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THE GROTESQUE: A METHOD OF ANALYSIS

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS FROM RUSSIAN WRITERS

Many literary critics, historians, and theoreticians use the word "grotesque" in their writings. It is usually described as "a play with reality"¹, "a play with the absurd"², "an artificial compilation, which does not occur in nature or society"³, and so on. Unfortunately, the lack of precision and uniformity in the usage of this word makes it difficult to discern a definitive meaning. Not only is the term used by different people to describe different phenomena, but there exists a universal confusion as to which component of a literary work can be grotesque.

I want to try here a method of analysis of such a work, in hopes that this systematic approach will bring some amount of logic and order into the difficulty of discussing the illogical. I will give examples from various authors to obtain a broader cross section of the demonstrations of the grotesque.

We call a literary work "grotesque" when it produces upon us an effect of something distorted, absurd, incongruous, or estranged; when something is presented to us not only as different from what it is, or from what it might be, but is also presented in a way which does not

¹ Ia. Zundelovitch, *Poetika groteska*, [in:] *Problemy poetiki*, red. V. Briusov, Moskva 1925, no page ref.

This and all subsequent Russian quotations are translated by the author.

² W. Kayser, *Das Groteske, seine Gestaltung in Malerei und Dichtung*, Oldenburg 1957.

My quotations are from the English translations by U. Weisstein (Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 198 ff.

³ A. S. Bushmin, *K voprosu o giperbole i groteske v satire Shchedrina*, [in:] *Voprossy Sovetskoi literatury*, Moskva 1957, p. 25.

fit with our familiar logical or imaginative pattern. Both "the manner or fashion of presenting an idea"⁴, and the idea itself seem distorted.

What is the first thing that strikes us as absurd when we read a literary work? First of all, we notice discrepancies in the narrative element (the idea). We can easily see that the main theme of a literary work may be based on an absurdity: e. g., relationship of man to man in Gogol's *The Quarrel of the Two Ivans*. The story of such a work may be grotesque. The reader then is confronted with an absurd situation presented as an actual occurrence; e. g., in Gogol's *The Nose*, no one is surprised that a nose ran away from a man, but is only concerned how to retrieve it. Among the most favored settings of a grotesque story are a masquerade, a circus, parties of all sorts, because they provide for additional alienation from reality; a sort of an inner circle within a story; e. g., the celebration attended by the Underground Man in Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground*. Nature is rare as setting, and when it is, it also becomes transfigured, like Plushkin's garden in Gogol's *Dead Souls*. The grotesqueness of heroes may be internal with reference to the work, e. g., the two Ivans with heads like radishes in Gogol's *The Quarrel* as well as external, e. g., the humble farmboy, who watches his father killed by an older brother but is much more concerned about his colt, in Babel's "The Letter" from *Red Cavalry*. Quite often the number of heroes and their actions are reduced, as in Dostoevski's *Notes from the Underground*, to allow the author to concentrate out of proportion upon the hero's few outside contacts. The characterization of heroes may be grotesque, when based upon a minor feature exaggerated all out of proportion: as in Zoshchenko's *The Electrician*, where a man is described as one who insists upon posing in the middle of a group picture. The motivations and the reasoning of heroes are affected most frequently to the point of absurdity and a breakdown of all logical processes. A good example of grotesque motivation is the man in Gogol's *The Overcoat* who, as a proof of his loyalty, attached to this petition an enormous volume of some highly romantic work, in which a police commissioner figured on almost every page. The grotesque motivation and reasoning are closely connected to the sentence structure, which we will discuss later. Finally, any image evoked may present something distorted, absurd, or unexpected, as for example, the tailor in Gogol's *The Overcoat*, who wraps the overcoat in his handkerchief; or in the same story, the terrifying city square, the end of which you cannot see. Let us call this the "Thematic Grotesque".

⁴ Cf. Aristotle's definition of style in *De poetica*, 3, [in:] *Works*. Tr. by W. D. Ross, Oxford, reprinted 1946, vol. 9, No 1448.

