



# The Reception of the Life and Work of Franz Kafka in Philip Roth's Non-Fiction Writings

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## SYNOPSIS

Philip Roth made no secret of his great admiration for the work of Franz Kafka, which ultimately brought him to Prague in the 1970s and fostered his interest in Czech culture. This contribution focuses on the reception of the personality and work of Franz Kafka in Philip Roth's non-fiction writing. The first section focuses on Roth's essential Kafkaesque essay "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or Looking at Kafka' from 1973, in which Roth combines an empathetic portrait of his favourite author with a counterfactual vision of Kafka's life, in which the author of the *Trial* and the *Castle* did not die of tuberculosis and instead fled from the Holocaust to the United States, where he became Roth's uncle. In the second section, based on Roth's dialogue with Ivan Klíma from 1990, we document how Kafka serves Roth in his reflections on the position and role of the writer in society.

## KEYWORDS

Franz Kafka; Philip Roth; Ivan Klíma; American literature; Czech literature; totalitarian regime.

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## INTRODUCTION

In this study I focus on how the work and personality of Franz Kafka are reflected in the non-fiction<sup>1</sup> writing of the American author Philip Roth (1933–2018), who is considered one of the most distinguished representatives of the modern novel and of American Jewish literature. Together with Henry James, Gustav Flaubert and James Joyce, Kafka is ranked among the authors that have fundamentally influenced

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1 For the purposes of this study we shall consider non-fiction to cover texts that are perceived as non-fiction both by the author himself, and by the editors of the volume *Why Write?* (Roth 2017). We therefore also include here the essay "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or Looking at Kafka', even if its second part comprises a fictional text about Franz Kafka's emigration to the USA and his subsequent fate. In order to place Roth's views, as expressed in the non-fiction texts, within a broader context, in certain passages I shall refer also to the author's works of fiction.

this American writer (Parrish 2007, p. 2; Parker Royal 2007, p. 25), and forms part of 'Roth's family of Jewish writers' (Miller Budick 2007, p. 75). Kafka fascinated Roth throughout his life, not only as a key author for the formulation of the life experience of the human being of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but also as the bearer of a specific artistic and human destiny. This fascination took on many forms. First of all Roth lectured on Kafka within the framework of his activity at the University of Pennsylvania from the mid-1960s, on a course which he later jokingly referred to as 'Studies in Guilt and Persecution' (Roth 2017, pp. 69–70). Kafka's influence was projected also into his prose works, most markedly in *The Breast* (1972), a variation on 'The Metamorphosis', in which the main character David Kepesh wakes up one morning to discover that he has been transformed into a giant breast.

However, in the following text I do not intend to uncover the Kafkaesque references in Roth's work, but shall focus on Roth's reception of Franz Kafka in his non-fiction writing. A specific role is played here primarily by interviews, not only interviews with Roth (2007; 2017) but also the dialogues which the American writer held with his colleagues, and which he later incorporated into *Shop Talk* (Roth 2002; 2017). In his dialogues with Aharon Appelfield, Ivan Klíma, Isaac Bashevis Singer and Milan Kundera, the Kafkaesque theme is present either as an explicit content of the debate, or implicitly in the sense that in conversations about literature, and about which writers had a formative influence on the work of his writer colleagues, Kafka is regarded as a key author for the expression of the Jewish, or as the case may be Central European experience. Of fundamental significance for the formulation of Roth's stance towards Kafka is his expansive dialogue with Ivan Klíma from 1990 (Roth 2017, pp. 217–245).

Roth's non-fiction texts, collected in the volume *Why Write?* (Roth 2017), which concluded the publication of his work by The Library of America press, shall thus represent the source material for the following study, in which I shall trace the development of Roth's opinions of Kafka: First of all I shall focus on the counterfactual essay "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or Looking at Kafka' and its interpretation within the context of Roth's life and work. Subsequently, on the basis of Roth's dialogue with Ivan Klíma, I shall show how it was Kafka who influenced Roth's more general reflections on the position of the writer and his work within society. Methodologically I shall take as my base the procedures of hermeneutic text analysis in connection with biographical critique.

