

NATURALIZING THE TEXT

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ABSTRACT

*This paper looks beyond New Criticism. It ties in with a great name, Jonathan Culler associated with critical theory. Not content with neo-critical formalism, he explores the structuralist notion of Vraisemblance which goes by several names such as Naturalization, Recuperation, and Motivation as well. Each of these underlines an aspect of meaning and coherence. Each of these tries to situate the text with a view to making it 'seem natural or real'. As to Naturalization, it is the idea of bringing the 'strange or deviant' into an intelligible order. Culler places all these under his concept of Vraisemblance which works on certain structuralist assumptions. These five relate to (1) "the socially given text" (2) to general cultural text, (3) Convention of the genre (4) Natural attitude to the artificial and (5) intertextualities. Three famous non-poetic texts- Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Marcel Aymes's *Dermuche* and William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily* are critically examined from the point of view of Vraisemblance or Naturalization.*

Key words: *Textuality, Vraisemblance, fantastic, intertextualities, Recupertation and Motivation.*

My aim in this paper is to introduce very briefly Culler's¹ structuralist notion of Vraisemblance and explore its application in three fictional texts: Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*² Marcel Avme's *Dermuche*³ and William Faulkner's *A Rose for Emily*⁴.

The Structuralist probabilitizes rather than problematizes meaning, In this task of probilitizing he goes beyond the neo-critical formalist. He does not barricade himself in his textual ivory tower with all its self-referential aesthetic constraints. On the contrary, he invokes all models of intelligibility all codes and conventions, literary and aliterary , by means of which he situates the text in as much as he makes it seem natural and real or vraisemblable. What is Vraisemblable goes by names as different as Naturalization recuperation, motivation and Vraisemblablization. Each of these emphasizes an aspect of meaning and coherence in its own way. Naturalization is the idea of bringing the" strange or deviant" into an intelligible order. Recuperation recovers the sense along the line of organic unity. Motivation implies the appropriateness of the different items in the text whereas Vraisemblablization foregrounds the cultural citation as a model of coherence and meaning. Jonathan Culler subsumes all these under his elaborate concept of Vraisemblance which works on certain common structuralist assumptions. First there is nothing in the text that is not already there in the world or "world view" prevalent in a particular period of time.. Second, even the most fantastic art work can take on an aspect of intelligibility and meaning from a "specific view point." According to Culler there are five levels at which the literary text can make sense to the reader. First there is the" socially given text"... taken as the real world. Second a given cultural text, the shared knowledge which is recognized by participants, as part of culture... . Third there are texts and conventions of a genre, a specifically literary and artificial vraisemblance. Fourth, the natural

attitude to the artificial, where the text explicitly cites and expresses vraisemblance of the third kind so as to reinforce its authority. And finally, there is the complex vraisemblance of specific intertextualities, where one work takes another as the basis or point of departure and must be assimilated in relation to it" (p. 140). At each of these levels meaning is motivated or probablized.

In *The Metamorphosis*, the most elementary of actions are located at a level which Culler calls "fantastic" (p.141). This is a model of discourse socially or textually given requiring no justification much as it dispenses with the idea of causation as behind Gregor's transformation. In the opening sentence itself, "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect." A further description of Gregor reveals his "armour-plated back" and his "dome-like belly divided into still arched segments" and "his numerous legs... pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk .. waving helplessly before his eyes. Not only in his physical characteristics but also in his habits is he just a bug or a beetle locked in a state of generic alienation in which he lives from the late fall through the spring. In fact, his physical transformation is complete and unchallenged. What proves challenging however is his human mind which is still obsessively worried about his parents, sister and his profession. He is fully conscious of his "present condition" but longs for and decides to co—exist and cooperate with the family. Evidently there is no real interaction possible between the two worlds. Gregor is regarded as beyond redemption. The world around him senses his manoeuvres to open the door and notices the squeak in his voice. All his activities as a bug are either amusing or disgusting. Since he cannot reconcile himself to his being treated as a mere bug, he successfully wills his own end, a reasonable termination of his unreasoned narrative.

