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THE IDEA BEHIND PHILIP ROTH'S *THE BREAST* OR WHY THE AUTHOR OF REALISTIC FICTION RESORTS TO THE FANTASTIC

Abstract

The article is an attempt to explain why the writer known for his realistic narratives reached for the fantastic in his novella *The Breast*. Sexual obsession was one of Philip Roth's subjects of interest for his whole literary life. In addition to his portrayal of post-religious Jewish protagonists, socio-political problems of post-war America, and coping with the perspective of imminent death, sensual experience resulting from male heterosexuality recurs in Roth's narrations as a crucial element of human condition. His characters obsessed with sex are men of different ages. This article is a search for the reason why the writer reached for this device. Even though the narrator refers to literary inspirations: Gogol's *The Nose* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, the functions of those transformations serve different purposes from his own transformation into a woman's breast. Despite the fact that the latter remains inexplicable, the idea of resorting to the fantastic seems to stem from a literary attempt to transcend the experience of the heterosexual male without changing his sexual orientation, which resembles the Platonic concept of desiring the qualities we do not possess.

Key words: fantastic, realism, Philip Roth, Franz Kafka, Nikolai Gogol

The objective of this article is to hypothesize why Philip Roth decided to write his novella *The Breast*, which is built on the idea which cannot be called otherwise than fantastic, even though it fails to be classified as fantasy or sci-

ence-fiction. Despite the fact that these genres are out of the question, Roth's narration may be counted among the tradition of the use of the fantastic as an element serving other literary purposes. To quote what R.M. Philmus notes about Tzvetan Todorov's theory:

[Todorov] locates "the fantastic" between the logical poles of the natural and the supernatural. As "the hesitation experienced by a person [*un être*] who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event", "the fantastic" endures so long as the extraordinary occurrence remains, so to speak, inexplicably inexplicable. Once it has been determined to be supernatural (i.e., simply inexplicable in terms of natural law), the fiction enters the realm of "the marvelous." If, on the contrary, the mysterious event is finally reconciled with "the laws of nature" (i.e., is explained in those terms), the fiction ceases to be "fantastic" and becomes instead "uncanny" (*étrange*). Only where the nature of the "apparently supernatural event" stays unresolved can "the fantastic" be found "in its pure state" rather than in hyphenated form (as "the fantastic"-*"marvelous"* or "the fantastic"-*"uncanny"*).¹

In *The Breast* the reader cannot trace any elements that would comply with the characteristics of fantasy since the novella does not describe alternative communities resembling medieval social order or fails to refer to magic.² It is also difficult to find elements of science fiction³ in the novella in question save the fact that doctors seem to accept the protagonist's transformation. The author refuses to dazzle the reader with the advancements of technology or to predict an astounding future. Therefore, Todorov's description of the fantastic, terse yet accurate, constitutes a methodological point of departure for further consideration on the subject. However, the determination of the place of *The Breast* in Todorov's classification is by no means an easy task. Philip Roth's novella is perverse and elusive and thus evades attempts at unequivocal classification.

The Bulgarian-French theorist's method of defining the fantastic is based on the contrast with *the uncanny* (derived from the German *das Unheimlich*⁴),

¹ R. Philmus, *Todorov's Theory of "The Fantastic": The Pitfalls of Genre Criticism*, "Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal" 1980, Vol. 13, No. 3/4, p.72.

² The difference between the use of the fantastic and fantasy in this context is best explained by John Clute's statement that "Modernist and Postmodernist texts use elements of fantasy, but are not designed to be lived within in the way a fantasy text clearly invites its readers to co-inhabit the tale;" in: J. Clute and J. Grant (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* 1997: <http://sf-encyclopedia.uk/fe.php?nm=fantasy>.

³ "Science Fiction can be distinguished from fantasy on several grounds; but in our terms the most significant difference is that sf tales are written and read on the presumption that they are *possible* – if perhaps not yet." Ibid.