Before we come to the actual theme, it is necessary to explain at least briefly the role of work with the biographical context in an interpretation of Roth's texts. Philip Roth is generally regarded as an autobiographical author, who converts the whole of his life's contents into art. A reading of Roth's texts within the context of his biography is the standard method in the study of Roth. For example, David Brauner emphasises that in Roth's case it is difficult to distinguish autobiographical material from fiction, and refers to Roth's books using terms such as 'autobiographical fiction or fictional autobiography' (Brauner 2007, p. 9). Roth's oeuvre is primarily built upon a processing of personal experiences, not only on the level of exclusive autobiography, but in the fact that he achieves his greatest artistic successes when he writes about subjects which he is able to underpin with his own experience. This is not a mere causal connection between his life and work. Although his output is based on the writer's own





life experiences, it is of the nature of an exploration of possibilities. Writing serves him as a reshaping of situations which life has suggested, but which never actually took place; it is a retrospective projection of wishes concerning how the situation might or should have transpired, rather than a record of how it transpired in reality. For example, the series of novels *Zuckerman Bound* (1979–1985) reflects the reception of Roth's first short stories and the scandal surrounding *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969). In these, the writer's alter ego Nathan Zuckerman is indeed placed in different situations from those of his creator, and so the series of novels examines what would have happened if his family had turned against him following the publication of his first books, and the attendant consequences for his psyche. Roth himself, in one of his interviews in the book *Reading Myself and Others*, on one hand concedes that his work is based upon autobiography, but at the same time he expresses his disappointment that readers are unable to read his novels as fictional texts (Roth 2007, pp. 100, 112, 123).

## I.

In 1973 Philip Roth published an experimental text on the boundary between essay and prose entitled “‘I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting’; or Looking at Kafka’. The first, essay part of the text begins as a reflection upon a photograph of Kafka, taken when he was aged forty, thus the same age as Roth when he was writing about Kafka. It starts with the speculation as to what Kafka's fate might have been had he not died one year after the photograph was taken. As Roth Pierpont notes, this is the first time in his work that Roth uses the word Holocaust (Roth Pierpont 2013, p. 89):

*Skulls chiseled like this one were shoveled by the thousands from the ovens; had he lived, his would have been among them, along with the skulls of his three younger sisters.*

*Of course it is no more horrifying to think of Franz Kafka in Auschwitz than to think of anyone in Auschwitz — it is just horrifying in its own way. But he died too soon for the Holocaust (Roth 2017, p. 5).*

Roth describes Kafka's life — conflicts with his father, tribulations with women, how his mental states were projected into his work, and also how he coped with tuberculosis, which he died of one month before his forty-first birthday. Roth does not read Kafka's literary production allegorically or psychoanalytically, but with a deep empathy as a fellow writer: in his work he sees an urgent expression of the writer's inner disposition. For example, he interprets the short story ‘The Burrow’ as an ‘unromantic and hardheaded fable about how and why art is made, a portrait of the artist in all his ingenuity, anxiety, isolation, dissatisfaction, relentlessness, secretiveness, paranoia, and self-addiction...’ (ibid., p. 13). A pivotal theme that Roth perceives not only in Kafka's prose works, but also in his diaries and letters, is a feeling of being caught in a trap.

In the second part of the text, Roth shifts the genre from essay to a counterfactual vision of Kafka, who has managed to survive both tuberculosis and the Holocaust, and

here he elaborates upon an imaginary notion of Kafka emigrating to America. This Kafka finds work as a teacher in a Hebrew school, and in 1942 even teaches the nine-year-old Philip Roth. He becomes romantically involved with Philip's aunt Rhoda, but eventually ends the relationship by means of four letters. Finally, in 1953, he dies at the age of seventy. Nobody shows any interest in the written works of the depressive teacher, and as a result they are irrevocably lost. No books remain, no *The Trial*, no *The Castle*, nor his *Diaries*. All that is preserved is these four letters which he sent to Roth's aunt, on the basis of which Roth's father declares Kafka to be 'meshugeh'.

