

TROPES AS A DEVICE FOR EXPLORING THE PAST

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This paper examines the application of the three basic tropes (metaphor, metonymy and personification) in the work of historians. It reflects on the various functions tropes can fulfill in historiographic texts. The paper is based on some theoretical studies of the subject; however, it draws primarily from an analysis of Czech historiographic works of the 19th and the first half of the 20th centuries (Palacký, Goll, Novotný, Pekař, Šusta and Urbánek). Tropes do not fulfill a purely aesthetic function in historiographic texts. They facilitate the process of acquiring knowledge of the past and help to convey it. Metaphor is a synthesizing and metonymy an analytical element. Tropes can also operate as strategies for interpreting a particular period or phenomenon.

Tropes and figures have been one of the main devices for identifying artistic literary texts since time immemorial. They have long been perceived, however, merely as a decorative element. This viewpoint prevailed even at a time when elements began to be revealed in tropes whose function was certainly not mere embellishment. There was no doubt that tropes could only be appropriately applied in works of fiction. Twentieth-century theories of literature, linguistics and knowledge raised essential doubts about this position. They recognized the existence of important tools in tropes capable of facilitating, creating and even predetermining our ideas about the world. They analyzed the presence of imagery in different areas—from improvised demonstrations of everyday life to the exact language of science. They observed how images enable people to perceive the world around them, reflect upon it, familiarize themselves with it, understand it, orientate within it, evaluate it and become emotionally involved in it and, last but not least, discuss it. Although tropes were not regarded as the antithesis of rational cognition, the fact that they belonged to the world of the imagination (as an imaginative or creative principle), to the world of human subjectivity, aesthetic perception and the ethical judgement of reality had always been more evident (Tomaševskij 1971, 48-9). And as such, they cannot escape the attention of those engaged in historiography and the study of history as a whole. Of all scientific disciplines, it is probably history that is able to make the most of images. Drawing on an analysis of notable Czech historiographic works of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, this study will try to prove this.

Metaphor

Tropes can enter different levels of a historian's work. They can simply embellish the particular expressions used, but they can also occur in the text as thought mechanisms or even as strategies that create the character of the whole work. Of all the tropes, metaphor was always the main focus of attention and the same was also true of the theory of historiography, with several works explicitly devoted to metaphor (Demandt, Ankersmit, Wrzosek). Some, for instance Paul Ricoeur, were even convinced that descriptions of the past should necessarily be metaphoric (Topolski 1997, 78-79). Metaphors have several functions in the historian's discourse. As in other scientific disciplines, they help to reveal connections, replace missing information and construct hypotheses. D.R. Kelley provided a more concrete definition of the range of functions a metaphor fulfils in the historian's work, when he stated that tropes are needed when a historian deals with realities that are more complex than individuals and their actions. It is tropes that help a historian to work with more complex historical phenomena, such as social groups, institutions, collective actions and political, cultural or economic formations (Kelley 2003, 341).

The role of the metaphor in the historiographic text can be classified according to several criteria. One of them can be considered fundamental since it categorizes metaphors according to their function: be it purely aesthetic, where the metaphors merely embellish the text; or cognitive, where they contribute to the understanding of the historical phenomena.

Let us look first at purely aesthetizing metaphors. When Josef Šusta stated that Vladislav Lokýtek "had eaten the bitter bread of banishment since 1300" (Šusta 2001, 421), his aim was clearly that of simply embellishing the text. The author was not making it easier for the reader to understand the event; he was simply reaching out to the reader's aesthetic perception. The same cannot be said of the following extract, written by Rudolf Urbánek and taken from a passage devoted to the young George of Poděbrady: "We can only conjecture that this child of the storm had taken off the shoes of his childhood early on in life." (Urbánek 1915, 221) In this sentence Urbánek put together both metaphor ("child of the storm") and metonymy ("had taken off the shoes of his childhood"). He concentrated the information into two tropes in order to facilitate understanding of Poděbrady's life. The metaphor emphasizes the revolutionary circumstances that shaped the personality of the hero; metonymy, on the other hand, highlights the important fact that he was very young when he entered public life. Moreover, both the metaphor about the child of the storm and the metonymy of the shoes of his childhood share another function. They indicate the author's attitude to the subject matter and, at the same time, they stimulate emotional reactions in the reader. Urbánek is undoubtedly seeking to win the reader's sympathy for his hero.