⁴ The term comes from S. Freud's essay by the same title, where the psychoanalyst provides

which is a combination of the unbelievable and the familiar simultaneously, and the marvelous, which may be explained as a quality of classical fantasy. In the former the protagonists' reaction to the inexplicable events is crucial. Moreover, the events are not necessarily based on a supernatural factor. The latter assumes the characters' acceptance of the supernatural. They simply take them at face value without any doubts or even consideration. Consequently, the fantastic consists in hesitation between the attitude towards the supernatural: believe it or not. In Todorov's definition:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.⁵

The decision to employ fantastic elements in fiction usually serves certain purposes. Since the world created should be understandable for the reader, it contains a great number of elements with which the reader is already familiar. What makes the difference is their combination, which is unusual, surprising, strange or even shocking. The fantastic does not have to be placed on another planet to make readers perceive it as something far from the reality they know. Sometimes it is just one anomaly, a modification of a single element, that changes the whole seemingly earthly and boring universe into the world where nothing is the same any more.

The Breast by Philip Roth gives an impression of being closer to the fantastic than to the marvelous. Even though the people around David Kapesh become accustomed to his transformation into a woman's breast relatively quickly, the protagonist cannot resist trying to explain this unusual incident in a rational way, including a mental disease, which his doctor patiently denies. Thus, the hesitation of the main character makes the novella fantastic in Todorov's understanding. Apart from his definition of the fantastic the following article al-

an explanation: "we are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman's imagination, behind which we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree. The theory of intellectual uncertainty is thus incapable of explaining that impression." S. Freud, *The 'Uncanny,'* in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVII (1917-1919): *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, London: Hogarth Press, 1955, p. 230.

⁵ T. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975, p. 25.

so draws upon Todorov's concept of narratology, the theoretical approach I have decided to adopt in order to demonstrate differences between Roth's novella *The Breast* and two other texts, Gogol's *The Nose* and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, to which the narrator of *The Breast* refers as the cause of his unusual situation. Even though in terms of *function* and *actants*, as well as the use of the fantastic, the three stories seem very similar, Roth's narrative is significantly distinctive because of a different purpose of the latter.⁶

Philip Roth is an author whom nobody classifies as a science-fiction or fantasy storyteller. Therefore, when such a writer creates a text where a fantastic element makes the main plot, the reader is entitled to wonder why he decided to invent a story so different from his usual topics. Roth published his novella *The Breast* in 1972, quite long after his literary debut (the collection of stories *Goodbye Columbus*, 1959) and three years after *Portnoy's Complaint*, which brought him worldwide fame and established his position in the US literary world. Interestingly enough, the protagonist of *The Breast*, David Kapesh, professor of literature, became the main character of two other novels by Roth, *The Professor of Desire* (1977) and *The Dying Animal* (2001), which can be counted among Roth's regular realistic fiction illustrating one of his literary obsessions, namely, sex. There are critics who claim that the protagonist's obsession is purely pornographic and concerns "the dirty process of analyzing his own animalistic side."⁷ However, they do not even attempt to explain the idea behind the process or assume that the "analyzing" is the purpose in its own right.

The Breast is a novella, whose first person narrator, Professor David Kapesh, describes his gradual transformation into a woman's breast. As a result he ends up in hospital where he is very well cared of. The extension of his sensual abilities to feel pleasure is certainly one of the advantages in his opinion. Losing the sense of vision is a problem but the narrator does not seem very troubled by this fact. Moreover, his dreams driven by sexual desire remain masculine. He wants a nurse to "sit on his nipple,"⁸ since the nipple is what his penis has turned into.

The Breast has been widely discussed since its publication. For example, Ira Nadel in his article *The Fate of Sex: Late Style and "The Chaos of Eros"*

⁶ The basic concepts of narratology can be found in R. Barthes, *Introduction à l'analyse structural de récits*, "Communications" 1966, 8, p. 1-27, https://www.persee.fr/doc/comm_0588-8018_1966_num_8_1_1113

⁷ P. Matthews, *The Pornography of Destruction: Performing Annihilation in The Dying Animal*, "Philip Roth Studies" 2007, Vol. 3, No. 1, p. 46.