However much the combination of an essay with a counterfactual narrative may appear forced, Roth's fantasy of becoming Kafka's nephew metaphorically captures his relationship towards this writer. Although Kafka saves his life by emigrating to America, here too he feels trapped as a foreigner. He is a European Jew with old-world ways, so different from the behaviour of the American Jews of Newark in the 1940s.

The essay is not only about Kafka, but about what Roth and the Prague German author have in common — their age, their 'Jewish' appearance, as well as the fact that neither of them was able to escape the circumstances and environment that shaped them. Consequently, what they have in common is at the same time what most sets them apart: As David Gooblar writes, Roth's Newark is not Kafka's Prague, which despite all the affinity he may feel makes Roth a completely different author from Kafka (Gooblar 2011, pp. 69–70).

The manner by which Roth contemplates Kafka, especially the meaning of the second part of the essay, becomes clearer to us when we read the essay within the context of his other texts and biography. Roth works with a counterfactual narrative in a number of his fictional texts. At the same time, he intentionally creates a narrative which is counterfactual to his biography. In his novel *The Counterlife* (1986), every subsequent part represents an alternative to the previous one. *Operation Shylock* (1993) narrates a story in which Philip Roth enters the services of Mossad as an agent, and takes part in an operation so secret that he cannot even write about it. The most striking example is his novel *The Plot against America* (2004), in which he sets recollections of his own childhood and characteristic figures from Jewish Newark within the framework of an alternative history, in which the presidential election of 1940 is won by American isolationists, and the United States of America becomes a fascist state.

The most important of Roth's works for the purposes of this article and for capturing the context is the third chapter of his novel *The Ghost Writer* (1979), in which another 'Jewish icon', namely Anne Frank, becomes the object of a counterfactual narrative. In this text, Nathan Zuckerman dreams that Amy Bellette, the young assistant of the famous writer E. I. Lonoff, whom Nathan is visiting, is in fact Anne Frank, who by some miracle has survived the war and is now concealing her identity in part because she does not want to be an object of pity on behalf of all the Jewish victims, and in part because she does not wish to be constantly reminded of her own fate. Nathan's dream of Amy as Anne Frank in itself reflects his own traumas and conflicts; an ambivalence concerning his imagined obligations as a Jew and a writer (Brauner 2007, p. 32). Roth's early short stories, through his satirical presentation of the assimilated American Jews, met with a negative reception on the part of conservative Jewish critics. In short stories such as 'Defender of the Faith', 'Epstein' and 'The Conversion of the Jews', Roth refused to present the Jews as 'the chosen people', and emphasised





that the same problems and moral dilemmas pertain to Jews as to the majority society. But fourteen years after the war, American society was not ready for such a literary portrayal. As Roth Pierpont writes, the author struck a sensitive nerve of Jewish ethnicity, namely that the majority society might discover that the Jews are no different from them. By publishing such works Roth would be betraying his ethnic roots by revealing the 'Jewish secret' (Roth Pierpont 2013, pp. 7–14). After the publication of *Portnoy's Complaint* in 1969, the writer's reputation was damaged even further. Roth was criticised as a propagator of such anti-Semitic stereotypes that even the Nazis did not disseminate, he was accused of anti-Semitism, of building his career upon the compromising and scandalising of Jews. Roth suffered a highly personal trauma as a result of this criticism (Roth 2017, pp. 100–103; Brauner 2007, p. 26; Gooblar 2011, pp. 45–47). Nathan is in a comparable position to that of the young Roth, who faced similar criticism for his early short stories. A further theme that troubles Nathan appears in the subtext: an awareness of the price that the writer must pay for his work, especially his own conflict with his father due to the manner in which he depicts the Jews in his stories.

A further element of Nathan's dream of Amy as Anne Frank is the idea that he marries Amy. This 'erotic interest' too has roots in a conflict with his father and with the Jewish community. By marrying a 'Jewish saint', Nathan would purge himself of the stigma of anti-Semitism; he could return to the bosom of his family and cease to be a renegade. Who could accuse the husband of Anne Frank of apostasy and treachery?