Gregor's transformation is naturalized as his real world but most of his textual vraisemblance derives from the shared knowledge or cultural category, a kind of social discourse grounded in familial values functioning as a "target language". Because of the metamorphosis Gregor's alienation from the human world is complete. Yet his setting is the same geographical environment of the apartment as his parents' and his sister's. For his fantastic text to be continuous with his interactionist perspective Gregor has to remain moored to his family in the manner of his pre-transformation days, He recalls their quiet life and takes pride in the fact that he has provided this kind of life for them. All his meditations on his rearranging his life and lying low for the present are meant to help them to continue the way they did in the past. But the gap between the two worlds is ever widening. The family even begins to empty his room of all furnishings, all "his human background". As he resists the physical removal of his human past he gets into a row with his father. The father bombards him with apples but later realizes that Gregor was a "member of the family despite his present unfortunate and repulsive shape and ought not to be treated as an enemy". (p 440) Gregor survives the attack by the father but succumbs to his paradigmatic engagement with his sister as a potent cultural "catalyst. To her Gregor becomes "it", a kind of linguistic transformation which eventually proves fatal. When he materializes during her musical performance, Crete bursts out challengingly, "How can it be Gregor? If this be Gregor, he would have realized long ago that human beings can't live with such a creature that he would have gone away on his own accord. Then he would not have a brother, but we would be able to go on living

and keep his memory in his honour". It is in response to this cultural de-categorization by his sister that Gregor comes upon a firm resolve to quit this world as is clear from the following, "The decision that he must disappear was one that he held to even more strongly than his sister... In this state of peaceful meditation... his head sank to the floor of its own accord and from his nostrils came the last flicker of his breath."

The question of genre which defines but does not delimit *The Metamorphosis* is extremely complex. The transformation of Gregor occurs as in a fairy tale. But soon it takes on a frightening aspect; Gregor is a bug, a terrible bug chasing the chief clerk out of his apartment and frightening the daily woman out of her job. He spares neither his mother who screams and faints at her sight nor his sister whom he may bite if she does not desist from removing his pin up- the lady in furs from the wall. Yet what starts as pure horror degenerates into a grotesque fun. The swooning mother, the over-attached sister who exaggerates Gregor's condition, and the bemedalled father make for a kind of Dickensian atmosphere reminiscent of the stuff out of which the Victorian fiction is built. Structurally Gregor's narrative is dramatically drawn through a series of crises leading to the denouement as *Metamorphosis* is seen to approach "degenerative tragedy"⁵ in the manner of Mann's novella *Death in Venice*. Like Aschenbach, Gregor goes on demeaning himself, unlike him through both his Oedipal obsession and the larger theme of brother- sister incest. His antagonism with his father- a patent Kafka motif apart- his blurring vision when his terrified mother rushes into his father's arm is symptomatic of a Freudian son's refusal to accept the union of parents. Gregor's degeneration may be ascribed to his incestuous attitude to his sister. Even as a bug he cools his "hot belly" on the glass frame of lady in furs. Crete sees through enormity of his selfishness. But for his getting in the way of her final transformation (She stretches her body only after his death) his end would not be irrevocably motivated. A typically Structuralist response to Kafka's narrative naturalizes Gregor's text as a contract between the author and the reader in terms of Todorov's "fantastic"⁶. The uncanny event is not a "climax of a graduation" (p 171). Conversely, it happens all at once; it is reducible to a treatment which is neither "allegorical" nor "poetic". Besides, an invariant feature of this generic fantastic is the idea of the structural hesitation in the text. The reader must choose between the natural and the supernatural explanation of the event. And such a reader is Gregor himself. "What has happened to me" is his search for that explanation. In order to deny his metamorphosis he fumbles with "perhaps", "as", "as if" and dismisses the change in his voice as a precursor of a chill. Before too long he curses (himself) the chief clerk that such a fate befell him – an admission that the supernatural is naturalized as real by him and all others alike.