⁸ P. Roth, *The Breast*, London: Vintage, 2016, p. 31.

underscores the literary inspiration as an explanation for what happened to the protagonist, Professor David Kapesh:

But why this obsession with sex among Roth's older characters? The short answer: books. In *The Breast* (1972), the 38 year old David Kepesh identifies them as the source of his sexual fascination. He actually claims that his condition is the result of fiction: "The books I've been teaching inspired it. They put the idea in my head" (60). Kafka, Gogol, Swift: they are the culprits he declares, in his transformation, claiming that he becomes Kafka, Gogol and Swift. "I made the word flesh. I have out-Kafkaed Kafka", he proudly tells his doctor (81). The pure subjectivity of the protagonist allows him to become the books and authors he reads. This satire of Freud's transference theory permits the literary indulgence of a talking, educated breast, the sexual impulse gone wild.⁹

The literary inspiration explains just part of the issue. The reference to *The Nose* by Gogol or *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka is obviously important but fails to provide sufficient clarification why Roth decided to choose the breast. Both Kafka and Gogol's stories describe transformations but the messages they provide are clearly different from what Roth tried to communicate through David Kapesh's metamorphosis into a human female gland.

Philip Roth did not even try to conceal the fact that his novella was inspired by *The Nose* by Nikolai Gogol and *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. However, comparing the story published in 1836 in the Russian Empire, the novella created in 1915 in Austria-Hungary with *The Breast*, the reader may easily observe that the only thing they all have in common is the fact that the three protagonists were subject to transformation. Something unexpected and undesired happened to their bodies. If we were to reduce the three texts to the level of function, it would be "something unusual happens to the character's body", whereas the actant is the one whose body unexpectedly changes. Nevertheless, scrutinizing the circumstances of the three cases, it becomes clear that only *The Breast* is about the metamorphosis of a human body and, despite the fact that the protagonist, David Kapesh, is an object of various processes, including those resulting from his social and professional status, the main problem remains biology, his sensuality and sexuality.

The biological function of Gogol's nose seems not important at all, since the story is usually interpreted as a satire on the social relations and hierarchical

⁹ I. Nadel, *The Fate of Sex: Late Style and "The Chaos of Eros"*, "Philip Roth Studies" Spring 2013, Vol. 9, No 1, p. 81.

structure of the Russian bureaucracy. The vermin into which Kafka transformed his protagonist is a bitter and dark image of the human condition experiencing exclusion from the community and the family, illustrating the process of the elimination of someone who has suddenly become a repulsive insect, his progressive alienation and loneliness. Actually the biological aspect of the protagonist's new existence is inasmuch important as the social and psychological implications it entails. In the context of the two sources of Roth's inspiration,¹⁰ the protagonist of the novella is more introspective. The choice of the first person narration inevitably imposes the main character's point of view, which is limited not only to what he knows but foremost to what he feels. The new condition of his body preoccupies him obsessively, which gives priority to biology, even though the cultural and social consequences of his transformation are also present.

The suffering of Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov after losing his nose has nothing to do with physical pain. His transformation is unexpected but not accompanied by any sensual discomfort. Kovalyov wakes up and notes the lack of his nose. Throughout the story he is tormented by the social consequences of the situation. His status as a government official in the strictly hierarchical system of tsarist Russia is strongly jeopardized. The nose becomes a symbol of his position on the bureaucratic career ladder. Moreover, without the nose, Kovalyov's social life seems ruined. Although his emotional life is already disastrous because of his hideous personality, now any perspective of social meetings or marriage seem beyond his reach.

Simultaneously, his nose, found in the loaf of bread by Kovalyov's barber, Ivan Yakovlevich, and thrown into the Neva River, begins to live its own life. Its miserable owner incidentally sees the nose in the street wearing a uniform of a high rank official. Chased and stopped by Kovalyov the nose refuses to return to its place and flees. Kovalyov is not treated seriously when he asks the police for help. His visit to the newspaper brings no better results. Unexpectedly, yet luckily, a police officer delivers the nose to Kovalyov, but there is no way to fasten it back to his face. Nevertheless, the next day brings a happy end, since Collegiate Assessor Kovalyov wakes up with his nose in place.

¹⁰ For the consistency of the argument, I decided to ignore Swift's influence, since the fantastic in *Gulliver's Travels* does not refer directly to particular parts of the body or corporeal metamorphoses; the fantastic places and their inhabitants Gulliver visits are already in the consisted form proposed by the author.

