


European Literary Tradition in Roth's Kepesh Trilogy

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Recommended Citation

Sánchez-Canales, Gustavo. "European Literary Tradition in Roth's Kepesh Trilogy." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 16.2 (2014): [<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2404>](https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.2404)

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Volume 16 Issue 2 (June 2014) Article 8
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<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss2/8>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 16.2 (2014)**
Thematic Issue ***History, Memory, and the Making of Character in Roth's Fiction***
Ed. Gustavo Sánchez-Canales and Victoria Aarons
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol16/iss2/8>>

Abstract: in his article "European Literary Tradition in Roth's Kepesh Trilogy" Gustavo Sánchez-Canales discusses the significance of European literature in Philip Roth's novels. Sánchez-Canales analyses the influence of Nikolai Gogol's "The Nose" and Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" on Roth's *The Breast* and in Roth's *The Professor of Desire* of Anton Chekhov's tales and Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" and *The Castle*. Further, Sánchez-Canales elaborates on the impact of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice* and W.B. Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium" on Roth's *The Dying Animal*.

Gustavo SÁNCHEZ-CANALES

European Literary Tradition in Roth's Kepesh Trilogy

In 1980, Philip Roth edited a four-volume book entitled *Writers from the Other Europe* which made accessible in English the works of some major Central and East European novelists who, otherwise, would have probably remained unknown in the U.S. for a few more years. Roth's interest in European writers, however, had begun a couple of decades earlier. This is how he explained it in an interview with Alvin P. Sanoff: "I only came to read Kafka seriously in my late 20s. At about the same time, I began to read Céline. I could also mention James, Flaubert and Chekhov, all of whom have meant as much to me as a reader as they have as a writer. There is no separation between the two" (13). During the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, Roth was traveling back and forth between the U.S. and Europe to meet and interview European writers such as Isaac Bashevis Singer (1976), Milan Kundera (1980), Primo Levi (1986), Aharon Appelfeld (1988), and Ivan Klíma (1990). His interviews with these writers were published in his 2001 *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*. Thus it is no wonder that throughout Roth's novels there are many references "to a variety of literary touchstones, including Sophocles, Dostoevsky, Shakespeare, Strindberg, O'Neill, the Bloomsbury group, Joyce, Maupassant, Twain, Flaubert, Tolstoy, Henry James, Hemingway, Chekhov, Freud, Kafka, Yeats, Faulkner, Genet, Synge, Céline, Hardy, Mann, Brönte (both Emily and Charlotte), Bellow, Kundera, Melville, Colette, Updike, Henry Miller, Hawthorne, and Gogol ... Malamud, Beckett, and perhaps a touch of Dos Passos" (Royal 22).

The university is a setting in which one of Roth's alter egos, the young David Kepesh, is initiated into adult life. In both *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire* one learns that Kepesh, who is in charge of a European literature course, is so committed to teaching that he is transformed into a "mammary gland" (*Breast* 13). One of his theories is that his metamorphosis is owing to the fact that he has been "teaching Gogol and Kafka every year—teaching 'The Nose' and 'Metamorphosis' ... with so much conviction" (60). Although *The Professor of Desire* was published five years after *The Breast*, the chronological order of the action is reversed. In the 1977 novel, Kepesh is introduced from the outset of the story as a young man who studies European literature at Syracuse University. He soon finds out that the personal experiences of the writers he studies—Flaubert, Kafka, Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Mann—mirror his own. It is in this sense that one can claim that "Kepesh is true to his belief that fiction is best read with reference to life" (Balasubramanian 69). Curiously, although Kepesh's first semester's readings are "around the subject of erotic desire" and are "concerned with illicit and ungovernable passions, whose assault is made by other means: *Madame Bovary*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Death in Venice*" (*The Professor* 179), these works are hardly mentioned—let alone explored in detail—in the novel. Chekhov and Kafka, however, are addressed extensively in *The Professor of Desire* and Gogol and Kafka in *The Breast* and this makes it clear that the three writers are "literary mentors" for Kepesh.

