

## Metafiguration



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In one of my previous articles on the subject, titled “Microtropes, macrotropes, metatropes” (2004), I proposed a triple subdivision of semantic stylistic devices according to the level of language at which they operate and according to their functional scope (the range of the text which is their domain in the logical sense). Thus *microtropes* (small figures), the semantic figures of traditional poetics and rhetoric, operate within phrases or, at most, sentences. *Macrotropes* (big figures), in turn, organize sequences of sentences, usually fragments of larger texts or even entire shorter texts (e.g. lyric poems). Their prototypical instances are extended (Homeric) similes and extended metaphors. The concept of *macrotropes* originates in the distinction drawn by Roman Jakobson (1956) between the metaphoric and metonymic modes that structure various discourses. At the third level of description, *metatropes* (large figures) are perceived as those which structure and construe entire discourses as if from the outside. The idea goes back to Hayden White’s (1973, 1978) tropological tetrad consisting of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. However, in the light of the suggestions scattered across postmodernist literary criticism (Roland Barthes, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman, James Hillis Miller), I have proposed to extend this list. In the discussion which follows below it is worth remembering that *metatropes* are figures of the second order, active within the discourse whose subject is another discourse and that they are not overtly present in the text, like their more limited relatives – *micro-* and *macrotropes*.

The idea of applying stylistic figures to the holistic analysis of discourse is traceable, in contemporary poetics, to Jakobson’s influential article “Two aspects of language and two types of linguistic disturbances” (1956). The two dominant dimensions of language, according to the author, are *the metaphoric mode* (based on similarity and choice) and *the metonymic mode* (based on contiguity and actual presence). Metaphor and metonymy were thus promoted to the rank of super-devices useful in structuring various, very broadly understood discourses, not only on the linguistic but also on the artistic level (to mention only painting or cinematographic art).

The Jakobsonian distinction between two opposing aspects of thought and of linguistic expression (metaphoric and metonymic) was very aptly applied by David Lodge to the analysis of modernist literature in his well-known study *The Modes of Modern Writing* (1977). Of real import are Lodge’s observations that prose whose general macrostructure turns out to be, e. g., metonymic may contain a considerable number of metaphors at the level of the stylistic microstructure (and vice versa), which corroborates my belief that the distinction between the micro- and macrostylistic levels (overt) on the one hand and the metastylistic level (covert) on the other, is fully justified. Lodge demonstrates, importantly, that a macrometaphoric or macrometonymic text does not have to be literary at all and that it may contain no microfigures whatsoever, thus

being simply non-figurative at the lowest level. It should be stressed that what Jakobson and Lodge describe in terms of macrofiguration, already bears in itself the potential for metafiguration, for a hidden text-forming stylistic and rhetorical dimension.

In what concerns the scope of stylistic figures, sometimes referred to as *the tropological space* (Foucault, 1966; White, 1978), the suggestions have been voiced to the effect that a given metafigure may impose its organization on: 1) a whole literary work, including longer narrative forms, 2) the entire genre (prose, lyric poetry or drama), 3) the whole style of the epoch (Classicism vs. Romanticism, Romanticism vs. Realism, Naturalism vs. Modernism, etc.). Lodge (1977: 109) projects this distinction onto an even wider area: in his view the poetic/literary is homologous with the metaphoric mode, while the non-literary is an analogue of metonymy.

A *metatrophe*, in accordance with its etymology, should be understood as a ‘self-aware’ and ‘reflexive’ figure, viz. a figure that distances itself in relation to a particular text, a figure capable of ‘talking about itself’, about the figures in the lower domains, about the language whose part it is but which it can transcend in its own way. White (1973, 1978), the meritorious creator of tropics for historical and historiographic discourse, maintains that tropes may in fact cease to be figures proper and change into **large textual models**, reaching in substance the status of **rhetorical modalities**.

The tropological duet of Jakobson’s and Lodge’s seems, however, to be too modest. As a result, White has extended the list to include four **basic tropes (master-tropes)** according to Kenneth Burke’s terminology), which – in the light of our taxonomy – are nothing else but **four chief metatropes**.

These are:

- 1) **metaphor** – the trope of similarity; the iconic trope
- 2) **metonymy** – the trope of the objective though accidental contiguity; the indexical trope
- 3) **synecdoche** – the trope of essentiality, salience, of particularity or of generality
- 4) **irony** – the trope of exchanging truth for falsehood; according to White, the opposite of metaphor and the figure superordinate in relation to the remaining master tropes. For White irony is the **figure of distance**, displayed not only by the speaker in relation to himself/herself or in relation to reality, but the figure in which discourse distances itself from itself (thus a metatrophe *par excellence*).

