

STORIES FROM THE BORDER OF THE DREAMY AND THE REAL: KAFKA'S *THE METAMORPHOSIS*, GOGOL'S *THE NOSE*, AND ROTH'S *THE BREAST*³¹

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Abstract: The present article contains a comparative analysis of three short fictions, namely Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol's *The Nose*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and Philip Roth's *The Breast*. Attention is paid to the absurd bodily transformations that are central to the stories, though a number of parallels on more abstract levels are pointed out as well. In this connexion, the notion of (relative) visibility resulting from absurd sets of circumstances is discussed in greater detail. It is also suggested that the fanciful subject matters of the stories tally with the structure of the playful storytelling techniques employed by the authors.

Key words: Roth, Kafka, Gogol, metamorphosis, transformation, visibility, absurdity.

Introduction

Besides Swift and Shakespeare, the literature professor David Alan Kepesh, protagonist of Roth's *The Breast* (1972), makes a number of explicit references to Gogol's *The Nose* (app. 1836) and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915)³². In fact, on a more abstract level, there are a number of parallels that connect David Kepesh, Gregor Samsa, and Platon Kuzmich Kovalev, ranging from the protagonists' overall states of mind, through the strictly metaphorical layer of their transformations³³, to their moods and attitudes to the extraordinary situations they have to face. The predicaments they find themselves in are astonishing to say the least, symptomatically dreamy, grotesque, and often – from a scientific viewpoint – absurd. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the protagonists' predicaments are all associated with sleep, rendering the characters confused, distorting normal physiology, and violating the laws of causality and time-space – in addition to those of sense – by establishing the *non-laws* of coincidence. The nonsensical nature of these phenomena leads to certain forms of *invisibility*. An absence of rational explanations (and efforts to rationalise) does not determine the three short fictions only at their start, though. On the contrary, the stories are written in such a way as to test the reader's gullibility and to emphasise their textual credibility (or lack thereof), as a result of which fiction and reality are rendered relative and a dreamy overlap is created.

Analysis

Sleep and awakening are closely related to the absurd metamorphoses in the three stories, which is quite apparent from the authors' numerous references to these natural

³¹ A Slovak version of this paper appeared in a collection of papers published by Prešov University in 2011, entitled "Genologické a medziliterárne štúdie 4 – Prieniky do areálu" (ISBN 978-80-555-0410-0).

³² Roth (1973, pp. 84, 87-88, and 92).

³³ Roth's novella is not the only piece of fiction in the present selection that deals with sexuality. There are a few serious interpretations suggesting that Gogol's *The Nose* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* both have implicitly expressed sexual undertones. For example, Lauren Lydic (2010) points out that Kovalev's nose – when looked upon through the lens of postmodernist parody – can be understood as a phallic symbol (Lydic, 2010, p. 1 ff.). When discussing the peculiarities of father-and-son relationships in Kafka's fiction, Anne Fuchs also touches upon Gregor Samsa's relationship to his father in *The Metamorphosis*: "In Kafka's world the fathers and their delegates do not just punish their sons, they destroy them in order to reinstate their fragile identity as phallically empowered fathers." (Fuchs, 2002, p. 35).

features of human life. At the beginning of *The Metamorphosis*, Kafka's Gregor Samsa wakes "from uneasy dreams" into a rather surprising reality – into an *alien* body or, more precisely, the body of "a gigantic insect" (Kafka, 1952, p. 19)³⁴. The moments of awakening for Gogol's barber Ivan Jakovlevich and collegiate assessor Platon Kuzmich Kovalev are no less astonishing: as soon as the former wakes up and sits down to his kitchen table he discovers, "to his surprise" (Gogol, 1999, p. 166), a human nose in the loaf of bread on the table; the nose belongs to none other than "Major" Kovalev, whose early morning (somewhat narcissistic) anxieties related to a spot on his nose quickly turn into "greatest amazement" when he sees "that instead of a nose he [has] a perfectly smooth place" (Gogol, 1999, p. 168). Last but not least, David Kepesh's metamorphosis into "a mammary gland" happens at night, in his sleep, "between midnight and four A.M." (Roth, 1973, p. 23). For all three authors, then, the phase of sleep marks the origin and the phase of awakening represents the very moment of the surprise related to the absurd phenomenon. It has to be pointed out, though, that the physiological changes described in the stories are only relatively superficial manifestations of these transformations. Echoing Nabokov's words in his lecture on Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation does not end with his morning incarnation into the body of a gigantic insect because Samsa "clings to human memories, human experience" (Nabokov, 1982, §17). In essence, the same holds true for Kovalev (let alone his walking nose) and Kepesh: they both awake into bodies that are significantly different from what they remember them to be, but the bodies are principally confining because, from the viewpoint of subjectivity, the protagonists carry on being human, albeit only with *memories* of the senses of smell (Kovalev) and sight (Kepesh).