The Professor of Desire covers a rather long time span, from Kepesh's Catskills memories when he was aged eight until the moment he decides to divorce his first wife Helen Baird and starts a more stable life with Claire Ovington. *The Breast* starts where *The Professor* finishes and shows how the idyllic life envisioned by Kepesh is but a mirage. *The Breast* presents Kepesh transformed into a huge mammary gland: Kepesh's references to Gogol's "The Nose" and Kafka's "The Metamorphosis" are constant. As in the case of Gogol's tale and Kafka's story, one of the strengths of Roth's 1972 novella lies in making an implausible narrative sound believable: "the themes of the writer-subject's transformation and the transformative relationship between fact and fiction that are so central to *The Breast* traverse Roth's later, more 'serious' works" (Mikkonen 13-14). The narrator of Gogol's tale explains that "yet, if you stop to think for a moment, there's a grain of truth in it. Whatever you may say, these things do happen—rarely, I admit, but they do happen" ("The Nose" 70). It is clear to Gregor Samsa from the very outset of the story that "what has happened to me? He thought. It was no dream" ("Metamorphosis" 89). And, as regards Kepesh, although he is not sure whether what he is experiencing is real or a dream, there are other characters like Dr. Klinger and his wife Claire Ovington who state that what he is going through is true. In a conversation between Klinger and Kepesh, while the latter thinks that "it's a dream," the former answers: "But you are awake, Mr. Kepesh. You know very well that you're awake" (*The Breast* 54).

In a 1972 interview with Alan Lelchuk, Roth was asked about the difficulties associated with writing a story like *The Breast*. When Roth referred to his treatment of Gogol's "The Nose" and Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," he explained that "I refer to these masters of fantasy to illustrate possibilities, not to lay claim to similarities of accomplishment or stature" (56). Roth's explanation is probably best exemplified in a conversation between Kepesh and his psychiatrist Dr. Klinger: "'Did fiction do this to me? How could it have?' asks Dr. Klinger. 'No, hormones are hormones and art is art. You are not suffering from an overdose of the great imaginations.' 'Aren't I? I wonder. This might well be my way of being a Kafka, being a Gogol, being a Swift. They could envision the incredible, they had the words and those relentless fictionizing brains. But I had neither, I had nothing—literary longings and that was it. I loved the extreme in literature, idolized those who wrote it, was virtually hypnotized by the imagery and the power ... So I took the leap. Made the word flesh. Don't you see, I have out-Kafkaed Kafka'" (*The Breast* 81-82). When Klinger says that "hormones are hormones and art is art. You are not suffering from an overdose of the great imaginations" (*The Breast* 81) he is reminding Roth's narrator of the fact that what is happening to him is real. This is a crucial aspect which does not apply to David Kepesh in the same way as it does to Gregor Samsa because while a character like Samsa accepts his fate from the beginning of his transformation, a character like Kepesh does not. Kepesh moves from literary explanations, fantasies and frustration to an eventual acceptance of his (grotesque) self. He is constantly questioning his fate and, although he ends up believing that he has become a mammary gland, his mind ponders alternative ways of being a breast. However, Kepesh—as Gregor Samsa does at the outset of "The Metamorphosis"—accepts his new self (note that at the end of "The Nose," Kovaloff retrieves his nose so he is the only character who does not need to learn to accept anything). Apart from the fact that in the three stories the mutation is presented as something real, it is also worth noting that from the beginning of *The Breast*, just after David's transformation, "the existential question of identity becomes painfully centered on his physical condition. His anatomy is his destiny; he is rewritten bodily as other ... Roth's book uncovers Kepesh's desperate desire to establish that the voice ... can affirm the possibility of an irreducible self, a self that cannot be altered—morally, psychologically, ontologically—by accident or design" (Shostak 30). I find that this claim is extendable to "The Nose" and "The Metamorphosis."

A third aspect "The Nose," "The Metamorphosis," and *The Breast* have in common is that all three stories deal with the absurdity of life to the extent that in none of them does the reader learn why the transformation took place. For instance, after Ivan Jakovlevitch—Kovaloff's barber—finds his client Ivan "absolutely stunned. He thought and thought, but just didn't know what to make of it. 'I'm damned if I know what's happened!' ... 'I can't say for certain if I came home drunk or not last night. All I know is, it's crazy'" ("The Nose" 43). As soon as Gregor Samsa wakes up in the morning, feels and sees his mutation, he exclaims: "What has happened to me" ("Metamorphosis" 89). Kepesh is also unable to grasp what is going on: "Alas, what has happened to me is like nothing *anyone* has ever known: beyond understanding, beyond compassion, beyond comedy" (*The Breast* 12). A little later, he asks the same question to himself: "What happened to me?" (18). Besides, there are no clear indications of the reasons for the mutation throughout each narrative, or if it got triggered off due to punishment for wrongdoing. There are just mere speculations.

In the three stories the respective protagonists experience mind/body dissociation. Their bodies change radically, but their minds continue to function like before their transformation. However, as they begin to get used to their new nature, they start to act according to their needs and desires. For example, when Kovaloff approaches his nose in order to retrieve it, the nose clearly behaves as a self-sufficient being, independent from the rest of the body: "The nose looked at the Major and frowned a little. 'My dear fellow, you are mistaken. I am a person in my own right. Furthermore, I don't see that we can have anything in common. Judging from your uniform buttons, I should say you're from another government department.' With these words the nose turned away and continued its prayers" ("The Nose" 50).

Kafka's protagonist's new eating/drinking habits reveal that the old, human Gregor has "died" and a new, non-human being is born: "He could almost have laughed with joy, since he was now still hungrier than in the morning ... he did not like the milk either, although milk had been his favorite drink ... indeed it was almost with repulsion that he turned away from the basin and crawled back to the middle of the room" ("Metamorphosis" 105). And Kepesh's ordinary sexual practices have to be necessar-

ily replaced by others which allow him to continue to enjoy his sexual life: "I just want [Claire] to squeeze me and suck me and lick me. I can't get enough of it. I can't stand it when she stops. I shout, I scream, 'Go on! More! Go on!'" (*The Breast* 34-35). Ironically, however, Kepesh does not have an epiphanic experience thanks to "The Metamorphosis" or "The Nose." While reading Rainer Maria Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo," Kepesh stops to ponder the final line of the poem—"You must change your life" (*Breast* 89; emphasis in the original)—which refers to the protagonist's mental transformation in an attempt to break with his present life. Instead, what he gets is a physical metamorphosis. Kafka and Gogol then turn out to be of little, if any, help to him.

In *The Professor of Desire*, Kepesh resorts to the mastery of European writers like Kafka, Chekhov, and Flaubert, among others. At one point, while studying at Syracuse University, David talks about one of his multiple selves. He explains that one of them is "a sober, solitary, rather refined young man devoted to European literature and languages. My fellow actors are amused by the way in which I abandon the stage and retreat into a rooming house, taking with me as companions those great writers whom I choose to call, as an undergraduate, "the architects of my mind" (12). One of Kepesh's "literary mentors" is Chekhov. Throughout *The Professor of Desire*, the references to Chekhov's short stories are constant. For instance, early in the novel, Kepesh discovers that "during the weeks near the end of the term when we study Chekhov's stories, I find, while reading aloud to my students passages which I particularly want them to take note of, that each and every sentence seems to me to allude to my own plight above all, as though by now every single syllable I think or utter must first trickle down through my troubles" (72). Kepesh's "own plight" is connected with the "[Chekhovian] disillusionment" (69-70) from which he is trying to escape. Kepesh realizes that many Chekhov stories deal with the writer's belief that real—i.e., effective—communication between (married) people is impossible. Eventually, Kepesh, whose marriage with his first wife Helen Baird is presented as a failure from the outset and whose relationship with Claire also turns out to be disastrous later on in his life, is obsessed with Chekhov's theory about marital life (69).

Kepesh is writing his dissertation—*The Man in a Shell/Case*—whose title he has borrowed from Chekhov's homonymous short story, one of the three tales included in the so-called "Little Trilogy": "The Man in a Case," "Gooseberries," and "About Love." In his dissertation, finally published in book form, there is somewhat of a prophetic irony because, as Kepesh himself acknowledges, he had chosen the theme of the book before meeting Helen. At the beginning of "The Man in a Case," Burkin, the narrator and one of Chekhov's mouthpieces, says that "'there are plenty of people in this world who are recluses by nature and strive, like the hermit-crab or snail, to retreat within their shells" ("The Man" 175). At the end, Ivan Ivanich draws a similar conclusion about living in the city: "'And is not our living in towns, in our stuffy, cramped rooms, writing our useless papers, playing vint, isn't that living in an oyster-shell, too?'" (185). Kepesh's (self-referential) Chekhov book, which also touches on the issue of marriage, reflects the disillusionment a professor of literature like him experiences when he attempts to cope with (his) daily life. I believe that Kepesh has this story in mind when he explains that Chekhov was tormented by the "anguished cry of the trapped and miserable socialized being ... of those who seek a way out of the shell of restrictions and convention, out of the pervasive boredom and the stifling despair, out of the painful marital situations and the endemic social falsity, into what they take to be a vibrant and desirable life" (*The Professor* 156). Frustrated by his failed marital life with Helen, David feels like Burkin—and Chekhov—in terms of anguish, boredom, and desire to build a better life for himself.

Probably the most significant Chekhovian motif in *The Professor of Desire* is the theme of "romantic disillusionment," Kepesh's feeling of entrapment in his marriage as addressed in Chekhov's "Gooseberries" and "The Lady with the Dog," among other stories, two tales which deal with "the varieties of pain engendered by spiritual imprisonment" (156) and, as such, with the intricacies of failed love. "Gooseberries" illustrates the issue of Chekhovian 'romantic disillusionment' perfectly well. It is the story of two brothers, Ivan Ivanich, a countryman who leads a carefree existence growing gooseberries, and Nikolai Ivanich, an urbanite who seeks to lead a quiet life in the countryside. Nikolai decides to work very hard for a few years in order to have an early retirement. One day, he feels he has enough money to fulfil his dream and buys a country house and a piece of land to grow gooseberries. The problem is that he makes such an effort to look after the gooseberries that he has no time to enjoy the pleasures of country life. Nikolai deprives himself of food, pleasures, and love. What is more,

his selfish behavior leads his wife to death. From the moment his dream is realized at the expense of other essential things in life, his unhappiness begins to grow. One of the initial disappointments he undergoes in his new life is connected with the first batch of homegrown, but "hard and sour" (191) gooseberries he tastes. This reference to Nikolai's distaste for gooseberries is a clear symbol of his distaste for life. Kepesh's allusion to this tale enables us to establish a parallel between Nikolai's feelings of disappointment with life and Kepesh's sense of disillusionment with his surrounding world. Kepesh, like the Chekhov character, has a big expectation he fails to fulfil. In his case, marrying Helen who, like the sour taste of gooseberries, epitomizes the protagonist's clash with reality.

"The Lady with the Dog" is another story which addresses the theme of failed marriage and becomes a key referent in Kepesh's reflection on love. The protagonists of the tale, Anna and Gurov, are two unhappily married youths who have an extramarital relationship in Yalta. Gurov is a philologist bored with his life in Moscow—Kepesh is a professor of literature tired of his life in London—in search of a short, enjoyable liaison with a woman. But when Gurov encounters Anna (Kepesh meets Claire in *The Professor of Desire* and their life together continues in *The Breast*), he starts to undergo a psychological evolution. At the beginning of the novel, Anna's adultery and her subsequent feelings of guilt—an echo of the Anna-Vronsky scene in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* and a key passage which mirrors the Kepesh-Helen relationship—are received by Gurov with indifference. For instance, while she is crying over her action, Gurov is eating a piece of watermelon without paying any attention to Anna's suffering. However, his attitude of indifference toward her changes almost at the end of the tale when "on the landing above them were two schoolboys, smoking and looking down, but Gurov did not care, and, drawing Anna Sergeevna towards him, began kissing her face, her lips, her hands" ("The Lady" 232). She has finally been able to share her suffering with him. At this stage, they wonder how they can free themselves from their respective chains.

In connection to the end of "The Lady with the Dog," Kepesh says: "I speak of the amount of human history that Chekhov can incorporate in fifteen pages, of how ridicule and irony gradually give way, even within so short a space, to sorrow and pathos, of his feel for the disillusioning moment and for those processes wherein actuality seemingly pounces upon even our most harmless illusions, not to mention the grand dreams of fulfilment and adventure. I speak of his pessimism about what he calls 'this business of personal happiness', and all the while I want to ask the chubby girl in the front row, who is rapidly recording my words in her notebook, to become my daughter" (*The Professor* 74). The "chubby girl in the front row" is Kathie, Kepesh's most brilliant student. He intuits that his salvation can be achieved through her. For example, one day while trying to overcome his traumatic separation from Helen Baird, he experiences anagnorisis in one of his classes. Kathie has written an essay dealing with "Anton Chekhov's overall philosophy of life." According to her, Chekhov's "philosophy of life" boils down to the following statements: "'We are born innocent' ... 'we suffer terrible disillusionment before we can gain knowledge, and then we fear death—and we are granted only fragmentary happiness to offset the pain'" (*The Professor* 94). Clearly, Kathie, "a gift and a dream fulfilled" serves Roth to reflect on the human being's inability to be happy (Balasubramanian 70).