In addition to function, there is another criterion suitable for classification: the type of extralingual reality to which a metaphor is related (Krupa 1990, 27).

Historians mainly use so-called organic metaphors in their work, which are based on an analogy between human society and the natural world (Demandt 1978, 17-123). Organic metaphors enable historians to capture a phenomenon that is most important for their work—the metamorphoses of historical phenomena in time. Constructing continuity and bringing events together in time are fundamental to a historian's work. A historian has always to consider the categories of development, trends, growth and evolution (Kracauer 1969, 170-196). Metaphors from the natural world provide the historian with a rich source of material not only in terms of enriching the vocabulary used but also in creating the necessary links between the various historical phenomena.

Let us begin with a model from plant life. In his writing about the mission of Constantine and Methodius, Palacký developed the motif of seed and fruit:

A single, yet crucial, event of that time was preserved in the memory of the descendants because the seed took root, resisted the storms of all ages and has not yet stopped providing an abundance of salvagable fruit to millions of people. That was the invitation (...) of Constantine and Methodius to Moravia and their apostleship among the Slavs. (Palacký 1968, 126)

Anthropomorphized metaphors are more effective than so-called phytomorphs. By means of metaphors related to human age, a historian covers not only the time aspect but also its quality or intensity. For example, when Šusta describes early medieval states, he uses an analogy with puberty: "At the beginning, young states displayed both a sort of pubertal divergence and attempted to swallow one another up." (Šusta 1999, 135) In Palacký's work, as in Šusta's, nations go through the stages of childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. Palacký employed the following metaphor of the human body for the state: "The limbs of a large body, not having yet grown together, fell apart again, because foreign matter had intervened between them..." (Palacký 1968, 175) This metaphor is not mere embellishment and does not simply serve to facilitate the reader's understanding of the particular problem. It also indicates how the author saw historical realities—in this case the state. The metaphor of the state as a human body mirrors Palacký's political philosophy: his organically interpreted nationalism.

Like the analogy with human age, analogies with daily or yearly cycles bring together aspects of time and evaluation. In his account of the importance of Locke's philosophy for history, Šusta sees him as a "pioneer of new generations, which were able to stir up a spring storm of enlightenment against the autumn of the ageing Baroque" (Šusta 1999, 218). The motif of storm is suitable for the figuration of groundbreaking events, particularly revolutions. Václav Novotný employed this motif in a dramatic sense when characterizing the pre-Hussite period: "The intense pressure became ever more stultifying, the whole atmosphere foretold of an unavoidable storm, the period had to have its Hus." (Novotný, 20-21)

There are also other types of metaphor available to historians. In the following passage, Šusta derived a metaphor from the world of physics: “The empire was able to withstand the havoc primarily because it had an iron core with a magnetic force of the old, strong imperial tradition in Constantinople” (Šusta 1999, 111). Rudolf Urbánek offered an emotionally charged metaphor for outlining the fate of the Czech Kingdom and its historical figures at the beginning of the Poděbrady epoch. He employed metaphors with a landscape motif, which is lyrical even in this context:

The Czech lands faced a long, cheerless greyness of futile experiments in taking precautions to protect the king and the municipal authorities, (...) they were at the beginning of a long, dusty journey, without shady green trees and without the cooling sparkle of bright, quietly tinkling springs. (Urbánek 1915, 568-569)

A special type of metaphor is that which develops gradually. The following metaphor is based on the popular motif of fermentation, which leads to other analogies—to wine and drinking:

In the Anglo-Saxon milieu, the effect of Christ's teaching on rough German souls was like an intoxicating wine (...) By learning Latin from books, a true German pupil can escape the rustication of the word of mouth (...) and soak up the message of sacred knowledge... (Šusta 1999, 117)

