METAPHOR IN POLITICAL CONFLICT. POPULISM AND DISCOURSE

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PREFACE

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In George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch,* the young doctor Tertius Lydgate uses the metaphor of *curing the body politic* to criticise another character, Will Ladislaw, who works as journalist for a local landowner campaigning for a seat in parliament on a pro- "Reform Act" platform: "That's the way with you political writers, Ladislaw –crying up a measure as if it were a universal cure, and crying up men who are part of the very disease that wants curing". Ladislaw defends himself by extending the metaphor to an extreme conclusion: "Why not? Men may help cure themselves off the face of the land without knowing it" (Middlemarch 1965, 505).

This exchange illustrates one of the main powers of political metaphor, i.e. its multifunctional, or, as the editor of this volume calls it in her Introduction, "messy" nature. The astute doctor not only 'applies' the metaphor of a *political cure* to the 1832 British Reform Act which Ladislaw advocates on behalf of his sponsor (Arthur Brooke) but sarcastically extends it to point out that in this case the *cure* may expose its proponent as being part of the *disease*. Ladislaw who has no particular loyalty to his sponsor and writes for Brooke to stay close to his daughter Dorothea, with whom he is in love, concedes that the Reform Act policy may destroy the political ambitions of her father. He finds it most important that the "cure must begin somewhere", even if it spells political doom for the presumptive *healer*.

The age-old concept of the *cure* of a *political illness* (Sontag 1978) is employed by Eliot not just as a "source concept" to designate a historical target event but at the same time to evaluate its consequences and to expose the naivety of its proponent and the recklessness of Ladislaw who foresees the consequences but has no wish to

shield him from them. The metaphor works at the levels of argumentation, emotional and moral evaluation and dramatic characterisation, matching, if not surpassing, Roman Jakobson's famous list of multiple language functions (*referential, emotive, conative, poetic, metalingual, phatic;* see Jakobson 1960). As the exemplary studies in this volume convincingly argue, such figurative 'multi-tasking' is by no means confined to literary fiction but is indeed the hallmark of political metaphor use across diverse discourse types, cultural contexts and social registers. The real-life uses of metaphor in politics may not be as ingeniously crafted as those by Eliot but they, too, create – and destroy – discursive identities that have personal, social and historical impact. Only by combining conceptual, pragmatic, corpus-linguistic and discourse-historical methods, can we do justice to their multifunctional and multdimensional character.

References

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INTRODUCTION: APPROACHING METAPHOR IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

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It would be impossible to deny the importance of metaphor in political discourse. Everywhere we look - in the media and social media, in political debates and social campaigns - discussions of local, national and international issues are peppered with metaphorical language. This is so much the case that the very ubiquity of this kind of language often leads us to trivialise it, and to underestimate its significance. But we need to be extremely aware that metaphors are not just a conventional feature of everyday language. The specific metaphors we use to talk about a given issue actually matter, because they shape our ongoing mental representations of that reality and colour our reactions and appraisals: it is not the same to call our society a "melting pot" or a "mosaic", and it is not indifferent whether we talk about our dealings with antagonistic groups as a "war" or as a "shared journey". In this introduction I briefly review some of the background to these ideas, and then explain the rationale that underlies the rest of the volume.

It seems logical enough to begin this introduction by saying something about the importance of metaphor, and to discuss briefly the place of metaphor in politics. If we go back to the earliest reflections on the nature of metaphor, we find that Aristotle defined it, rather ponderously, as "the application of a strange term either transferred from the genus and applied to the species, or from the species and applied to the genus, from one species to another or else by analogy" (Poetics 1457b). Thus, Aristotle tells us, "old age is to life as evening is to day", so he calls the evening "day's old age" and he calls old age "the evening of life". As Levin comments (1982: 24), this theoretical formulation is somewhat unprepossessing, and

it has indeed come in for many criticisms over the years. Even on its own terms, it is not particularly consistent: as Brooke-Rose (1958: 4) pointed out, the third type ("from species to species") really covers all metaphors, since "all metaphors involve a mental transfer from one type of object to another, from one domain of thought to another". Other critics have decried it for being "unsystematic" and "incomplete" (Stanford 1936), or even "peculiarly useless" (Brooke-Rose 1965). But it would be hard to deny its influence. Centuries of rhetoricians and literary scholars have taken Aristotle as a starting point for their discussions of language and literature. Yet we should remember that Aristotle was not, primarily, a literary scholar: he was a philosopher and natural scientist, passionately concerned with understanding the world, society and the human being. Levin (1982: 25) argues cogently that Aristotle's main purpose in analysing metaphor is not to make startling revelations about the workings of poetry, but rather, on a more philosophical level, to "explain how metaphor promotes to consciousness an awareness of relations that subsist between the objects and concepts that make up our universe". His underlying objective is to explain "the teaching function of metaphor and the role it plays in the transmission and acquisition of knowledge" (Levin 1982: 25).

This is an interesting assertion, because metaphor was –for many centuries– firmly situated in the scheme of rhetorical devices as a "trope", alongside irony, euphemism, hyperbole, and so on, as a kind of elegant extra feature that can be used to decorate a speech or text (Lausberg 1960/1998). Rhetoricians habitually considered its role as subsidiary to ideas (*inventio*) and their arrangement in argument (*dispositio*), since metaphor was regarded as simply an aspect of style and language (*elocutio*), at most an "*ornatus*". Yet this is only half the truth. The persuasive function of metaphor was not ignored or forgotten: indeed, from ancient times onwards, the role of metaphor in persuasion –and in deception– was clearly a matter of concern. In fact, there is an undercurrent of thought that originates with Aristotle himself which accords much greater importance to metaphor than to other tropes. Aristotle himself underlined the "strangeness" of metaphor, which gives it a peculiar power to attract our attention: "we must introduce an element of strangeness into our diction because people marvel at what is far away, and to marvel