The mastery of Chekhov's short stories is, however, of little, if any, help to Kepesh. At one point, during a conversation with Dr. Klinger about Claire, Kepesh alludes to Chekhov's dislike of generalizations in the following terms: "'Dr. Klinger, I assure you that I am sufficiently imbued by now with the Chekhovian bias to suspect as much myself.' ... 'But, if I may, as Chekhov also had the ordinary good sense to write: in psychological matters, 'God preserve us from generalizations'" (*The Professor* 100). True, in Chekhov's tales there are no generalizations about the nature of love, among other reasons, because his characters fail to explain what love is. At the very beginning of "About Love," Alekhin says: "'The explanation which would seem to fit one case does not apply in a dozen others, and the very best thing, to my mind, would be to explain every case individually without attempting to generalize. We ought, as the doctors say, to individualize each case'" (194-95). This is probably due to the fact that Chekhov found that generalizations contribute little, if anything, to honesty and truth. He was obsessed with the idea of describing what actually existed rather than what he wanted to see. Without a doubt, this has led many critics to view him as a pessimist interested in depicting a gloomy reality where people are incapable of communicating successfully with each other.

Later in the story, in a conversation between Kepesh's poet friend Ralph Baumgarten and him, Baumgarten gives his personal theory about why Chekhov can never be the answer to the professor's

problems: "I can't even take that much of Chekhov, that holy of holies. Why isn't he ever implicated in the shit? You're an authority. Why is the brute never Anton but some other slob?" (*The Professor* 138): "It is significant that Kepesh does not find any obvious similarity between himself and any character from Chekhov, in spite of the many parallels he is able to draw between his life and those of Chekhov's 'trapped and socialized' beings" (Balasubramanian 69). Further, although Chekhov's tales prepare Kepesh to develop a philosophy as "literature-as-therapy" (Sánchez-Canales 68), the pessimistic view of human relations and human communication expressed in them turn out to be an unsuitable referent for him. Kepesh's attempt to cope with his first marriage in light of Chekhov's "romantic disillusionment" fails.

The other major literary mentor in *The Professor of Desire* is Kafka whose concept of "spiritual imprisonment" is of the Rothian character's interest as well. In order to explore the significance of this issue in Roth's novel, I focus on Kafka's story "A Hunger Artist" and *The Castle*. After reading these two works and Kafka's biography, Kepesh starts to believe that his own "spiritual imprisonment" stems from what he calls "sexual despair." It seems that his "despair" might come to an end when he meets, like Kafka, a woman who can help him leave a troubled life behind and settle down: while Dora Dymant brought stability to Kafka in the last months of his life, Claire is introduced as a counterpart of Dora toward the end of *The Professor of Desire*. As in the case of Kafka, Kepesh can stop leading a sexually active, but void, life and achieve spiritual renewal with his wife's aid. Kafka's "sexual despair," "a clear reference to the absence of true love in [his] life" (Sánchez-Canales 202), helps David reflect on his own despair but, unfortunately, it does not enable him to overcome it. The question of "sexual despair" is raised explicitly when David, alluding to Kafka's *The Castle*, claims that the main theme of this novel is Kafka's own erotic blockage: "I sometimes wonder if *The Castle* isn't in fact linked to Kafka's own erotic blockage—a book engaged at every level with no reaching a climax" (*The Professor* 173). In fact, there might have been a strong sexual component which contributed to Kafka's mental blockage.