A metaphor can also permeate the more extensive parts of the text or even the whole work. It then becomes a strategy for building on a theme. Šusta's “Úvahy o všeobecných dějinách” (Reflections on General History), from which the previous citations are taken, serve as an example. Although these were originally introductions to particular volumes of the so-called Melantrich's History of Mankind, the collected edition of these texts creates a remarkably coherent whole. One of the building blocks that helps to ensure this coherence is the metaphor of the element of water. Glancing through the book, the reader might conclude that references to *waves*, *surf*, *flow*, and *floods* were simply accidental or that they were evidence of Šusta's liking for such metaphors. The following quotation from the introduction to this book indicates, however, that their role is of greater importance in the book:

(...) it seeks rather to lay out a series of milestones and turning points indicating the unfolding of events, to show when this great flow of history was simply a ripple on the surface and when it frothed wildly in the sudden flowing rapids; it seeks to encourage general discussion on human affairs, their more detailed study from the perspective of history and reflections on the whirling and turbulent flow that springs forth in the darkness of the primeval glacial age carrying us on the waves towards the unknown opportunities of the future. (Šusta 1999, 9)

From this passage on, metaphors of the element of water return repeatedly. Šusta uses his favourite metaphor of reservoir to describe events in the fifth century when barbarian tribes *fought their way through* the Roman Empire. As a result, the cultural influence of Rome floods from the leaking aqueducts into the depths of the

European continent. The motifs associated with the element of water return when Šusta depicts the migration tribes, ethnic groups, and peoples in the 6th and 7th centuries:

In the north, a deluge of Slavic tribes floods into the empire, not as spectacular waves under the leadership of famous tribal chieftains from along the river Danube as the Germans had done previously, but in little streams escaping the attention of history, which, however, are able to destroy vast areas until the Slavic people set up new settlements (...) The flow reached as far as the heart of ancient Hellas, (...) the strange people that had lived so long in the shadow of the distant hinterland (...) now spilled over like a flood stretching from the Baltic Sea to the River Main (...) Soon, only the greater fortified towns can be seen, protruding like islands from the flooded areas of the Balkan peninsula. (Šusta 1999, 107)

Šusta does not hesitate to invent unique figurative expressions: for instance, when he compares the fate of the Byzantine Empire to an “ice floe gnawed by warm waters” (Šusta 1999, 111). There are also motifs of *dirty waves* (Šusta 1999, 147) and dispersing *oil slicks* (Šusta 1999, 194). The motif of the element of water provides a rich vocabulary for depicting dynamic, revolutionary periods found in the history of humankind. Thus the “ground swell of the reformation and the counter-reformation broke through the flood defences of the slowly consolidating state formations of the late Middle Ages” (Šusta 1999, 200) or “the ground swell accompanying political struggles reared up (...) to heroic heights” (Šusta 1999, 234) when talking about wars in the 1740s. In the passages devoted to the nineteenth century, we find *revolutionary spume* (Šusta 1999, 18) and a *sea of white horses bringing revolutionary resistance and romance-induced ferment* (Šusta 1999, 16). These metaphors enable Šusta to discriminate between the intensity of historical events, as the following passage illustrates

(...) they become the scene of this rivalry, which, under the leadership of such ambitious statesmen as Palmerston and Thiers, shows moments of the stormy surf; under the rule of more self-possessed men like Guizot and Aberdeen the tide ebbs... (Šusta 1999, 265)

It seems that it is precisely the motif of the element of water, its motion, its changing nature, its differing currents and forces that suits Šusta best for elucidating the character of historical process. Šusta does not see the historical process as a linear motion forward. In his writing, history sometimes works unobtrusively, slowly, but perseveringly and at times the pace of events quickens and strengthens. Sometimes the flow of historical events can be slow, at other times floods occur; the ebb alternates with the flow of the tide or the ground swell alternates with the foam, the ripples become a storm. By means of imaginative metaphors, Šusta was able to distinguish intuitively something that Fernand Braudel would conceptualize more precisely some ten years later: an outline of three different periods of historical duration.