Next, we notice that the texture of a literary work may be uneven, when its grammatical, syntactic, or rhetorical figures are affected by the grotesque. The distortion begins here with the smallest unit of an author's working materials, with the word. While it is not customary to speak of "grotesque words", Nabokov does just that⁵ to describe words like *chervotochina* for *chervi* (the suit of hearts), or *pikenzia* for *pika* (the suit of spades) from Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Ludger Vieth wrote a doctoral dissertation under Oscar Walzel in an attempt to prove the existence of grotesque words⁶. He observed a metaphor, taken literally; a play of words, which involves relationships between the primary and the secondary meaning of a word; and a play with syllables or with letters to produce nonsense. Lewis Carroll's "portmanteau words" also fit into this category, e. g., *okoloserdechnaia sumka* (near-the-heart bag) also from Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Neologisms, which adhere to a semantic or morphological pattern of formation and are designated to describe novel phenomena, cannot be considered grotesque, of course. But, *voyazhiroverka* for *doroga* (the road) in *Dead Souls*, is a grotesque word, because it has no other "raison d'être" than to stress Nozdrev's aspirations to good education. Unfortunately, grotesque words have frequently been confused with a poor knowledge of the language⁷. An effective grotesque practice is the use of a tongue-tie (*kosnoiazhychie*); it is created through repetition of particles, exclamations, and other expletive parts of speech, for example, *tovo, vot, etaki*, used like *ugh* would be in English. Tautological associations may also be considered as part of the tongue-tie⁸; e. g., the tenor, who speaks in his tenor voice in Zoshchenko's *The Electrician*.

Next step is the grotesque combination of words into sentences: a grotesque syntax, perhaps. Here, the practice of absurdity comes to full force, because now not only the morphological aspect is involved, but also the semantic and the syntactic. Several scholars, primarily of the Russian Formalist School, carefully analyzed the grotesque sentence structure without actually calling it such. They arrived at similar definitive conclusions⁹, which I am presenting here in a digested form: (1a) Words within a sentence may be combined at random, without any

⁵ Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 1944, p. 85. New Directions Paperbook.

⁶ L. Vieth, *Beobachtungen zur Wortgroteske*, 1931. Diss. Bonn.

⁷ For reference to Gogol's poor knowledge of Russian see: A. S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii*, Moskva 1962, vol. 6, p. 108; Io. Mandelshtam, *O kharaktere gogolevskogo stilia*, Helsingfors 1902, p. 367; A. Bely, *Masterstvo Gogolia*, Moskva—Leningrad 1934, p. 280.

⁸ V. V. Vinogradov, *Etudy o stile Gogolia*, Moskva 1926, p. 16.

⁹ Mandelshtam, *op. cit.*, p. 273 ff.; A. Slonimskii, *Komicheskoie u Gogolia*, Petrograd 1923, Chapter: *Komicheskii alogism*; Vinogradov, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

logical interrelation, as for example, Chichikov, in Gogol's *Dead Souls*, spoke with great compliments about the size of the Russian state; a store, in the same story, has rolls, a woman in a red kerchief, and some soap. (1b) There may be an illogical association of ideas within a sentence, "displacement of semantic sequence"¹⁰, or a lack of correspondence between the grammatical and the semantic movement of speech¹¹. For example, in Gogol's *The Marriage* the match-maker says: "[...] he is such a sober merchant, doesn't touch anything alcoholic, and he has three sons, two are already married [...]". (2) The relationship between sentences or ideas within a paragraph may be grotesque in two ways: (a) An idea may be leading up to a logical conclusion, then deviate to such an extent, that the meaning of the paragraph is completely distorted¹². This type is closely related to an extended epic simile, which we will discuss later. Here is an example of this relationship, taken from Zoshchenko's *Nervous People*: "[...] people are nervous nowadays, easily upset, become very excited, and because of that, whenever a brawl breaks out, they fight coarsely, as if in a fog". (b) Another distortion of relationship between sentences is a combination of ideas, which are mutually exclusive and therefore create an effect of absurdity, as in Gogol's *Nevskii Avenue*, some people read Karamzin, others read the „Moscow Herald”, and still others did not read anything at all.