The protagonist of *The Castle*, a land surveyor named K., meets a waitress called Frieda, the lover of an important employee in the castle named Klamm. The sexual attraction between them is obvious from their first encounter: "They embraced one another, her little body burned in K.'s hands, they rolled, in a semi-conscious state from which K. tried constantly but unsuccessfully to surface, a little way on, bumped into Klamm's door with a hollow thud, then lay there in the puddles of beer and the rubbish covering the floor" (40). However, the surveyor only wants her to reach Klamm, count West-West's closest collaborator in the castle. Frieda is apparently modeled on Milena Jesenková, a young woman Kafka met in Prague in 1919 when she showed a keen interest in translating his short stories. Like Frieda, Milena was an unhappily married woman whose cantankerous husband echoes Klamm. According to Kafka, Milena was an extremely erotic woman who epitomized the "erotic maternal figure" Kafka had always considered in an incestuous way (see Brod 32). After repressing his libido, Kafka might have been sexually blocked. However, Max Brod, Kafka's best friend and biographer, dismisses the theory of the erotic mother-complex like this: "the psychoanalysts have their scheme of a subconscious erotic mother-complex, and a subconscious hate of the father. But for the infantile complex there is surely ... the simpler explanation that the parents are the first problem a child comes up against, the first resistance he has to assert himself against; his arguments with them are the model for all his later fights in life" (32).

The theme of Kafka's sexuality is taken up again toward the end of *The Professor of Desire* when, in a quasi-oneiric scene, Kepesh encounters a Czech guide called X—a clear echo of Kafka's K.—who offers to help him "to meet the whore Kafka used to visit" (187). David is deeply interested in collecting information from the prostitute, an 80-year-old-plus woman called Eva, about the connection between her relationship with Kafka and the tale "A Hunger Artist." In "A Hunger Artist," a tale Kafka wrote when he was approaching death, the narrator explains that the reason why the hunger artist looked like a skeleton was not only because of his fasting but "perhaps it was dissatisfaction with himself that had worn him down" (270). Much the same as Kafka's character, whose "inner dissatisfaction always rankled" (270), Kepesh's entrapment in his "spiritual imprisonment" embitters him. Both "A Hunger Artist" and *The Professor of Desire* can be read as two stories in which their protagonists view themselves as alienated artists: while the hunger artist is a joy-deprived individual who has no longer interest in anything, David is apathetic and lost in his "spiritual starvation." Thus I posit that there is a

connection between Kafka's and David's respective "sexual despair" and Kafka's supposed "erotic blockage" as shown in both "A Hunger Artist" and *The Castle*. In this way, Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" and *The Castle* serve Roth to show that Kafka's and David's respective works remain unfinished because they are sexually unsatisfied. This parallel between both writers leads David to regard Kafka as the perfect embodiment of his vision of life and art. Kafka's texts, however, are probably not of much more help to Kepesh because "sexual experience is ineffable, and its relation to art is a mystery" (Lee 75). In other words, Kafka's own life does not help Roth's protagonist come to terms with himself.

Kepesh's farewell as a Roth character takes place in *The Dying Animal*. David is an elderly man who is awaiting death. Throughout the story he remembers his love affair with one of his former students, a young Cuban woman of great beauty called Consuela Castillo. Her breasts become a fetish for the protagonist: "the beauty of Consuela's breasts is the leitmotif of the novel" (Trendel 63). The turning point of the novel occurs when, after many years of estrangement, Consuela pays Kepesh a visit to tell him that she has been diagnosed with a breast cancer. Consuela's disease will surely lead to her final death: "The breast is the link between Eros and Thanatos in the novel" (63). The title of the novel, which comes from Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium," does not only refer to Kepesh's ageing body, but also to Consuela's body consumed by cancer.

As happens with *The Breast* and *The Professor of Desire*, in *The Dying Animal* there are countless references and allusions to European writers and artists. To give just a few examples, painters Diego Velázquez, Pablo Picasso, and Amadeo Modigliani, composers Giacomo Puccini, Frédéric Chopin, and Franz Schubert, poet Yeats, writers John Milton, Joseph Conrad, Thomas Mann, Fiodor Dostoevsky, and Franz Kafka. In order to approach what is probably the main theme of *The Dying Animal*—the interrelations between art, erotic desire and death—I argue that Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and Mann's *Death in Venice* are two key literary referents. As in the case of the works of Chekhov, Gogol, and Kafka, those of Yeats and Mann do not eventually help the protagonists either alleviate their pain or come to terms with themselves. "Sailing to Byzantium" is Yeats's reflection on the tragedy of old age and the spiritual work needed to feel alive even when the individual is growing into "a dying animal": "Consume my heart away; sick with desire/And fastened to a dying animal/It knows not what it is" (21-23; *The Dying* 102). In order to escape his mortal condition, Yeats believes that it is imperative to leave the "country for old men"—i.e., Ireland—and travel to Byzantium, a place he envisions as the center of European civilization, a place where sages can become the "singing-masters of my soul" (20). "Sailing to Byzantium" is then an excellent example of Yeats's obsessive idea of a world where there is a conflict between passion (i.e., the senses) and the spirit.

This tension between intellect and passion or between body and mind is also present in Mann's *Death in Venice*. Much the same as Yeats who resorts to the use of classical, Greek images to show this conflict between the "higher world of ideas" and the "world of the senses," both Mann's Aschenbach and Roth's Kepesh also make use of classical imagery to address the theme of love. This is especially true after they encounter their "objects of desire." For instance, Aschenbach, who becomes obsessed with beauty in Venice, uses Greek imagery when he refers to Tadzio. This is clearest in the first description he makes of the teenager: "Aschenbach noticed with astonishment the lad's perfect beauty. His face recalled the noblest moment of Greek sculpture—pale, with a sweet reserve, with clustering honey-coloured ringlets, the brow and nose descending in one line, the winning mouth, the expression of pure and godlike serenity. Yet with all this chaste perfection of form it was of such unique personal charm that the observer thought he had never seen, either in nature or art, anything so utterly happy and consummate" (30-31). Kepesh compares Consuela with a piece of classical art and shows, like Aschenbach and the narrator of Yeats's poems, that his erotic pursuit of the "object of desire" is to a great extent spiritually oriented: "[Carlos] too knows she is a work of art, the lucky rare woman who is a work of art, classical art, beauty in its classical form, but alive, alive, and the aesthetic response to beauty alive is what, class? Desire" (*The Dying* 46). The fact that there is a significant age difference between the writers and their worshipped beloved makes them feel old. As a consequence of this, they feel a rejection of their own bodies. While this is one of Yeats's clearest points—apart from the aforementioned line "sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal," in the same poem he writes "an aged man is but a paltry thing" (9)—it is also the case with both Mann and Roth. For instance, almost at the end of *Death in Venice* when the deadening, noxious atmosphere of the city is inescapable, the dying Aschenbach establishes a contrast between his ageing body and Tadzio's

youthful vigor: "The presence of the youthful beauty that had bewitched him filled him with disgust of his own ageing body; the sight of his own sharp features and grey hair plunged him in hopeless mortification" (77). Early in the *The Dying Animal* Kepesh confesses gloomily his inability to please or satisfy a young, beautiful woman like Consuela: "I still can't say that anything I ever did sexually excited Consuela about me. Which was largely why, from the evening we first went to bed eight years back, I never had a moment's peace, why, whether she realized it or not, I was all weakness and worry from then on, why I could never figure out whether the answer was to see more of her or to see less of her or to see her not at all, to give her up" (22-23).

I conclude to point to Roth's creative use of literary references: in *The Dying Animal* while looking back upon his life where there has been room for fatherhood, grandfatherhood, and countless affairs, Kepesh cannot help establishing a comparison between the ageing Aschenbach and his likewise ageing state: "when will you begin to rouge your cheeks, Herr von Aschenbach? What do you think you look like? Do you have any idea? All that devotion to the Higher Life. Manning the aesthetic barricades on Channel Thirteen" (*The Dying* 89). However, there is a significant difference regarding the end: unlike Yeats's poem and Mann's novel, where as the poet's/novelist's body ages the protagonist becomes a "dying animal" whereas his lover (i.e., muse) stays young, *The Dying Animal* is gloomier in the sense that both the old and the young are doomed to perish. At the end of the novel—Consuelo aged thirty-four and Kepesh aged seventy-plus—are equally touched by "the wound of age." Worse than that—here lies the tragedy in the story—the biological clock has been reversed: "Her sense of time is now the same as mine, speeded up and more forlorn even than mine. She, in fact, has overtaken. Because I can still tell myself, 'I'm not going to die in five years, maybe not in ten years, I'm fit, I'm well, I could even live another twenty,' while she" (148). Once again, life is so implacable that no literary, artistic or musical mentors are of much help. At best, their grief and feelings of despair can be accompanied by Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* (141). Not much more can be offered to someone for whom "there was no consoling" (153).

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