But metaphor can fulfill a much more important function in the historical text. This occurs when it becomes the lynchpin of a piece of writing, an interpretative starting point for an outlook on a particular epoch, or process, or individual. For the purposes of illustration, let us consider perhaps the most familiar metaphor related to Czech history. Although it originated from a historical novel, its effect spread far beyond the circle of the readers of the book. The book in question is *Temno* (Darkness) by A. Jirásek. The metaphor was to ensure a particular interpretation of Czech history after the Battle of the White Mountain for several decades. The impact of Jirásek's novel was such that the metaphor helped to create a negative image of Czech history in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Both the metaphor and Jirásek's novel became targets for those who sought to rehabilitate that period. Polish historiography has a similar metaphor—volume two of Sienkiewicz's trilogy about seventeenth-century Poland, metaphorically entitled *Potopa* (Flood), since it describes a period when Poland was "flooded" by the Swedish invasion.

Another powerful metaphor is found in comparisons of the beginnings of the modern Czech national movement with terms such as *awakening* and *revival*. It does not simply refer to the concept: the metaphor chosen also serves as an explanation of this process. Contemporaries of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of the Czech national movement as a continuation of Czech statehood, culture, and national consciousness which had been suppressed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a consequence of the defeat of the Bohemian revolt followed by the Germanization, re-Catholization and centralization policies of the Habsburgs. This is why that period was often metaphorically compared to sleep. Today we look at that process in a different way and therefore seek to replace the metaphorical expression with another word, generally, the concept of *emancipation*. In spite of this, the notion of *revival* shows remarkable persistence, partly because the original connotations have gradually faded away. This metaphor gave rise to other terms in common use, such as renaissance (i.e. *rinascimento*—revival), enlightenment, etc. Huizinga's "autumn of the Middle Ages" represents the most well-known metaphor in academic history, which predetermines the explication of a historical period or the interpretation of a historical phenomenon.

Metaphorical titles can also be found in Czech historiography. Šusta's *Soumrak Přemyslovců* (The Twilight of the Přemyslids) is derived from the metaphorical link between daytime and the end of the Přemyslid dynasty.

Metonymy

Although less attention was devoted to metonymy and synecdoche than to metaphor, they are almost equally important for our cognition. This argument is supported by the opportunities that arise from its use in thinking and writing about history. One of the advantages of metonymy consists in simplification. Goll used

the following synecdoche in his “*Čechy a Prusky ve středověku*” (The Czechs and Prussians in the Middle Ages) “The Slav did not fulfil his role here either and retreated in front of the German” (Goll 1897, 12). This brings a formal simplification based on the synecdochic formula of *singularis pro plurali*, which is used here to represent successful German expansion into the countries inhabited by the Slavs. The point at issue is not necessarily just simplification. Replacing complex wholes with their parts, metonymy helps the reader orientate him/herself in less transparent events or more complicated processes. Another synecdoche can be found on the following page of the afore-mentioned book by Goll: “a merchant often shows a missionary the way” (Goll 1897, 13), where we are not just concerned with the substitution of singular for plural. This metonymy seeks to explain the impact of individuals or of historical forces on a particular historical process, in this case a political, social or cultural movement in early modern Europe. The aim of this synecdoche was not only simplification but also illustration. The use of metonymy allowed the author to define a long historical process in just one short event.

These relatively simple examples show both how metonymy can operate in a historian’s work alongside metaphor and also explain the difference between the two tropes. Metaphor helps the reader by defining the character or essence of a phenomenon. Metaphor is able to pin historical events, processes or states together to create a coherent whole. Its mission therefore is to synthesize. In contrast, metonymy results from analysis. It is not based on deeper or hidden similarities but on spatial, temporal, causal or other connections (Krupa 1990, 146-8). In other words, where metaphor clarifies the similarities found in different areas, metonymy decomposes the whole and singles out characteristic parts or qualities. Metaphor symbolizes while metonymy represents. The focus of metaphor is on the meaning, whereas metonymy works with detail.