In the figurative language, an epic simile yields itself easily to a distortion; e.g., the governor's ball in Gogol's *Dead Souls* is attended by young men in black tails, who swarm around the ladies like flies, who on a hot summer day swarm around a sugar cone, which was put out by a housewife, who... and so on. Next best is a metaphor, especially the extended one, as also in Gogol's *Dead Souls*, a watermelon drove into the city, rolled up to a house, and out of it rolled the old lady Korobotska. Of note in both examples are the human-animal comparisons, the downward metaphors. An oxymoron and a paradox can easily produce an effect of absurdity, e.g., it is a saintly deed to lose an overshoe in a street car, in Zoshchenko's *An Overshoe*. A metonymy, because of its nature to substitute one word for another, can be absurd, as in Gogol's *Nevskii Avenue*, some people read Karamzin, as opposed to Karamzin's books. And a synecdoche, because it involves the use of

¹⁰ Slonimskii, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹¹ Chizhevskii's excellent article on the grotesque sentence structure of Gogol's *The Overcoat* by means of the word "even" (Chizhevskii, *O shinelii Gogolia*, [in:] *Sovremennye zapiski*, vol. 67, 1937).

¹² Incidentally, Professor Mandelshtam considers this type of distortion of an idea a major fault, rather than a particular artistic device. See: Mandelshtam, *loc. cit.*

a part instead of the whole, as in Gogol's *The Quarrel* one astrakhan hat entered. The figure of personification is closely connected with the motif of animation, which we will discuss later, but a typical personification lacks the ominous quality of a grotesque animation, which instills fear and doubt in life; e.g., in Andreev's *Life of Vassilii Fiveiskii*, the unfinished part of the house looks like a skeleton, and the storm peeks into the windows and watches Father Fiveiskii. We shall call this the "Textural Grotesque".

Finally, we notice that the manner of arranging the various elements within the work may produce an effect of absurdity. Here we would first of all notice a contrast between the story and the tone in which it is told, e.g., the innocent eye narrator (*skaz*), who jocularly tells about a tragedy in Babel's "Salt" from *Red Cavalry*. The Russian Formalist critics paid special attention to the contrast caused by using two different styles — where one style may lead up to an exalted climax, while the other brings it down to a collapse into absurdity¹³, as in Gogol's *The Quarrel*, where the light, humorous tone of the story collapses into a pathetic contemplation of the boredom and futility of life. Leon Stilman projects this structural principle to the usage of contrasting themes within a work. In analyzing the thematic pattern of Gogol's *The Overcoat*¹⁴ he distinguishes a series of optimistic build-ups, followed by pitiful collapses. The contrasting of two plot lines, as in Weltman's *The Traveler*, can also leave an impression of distortion¹⁵. The arrangement of events into a plot may be subjected to illogical (Sternian) divisions into chapters, or to interruptions by separate, sometimes disconnected entities, or digressions. This frequently produces an effect of calamity or of absurdity by obstructing the steady, logical development of the story, as the beginning of Gogol's *Overcoat*: "In the department [...] but perhaps it is just as well not to say in which department [...]" A grotesque motif is a frequently used structural principle. It may involve the transition of a human into a plant, or animal, or a mechanical object¹⁶, as the little daughter of Vassilii Fiveiskii, in Andreev's *Life of Vassilii Fiveiskii*, who is alluded to as a wolf. Another frequent grotesque motif is the

¹³ Slonimskii, *op. cit.*, p. 25; A. Stender-Petersen, *Geschichte der russischen Literatur*, Chapter: *Der groteske Stil Gogol's*, München 1950, p. 169; V. Hofman, *Iazyk literatury. Ocherki i etudy*, Leningrad 1936, p. 325.

¹⁴ L. Stilman, *Gogol's "Overcoat": Thematic Patterns and Origins*, "American Slavic and East European Review" 1952, XI/2, pp. 138—148.

¹⁵ B. Bukhshtab, *Pervye romany Weltmana*, [in:] *Voprosy poetiki*, red. B. Eikhenbaum, Leningrad 1926, p. 198.

