

Politics, History and Aesthetics as Tropes: An Introduction

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The studies of trope and literature have been closely connected on both theoretical and textual levels ever since antiquity, and many great literary works were written by writers who were well versed in tropes. It is therefore worthwhile to examine thoroughly what these writers know about tropes and how literary creation and literary criticism have been enriched through rhetorical knowledge. As early as 16th century, Richard Sherry has already come to the realization of the relations between trope and literature. In his ground breaking monograph *A Treatise of Schemes and Tropes* (1550), Richard suggests that trope is the tool for “achieving ornateness” in both secular and religious writing and speaking (Hildebrandt 2). In this mode of thought, the tropes like metaphor, metonymy and synecdoche are basic human tools of understanding, and they are both mentally and physically anchored in literature.

The meaning of trope goes through a long process of transformation from figure of speech to discourse. From the perspective of rhetorical tradition, the value of trope to literature lies in its feature of deviation (Harland 4). In standard rhetorical terminology, a trope is a deviation from the normal use of an individual word; But with the development of literary criticism, trope is endowed with broader and more complicated meanings. Recently many literary debates hinge on competing definitions of “trope” between motif and rhetorical turn (Dvora & New), leading to rhetorical studies of politics, economics, space, history and aesthetics across cultural divides in literary works. Therefore in order to understand these exchanges between literature and other various dimensions of the world, it is productive to take different tropes into consideration in our critical readings and writings.

The three essays presented below address the aforementioned relations between trope and literature in very different ways. They are diverse in terms of themes, subjects and theoretical approaches, which, at first glance, bear no relation to one another. Anne-Marie Mai, professor of Nordic Literature at the University

of Southern Denmark and a Fellow of the Danish Academy of Arts and Sciences, begins this special cluster of articles with her study of welfare metaphors and welfare critique in works by Danish writers Kirsten Thorup, Vibeke Grønfeldt and Jette Drewsen. She looks closely at how these Danish novelists' works interact with the development of the Danish welfare state. The second contribution to this special cluster comes from Agnieszka Łobodziec, of the University of Zielona Gora in Poland. She focuses on Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, examining how Morrison elucidates the emotional dynamics between white subjects and black objects and their individual feelings at the genesis of racial and social bifurcation of mainstream American society that subsequently evolved into systemic racialized slavery. Another contribution to this cluster comes from Jørgen Veisland, of the University of Gdansk in Poland. He explores the issue of the aesthetics of loss in American writer Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*. Based on Kristeva's analysis of abjection, Jørgen Veisland examines how Paul Auster combines realism and abstract form in an attempt to capture pure thingness and the in-betweenness of things.

Although the three articles are varied in many ways, however, on a deeper level, they do have one thing in common. The tropes of politics, history and aesthetics are the unifying metaphors among the three essays and trope as the key word runs through the three essays. In Anne-Marie Mai's essay, welfare is a metaphor which, as a "dreamwork of language," establishes a metaphorical house to accommodate rich political and social meanings (Davison 435). Mai holds that the house metaphor is not substantial, but it forms a clear metonymic basis in the imagery used, and it has a reference back to the biblical metaphoric of the house and the temple building that was used in the labour movement songs from the end of the 19th century, where for example Ulrich Peter Overby made use of biblical expression when writing about the new society as "a strong house we build to protect us in need." In terms of cognitive pattern, house is a spatial pattern and a part-whole pattern which can be used in the study of the deep framing of the welfare state and its objectives.

Mai's house metaphor explores the abstract welfare issue in two different ways. First of all, to concretize and visualise the abstract object. The metaphor is the "main mechanism" through which we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning. Therefore the idea of the welfare state becomes "spatial and concrete" when it is visualised as a home for the people and a societal family to the public. Secondly, to fill in the gap between writer and reader. The productivity of metaphor results from the fact that the interpretations of metaphor reflects as much on the interpreter as on the originator. So to understand a metaphor is as

much a creative endeavour as to make a metaphor (Davidson 435). Based on this cognitive feature of metaphor, Anne-Marie Mai sets up a bridge across the readers and writers, through which the linguistic framing of the welfare state and its metaphorical patterns created by the writers are transmitted to the readers and are transformed to a social and political sphere of experience of the readers.

In Agnieszka Łobodziec's essay, Toni Morrison's emotional trope in *A Mercy* is viewed as a literary representation of historical truth. It is interesting to note that Agnieszka Łobodziec starts her analysis from "the etiology of the American Dream." To women, and especially to black women in the U.S., the realization of American Dream is a process of "Housing" or "Unhousing" the "gendered self"(Kalfopoulou1). In some sense, Agnieszka Łobodziec continues and extends the house metaphor initiated by Mai in her article, but Łobodziec's house metaphor targets to a completely different point. To African American woman writer in the U.S., their American dream is a struggling out of the father's house, the slavery house and the interiorized slaverized house. And therefore their fulfillment of self is a process of "coming home"(Kalfopoulou173).

However Agnieszka Łobodziec's American dream metaphor and interiorized metaphor are only parts of the story. It is obvious that Agnieszka Łobodziec is taking good use of the concept that the black tradition is double-voiced utterance, or as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. put, possesses "two mouths" (341). This spirit of the double-voiced utterance is in the same vein with the nature of metaphor in which a word or phrase denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another in order to suggest similarity or difference between them. Via these two mouths, Agnieszka Łobodziec hopes to enhance the reader's experience of black texts by identifying levels of meaning and expression that might otherwise remain buried beneath the surface.

Jørgen Veisland explores Paul Auster's experiment in trying to dissolve and then reconstruct the relation between thing and sign, *res* and *signum* in *Sunset Park*. It is obvious that Jørgen Veisland adopts a Lacanian perspective. German scholar Heiko Jakubzik in his dissertation proposes that there are two central influences in Paul Auster's writing, one is Jacques Lacan's psychoanalysis and the other the American transcendentalism of the early to middle nineteenth century. This Lacanian psychoanalytical approach to the relations between world and language, between thing and sign is metaphorical in the sense that Lacan's key concept symptom is first described as a metaphor, then as an ego: the subject of literature, the writing and written subject will ultimately become a myth for culture(Rabate19). Auster's text reverses the history of semiotics in trying to

capture existence prior to the sign, which in some sense explains the reason why we need a metaphor. The sense of being outside language, and thus outside of the world is exactly the reason why we need a metaphor, and why we need art. Just as Jørgen Veisland put in his analysis that access to “the world of others” is “through the work of art *only*.” It is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that Jørgen Veisland’s study in some sense provides a theoretical framework for the other two articles in terms of linguistics, psychology and language philosophy, or in other words, it is an aesthetic trope for the other two essays in this special cluster.

It is somewhat surprising how differently and extensively tropes play the roles in literary expression. The three critics identify politics, history and aesthetic as epistemological tropes that offer different and effective ways to rethink identity, otherness, society and art. In other words, politics, society and aesthetics are exciting and useful tropes for the epistemological shift from reading the word to reading the world so as to detect the truth deep beneath the surface.

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