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## A CONFIGURATION OF THE NON-ABSOLUTE

### THE STRUCTURE AND THE NATURE OF THE GROTESQUE

My previous article\* attempted to establish a systematic method of analyzing a grotesque literary work, a work which produces an effect of absurdity. I defined the devices employed to create such a work as "distortion" and "illogical shift between two opposites" and listed the components of the work, within substance and treatment, which are subject to these devices. Here I will attempt to delineate the various types of structure and to examine the nature of a grotesque literary work. I shall illustrate my findings with examples from Russian literature, referring to works which I consider best illustrate the point in question. I hope to be able to draw conclusions which will further elucidate the problem of the grotesque.

The structure of a grotesque literary work depends on the relationship between the work's substance and its stylistic treatment. Substance, in conventional terms, encompasses "what is being told": the main theme, the motifs, the atmosphere, the various components of the narrative element, such as plot, setting, characters, their actions, motivations, the imagery. Treatment, again in conventional terms, encompasses "how something is being told": the various components of style, such as the tone, the point of view, the devices, the verbal texture, the figurative language, etc. The relationship between substance and treatment within a literary work can be threefold: either both or each one can be affected by the devices of distortion and shift. A good example of the first type of relationship is *Liubimov*, where grotesque devices affect both the substance of the novellette and the artist's presentation of it. One of the main themes is the paradox of power, the plot is an unbelievable event, the setting is some weird town, and even the nature is eerie. The images are distorted beyond recognition and the characters' motivations are based on an absurdity. The treatment shows distortion on every level, especially in the verbal texture. Absurd words are manufactured, sentences consist of totally unrelated syntagms, the syntactic movement does not correspond to the semantic

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\* Cf. "Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich", vol. 9, cahier 1, pp. 75—81.



movement. Paragraphs take sharp curves and lead off on a tangent, epic similes do the same. Metaphors are taken literally. Metonyms, synecdoches, oxymorons are used in profusion. Motifs involve a distorted natural order, such as dehumanization and animation, unreal doubles, etc. The author not only distorts the narrative and the time sequences, but constantly shifts the point of view by changing narrators. This is the fullest type of grotesque in literature and the absurd effect it produces is unmistakable and complete.

When grotesque substance is treated "normally", the absurd effect is somewhat weakened by the tension. There is a "deliberate disproportion between subject-matter and style"<sup>1</sup>. Thus, the grotesquerie in Sologub's *Petty Demon* is ambiguous. It can be dismissed as drunken hallucinations or as a case history of madness, critically presented by an objective author, or it can be considered equally well as a puzzling absurdity. The distortion within the substance affects several components: one of the themes of the novel is the heroes' alienation from reality, the inability to communicate with each other. The plot is only embryonic, centering on Pere-donov's monomaniac striving for a promotion. The heroes are bizzare, their motivations are illogical and their perception of life is odd. The setting includes ominously looking flower gardens, strange church squares, masquerades, and drunken orgies — creating a separate reality with its own laws. The atmosphere conveys a fear of life, instilled by the intrusion of the demonic into the logical. Motifs of dehumanization and animation add a shade of eeriness to the atmosphere. And yet, all this is told in matter-of-fact language. No unusual words are used, there is no play with syntax or with tropes, paragraphs do not take the reader off on a tangent, the time or the narrative sequences are not destroyed, and even on those occasions when the author peeks from behind the narrator, his asides are more like commentaries, or stage directions, than a deliberate breaking of the sequence. In fact, Sologub's language is a perfectly structured prose, the verbal texture is "smooth" and the substance alone creates the effect of the grotesque.

The third type of relationship has non-grotesque substance treated in grotesque manner, reminiscent of Dali's portrayal of clocks in his painting *The Clocks*, or of Stravinsky's interpretation of peasant wedding songs in *Les Noces*. In this case the distortion within the treatment makes the substance grotesque by evoking incongruous images, by creating an eerie atmosphere, or by affecting some other component of the work. There still is certain tension between the objects and their presentation. Thus, in Voznesenski's poem *The Guitar*, the familiar object becomes totally unrecognizable through the poet's presentation of it. Metaphors and similes bring in objects from other realms. Absurd actions are ascribed to the guitar. The motif of puzzling animation renders the guitar in unexpected forms from other logical categories. The author transcends the boundaries of a narrator to participate in the poem as the son of the guitar. The descriptive approach becomes an address

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<sup>1</sup> A. Clayborough, *The Grotesque in English Literature*, Oxford 1965, p. 242.



to an enigmatic friend who is in the company of nocturnal figures. Grotesque works of this type are, perhaps, the most contrived, because the subjective distortion in treatment is inconsistent with the objective substance and the grotesque becomes even more incongruous.

These three configurations of substance and treatment are separate structural variants. At times, however, a single interpolation of distortion, a "Baroque insertion"<sup>2</sup>, can affect any component of a literary work written in an entirely different style. For example, one character in a story can speak in absurd utterances, as Belkin does in Pushkin's *The Tales of Belkin*, or one event can be described in a grotesque atmosphere, as Raskolnikov's relapses into "brain fever" in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, or one image can be disproportionately hyperbolized, as the figure of the narrator in Leonov's *The Thief*. Such practice, of course, does not make the entire work grotesque.

By "nature" of a literary work we understand the kind of attitude toward life it presents and the tone of presentation. In grotesque literary works neither the attitude nor the tone exhibit the consistency and the harmony of an absolute. They do not adhere to a rationally ordered system. Life, as reflected in such a work, is neither fully realistic nor fully fantastic. The reality is estranged and the fantastic is made familiar. Wolfgang Kayser places the grotesque in the intermediate world between reality and unreality, "the estranged world"<sup>3</sup>; Elli Desalm places it inside the common part of two intersecting discs, the real and the unreal<sup>4</sup>. Byron Jennings insists that "both aspects must be present in equal degree"<sup>5</sup>. At times the juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic means positing the natural, the Divine, against the Demonic, as in Gogol's *The Nevski Avenue*. At other times the juxtaposition is on a more realistic level, between sanity and madness, as Raskolnikov's "brain fever" in *Crime and Punishment*. Again, it is only an interplay, a shift, because an outright insanity would be too static, too close to being an absolute, and would provide a logical explanation for the grotesque, as it does in Gogol's *Diary of a Madman*.

The grotesque is at all times based on reality, and is often presented as reality (unlike the surrealistic, which deals with the explicitly subconscious<sup>6</sup>). The grotesque often contains a profusion of realistic detail. But, as Victor Erlich notes, the use of these details "serves here not as the subsoil of an autonomous, yet reality-

<sup>2</sup> O. Walzel, *Gehalt und Gestalt im Kunstwerk des Dichters*, Berlin — Neubabelsberg 1923, p. 338.

<sup>3</sup> W. Kayser, *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. Transl. by U. Weisstein, Bloomington 1963, p. 184. Indiana University Press.

<sup>4</sup> E. Desalm, *E. T. A. Hoffmann und das Groteske*, Remscheid 1930, p. 65. Diss. Bonn.

<sup>5</sup> B. Jennings, *The Ludicrous Demon. Aspects of the Grotesque in German Post Romantic Prose*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1963, p. 16. University of California Press.

<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of the surrealistic as a part of the grotesque see Clayborough, *op. cit.*, chapter V.



like world, but as a factor of contrapuntal tension, or ironic incongruity"<sup>7</sup>. Stender-Petersen agrees that "the reader is confronted with a method, which seems to be realistic, although the realism to which it leads is quite unreal"<sup>8</sup>.

Life, as presented in a grotesque literary work, owes its ambiguity to the same devices which create the grotesque in other components of the work. The absolute reality (or fantasy) is either distorted beyond our familiar perception, a *reductio ad absurdum*, or the two absolutes are juxtaposed with illogical shifts from one to the other, a *non sequitur*. Furthermore, the discrepancy can either be intrinsic, within the work itself, or extrinsic, between the author's presentation and the reader's familiar frame of reference. This incompleteness produces an effect of incongruity and absurdity and gives the grotesque its ephemeral and elusive quality: the grotesque approaches the absolute for which it is being passed but frustrates the reader's expectation of a logical projection.

Whenever verisimilitude predominates, the literary work is a "realistic grotesque". So in Babel's story *Salt* the incident is narrated as an actual occurrence and is likely to have happened. There is no internal discrepancy, no shift in point of view of the innocent eye narrator. But there is a discrepancy between the reality as presented in the story and the reader's perception of reality. No one can imagine a soldier actually shooting a woman for feigning her way into a packed railroad car by posing as a mother with a baby in her arms. Gogol's *Dead Souls* is also a basically realistic story: there is nothing of a fairy-tale in it, nothing unbelievable happens, but reality is distorted within the story to the point of being grotesque. The plot is based on an absurdity, the setting is eerie, especially the nature. The heroes are anything but plausible human beings, most of the images are bizzare, the time sequence is broken up and the narrative sequence is pierced by constant digressions which introduce a second narrator with a different thematic element and a different point of view. The intrinsic distortion of reality is complete. Other literary works contain only separate lapses into the grotesque, as Vasili Aksenov's *Oranges from Morocco*, where a puzzling atmosphere is created by a play with the heroes, while the story remains basically a realistic one.

When whimsical imagination predominates, we have a "fantastic grotesque". It is not the pure fantasy of fairy-tales or of science fiction, not is it the abstract surrealism of dreams and stream-of-consciousness sequences. Fairy-tales and science fiction are too static for the grotesque and surrealism is not rooted in reality the way the grotesque is. The imagination varies in the degree of exoticism from something outlandish, like a triangular pear in Voznesenski's poem by that name, to something quite commonplace, like a nose in Gogol's story *The Nose*.

<sup>7</sup> V. Erlich, *Gogol and Kafka. Note on Realism and Surrealism*, [in:] For Roman Jakobson, ed. M. Halle, The Hague 1956, p. 102. Mouton and Co.

<sup>8</sup> A. Stender-Petersen, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur*, München 1950, p. 169. The quotation translated by L. A. F.



The fantastic grotesque is created by the two devices in the same way as the realistic grotesque is. The improbable is either intrinsically distorted by a realistic explanation, as in *Liubimov*, where the French-speaking bird could have been the colonel's dream, or in Gogol's *The Nose*, where the author repeats some twenty-seven times that it is a "strange" situation and that he does not understand it. Or the distortion can be extrinsic, based upon a juxtaposition of the fabrication with the reader's reality, as in Arzhak's *The Man From Minap*, where the hero thinks of Karl Marx in order to produce a male off-spring and of Clara Zetkin, for a female one. In all cases the fantastic is not a single projection into the realm of imagination, but is marked by the same non-absolute characteristic as the realistic grotesque is.

On an entirely different level both the realistic and the fantastic grotesque can be treated in either a comic or a non-comic tone. Again, neither tone is absolute, because its nature is altered by the grotesque devices. The device of distortion renders the tone incongruous and the device of shift makes it paradoxical. As before, the inconsistencies can be intrinsic or extrinsic. In addition, there are four new configurational possibilities: grotesque humor can be found in a realistic work, like Zoshchenko's *Nervous People*, or in a fantastic work, like *Liubimov*. The non-comic grotesque can also be found in a realistic work, like Andreev's *Life of Vasili Fiveiskii*, or in a fantastic work, like Dostoevski's *The Double*.

The grotesque comic differs from other types of the humorous, because, due to the devices by which it is created, its effect depends upon a collapse of the reader's logic. The comic effect is not a detached amusement, or pure joy, but leaves the reader wondering and at times even uncomfortably so. The treatment of a literary work is the main vehicle for the grotesque comic. Twisted words, a tongue-tie, words out of context, double entendres, colloquialisms, misquotes, distorted stable expressions, or proverbs are used for an additional comic effect. Semantic sequences within a sentence become illogical, as in the phrase "there was an unaffected intonation in his voice", in *Liubimov*. The semantic progression does not always correspond to the syntactic movement of a sentence, as in Gogol's *The Marriage*, when the match-maker says "he is such a sober merchant, does not touch anything alcoholic, AND [my stress] he has three sons, two are already married"<sup>9</sup>. In the figurative language the tropes can be constructed with absurd associations, metaphors can be taken literally, similes can juxtapose incompatible objects from different logical categories, or the similes can be developed beyond reasonable necessity. A favored trope is the hyperbole, which becomes an absurd exaggeration, as in Gogol's *The Inspector General*, when Khlestakov claims to have written not only several famous novels, but somebody's well-known opera as well, or that 39 000 couriers serve him.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of the distorted semantic movement within a sentence by the means of the particle "dazhe", see D. Chizhevski's *O shineli Gogolia*, [in:] *Sovremennye zapiski*, vol. 67, Paris 1937.



