't got no noses, / The fallen sons of Eve.' So sings the dog in G. K. Chesterton's 'The Song of Quoodle'. Similarly Woolf's biography of Flush, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel, laments the weakness of the human nose, and celebrates the canine 'world of smell'. The human nose, in contrast to the dog's, 'is practically non-existent':

The greatest poets of the world have smelt only roses on the one hand, and dung on the other. The infinite gradations that lie between are unrecorded. Yet it was in the world of smell that Flush chiefly lived ... He nosed his way from smell to smell; the rough, the smooth, the dark, the golden.¹⁹

Pointing out the striking facial resemblance between Barrett Browning and her pet, Woolf suggests that both the woman poet and her dog are pampered captives of the stifling Victorian interior, kept down by the upright world of patriarchy. Moreover Flush's gender, which is almost as malleable as Orlando's, is determined largely by environment: a Lothario in his rustic youth, Flush is feminized by his allegiance to his urban mistress. Not only does Flush change sex, but he changes into everything he smells, thus evading the egotistical aloofness that Woolf attributes to the masculine mind.

19 Woolf, 86–7.

As Quentin Bell remarks in his biography of Woolf, '*Flush* is not so much a book by a dog lover as a book by someone who would love to be a dog.'²⁰ In particular, Woolf would love to have a doggish nose. 'Where two or three thousand words are insufficient for what we see', Woolf complains, 'there are no more than two words and one-half for what we smell.'²¹ Woolf, like Joyce, uses the nose to reach beyond the limits of the visible and the audible, and to open up the wordless world of smell.

²⁰ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, vol. 2 (London: Hogarth Press, 1972), 175.

²¹ Woolf, 86.