The three night-time conversions³⁵ are physiologically absurd and, from the point of view of literary studies, fantastic to say the least. However, they quickly establish themselves as natural in the lives of the affected characters the way such things do, say, in magical realism. (This naturalisation is at its most extreme in Nosov's case³⁶ because he does not even realise who he really is, i.e. who he really is in the world "according to" Kovalev.) However absurd these metamorphoses are, their consequences are obvious and reality (that is to say, the reality "outside" the world of the protagonist that this or that author focuses on) seems to absorb them (or comes to term with them) a lot faster than the central characters themselves: Gregor Samsa's family surprisingly *tolerate* the absurd presence of a gigantic insect; Kepesh's family (esp. his father and his girlfriend) are similarly *tolerant* of Kepesh's new appearance, getting quickly accustomed to the newly emerged situation; and the people around Kovalev are practically almost oblivious to Kovalev's predicament, paying no special attention to the absurd disappearance of his nose. The nature of the transformations is no less absurd considering the fact that, in contrast to Gogol's walking nose and Roth's inertly *reclining* breast, Kafka's multi-legged, crawly vermin³⁷ is actually a *compact* living organism.

³⁴ There has been a great deal of debate over many existing translations of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. It seems that some of the meanings conveyed by Kafka's original German wording get lost or distorted in translation. As an equivalent to "ungeheuren", for example, the English word "monstrous" represents a shift because the primary meaning of the German word is related to size rather than repulsion or ghastliness. The original noun "Ungeziefer" is not quite equivalent to the English word "insect" because the meaning of the German word is more general (suggesting the state of filth as well). For more information, see Preece, 2002, p. 217; Reynaga, 2010, p. 75; Swinford, 2010, p. 211 ff.; or Nabokov, 1982, §19.

³⁵ In Kepesh's case, Roth goes as far as to note that the metamorphosis started off as a pigment change at "midnight, according to the magically minded the time at which transformations take place" (Roth, 1973, p. 13).

³⁶ When Kovalev dictates the wording of his newspaper advertisement (offering a reward for anyone who finds his nose), the advertisement clerk considers the nose Kovalev mentions to be a person whose surname is "Nosov" (Gogol, 1999, p. 172).

³⁷ It is likely that Kafka intentionally uses the word "Ungeziefer" in order to ensure that the "end product" of the metamorphosis is as unspecified as possible, giving the impression of being unclean at the same time (cf. Preece, 2002, p. 217).

It seems, then, that any anomalies are objectively (though subjectively not quite so) “tolerable”.

From the viewpoint of the structure and effect of the literary works, the absurdity of the transformations is by no means accidental because being either a noseless man, *humanoid vermin*, or a *humanoid breast* – note that Gogol never gets round to describing how it feels to be a “humanoid nose” – comes with great potential for a variety of situations. On top of that, it also serves as a clever instrument in the hands of a writer: these ideas are practically tools that throw relatively ordinary characters (a barber, a clerk, a travelling salesman, a professor) into a maelstrom of intense and conflicting occurrences. While Gogol’s lost nose causes embarrassment on the part of the subject and conjures up smiles on other people’s faces, Kafka’s vermin leads to subjective remorse and feelings of guilt on the one hand, and *objective* horror on the other. Finally, Roth’s breast is a source of internal indignation paradoxically combined with sexual excitement (both of these emotions are quite typical for Roth’s works³⁸), both of which are met with embarrassed astonishment and an even more surprising acceptance of the absurd. The said acceptance is most explicitly expressed in Gregor Samsa, whose attitude to his new appearance is, as suggested by Nabokov, based on “a childish acceptance”³⁹. Philip Roth, then, is at the top of what we might call an imaginary scale of absurdity since his choice of the *target organism* automatically implies the most diverse spectrum of issues, integrating the Gothic tragedy typical for Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* with the grotesque comedy of Gogol’s *The Nose*.