The use of metonymy enabled Pekař (1986) to describe the circumstances which led to the victory of the Habsburg coalition over the Bohemian revolt

(...) you cannot avoid the question of whether it was more the joint hatred of the Bavarian and the Saxon against the Calvinist Palatinate (Falc) rather than the revengefulness of Ferdinand II that triumphed over the Bohemian rebellion. (Pekař 1986, 35)

This passage attracts attention particularly because of the contrasting protagonists. Each of the five factions being considered is actually represented in a different way. The author employs synecdoche when he juxtaposes not the state against the Palatinate (Falc) but rather the inhabitants, but he was also probably attempting to embellish the sentence. In the second case, the use of metonymy has certain connotations. The author presents an individual (Ferdinand II) who is confronted with a situation (the Bohemian revolt) and conveys thus, among other things, that the Bohemian revolt lacked a leading figure in contrast to the

opposition whose leader was King Ferdinand II. Another metonymy found in this passage is the combination of the two words—*kalvínská Falc* (Calvinist Palatinate). The adjective defines metonymically the most important aspect of the conflict that triggered the Thirty Years' War—the religious aspect.

Metonymy links historical actors not only with events but also with realities that are more difficult to describe: long-lasting processes or phenomena unchangeable in time. It would be more suitable in this case to use the term *representative* instead of the word *agent*. It is not the instigator of the event that is under consideration, but the bearer of the essential signs of a particular historical reality. Of the possibilities offered by metonymy to historians, it is obviously representation that is used most frequently. Representation occurs when a whole (event, process or phenomenon) is represented by its particular part, namely the most important or characteristic part. It is the people who represent historical realities most vividly. Metonymy referring to historical figures requires, however, a well-informed reader who knows what the particular persons embody. Only such a reader will understand for instance Goll's message that Palacký's character was "a combination of both Dobrovský and Jungmann" (Goll 1929, 54). In addition, Goll also succinctly creates a typology of revivalists and distinguishes between the two periods or two tendencies of the Czech national revival.

Abstract figures can, however, also act as representatives:

But in the West different strategies were also used to overcome the conflict by resourceful compromises. We can see an attempt at reconciliation between the bloodshed and spiritual heroism embodied in the figure of a Christian knight as early as the eleventh century, just as the cult of Madonna had brought an attempt to shift erotic tendencies towards the religious sphere... (Šusta 1999, 149)

In this example, we find a figure (the Christian knight) and a symbol (the Madonna) representing different cultural historical trends. The historian used both of them as a metonymical embodiment of the two contrasting tendencies joined together—the warlike culture wedded to spiritual culture and eroticism to piety.

Palacký's use of metonymy is specific. He often focuses on personal characteristics rather than the characters themselves, as for instance in the following sentence

What happened to the Czechs twenty-six years ago, is happening to the Polish people now: because of the discord and villainy of the sons, the father's beautiful inheritance was dissipated... (Palacký 1968, 212)

Thus for example, the *mind* ("due to his high intellect the ruler could not endure such cruel degradation; he had to be courageous enough to use all his power to regain virtue and power and dignity in another, more successful fight") or *spirit* ("Although conditions must have been hard for the ambitious Břetislav (Bretislaus), he submitted to them and then loyally delivered everything he promised") intervene

in historical events (Palacký 1968, 219-220). But the heroes were more emphatic when for instance *power* or *wrath* spoke out instead of them, for example when Bretislaus I (Břetislav I) let the Poles “experience his power and anger with all its intensity” (Palacký 1968, 213). The examples given demonstrate more than just the author’s delight in metonymic games. They provide evidence of the historian’s conviction that the motives for the protagonists’ behaviour are their human qualities, emotions, and passions, such as virtue, pride, anger, desire and greed. This links Palacký more with the tradition of older historiography—ancient history and the period of the Enlightenment. He did not hesitate to describe Bretislaus I as a *Bohemian Achilles*: in this way he used one of the types of metonymy—*antonomasia*.