¹⁶ Kayser, *op. cit.*, p. 194.

reduction of a human being to a puppetlike automaton, or a Commedia dell'arte-type mask, or a double which is not really a double, like Mr. Goliadkin, Jr. in Dostoevski's *The Double*. Here the use of a regular double-motif must be disqualified as much too static. By the same token, the motifs of insanity and dreams also cannot be considered as grotesque, because they provide a realistic explanation for otherwise absurd phenomena, such as Popryshchin's ability to read the dogs' correspondence in Gogol's *The Diary of a Madman*. It is only the juxtaposition of sanity and insanity that produces the necessary distortion. We shall call this the "Structural Grotesque".

Let us now examine the devices which are used by an author to produce the effect of absurdity. First, a distortion. It may affect any component of the work. It affects intrinsically; it is an illogical exaggeration, which omits the main or the characteristic feature and emphasizes the irrelevant or the strange. We can see this principle in the grotesque approach to life: it is based on reality, but distorts it to the point of alienation. In this the grotesque differs from a hyperbole, which is a logical exaggeration, a direct extension of proportions. In this the grotesque differs also from a caricature, which stresses only the characteristic feature and is usually humorous and didactic.

The other grotesque device is an illogical shift in emphasis. It requires a juxtaposition, a duality, a coexistence of opposite or in some way incompatible elements. It affects extrinsically. It is broader than either the anticlimax or the bathos, because like the distortion, it may affect any component of the work and has no prescribed direction. This can be noticed in the coexistence of the realistic and of the fantastic, of the comic and of the tragic, with frequent transgressions. The predominance of one of these elements sets the tone of the entire work. Thus there can be Realistic Grotesque, e.g., Gogol's *Dead Souls*; Fantastic Grotesque, e.g., *The Nose*; Comical Grotesque, e.g., Zoshtchenko's *The Nervous People*; and Morbid Grotesque, e.g., Andreev's *Life of Vassilii Fiveiskii*. This is the general pattern of grotesque works: they contain several elements, being neither in full.

We can see furthermore that the purpose of a grotesque work can be either purely entertaining or didactic¹⁷, and that the work's effect upon the reader depends upon his own degree of perception: what may seem perfectly realistic (or, for that matter, fantastic!) to one person, may seem completely absurd to another. Hence the ambiguity of designating literary works as grotesque.

¹⁷ The usage of grotesque for satirical purposes is the only one recognized by Soviet critics and theoreticians, as in Saltykov-Shchedrin and in Gogol. See Bushmin, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

We are now ready to take stock of what has been said above, and to ascribe to the "grotesque" a definitive meaning. It is obvious that "stylistic analysis can easily lead to problems of content"¹⁸, since both the author's working materials and the aesthetic process of putting them together¹⁹ are involved. Thus, it would see that the grotesque is best defined in terms of a literary style, which employs the devices of distortion and shift, and may affect all aspects of a literary work to produce an effect of absurdity or estrangement.

A systematic analysis of a literary work written in the grotesque style helps us to evaluate the aesthetic quality of that work more fully.

GROTESKA. METODA ANALIZY
NA PRZYKŁADZIE UTWORÓW PISARZY ROSYJSKICH

STRESZCZENIE

Dzieło literackie bywa określane jako „groteska” wówczas, gdy wywołuje u czytelnika wrażenie absurdalności. Wrażenie to osiągnięte jest w następstwie zastosowania swoistego układu deformacji (w zakresie cech wewnętrznych) oraz konfrontacji — *sopostawlenija* (w zakresie prymarnych cech zewnętrznych). Każdy komponent dzieła jest zdolny do wywoływania tego rodzaju efektów: warstwa narracyjna, tworzywo słowne, kompozycja. Przykłady obu sposobów deformacji zaczerpnięte są z dzieł pisarzy rosyjskich XIX i XX wieku. Praca przynosi również propozycje na temat metody systematycznej stylistycznej analizy groteski literackiej. Stosunek groteski do realistyczności i fantastyczności, komizmu i tragizmu będzie przedmiotem odrębnej rozprawy.

Przełożył Jan Trzynadłowski

¹⁸ R. Wellek, A. Warren, *Theory of Literature*, New York 1948, p. 172.

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 129.