Moreover, the use of the comic tone in the treatment of a work lends the substance of the work a quality of comicality as well. Thus, the plot becomes a nonsensical occurrence, as in Zoshchenko's *Nervous People*, a vicious fight breaks out in a vacuum, not only does no one know why it did, but people can not even fight well, because they are too nervous nowadays. The characters, especially their illogical motivations and absurd actions can be humorously grotesque, as the husband of one of the combatant ladies in *Nervous People*, who is tired, because he works hard, smiles at the customers, and weighs out the sausage. The characterization is frequently based on something contradictory or insignificant, which becomes exaggerated out of proportion, as the barber's wife in Gogol's *The Nose*, who is introduced as a rather respectable lady, who likes to drink coffee in the mornings; actually even this characterization is superfluous, because the nice lady does not reappear in the story after this. Motifs of obscenity, of comic animation and dehumanization help to reduce life to a level of a sub-human, or a sub-logical existence, and the perceptible world — to an empty and aimless appearance. This last aspect of the comic grotesque is particularly conducive to the use of the grotesque comic for the purpose of satire of the Philistine. However, the absurdity which created the comical effect is so prominent, that it overshadows the collapse of logic. The reader does not notice the morbid nothingness behind the comic effect.

The non-comic grotesque is not an absolute either. It lacks the consistency and the pathos of true tragic. It does not evoke pity or produce a catharsis. As Jan Kott put it: „Tragedia jest w ostatniej instancji oceną doli ludzkiej, miarą absolutu; groteska jest krytyką absolutu w imię wątpliwego ludzkiego doświadczenia. Dlatego też tragedia przynosi *catharsis*; groteska nie daje żadnego pocieszenia”<sup>10</sup>.

True tragic is either rendered absurd and pointless by the device of distortion, or the comic transgresses it and makes its seriousness doubtful, at times resulting in the melodramatic. The rendition is again either intrinsic or extrinsic. Because of this inherent quality of tone and because of the effect produced, I would like to designate this category as “grotesque morbid”. The morbidity ranges from incomprehensible oddness to repulsion, to eeriness, and the effect descends from perplexity to apprehension of life and of death, to depression from which there is no exit.

The morbid grotesque is expressed primarily through the substance of a work, rather than through any unevenness of the verbal texture. The narration unfolds most of the times with a coherently flowing familiarity. Within the substance, the main theme frequently is a problem of human conflict, valid in the absolute, but shown here out of focus. The problems can be grouped as follows: a) relationship of man to God, or to life, which implicates motifs of doubt, fear, denial of the world, repulsion, search for truth, etc.; b) relationship to self, which involves motifs of search for identity, rationalization of self-assertion, with additional motifs of masks,

<sup>10</sup> J. Kott, *Szkice o Szekspirze*, Warszawa 1961, p. 105.



automatons, unreal doubles, dehumanization, and other allusions to a transgression of natural categories; c) relationship to others, which includes the motifs of alienation, inability to communicate, hostility, futile rebellion, etc. As a single example in this last group would be the problem of social conformity in Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground*.

The study of the problem develops at times at the expense of the plot, which becomes embryonic, as also in *Notes from the Underground*. The atmosphere becomes important, because it helps to create the morbid effect, as the hopeless, closed circle of Vasili Fiveiskii's existence in Andreev's *Life of Vasili Fiveiskii*. The setting often symbolically represents this closed world, "a circle within a circle", as the masquerade scene during which the Nedotykomka appears in Sologub's *Petty Demon*. Certain images are eerie, as the horse-whipping scene in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*, or the man writing in his diary without any ink in his pen in Andreev's *The Red Laugh*. This category of the grotesque, by stressing the subjective as central and distorting the objective, lends itself easily to portrayal of the incongruity of existence and of the absurdity of essence.