Like metaphor, metonymy can also be used in the later stages of compiling a work of historiography. In his book “*Poslední Přemyslovci*” (The Last Přemyslids), Šusta employed metonymy to introduce the reader to Czech history at the beginning of the fourteenth century: “Bohemia was the country of silver throughout the thirteenth century... (Šusta 2001, 54). Silver is not introduced here simply as being representative of the period, it is also the key to its interpretation. Although the first of the two books of *Dvě knihy českých dějin* (Two Books of Czech History) gives the reader a very attractive account of the period, Šusta rather surprisingly introduces into this synthesized work, passages dealing with economic development. It was ingenious of Šusta to make silver and not a historical figure the hero of the period.

The use of metonymy is not limited to this strata of historiographic writing. Metonymy is also able to stamp a particular character on the whole work—either through the key words or the titles of the books. Historiography uses the principle of metonymy much more frequently than that of metaphor. Let us take for instance the title of the greatest work of Urbánek—*Věk poděbradský* (The Poděbrad age). When naming the period assigned to him in the Laichter series of *Czech history*, Urbánek focused on one particular aspect in selecting the name of one of a number of historical figures available to him. This tendency is even more evident in terms, such as the ‘pre-Hussite period’ (*předhusitská doba*) or (*pobělohorská doba*) ‘the period after the Battle of the White Mountain’. It is through the use of metonymy that the character of great events at the beginning or end of some historical periods is determined. The events, for example, the Hussite revolution or the White Mountain then have a bearing on the interpretation of the periods that either precede or follow the events. They provide a link that enables facts, which may at first seem disparate and unconnected, to be woven together in a network of temporal and causal connections that progress inevitably towards a predictable aim: be it war, revolution or any other historical phenomenon. In search of a unifying component for his/her work, the historian often yields to temptations of this temporal and causal deduction and interprets the period in terms of a logical and natural progression towards a given goal. As a result, the significance of particular

periods or historical processes is reduced to a mere prelude to or epilogue of great events.

Another example of the use of metonymy is the period of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries denoted as the Baroque period. The concept of *Baroque* itself is originally a metaphorical name for a cultural style whereas the expression Baroque period is metonymic in that only one aspect relates to the whole period. Nevertheless, this metonymy creates a strategy for construing the period and Baroque culture becomes the key to understanding the epoch. The concept of *Baroque* is also related to other phenomena of the period, including politics, as the expression *Baroque absolutism* shows. It should again be emphasized that these metonymical terms not only give the period a name but also evaluate it.

The constituents of metaphor and metonymy and the ways in which they operate unite in the third trope, which should be mentioned in the context of perceptions of the past—personification. In personification, inanimate objects and phenomena acquire human qualities, abilities, emotions, ambitions and intentions. Personification is thus an excellent device for all those who are involved in conveying knowledge of a variety of social realities. Of all the works of Czech historiography, personification is most evident in a tiny book *White Mountain* by J. Pekař, originally written as a series of newspaper articles. The personification of the White Mountain became the unifying principle in this work. It is as if the White Mountain has become independent of the close ties it had with the site where the decisive battle between the Catholic League, the Bohemians and their allies occurred. It grew into one of the most impressive symbols in Czech history, a symbol that determined the outlook on the history of that period, particularly in amateur studies on Czech history. Pekař used a wide range of metonymic mechanisms. For instance, he focused on the consequences of the White Mountain in such a way that the White Mountain itself became the purveyor of the outcome; the consequences of the event thus became the intentions of the personified reality or its actions.

The White Mountain has the remarkable attribute that she did not stop at the disaster she had caused when she first entered history, but her wickedness grew progressively. He who wants to understand her better has to distinguish her primary intention from what it was that she later became due to the circumstances. (...) It has to be emphasized that the White Mountain's intention was neither to destroy the sovereignty of the Czech state nor to consciously establish a certain kind of Austria. The White Mountain was a battle between the two Czech kings—neither of them being Czech—and the winner could only have been one of them—the Czech king. (Pekař 1986, 54)

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