A similar function is played also by the imaginary admission of Franz Kafka into the Roth family (or Roth's loyal engagement in the Israeli secret service): who could accuse a Mossad agent or the nephew of Franz Kafka of anti-Semitism? The counterfactual imagination here resolves the dilemmas and traumas of the author himself.

## II.

Whereas the essay "I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting"; or Looking at Kafka' depicts Kafka himself, whose work serves him in formulating his innermost traumas, and simultaneously as a writer via whom the author of the essay formulates his own inner traumas, Roth's later reflections on Kafka turned in a different direction and culminated in a contemplation of the role of the writer within society. A key role here was played by Roth's journey to Prague and his contact with proscribed Czech intellectuals (see Roth Pierpoint 2013, pp. 86–97).

At the beginning of the 1970s, Roth was drawn to Prague precisely by his interest in Kafka. After familiarising himself with the situation of proscribed Czech writers, and specifically with life in a totalitarian society, the nature of Kafka's work aided him in understanding the reality here during that period. It was as if the specific nature of Czechoslovakia could be identified by the very fact that it was 'the place that produced Kafka' (Roth 2017, p. 232). Roth's fascination with the different life experience of writers living under a totalitarian regime, and in its way also his expression of admiration, is the foundation for his novella *The Prague Orgy* (1985), in which Nathan Zuckerman sets out for totalitarian Czechoslovakia and is confronted with various model types of writers (Sýkora 2019).

Ivan Klíma, in his memoirs *My Crazy Century* recalls Roth as a person who disdained small talk in favour of debate about the things that interested him — thus above all the theme of Jewish identity:

*Philip Roth strived to understand also our problems. His interest in the Jewish fate could naturally not omit one of the basic Jewish experiences: persecution. Although he himself avoided it, living in a free country, he felt solidarity with those who were somehow persecuted in a country that was deprived of its freedom. In my opinion, no other American writer wrote about the gloomy fate of Czech writers and Czech culture the way Roth did. This was also the reason why the Czech authorities refused to grant him another entry visa (Klíma 2010, pp. 169–170; translation in Sýkora 2019).*

The dialogue with Klíma in the most condensed possible form summarises Roth's perception of Kafka, even if both writers speak of Kafka rather figuratively, as if Kafka personified a kind of fluid meaning which Roth (and Klíma) together aspired to take possession of. Kafka reveals the essence of human existence. He enables a reconciliation with the fact that 'there are no uncontaminated angels, that the evil is inside as well as outside' (Roth 2017, p. 234). Kafka placed the source of evil within a system, and the writer then examines 'how the system contaminates you and me' (ibid., p. 235). Roth thus rejected a reading of Kafka as 'a fantasist creating a dream or a nightmare world as opposed to a realistic one' (ibid.).

Contact with dissident intellectuals led Roth to an understanding that on one hand Kafka is viewed differently within the Central European life experience, and on another that his work too plays an entirely different social role, since Kafka's books help reveal the nature of the totalitarian regime. Roth also views the fact that 'Kafka was banned by the Communist authorities from the bookstores, libraries, and universities in his own city and throughout Czechoslovakia' (ibid., p. 236) as a document of the fact that Kafka identified the essence of the real world. Kafka provoked and outraged the regime by capturing in his vision of an absurdly fantastical world something from the reality of life. Roth is fascinated by the fact that Kafka became an inspiration for the strategy of Czech opposition writers from the 1960s to the 1980s. Even if it meant 'violating the integrity of Kafka's implacable imagination', Kafka's books became 'a political weapon' in the struggle against the regime (ibid., p. 343).