The Metamorphosis cannot be vraisemblablized as a generally closed art work. Nor can its contextual perspective be oversimplified. Gregor's condition seems to engage with both religious and literary references. In his *Metamorphosis* the "transfiguration of Christ" is paedostically refunctioned. Kafka's Christ is an apocalyptic recreation inspiring an unmitigated dread. "Heavenly father", "God", "miracle", "deliverance, s appeal to Saints" do work as religious innuendoes but they are textually designed to undermine their divine import. A plausible literary text to serve one as a base Kafka, is Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground* rather than Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. "I tell you solemnly" says Dostoevsky, "that I wanted to become an insect many times but I was

not even worthy of that.⁷ Kafka accomplishes this goal in one stroke but the rest of his existence is the parody of Dostoevsky text as it exhibits the impossibility of living a dual life- the life of an insect burdened with the human mind. What thus begins as an attainment of a noble ideal gradually peters out in Gregor's mock epic, Orwellian confrontations with the charwoman as she faces him, well- armed with a broom- a remote indication that later she might poke at Gregor's dead body with it. Besides taking a sub-evolutionary stance, Kafka also demonstrates the nullity of the Aristotelian narrative by subverting its traditional order- beginning, middle and end as he prioritizes the last over the first.

The Metamorphosis and Dermuche are about a supernatural event – the transformation of the protagonist into a different being. Gregor changes into a beetle, Dermuche a thirty year old man into an infant. What occurs initially in Kafka's text becomes constitutive of the ground level of the *vraisemblance* here. Dermuche undergoes a kind of emergent evolution in *media res* like a half –way climax. Fundamentally his is the discourse of a prisoner charged with the theft of a gramophone and three murders. He is terrible looking – “heavy shouldered”, “bull necked”, and “all jaws, no forehead”. His case is messed up in the course of the trial because he is “indifferent and uncomprehending” to the point of complete retardation. Lack of ‘remorse “for killing” the three geezers “as noted by the jury does not bother this megalomaniac for music. Inevitably in confrontation with the legal discourse he cannot escape execution change as he might into a Christ figure himself.

The retired text of Dermuche becomes coherent as it co-exists with the “Chaplain's narrative.” This does not mean that Dermuche has suddenly been blessed with comprehension by the Chaplain. On the contrary, he is still “tree- like soulless. To him “the sacred truth of the Holy Virgin and angels” and the infant Jesus are no more than a “fable”. Not all the yarn about the magi, the slaughter of the innocents and Crucifixion can inspire “repentance” in him. Although he is insensitive to any notations of the cultural discourse, the Chaplain through his presence, narrative and interpretation constructs a perspective of shared assumptions for the text. He re-reads Dermuche's crimes as an innocent child's cutting open its doll or plaster cradle of the infant Jesus. It is he who treats the fact of the” Christmas eve- the transformation of Dermuche into a new born babe as an “exquisite miracle “. But for his constraining, the prosecutor would not reinvestigate the complete truth of the baby Christ's crimes even after his execution.

Dermuche is psychologically *vraisemblance* as a retarded narrative. In lack of feeling or repentance he resembles Camus's Meursault. The “extraordinary metamorphosis “renders the – fantastic in the sense that no “rational explanation” is reached. The one that occurs may situate it as a latter day parable. Dermuche's actions are in violation of biblical injunction. So he is a sinner. But he is no more sinning than a child who hurts its doll without malice.in recognition of that malice he is entitled to spiritual redemption. His execution only cleanses him of his impurities. The Chaplain's concluding remark makes sense in this context. “God could not allow a murderer entirely untouched by remorse to enter Paradise. But Dermuche's had hope on his side and his love of the infant Jesus. So he effaced his life as a sinner and restored him to the age of innocence.” What is spiritually so consoling is yet too unbearably melodramatic- the execution of an infant. Dermuche differs from

the Metamorphosis as regards the paradigmatic level of the text. With Kafka it is the cultural stereotype that is foregrounded, Ayme's work confronts parody and irony in the transformed text. Basically it engages with Kafka's Metamorphosis; unlike his though it is exposed in the rational questioning. To the Chaplain it is an exquisite miracle transforming a thief into the infant Christ, a kind of Metonymic skid of His Crucifixion. The law-enforcing authority views it as a "treacherous stratagem" to commit crimes and get away with them. In that they proceed the set course of justice and replay the Grand Inquisitor, the idea of the Metamorphosis either sub human or superhuman becomes a redundancy. Finally the whole narrative collapses into a huge farce when the counsel makes the devastating revelations about the theft and three murdered people in these words. "The three old people received him at first and after being reassured, complained to him that very night someone had stolen a gramophone record lying on the table") p258).