The fantastic story of the independent life of a government official's nose disguised as a government official itself may be interpreted as a satire on the social relations in the Russian Empire, on the mentality of such an official resulting from the system introduced by Peter the Great a century before. However, the discussed literary work may be perceived from multiple points of view. For example, Paul Evdokimov, the Russian Orthodox theologian, proposed a deeper interpretation that would search for hidden signs which suggested a diabolic aspect behind the story of the nose. In his opinion, Gogol attached a great importance to the dates he set his story, and thus he chose March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, especially cherished by Orthodox Russians. Evdokimov notes that the Nose observes the tradition and heads towards the Kazan Cathedral. Its coach has the appearance of a triumphal chariot and the Nose rides it as if it had power over the world. However, the sacred place of the church remains beyond its control. Thus, Evdokimov perceived the scene as an apocalyptic mockery of the Day of Annunciation and the false piety of Anti-Christ.¹¹

Whichever interpretation the reader chooses, it is clear that the corporal aspect of the story serves as a pretext to portray problems of social, if not political, or even metaphysical nature. The actual nose and its biological functions are of little importance. Here lies the fundamental difference between Gogol's story and Roth's novella. The dominant significance of biology in the latter strikes the reader throughout the text.

Of little importance is also the species of the creature into which Gregor Samsa turned in *The Metamorphosis* by Franz Kafka. The original German expression used by the author, *Ungeziefer*, is usually rendered in English as vermin or insect. Specialists in literary animal studies would have a problem with the identification of the species, although sometimes it is identified as a cockroach. As Axel Goodbody observes:

Kafka's animals are primarily figures for the articulation of human affairs – his own subjective experience and its symbolic extension to related collectives. In his diaries and letters, he often relates the plight of an animal to his own feelings, for instance observing a beetle lying helplessly on its back and inferring it mirrors his psychological state, or describing himself as a mole, burrowing in search of self-knowledge.¹²

¹¹ G. Przebinda, *Literatura i teologia: niebezpieczeństwo uproszczonej lektury. Jaskinia Gogola i Dostojewskiego*, Instytut Filologii Wschodniosłowiańskiej UJ, http://www.rubl.uj.edu.pl/pracownicy/fiszka.php?os=01_przebinda&jed=KKS&opis=przeb_tp10&w=1 [28.10.2017]

¹² A. Goodbody, *Animal Studies: Kafka's Animal Stories*: http://opus.bath.ac.uk/44961/3/Animal_Studies_Ecocriticism_and_Kafkas_Animal_Stories_4.pdf [25.10.2017]

Thus, in spite of Kafka's inclination to empathize with animals, his fiction uses them as allegories of a human condition rather than reflects the author's fascination with the animals' inner life or sensual experience. Even though the description of the vermin's suffering reveals an attempt to present the consciousness in an animal's body, it is still the consciousness of a human being reduced to the form of an animal.

In *The Metamorphosis* the reader becomes familiar with the life and financial struggle of an urban family at the beginning of the twentieth century, who were lucky enough to have a son working in an office, which at that time meant a decent income. After Gregor Samsa's metamorphosis into a repulsive creature, his parents and sister have to work hard to make a living for themselves and for Gregor. The whole story is a depiction of the gradual transformation of the family's love towards the son and the brother into a sense of decency keeping up the appearance of love, then into impatience and finally into the desire to get rid of the embarrassing flatmate. Gregor's father is the first one to want to kill the vermin. The problem disappears with the natural death of the creature which used to be Gregor Samsa. The family may return to a normal life, which may be interpreted as a macabre kind of happy end.¹³

The fantastic element of the transformation of a human being into an animal is a pretext to tell the reader a story about the unpredictable degradation, exclusion, vanishing and death. The vermin is a terrible metaphor of what may happen and what really happens in human life. Moreover, it is a story of the growing indifference to tragedy as the only defense mechanism. Told from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, it gives an impression of a callous account of an incident which just happens. Since Kapesh "out-Kafkaed Kafka", the author of *The Trial* cannot serve as a sufficient explanation of the source of Kapesh's transformation. In this case, as David Gooblar observes, "Kafka can serve merely illustrative, or even ironic, purposes, on the way to an understanding that what is happening is happening because it is happening."¹⁴ At the level of narration Roth's novella differs dramatically from Kafka's story, to which the narrator of *The Breast* refers himself.