Kafka's work has given birth to terms such as 'Kafkaesque' or 'Kafkaism', serving as a means of simultaneously expressing both the specific Central European experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and also the absurd features of life in a totalitarian society. It is a world ruled by official arbitrariness and reversal of values. Kafka's name is linked with a vision of the world as an absurd place, where the individual vainly attempts to find meaning, sense, and to reach the authority that could shed some light on this sense. In the words of the philosopher Karel Kosík, this is a 'nightmarish and senseless labyrinth, a world of powerlessness of humanity within a network of bureaucratic machinery' (Kosík 2009, p. 141). It is from this awareness that the Central European life experience evolves, expressed precisely in the works of the Central European authors who attracted Roth's interest and whose English translations he in many cases initiated himself, thus in stories about how history is 'thrust upon' people, stories combining the tragic with the comic and an ability to perceive the humorous aspect of





a desperate situation. Roth himself adopts this perspective when he regards the events taking place within the Central European space through the optics of Kafkaesque metaphors: For example, when Václav Havel acceded to the post of President, Roth commented that it was like a situation of K. actually making it to the Castle — and not only meeting the elusive Mr. Klamm, but taking over his job (Roth 2017, p. 235).

The significance that Kafka took on within the Central European context demonstrated to Roth the social relevance that could be attained by a work which had come into existence exclusively out of a private need to write. Both Roth and Klíma regard Kafka as an apolitical writer — ‘Kafka wrote only from his innermost need to confess his personal crisis and so solve what was for him insoluble in his personal life’ (ibid., p. 237) — who nevertheless took on an extraordinary social significance. Kafka is ‘a creator who knows how to reflect his most personal experiences deeply and truthfully also touches the suprapersonal or social spheres’ (ibid.).

Roth shared with Kafka this experience of writing out of an innermost need to confess, but he himself reflected that artistic production conceived in this manner — however much it may enjoy popularity among readers — never enjoys social respect, which is due to the position and function of literature in the United States, or in a free society in general. In comparison with the role played by art and literature under totalitarian regimes, the position of artists and art in the West will always be essentially trivial (ibid., p. 165). In an interview from 1988, Roth writes (recalling the words of Josef Škvorecký) that ‘there is almost a chemical affinity between the consequences of oppression and the genre of the novel’ (ibid.). As a result, Roth was fascinated by the role of writers under totalitarian regimes, and he himself attempted to generalise the difference in the status of the writer in a free and totalitarian regime. This is best captured in an interview for *The Paris Review* from 1983:

*When I was first in Czechoslovakia, it occurred to me that I work in a society where as a writer everything goes and nothing matters, while for the Czech writers I met in Prague, nothing goes, and everything matters. This isn't to say I wished to change places. I didn't envy them their persecution and the way in which it heightens their social importance. I didn't envy them their seemingly more valuable and serious themes (ibid.).*

## CONCLUSION

In this study it was my intention to provide an overview of the way in which Philip Roth reflected upon the work of Franz Kafka, and how this was projected into his own meditations on literature.

This complex fascination with the personality and writing of Franz Kafka has its roots in Roth's interest in Jewish culture, considerations on the role and function of literature on one hand from the perspective of the author and on the other from the perspective of the entire society. The reception of Kafka's work serves Roth as a source of authorial self-identification. Roth naturally reflected a different historical, social and personal experience, which determined himself and Franz Kafka. At the same time, however, he was conscious of their common traits: Kafka is not viewed *only* as

a Jewish author, but he is appropriated by a number of contexts; the same applies to Roth, who wished to be read primarily not as a Jewish writer, but as an American author writing about universal human issues.

Through Kafka, Roth defines his own position as a writer, as well as the role played by literature in various different types of societal regimes. Roth shows an extraordinary interest in the work and life experience of proscribed (and exiled) Czech writers. It is precisely thanks to his openness and empathy that a new way of viewing Kafka's work opened up to him, based on the life experience of his Central European colleagues. For Roth, Kafka is a type of writer on intimate and private themes, who at the same time in his texts offered answers to timeless political questions.

Roth takes possession of Kafka through dialogue. Not merely a notional hermeneutic interview with Kafka's texts, but also a dialogue with his fellow writers, who show a similar interest in the literary output of this Prague German writer. It is symptomatic of Roth's openness that in his most expansive debate on Kafka, held with Ivan Klíma, he leaves the last word of summation to his Czech friend: 'Literature doesn't have to scratch around for political realities or even worry about systems that come and go; it can transcend them and still answer question that the system evokes in people. This is the most important lesson that I extracted for myself from Kafka' (*ibid.*, p. 237).

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