What conclusions can be drawn on the basis of this and of the previous study? First of all, that the grotesque is a separate literary style, because it is created by means of specific devices, to achieve specific effect. The device of distortion functions intrinsically, the absurdity is internal. The device of a illogical shift between two incompatible juxtaposed entities can be either intrinsic or extrinsic, in which case the absurdity lies outside the work, between it and the reader's perception. These devices can affect any number of components within both the substance of a literary work and its treatment by the author. While there are no explicitly grotesque themes or plots, there are definite grotesque motifs.

Substance and treatment configure into three separate structural variants: a distorted narrative presented in an absurd manner, a distorted narrative rendered cohesively, and an objective narrative told in an absurd fashion. Moreover, single uses of grotesque devices can be interpolated into works of predominantly different styles, without making those works grotesque.

The nature of the grotesque is non-absolute, it lacks the logical consistency, harmony, and directedness of the vectorial projection of an absolute. This is also due to the two devices, the distortion and the shift. Thus, the attitude toward life, as presented in a grotesque literary work, is neither absolutely realistic, nor absolutely fantastic, although both are based on reality. The tone of presentation is neither truly comic nor truly tragic. The comic grotesque is expressed primarily through the treatment, and the morbid grotesque distorts the substance, above all, the thematics. Any configuration of the four types is possible.

This predilection for instability and incompleteness makes a grotesque literary work characteristically ephemeral and elusive of definition. The difficulty of definition is also due to the specific effect of absurdity, which ranges over an entire spectrum of shadings. The author can allude to or play with themes, emotions, situations,



and so on, without making any of them explicit. This, in turn, leaves more freedom for individual, subjective interpretation on the part of the reader, for "imaginative reading", so to say. Thus the problem of the grotesque as a manner of artistic communication between the author and the reader rests on its pliability, made possible by definite devices.

## KSZTAŁTOWANIE NIE-ABSOLUTU STRUKTURA I NATURA GROTESKI

### STRESZCZENIE

Rozprawa omawia trzy odrębne warianty strukturalne dzieła opartego na zasadzie groteski będącej dwojakim sposobem ukształtowania zawartości utworu (jego specyficznej „substancji”) i metody traktowania tej substancji. W obrębie utworu literackiego oba te zjawiska mogą ulegać swoistemu przedstawianiu; substancja groteskowa może być oddana w sposób naturalny, groteskowo odbarwiony, z drugiej zaś strony zawartość (substancja) w pełni zobiektywizowana może ulec przekształceniu w następstwie potraktowania jej w sposób groteskowy.

Istota groteski została poddana badaniom z punktu widzenia zawartego w niej obrazu życia. Zasada ta może być realistyczna lub fantastyczna, jednakże i jedna, i druga opierają się na przesłankach realnych i konkretnych, przy czym dokonana być może właściwa transformacja w sferze stylistycznej, polegająca na zmianie lub odpowiednim przesunięciu układu. W następstwie tak przyjętego planu powstaje konstrukcja absurdalności wewnętrznej lub zewnętrznej, formalnej. Istota groteski jest zatem rozpatrywana ze stanowiska zasadniczej tonacji, która może być bądź to komiczna, bądź też groźna i ponura, która z drugiej strony zmieniając prawa rzeczywistości wedle swej własnej zasadniczej manieri daje swoiste spojrzenie na życie. W rozprawie przedstawiono różnorodne, dalekie nawet możliwości groteski w kręgu tonacji realistycznej, fantastycznej, komicznej i groźnej, a nawet „chorobliwej”. Krótko przedstawiono charakter oddziaływania tych kategorii groteski.

W podsumowaniu dokonano próby wyciągnięcia ostatecznych wniosków z groteski jako specyficznej zasady artystycznej komunikacji między autorem a czytelnikiem, w oparciu o wyniki zawarte w tej rozprawie oraz w studium ogłoszonym w poprzednim zeszycie „Zagadnień Rodzajów Literackich”.

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