The only aspect where both Gogol and Kafka try to transcend the reality is just a trick with transformation, which, however, serves other purposes. The protagonist of *The Breast*, a professor of literature, pondering over the reasons

¹³ F. Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, transl. David Wyllie, 2005, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm> [20.10.2017]

¹⁴ D. Gooblar, *The Major Phases of Philip Roth*, London: Continuum, 2011, p. 67.

of his transformation, openly admits that literature, especially *The Nose* by Gogol and *The Metamorphosis* by Kafka, could have had an influence on his strange incident. As an academic teacher David Kapesh discussed these texts with his students. Though the narrator fails to explain how analyzing literature can bring about a physical change in the real world, the reader is well aware that the fantastic belongs to the world of literature and art.

Actually a certain problem may result from the fact that *The Breast* is the first text where David Kapesh appears. A few years later another book, where no fantastic elements are employed, will provide the reader with a more complete description of his personality. Professor David Kapesh is primarily preoccupied with sexual attraction towards women, many of them his students. Kapesh is a man with rich experience as a male partner in heterosexual intercourses. Elaine B. Safer does not hesitate to refer to his relationships as the ones in which he adopts a “nonchalant, macho attitude.”¹⁵ On the other hand, it is not easy to describe him as a macho type, since the women he has been with do not feel cheated or harmed. Kapesh and his female partners are products of the sexual revolution of the 1960s; therefore, the women presented in the novella are positive about their right to sexual pleasure and take an opportunity to make love with the professor of literature with no prudery. It is the question of readers’ interpretation whether they should treat Kapesh as a selfish promiscuous hedonist but the problem of traditional morality is not the issue. Kapesh is promiscuous and he accepts himself the way he is as well as his sexual partners do. However, in the world of sexual experience there are elements unavailable to him.

In his article *Master and Pupil in Philip Roth’s “The Dying Animal”* Aristide Trendel refers to Julia Kristeva’s observations on *The Symposium* by Plato: “In *The Dying Animal*, the breast, dazzlingly prominent, becomes a matter of life and death. In fact, the beauty of Consuela’s breasts is the leitmotif of the novel.”¹⁶ Consuela will die of breast cancer, similarly, Kapesh also realizes that his end is imminent. “The exchange between master and pupil is now no longer centered on love, but on death. The breast is the link between Eros and Thanatos in the novel.”¹⁷ This refers to the last book of the Kapesh cycle, where the theme of the symbol of femininity initiated in the first one finds its conclusion.

¹⁵ E. B. Safer, *Mocking the Age: The Later Novels of Philip Roth*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, p. 134.

¹⁶ A. Trendel, *Master and Pupil in Philip Roth’s “The Dying Animal,”* “Philip Roth Studies” 2007, Vol. 3., No 1, p. 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

The Breast also evokes another reference to Plato's seminal text. Socrates in *The Symposium* elicited from Agathon, his interlocutor, a corroboration of his claim that a person desires something that they do not possess:

The inference that he who desires something is in want of something, and that he who desires nothing is in want of nothing, is in my judgment, Agathon, absolutely and necessarily true. What do you think?

I agree with you, said Agathon.

Very good. Would he who is great, desire to be great, or he who is strong, desire to be strong?

That would be inconsistent with our previous admissions.

True. For he who is anything cannot want to be that which he is?

Very true.¹⁸

Kapesh probably knows everything about sensual feelings available to a heterosexual male. The sensuality of a woman is beyond his reach and is the thing he desires because he is not a woman. Thus, Roth decides to resort to the alternative, fantastic reality, where his protagonist may experience the impossible.

"It began oddly, then, with a mild, sporadic tingling in the groin,"¹⁹ the narrator informs, and soon he realizes what is happening to him. He becomes a woman's breast. However, as he consciously notes: "I'm still very much a man."²⁰ As already mentioned, Kapesh is a heterosexual man of rich erotic experience. One of the explanations of his transformation into a female gland may be his breast fetishism. Nadel aptly observes:

Breasts. The topic is dissertation-ready when writing about Roth, beginning with *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and continuing with his 1972 satire *The Breast*, followed by *The Professor of Desire*, *The Dying Animal* and the more recent *Indignation* and *The Humbling*. *The Dying Animal* addresses the subject most nakedly when the public intellectual David Kepesh pursues the voluptuous 24 year old Cuban American Consuela, largely because of her breasts. But in a tragic twist, years after their affair ends, she contacts Kepesh to tell him that she is ill—with breast cancer. But she has a request: could he photograph her breasts before they are treated? The scene is not pornographic, nor even erotic, but intimate and personal.²¹

¹⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, transl. by Benjamin Jowett, 2013, The Project Gutenberg EBook of Symposium, by Plato, http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1600/1600-h/1600-h.htm#link2H_4_0002 [20.10.2017]

¹⁹ P. Roth, *The Breast*, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²¹ I. Nadel, *The Fate of Sex*, p. 83; The topic is actually a subject of dissertations, for example:

Thus, the topic is quite extensively explored in Roth's prose, even though it is important to note that with age, his protagonists' approach to women's breasts becomes less driven by *machismo* than by mature attempts at understanding another human being. Nevertheless, in *The Breast*, Roth's male hero is obsessed with woman's breasts as objects of sexual desire.

In the description of a sexual intercourse with Clair, Kapesh's girlfriend, her breast plays a significant role:

Down in the hollow of the dunes, I unclip the top of her bikini and watch it drop away. "Imagine," she says, "where they'll be at fifty, if they droop like this at twenty-five." "Can't," I say, "won't," and drawing her to her knees, I lean back on the hot sand, dig down with my heels, shut my eyes, and wait with open lips for her breast to fill my mouth. Oh, what a sensation, there with the sea booming below! As though it were the globe itself – suckable soft globe! – and I Poseidon or Zeus! Oh, nothing beats the pleasures of the anthropomorphic god.²²

Here the reader is entitled to wonder if the anthropomorphic male god has access to the pleasures of an anthropomorphic goddess or just a mortal woman. Furthermore, Roth's protagonist goes on to make references to ancient mythology, recalling "the Greek seer Tiresias" who

was transformed into a woman in order to solve the ancient riddle as to whether men or women feel greater pleasure in sexual intercourse. Playing with modern biology to achieve a parallel effect, Roth creates a contemporary fable that explores the links among female sexuality, male individualism, and the power of thought to define and maintain a sense of personal identity.²³

David Kapesh is mysteriously endowed with a gift of transcending his natural condition. As Baumgarten and Gottfried observe, "[i]ronically, the passivity his shape enforces makes him aware of the power of male sexuality just at the

M. Witcombe, *Beyond Imagining: Sex and Sexuality in Philip Roth's Kapesh Novels*, University of Southampton Research Repository ePrints Soton, 2015, <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/376467/1/Witcombe%2520PhD%2520Thesis.pdf> [20.10.2017]; Witcomb's thesis is a very interesting proposal of psychoanalytical reading of Roth's texts, including references to Melanie Klein, who extensively discussed the place of mother's breasts in the formation of the child's mental universe, see, for instance: M.Klein, *The Psychoanalysis of Children*, trans. Alix Strachey, New York: Grove Press, 1960.

²² P. Roth, *The Breast*, p. 31.

²³ M. Baumgarten, B.Gottfried, *Understanding Philip Roth*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press 1990, p. 113.

moment when he has taken on female characteristics."²⁴ This state would be difficult to achieve without the fantastic.

It is important to bear in mind that the lascivious professor of literature did not consciously ask for this gift. His new state is far from comfortable. Therefore, it is difficult not to think about the situation as a result of the mysterious powers of his unconscious desire. Debra Shostak notes that "[a]lthough Kapesh's understanding of his erotic experience remains masculine, his ceaseless appetite shows the complications of trying to attach gender to the experience of desire," and poses a rhetorical question "Is Kapesh in his helpless, insatiable desire 'masculine' or 'feminine'?"²⁵ As she concludes, linguistically it is impossible to determine the gender of the narrating "I". However, the way he carries out his rant throughout the novella allows the reader to believe that it is still a male "professor of desire" who is speaking, and the sensual transformation has not resulted in the production of a new female identity, even though now the protagonist perceives the reality with the senses available to a woman's breast. Referring to Rosi Braidotti, Debra Shostak observes:

Given his overtly confused subjectivity, which he futilely tries to force into normative categories – feeling, for example, a "masculine" consciousness inside a "feminine" body – he stands for the principle of "the same and yet other" ... that is fundamental to the way woman has been conceptualized in Western culture.²⁶