The tension between the *uninvited* grotesque and reason that has been disconcerted is an area of overlap where the three fictions discussed here meet, with their protagonists trying to rationalise the absurdity of their metamorphoses. As soon as the initial surprise has worn off⁴⁰, Kovalev, Samsa, and Kepesh begin making efforts to tackle the undesirable situation that has a major impact on their social life (as well as their identity). In other words, readers are thrown *in medias res*, more precisely into the moments right after the transformations, and only from the subsequent narration do they learn that the newly emerged predicaments are not only directly related to the protagonists’ character features, but they also *ensue* from the characters’ (social) behaviour and thinking (Gogol’s nose – the narcissistic Kovalev; Kafka’s vermin – the ostracised Samsa; Roth’s breast – the oversexed Kepesh). It is perhaps not a surprise that Roth’s professor of literature makes the greatest of efforts to rationalise his metamorphosis, and soldiers through, as he puts it, a series of “crises”⁴¹. These efforts throw some light on his predicament, though they should rather be seen as *explicit interpretive strategies* (in terms of his madness and aesthetic thinking that make him a *homo culturalis*). By contrast, the overweening Kovalev⁴² from Gogol’s short story only gets a *desperate* idea – that the disappearance of his nose (i.e. his social disqualification) must have been caused by the mother of a girl he refused to marry earlier because no dowry was involved. What he

³⁸ For example, see his loose series of novels called *Everyman* (2006), *Indignation* (2008), *The Humbling* (2009) and *Nemesis* (2010).

³⁹ Nabokov (1982, §17).

⁴⁰ „What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream.“ (Kafka, 1952, p. 19); “Frightened, Kovalev asked for water and wiped his eyes with a towel: right, no nose! He began feeling with his hand to find out if he might be asleep, but it seemed he was not. The collegiate assessor Kovalev jumped out of bed, shook himself: no nose!” (Gogol, 1999, p. 168); David Kepesh’s process of transformation is described in detail and in retrospect, although the first symptoms – “a mild, sporadic tingling in the groin” (p. 10), “a pinkening of the skin barely perceptible beneath my corkscrewed black pubic curls” (p. 11), etc. – are no less surprising for him.

⁴¹ Cf. „the torment of desire“ (Roth, 1973, p. 65) and „a crisis of faith“ (Roth, 1973, pp. 75-76).

⁴² “Kovalev stretched and asked for the little mirror that stood on the table. He wished to look at a pimple that had popped out on his nose the previous evening; but, to his greatest amazement, he saw that instead of a nose he had a perfectly smooth place!” (Gogol, 1999, p. 168); “Major Kovalev had the habit of strolling on Nevsky Prospect every day. The collar of his shirt front was always extremely clean and starched.” (Gogol, 1999, p. 168).

chooses, then, is an esoteric way of explaining the mysterious phenomenon, which the reader is encouraged to see as an excuse rather than a rational(ising) approach. Kafka's protagonist is undermined by shame as well, although Gregor Samsa prefers to tackle the symptoms of his metamorphosis rather than its causes, putting considerable emphasis on the metamorphosis of the family, which entirely subsisted on his money until recently⁴³, which is – in contrast to Kovalev and Kepesh – more of an altruistic, selfless, and non-narcissistic response. This is why he deals with the new circumstances rather passively, so as not to hurt his family members: despite his enormous body, he hides under a sofa whenever somebody enters his room, which practically makes him a piece of *invisible* vermin. While Kovalev's and Kepesh's behaviours (i.e. also their rationalising strategies) are dominated by egoistic motivations, Samsa falls victim to chance as well as his (over)sensitive behaviour from the very beginning of the novella to its end. The predicament that the non-heroic Kovalev finds himself in sorts itself out (in the same mysterious, nonsensical, and accidental way it emerged in the first place⁴⁴); Samsa's metamorphosis brings only suffering and death; while Kepesh's desire to turn his fate practically comes to no end, the novella itself having no end either (like his never-ending efforts to rationalise the situation). All in all, although rationalisation takes many different forms in the fictions discussed herein, it always turns out to be inconsequential.