A Rose for Emily is also degenerate text born out of terrible isolation. But its degeneracy is exteriorized as the overtly "fantastic" such as Kafka's and Faulkner's monstrous vermin a castrated construct embodied in Emily whose abnormal firmness of will and unpredictably atrocious actions may make her a pathological case of a woman ("crazy") with a history of insanity in her family. In fact her lover having been run off by her father, she withdraws herself into voluntary isolation and undergoes a curious transformations. A contempt for public opinion grows in her and she even loses her sense of distinction between illusion and reality. She treats her tax notice as "paper". She derecognizes her death. To her neither Colonel Sartoris nor her father nor her murdered lover is dead. In that she can even live with the dead, the narrative of this necrophiliac verges on the fantastic where no precise motive other than her meeting the world on her own weird terms can be assigned to her actions.

Faulkner's text is more explicit than The Metamorphosis in respect to its communal meaning which is the chief level of its vraisemblance. Emily is a "tradition, a duty, care – a hereditary obligation" to the townfolk. Although she lives in virtually complete isolation she occasionally interacts with the outside world in her own way as one of the "high and mighty Griersons". In her descriptions as an "idol" ("angelic") she takes on a venerable religious reference. But "disgrace" and "fallen woman" transform her into a denunciatory social discourse comparable with "Poor Emily" as she goes down with a "Day Labourer, a Northerner" much to the shocked conscience of the South. Still she is a historical "" ("She has vanquished horse and foot") attracting the entire citizenry to her house – a pilgrimage, as it were.

The generic model which Faulkner uses here is, in the main, one of tragic horror generated through setting, characterization and action. A weird character with "To be"- a "doddering negro with his rusty voice as from disuse" as her aide and the most gruesome murder- are as shocking as the "chill fables" of Hemmingway and Ring Lardner. The protagonist in her terrible aloofness invincible pride and in her fall too is "towering personality (Emily has a "light housekeeper's face") comparable with a classical tragic hero. Like Kafka's The Metamorphosis, A Rose for Emily too insinuates an oedipal meaning. Emily's father not only runs off her lover but also forms a "tableau" with her, she "a slender figure in white in the background, her father a spraddled silhouette in foreground, his back to her may be further specified as a "generalized parable about the decay of human sensibility

from false gentility to genteel perversion.”⁸ Finally unlike the Kafka and Ayme texts, this one substitutes a narrator- focalizer – an inhabitant of Emily’s town for the “empirical author”. He knows the whole story right from the start as an external focalizer but reveals it only gradually as an “internal focalizer”⁹ who reaches the denouement of the Emily text with the rest of the townsfolk.

A possible intertext for the Emily story may be Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. The Havisham text reappears in *Miss Emily*. Both are jilted and both resistant to change. Miss Havisham stops time because she wants to live with her wedding ‘expectations’ in her bridal dress but is destroyed. But not so Emily, she is jilted once but cannot be destroyed nor can be jilted again. No marginal character, Emily may murder her lover and turn necrophiliac and reassure herself of her plinths of continuity with her lover by derecognizing his death itself.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p138-160.
2. Franz Kafka, “The Metamorphosis” in *Classics of Modern Fiction* (edited) (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, inc, 1960), pp. 411-455.
3. Marcel Ayme, “ Dermuche” in *The scope of Fiction*, ed. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn warren (New York : Appelton – Century Crofts & Company, 1945), pp.251-258.
4. William Faulkner, “A Rose for Emily” in *Understanding Fiction*, ed. Cleanth Brooks, Jr and Robert Penn Warren (F. S. Crofts & Company, 1945), pp 400-409.
5. Mary Doyle Springer, “ Form of Modern Novella” (Chicago:University of Chicago Press,1975),pp.105-109
6. Tzvetan Torov, “ The Fantastic”(Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University,1973), p.56
7. Fyodor Dostoevsky, “ Notes from The Underground and The Grand Inquistor” (New York: Dutton,1960), p.6.
8. Irving Howe, “ William Faulkner: A Critical Study” (New York: Vintage Books, 1962), p.265
9. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, “ Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics” (New York: Methuen, 1983), p.78.