Thus, Shostak goes deeper into the nature of human sexuality, its ambiguity and cultural roots of constructing gender identities. It is, however, a problem of an individual mind to cope with such challenges, since such masculine types as David Kapesh seem not to assume a philosophically reflective approach. Kapesh had to face this uncanny experience to devote his attention to the issue. In this context, "natural" as an adjective describing his masculinity may not seem so justified. Nevertheless, whatever the explanation of gender differences, it is important to reiterate that the situation comes to the protagonist as shocking and extremely difficult to reconcile with. The statement by Baumgarten and Gottfried that "David Kapesh cannot relinquish his male ego"²⁷ seems to be of

²⁴ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁵ D. Shostak, *Return to The Breast: The Body, the Masculine Subject, and Philip Roth*, "Twentieth Century Literature" 1999, Vol. 45, No 3, p. 326.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 328.

²⁷ M. Baumgarten, B.Gottfried, *Understanding Philip Roth*, p. 113.

the utmost importance in understanding Roth's idea of the character.²⁸

As Debra Shostak observes, "[o]ne of the strengths of *The Breast* is the way in which Roth makes an absolutely implausible premise believable – precisely the lesson that he learned best from Kafka."²⁹ Harold Pinsker also praises him for a creative development of both the Prague writer's ideas and the very approach to the female breast in culture:

If I am right about *The Breast*'s mode as one of comic allegory, it is "allegory" of a very playful, post-Modern, sort. To talk pedantically about, say, the breast fetish in American culture (see Woody Allen's delightful spoof in *Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex*) or about Kafkan themes in current fiction is to miss both the pain and the wit of Roth's novella.³⁰

Nevertheless, in another text of his, Pinsker criticizes Roth for not being sufficiently good to match Kafka or other classics: "the Kepesh novels strive for greatness, but fall far short of their mark: Roth is no Kafka in *The Breast* (1972), no Chekhov in *The Professor of Desire* (1977) and, without his distinct brand of humor, not even equal to himself in *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969)."³¹

Considering the literary works from a traditional point of view of literary studies, Sanford Pinsker seems not to take into consideration the fundamental difference between Roth's and Kafka's novellas. The allegories of transformation into another type of living body do not pursue the same ends. Becoming an insect, which is culturally perceived as abominable, Gregor Samsa symbolizes social degradation. This has little to do with the sensitivity, not to mention sensuality, of an animal. Senses play a secondary role in Kafka's allegory, whereas Roth made them the central point of his story.

Roth proposes a new quality in the form of David Kapesh's attempt at finding a rational explanation for his sudden abilities to feel all the pleasures available to a woman's breast, simultaneously preserving his masculine consciousness and mentality. This is an attempt at presenting two types of sensuality in one

²⁸ The protagonist's obsessive attachment to his gender identity eliminates, at least on the conscious level, the temptation of an interpretation based on the transgender or transsexual theories. Kapesh's reality embraces just two traditional genders, which are clearly different.

²⁹ D. Shostak, *Return to The Breast...*, p. 318.

³⁰ S. Pinsker, *The Comedy that "Hoits": The Breast*, in: Philip Roth, ed. H. Bloom, Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2003, p. 60.

³¹ E. L. Gerstle, *The Dying Animal: The Art of Obsessing or Obsessing about Art?*, in: *Turning Up the Flame: Philip Roth's Later Novels*, eds. J.L. Halio, B. Siegel, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005, p. 195.

person. It is important to underscore that Kapesh's case does not represent just bisexuality or transvestism. He is still a heterosexual man and it seems irrelevant whether this fact is a result of pure biology or a cultural process. His transformation into a woman's breast comes to him as a shock, and what he experiences afterwards is a condition which is impossible to occur in the real world. To present such a state Roth had no other choice but to resort to the fantastic.

Even though far from fantasy or science fiction, *The Breast* is a text which, according to Todorov's definition, should be classified as fantastic. The protagonist's hesitation, whether to believe in his new condition or not, makes it even a model example of the genre. Roth utilized the fantastic to touch upon an alternative way of perceiving one's own body, which was an attempt to involve not only reason but all possible senses, too. The fantastic is so far the only instrument available to writers to approach the issue.

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