The idea of these four leading tropes originates (as admitted by White) not only from contemporary poetics (K. Burke, N. Frye, R. Jakobson). The intertextual roots of White’s tropics reach back to Giambattista Vico’s *La Scienza nuova* (1725, 1730). Both Burke and Vico drew, in turn, from classical tropics, thus the distant source of the concept of *metafiguration* can be perceived in Aristotle’s poetics.

Is White’s great foursome exhaustive as the list of models that underlie all discourses? The answer seems to be negative and the suggestions as to a possible broadening of the set of what I dub *metatropes (metafigures)\** appear in the vast modern criticism of the poststructuralist and deconstructionist current. And though much could be said against deconstruction as the Derridian philosophical (or rather philosophical-literary) system, researchers in the fields of literary semantics, stylistics or poetics cannot afford to pass

by those writings indifferently, recognizing that their focus is rhetoric and a profoundly understood tropics of natural language. Let us then give below a cursory overview of other candidates for metatropes.

- 5) **Antithesis**, the game of oppositeness and antinomy, in Barthes's opinion (1970/1999: 52) is the "best known among rhetorical figures". An exemplary model of antitheticality is one of the so-called "Lucy Poems" by William Wordsworth:

*A slumber did my spirit seal;  
I had no human fears.  
She seemed a thing that could not feel  
The touch of earthy years.*

*No motion has she now, no force;  
She neither hears nor sees;  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,  
With rocks and stones, and trees.*

The pivot of the semantic construction is here a representation of the opposition between life and death. What is of particular interest, however, is the fact that this oppositeness is not explicitly signalled at either *the micro-* or *the macrostylistic level*, which lack antonymous pairs of lexemes. Hence, it is an excellent instance of the stylistic device functioning at a higher, implicit level, namely at the level of metatropes. The metatropological opposites, which are not overtly given in the text, but remain hidden at a higher level of interpretation, require an obvious effort on the part of the reader and invite him/her to participate in the game in which multiple senses can be generated freely, though not endlessly. Hillis Miller (1986) mentions over twenty such concealed opposites (apart from the basic contrast between the living and the dead girl) which lie covertly at what I propose to call the *metatropological, second-order level of interpretation*.

- 6) **Inversion** is another large figure invoked by Barthes and claimed to be ubiquitous in, e. g., Marcel Proust's prose. Barthes defines inversion as a technique by which we unite two contrasting states in the same object and, consequently, transform the appearance into its opposite. Hence this form of discourse is founded on **equivocation**, whose essence has been epitomized in the Shakespearian "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (*Macbeth*).
- 7) **Chiasmus** (which should not be confused here with a classical figure of syntactic inversion) is a broadly understood 'reversal'. Following de Man (1979a) and Hillis Miller (1986), we can claim that it is grounded on the transformation of concepts into their own contraries, that is on the transposition of particular elements, as a result of which meanings of words change into sets of contradictory senses. The discriminating reader will have noticed that both inversion and chiasmus are akin to antithesis, though the arrangement of antinomies/contradictions is different within each of the figures mentioned.

- 8) **Catachresis** (*abusio*), a semantic abuse/misuse (in traditional stylistics a metaphor based on a shocking association), in White's opinion is a foundation of a peculiar rhetoric present in Michel Foucault's writings, who was much in its favour. White maintains that this unusually capacious metatrophe sanctions the whole bundle of figures based on various kinds of logical and semantic transgression, such as: paradox, oxymoron, hysteron-proteron, metalepsis, prolepsis, antonomasia, etc.
- 9) **Paronomasia**, in a metafigurative sense (suggested by de Man, 1982) of **inexact imitation**, not solely in the basic phonetic sense of partial homophony, is in effect the metatrophe of **incomplete, unsuccessful mimesis**, an abortive or straightforwardly impossible imitation of reality.
- 10) **Euphemism**, in the metafigurative sense called also **euphemia** (Hartman, 1985), can be defined as the large figure of **toning down, lessening** and **mitigating**. It is present, for instance, in the above-quoted "Slumber" by Wordsworth, who – through the mouth of the poetic persona - assumes such a euphemic distance in relation to the subject of the demise of the beloved. In my opinion a natural relative of euphemia is the general discourse strategy discussed in 11).
- 11) **Suppression, passing over (aposiopesis, paralepsis), insinuation** belongs, undoubtedly, to principal rhetorical figures. Indeed, it far exceeds the frames of particular literary creations, being – in fact – one of fundamental dimensions of discourse, not necessarily limited to literature. It is indissolubly connected not only with the pragmatic category of politeness, but also with one of the defining features of human language: **prevarication**, running along the scale from patent falsehood through half-truths to truth concealed.
- 12) **Exaggeration**, something like **meta-hyperbole**, was taken by Maxim Gorky to function as a fundamental law of artistic creation in general. Exaggeration is clearly present in visual arts and in music, hence it can be claimed to act as a cultural, not only linguistic metatrophe.
- 13) **Anomaly** is understood here not in the narrow sense of the conflict of semantic features between particular lexemes but rather as a very broadly conceived **strangeness**. According to Hillis Miller (1986), it is an "inexhaustible" property of any literary text, due to the fact that our "Western" languages oscillate between being concurrently logical and illogical, or even outright anti-logical. Anomaly defined in this way displays strong connections with the category of **defamiliarization, deautomatization** or **estrangement** (cf. Shklovsky's *ostranienije*). Although the device named 'estrangement', a metatrophe that tries to counteract boredom lurking around us, is a *spiritus movens* of linguistic creations and of the entire culture, on the other pole of linguistic practice it is counterbalanced (as pointed out by White) by the contrary technique in which we apply figuration in order to 'familiarize', 'domesticate' or 'render normal' the strangeness present in the surrounding extralinguistic reality.
- 14) **Allegory** in traditional stylistics consists in creating a more fully elaborated image or symbolic narration whose implication is either moralizing or referring in a general way to *la condition humaine*. In de Man's and Hillis Miller's considerations it obtains,