The rationalisation of an absurd predicament in the three texts is further determined by relative (*in*)visibility, which relates to Kovalev, Samsa, as well as Kepesh. Kovalev keeps on hiding his imperfection – his *shame*⁴⁵. Samsa hides under a sofa, and even when he manages to leave his *prison-like*⁴⁶ room (which is carefully avoided by the other family members, who also gradually move out all the furniture from it, rendering it a dirty cell⁴⁷), he only steals around the house⁴⁸ and remains practically unseen, *invisible* until the moment of revelation, which is invariably shocking (even during the first encounter with the family after the metamorphosis, the door to his room is opened very slowly and mysteriously, and that's when he pops out⁴⁹). Kepesh's indisposition, however, is in contrast to the previous two: Kepesh is always *under surveillance*, although he only senses the environment *passively*, i.e. through hearing and touch, so all of his (limited) senses are practically controlled by the environment.

⁴³ "...later on Gregor had earned so much money that he was able to meet the expenses of the whole household and did so. They had simply got used to it, both the family and Gregor; the money was gratefully accepted and gladly given, but there was no special uprush of warm feeling." (Kafka, 1952, p. 49).

⁴⁴ In this connexion, Gogol's narrator dryly comments that "such incidents do happen in the world—rarely, but they do happen." (Gogol, 1999, p. 179). By comparison, Roth begins his novella in the following way: "It began oddly. But could it have begun otherwise, however it began? ...some things are more wondrous than others, and I am one such thing." (Roth, 1973, pp. 9-10).

⁴⁵ For example: "...he had to go on foot, wrapping himself in his cloak and covering his face with a handkerchief as if it were bleeding." (Gogol, 1999, p. 168).

⁴⁶ "This statement made by his father was the first cheerful information Gregor had heard since his imprisonment." (Kafka, 1952, p. 48).

⁴⁷ "And yet just on this occasion he had more reason than ever to hide himself, since owing to the amount of dust which lay thick in his room and rose into the air at the slightest movement, he too was covered with dust; fluff and hair and remnants of food trailed with him, caught on his back and along his sides..." (Kafka, 1952, pp. 75-76).

⁴⁸ "To be sure, no one was aware of him. The family was entirely absorbed in the violin-playing... Gregor crawled a little farther forward and lowered his head to the ground so that it might be possible for his eyes to meet hers. ... He was determined to push forward till he reached his sister, to pull at her skirt and so let her know that she was to come into his room with her violin, for no one here appreciated her playing as he would appreciate it." (Kafka, 1952, pp. 76-77).

⁴⁹ "Since he had to pull the door towards him, he was still invisible when it was really wide open. He had to edge himself slowly round the near half of the double door, and to do it very carefully if he was not to fall plump upon his back just on the threshold. He was still carrying out this difficult manoeuvre, with no time to observe anything else, when he heard the chief clerk utter a loud 'Oh!'" (Kafka, 1952, p. 34).

Metaphorically speaking, the notion of invisibility in the three stories becomes even more universal: neither the protagonist, nor the people he encounters, can *see* a solution to his predicament. Kovalev desperately addresses any official or public bodies he can think of, but all he finds is a lack of understanding or an unwillingness to *see*, that is to say, to recognise his problem as a problem. The people around him (the clerk, the police commissioner, and even his own nose incarnated in a human body!) disassociate themselves from Kovalev's *absurd* requests. Although Gregor Samsa tries to communicate as well, his expressions are just cries into a void because nobody in the house can understand what he says – they can only hear sounds that are ever more animal-like⁵⁰. Samsa's family can thus only see a fraction of who Samsa really is: his invisible, half-animal subjectivity is transformed into physical motion at best, which progressively widens the gap between Samsa and the human race, shifting him into the category of "vermin" ("Ungeziefer"). As mentioned above, David "The Breast" Kepesh happens to be blind, but the people around him suffer from a certain form of blindness too – either defined scientifically (as a psychiatrist, Dr Klinger refuses Kepesh's *discovery* according to which he has gone mad and the whole situation is just an illusion) or pragmatically (Kepesh is repeatedly put to sleep so that his sobs, cries, insults, and/or sexual desires are subdued⁵¹). All in all, the three fictions can all be characterised as follows: what is tolerable in the circumstances remains visible; but what is *intolerable* is relegated to (or beyond) the periphery of the visible by an adequately *rationalising* strategy.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let us get back to dreams, whose laws make *incredible* transformations possible and open an arena of boundless fantasy and playfulness. The three texts discussed herein explicitly deal with the possibility of everything being just an illusion (each of the protagonists considers this option sooner or later), though Roth deals with this issue most extensively, turning it into one of his protagonist's principal crises¹⁰. Indeed, it is questionable if the apparently accidental and absurd metamorphoses and disappearances in the three works of fiction are all simply part of a delusion or a dream (or drunkenness, for that matter⁵²) entertained by Samsa, Kepesh, and Kovalev. In contrast to *The Metamorphosis* and *The Breast*, Gogol has two people participate in what appears to be a single metamorphosis, namely Kovalev and Nosov. Nosov is clearly not aware of any transformation, although it is quite possible (or even probable?) that Nosov is not subject to or part of any transformation at all. The fact that Kovalev identifies him as a nose rather than a human being can be seen as

⁵⁰ "Did you understand a word of it?" the chief clerk was asking... "That was no human voice." (Kafka, 1952, p. 32).

⁵¹ "Of course it was days after the change had taken place before I even regained consciousness. ...I howled so wretchedly to rediscover each time I awoke that I could neither see, smell, taste, or move, that I had to be kept under heavy sedation." (Roth, 1973, p. 27). "...oh that does feel so good!" And then I began to sob uncontrollably and had eventually to be put to sleep." (Roth, 1973, p. 31). "So, with Dr. Klinger's assistance, I undertook to try to extinguish... the desire to insert my nipple into somebody's vagina. ...so in the end it was decided that in order to assist me in my heroic undertaking, my nipple and areola would be sprayed with a mild anaesthetising solution before Miss Clark started in preparing me for my day." (Roth, 1973, p. 62). "This is a dream! Stop torturing me! *Let me get up!* I howled and I cursed at my captors, though of course if it was a dream I was only cursing captors of my own invention. Still I cursed: Claire, you cold-hearted cunt! Father, you ignoramus! Mr Brooks, you sadistic fag! Klinger, you liar! Gordon, you know-nothing! I cursed the spectators I the gallery that I had constructed, I cursed the television technicians on the television circuit I had imagined – voyeurs! heartless voyeurs! – and on and on, until at last, ...they decided to place me under heavy sedation. How I howled then! 'Thugs' I cried. 'Criminals! Fiends!' even as I sank beneath the numbing effect of the drug..." (Roth, 1973, p. 78).

⁵² Gogol, 1999, p. 166.

Kovalev's illusion, which is actually corroborated by all aspects of their interaction (Gogol, 1999, pp. 168-170). Kovalev notices the absurd physiological change in his face, which pushes the boundaries of credibility and creates a peculiar area of overlap between *the real* and *the dreamy*, he never becomes absolutely certain, though – and no such certainty is attained by Samsa or Kepesh, either.

The three texts thus seem to open an agnostically styled discussion focused on what is and what is not interpretable, or even the question of whether it is at all worthwhile to interpret all the innumerable anomalies, all the relative randomness of human life. While the metamorphoses discussed herein conjure up new (imaginary) worlds for Kovalev, Samsa, and Kepesh – worlds that *trifle* with the characters' gullibility, on another level, Gogol's *The Nose*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, and Roth's *The Breast* conjure up new literary worlds that trifle with the gullibility, scepticism, or simply fancy on the part of the reader.

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