however, the rank of second-order narration, thus of a metatropes which is a narration about another discourse and stylistic figures couched in it. Already the title itself of a well-known study by de Man *Allegories of Reading* (1979b) implies that for him allegory constituted the basic way of signification and of interpretation at the same time. It appears, then, that this deconstructionist allegory is an instance of the second-order symbolization, the symbol of lesser symbols, in a word: a metasymbol.

The enumeration of large figures of discourse has, for the time being, been exhausted. Yet the list of metatropes is evidently an open one, contrary to the set of small figures of traditional stylistics and rhetoric, which – albeit running in hundreds – is already closed. Further investigations of language, literature and non-literary discourse (in its most comprehensive, cultural aspect) will certainly add to it new ideas or reassess old conceptions and the taxonomy postulated above.

In all probability, at least an important figure of **simile** should find its place among serious candidates for metatropes. And although simile has been eclipsed by the all-powerful metaphor, of which it is a foundation, its importance and independent status in structuring several artistic and non-artistic texts cannot be denied. Seda Gasparyan's (2000) comprehensive treatment of this unduly neglected trope speaks strongly in favour of its role in metafiguration.

An important query raised in this connection concerns the number of metatropes. I strongly believe that their set, though open at the present stage of research, is not infinite. What is more, it should be kept within reasonable limits and include only important figures. In Chrzanowska-Kluczevska (2004) I point to the fact that a number of poetic and prose works (be it in the English or any other literature) are constructed around figures that are not necessarily semantic ones, in other words, not genuine tropes (to mention only phonetic, morphological or structural stylistic devices). But even if we allow the level of macrofiguration to be enlarged to accommodate those other poetic techniques, we should be very careful about extrapolating them onto the metafigurative level. If we want metatropes to possess a truly explanatory power, their list – for methodological reasons – should not be unduly extended.

Metatropes seem to be an inherent feature of human language, possibly universal. Yet, it is worth realizing that they are primarily the figures of thought, originally cognitive and conceptual and only derivatively linguistic. This claim is a reflection of my personal belief that there is nothing in the human language that has not existed prior to it in the human mind. White and Derrida (1977) went even further in their opinion that metatropes, by their very nature, are pre-cognitive and pre-conceptual, which boils down to saying that figurativeness (not necessarily reduced to metaphor) lies at the core of language and cognition and that it is archetypal and primary.

#### Notes:

- \* I do not draw here a traditional distinction between figures and tropes but use the terms *metafigure* and *metatropes* interchangeably (in fact, the concept of *figure* is more encompassing than that of *trope*, since stylistic figures can be subdivided into

phonetic, morphological, syntactic, graphic and semantic ones, with only the last group qualifying as genuine tropes).

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### ՄԵՏԱՖԻԳՈՒՐԱՑԻԱ

Չեղիմակի համոզմամբ լեզվաոճական երկու կարևորագույն հասկացությունները՝ փոխաբերությունն ու փոխանունությունը այնպիսի ոճական գերհնարներ են, որոնք կիրառելի են բազմազան և բազմաբնույթ խոսույթներում: Ընդ որում այս կարևորությունը արտահայտվում է ոչ միայն խոսքարվեստում, այլև կիրառական արվեստի այնպիսի ձևերում, ինչպիսիք են կինոն և թատրոնը: Ներհատուկ լինելով մարդկային լեզվին ընդհանրապես՝ փոխաբերությունը, առաջին հերթին, մարդկային մտքի արգասիքն է և, հետևաբար, խոսքի փոխաբերականությունը ընկած է լեզվի և ճանաչողության հիմքում: