

Tropological Modes and Projected Images in *The Fall of America*

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Abstract. *The Fall of America: Poems of These States*, 1965–1971 (1973) is a collection of poems composed by Allen Ginsberg during his drive cross-country tour of America, for which he shared the U.S. National Book Award for Poetry. In these lines, the American landscapes, situation and his experiences and observations of the social and political turmoil during the 1960s and early 1970s are described with vivid and striking details in the projected images in the poems. This study aims to investigate tropological modes involved in the poetic images in *The Fall of America*, exploring Ginsberg's encoded cognitive discourses on the corrupt government, industrialization and ecological deterioration through the tropological analysis of the projected images like “longhaired magician” and “borax” in the poems. It focuses on the primary level of Ginsberg's multiple discourses and thus provides the foundation for his historical narratives on the 1960s. Textual analysis is the main research approach and Hyden White's theories of four tropological modes are applied as the theoretical framework.

Keywords: Tropological Modes; Tropic of Discourses; Poetic Images; *The Fall of America*.

1. Introduction

In his famous work *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Hayden White contributed to bringing about a linguistic diversion into the analysis of history and literature by integrating the essence of modern linguistics and philosophy. He constructs a system of tropological modes to analyze discourses and historical narratives. According to White, tropes offer a framework for interpreting history, politics, and society in the form of discursive structures and figurative language. He outlines four tropological modes—metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony—arguing that they are essential for interpreting discourses and narratives in the texts. (34) With them, the interpretative, ideological, and critical concerns of narrator could be revealed. In short, tropes show up as a “precritically accepted paradigm” in the operation of narrative “encodation.” (9)

White considers metaphor as the most essential and frequently used trope, crucial for concisely describing the complex experiences of human life. According to him, metaphor serves a representational function, suggesting that it “asserts a similarity between two distinct objects, acknowledging their differences while emphasizing shared qualities, to evoke various qualities like beauty, preciousness, and delicacy.” (72)

Metonymy focuses on a specific portion or segment of the entirety. Thus, the meaning scope of wholeness is reduced to a certain part. In “Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground,” White comments that metonymy is the poetic strategy by which “contiguous entities can be reduced to the status of fictions of another, as when the name for a part of a thing is taken for the whole thing.” (253) For instance, “fifty sails” are applied to represent “fifty ships.” (253) Similar to metaphor, metonymy is more than a decorative trope model but also a way to help to understand “the most vivid feature of the abstraction and accomplish the process from sensibility to rationality.” (206)

White discovers synecdoche in symbolizing the nature of a part to its wholeness. For instance, in the phrase “he is all heart,” (73) the meaning of “heart” surpasses a significant part of the body but denotes personal qualities like kindness, passion, sympathy, etc. The trope of synecdoche ascribes “wholeness and organic unity to a congeries of elements in a system.” (254) It is equivalent in poetic usage of the relationship presumed to exist among things by those philosophers who speak about microcosm-macrocosm relationships.

Ironies are negative feedbacks of skepticism towards a judgment on a certain history, exhibiting an opposite perspective. With the poetic strategy of irony, the entity is described positively in literal

meaning and negatively on a tropological level. (23) Apparently, ridiculous descriptions and obvious fallacy can be seen as signals of irony. Therefore, in irony, the rhetoric expression retreats itself with cognitive distortion of the object it refers to, creating a cynical effect of distorting the fact.

Cognitive Discourse in Projected Images in the Poems

In *The Fall of America: Poems of These States 1965–1971*, Allen Ginsberg creates a series of fragmented yet interconnected images that capture the complexities of America during the 1960s. Then, in the following analysis, this study sorts, arranges and organizes these projected images and analyzes them in the tropological modes.

Firstly, it explores discourse cognition embedded in dispersive and multiple images in the poems from a micro point of view. It means that, in this part, the four tropological modes are mainly interpreted from the perspective of rhetoric and cognition. To be specific, the metaphors, metonymies, synecdoches and ironies are analyzed firstly as literal rhetoric in images and secondly as a process of cognitive projection for discourses. For example, Statue of Liberty and military force are examined as ironies to satirize industrialization and pollution.

Based on Jean Piaget's theories of children's cognitive pattern, Hayden White believes that tropological linguistic-rhetorical structure is involved in cognition, which is the process by which "all discourse constitutes the objects." (16) And discourse itself can be defined as a "cognitive verbal operation, a movement through which all structures of experiences and cognition relate to each in different ways of knowing." (11) Therefore, cognition is understood as a fundamental structure and a kind of discourse. It should be noted that, the exploration in this part focuses on two keywords: Images and Recognition of Discourse, which serve as the basis for the analysis of Ginsberg's discourses of criticism and narratives later.

2. "Longhaired Magician" and "Inferior Sorcerers" as Metonymies of Poet and Corrupt Government

Based on White's tropological theories, metonymy is "an epistemological projection of the trope." (253) In the cognitive discourse of metonymy, there are some key concepts to be concerned, i.e., contiguity, reference and name displacement. A complete cognitive process of "metonymy" consists of three basic elements: the reference, the subject of further specification, and the association between them. First, the references are known as "the most particular" and "the most sensible" ideas, which is the most prominent and familiar parts in discourses. (253) And the subject of further specification or target meaning is the characterization of unknown things. The field in which the two (referent and target) are interconnected is language-based, and the relationship itself has a "spatial-temporal, behavioral, or conceptual adjacency (contiguity)." (131) In other words, contiguity is the basis and soul of the mechanism of metonymy. Therefore, the study of objects is to explore their existences and essences of one or another of the discrete parts of the wholes or totalities. The mode of thought in "parts" and "the whole" is the most important in this process.

In his poems, Ginsberg employs many metonymical name displacements by figuring himself in the poem as the priest of language to diagnose the American government, exposing its hypocrisy and deceitfulness. In order to create this persona, he drawing on references of "longhaired magician" or "the Good Gray Poet." (533) Being a famous intellectual, Ginsberg's distinctive appearance of long hair and full beard play a significant role in shaping his defining features and poetic identity. These physical appearances provide the basic for "contiguity" for the tropological recognition to know him. Based on that, the metonymic descriptions of his physical traits are evident in his poetry, notably in lines which he refers to himself as the "good gray poet" and "longhaired magician." (533) Gradually, they became "the most particular" and "the most sensible" ideas or "references" to know him.

Furthermore, they offer insight into how Ginsberg viewed his own physical appearance in relation to his identity as a critical poet and spiritual seeker with his connection to the prophet, the spiritual seeker and the criticizer of American government attempting to reveal all "bad guesses" and "dumb

behaviors.” Like a prophet, Ginsberg employs a series of metonymical images to enlighten the public to look at the corrupt American military and the broader systems of the power system, particularly during the Vietnam War and the Cold War, including inferior magicians, wrong alchemical formula, funky warlocks, wrong equations, etc.

O longhaired magician come home take care of your dumb helper
before the radiation deluge floods your livingroom,
your magic errandboy’s
just made a bad guess again (534)

Among them, the “longhaired magician” is a self-image Ginsberg adopts from a description once applied to Walt Whitman, a figure he deeply admired. By aligning himself with Whitman’s nickname in his poem, Ginsberg evokes an image of wisdom, age, and spiritual leader and presents himself as a mystical figure. As a “magician,” he behaves just like a wandering sage who always defies social norms and embraces the power of magic, positioning his poetic metonyms to create spiritual insights engaging with his recognitive discourses to know about the corrupt government.

According to White, literal name displacement by which “contiguous entities can be reduced to the status of functions of one another.” (253) In this process of name displacement, Ginsberg evokes a world where leaders mishandle their authority like incompetent sorcerers. In this context, the failures of American government, particularly in its handling of war, social justice, and political hypocrisy are entitled as “magic and alchemy,” functioning as metonymic devices to criticize them.

Communion of bum magicians
congress of failures from Kansas & Missouri
working with the wrong equations
Sorcerer’s Apprentices who lost control
of the simplest broomstick in the world:
Language (534)

Through the use of them, Ginsberg evokes a world where leaders mishandle their authority like incompetent sorcerers. In this context, the use of “magic and alchemy” function as metonymic devices through which Ginsberg critiques the failures of American government, particularly in its handling of war, social justice, and political hypocrisy. Moreover, Ginsberg’s recognitive discourses toward the corrupt government extends directly to their involvement in Vietnam War, which he describes as an immoral and unjust conflict fueled by their misguided desires to control global politics. The politicians and military leaders who supported the war acted are likened to sorcerers, casting spells through war rhetoric and propaganda. Instead of achieving the order and control they sought, their “magic” only brought about destruction and widespread disillusionment.

The War is gone,
Language emerging on the motel news stand,
the right magic
Formula, the language known (542)

Just as he said, the “sorcerer’s apprentices lost control of the simplest broomstick” —metonymies for the language the American government wielded to control both the public and the war. By casting himself as the Sorcerer, Ginsberg positions his intended readership and prophecy to lead the American public to get away from the control of misleading political rhetoric. Interestingly enough, Ginsberg’s chief weapon to attack the official voice is also language.

Therefore, Ginsberg’s metonymical images call for a critical reevaluation of the systems of power and the corrupt forces, urging readers to see beyond the political rhetoric and recognize the moral, social, and political essence. The prophecy and power are employed to reclaim control over language, that mythical broomstick threatening to drown the world. He claims his confidence of his languages and the application of them with magic power. Through his use of metonymies, Ginsberg portrays the social reality of the 1960s. The function of these references and the name displacement in the interplay between longhaired sorcerer and the poet himself as well as the “inferior magicians” to represent the corrupt government are based on the contiguity embedded in these images for Ginsberg’s recognitive discourses of his own identity as the intellectual prophet and revelation of the corrupt government with their reliance on the “magic formula” to address complex social issues such as poverty, racial inequality and war.

3. Borax and Muddy Lakes as Synecdoches of Industrialization and Pollution

According to White, the recognitive discourse of synecdoche features a movement from the most particular idea to the most general, which results in the “elevation” of particulars into universals and of parts into wholes. It suggests an integrative relationship among the parts of the individual. To understand or recognize something synecdochically is to conceive a statement suggesting a qualitative relationship among the elements of a totality. (White 1973, 36) Moreover, synecdoche is a kind of “intrinsic language” (36) and a recognitive phenomenon that can be characterized by using the part to symbolize some quality presumed to inhere in the totality. For example, in “He is all heart,” it is meant to signal not simply a “name change” but a displacement designating a totality (“He”) which possesses some quality (generosity, compassion, etc.)

It is known that *The Fall of America* is a collection of poems describing the situation of the US, mainly composed during a drive, a cross-country tour of America undertaken by Ginsberg, Peter, and Julius Orlovsky in a Volkswagen minibus. Along the road, the landscapes of first Nebraska, and then Kansas are described with vivid and striking detail in his poems. In his poetic lines, from the perspective of “totality,” nature is portrayed as increasingly destroyed by human culture and history. Many images are created, including borax, neon and muddy lakes, etc. as synecdoches of industrialization and pollution in American society. Examples could be seen clearly in the very first lines of “Wichita Vortex Sutra” with depictions of various sceneries under pollution.

Red sun setting flat plains west streaked
with gauzy veils, chimney mist spread
around christmas-tree-bulbed refineries—aluminum [...]
beneath pillows of smoke, flames in machinery— (525)

Ginsberg’s ecological vision could be traced back to its origin in Zen Buddhism, the Romantic and Transcendental traditions in English literature. He shared their skepticism toward human civilization and beliefs in a spiritually interconnected universe, which is an integrative point of view. As an activist poet, Ginsberg rejects traditional Western culture’s notion of human supremacy in his poems. From the perspective of synecdoche, he views human behaviors in modern society as a part of the integrity of the ecological system and reflects the industrial civilization with its harm to both the

natural world and human beings themselves with an integrative mode of thought. Firstly, “Borax,” a repetitive image to refer to industrial pollution is a good example.

Borax, Borax, Borax [...]
 Borax the Dinosaur slounges thru
 fronds under Pleiades—
 Delicate filament of highway lights
 the nerves between cities—
 Borax, Borax Borax Borax [...] (572)

Featuring of his integrative thoughts, Ginsberg consistently expressed deep concern over the impacts of industrialization on both American society and the natural environment. His poetry reflects a profound awareness of the interdependence of all living beings, rooted in his belief that everything in nature is sacred and should be respected. Simply put, his synecdochical discourse could be analyzed from two perspectives, namely, the relationship between human beings and the natural environment as well as the connection between polluted images and environmental pollution on earth.

Firstly, readers would pay attention to the integrative thoughts that are characteristic of humans as a part of nature in totality, which means they are interconnected closely, sharing a common faith. Ginsberg argues that, on the one hand, animals and the environment are suffering because of man’s dependence on industrialization. As it could be seen in many of his poetic lines, technological development in mankind’s modern society has already brought about the extinction of many species of birds and animals.

Om. How many species poisoned biocided from Earth realms?
 O bald Eagle & Blue Whale with giant piteous Cat Squeak—Oh Wailing whale ululating
 underocean’s sonic roar of Despair! (728)

And on the other hand, he believes all living beings are interdependent. Therefore, in the lack of foresight to consider the consequences of their exploration of natural resources, human beings are paying equally high prices for their industrial development and natural exploration. “[...] body plumes brown webbed like dollarbills / insecticides sterilized many / adults. (679)

In “Death on All Fronts The Planet is Finished,” his tone is even gloomier in the forecast of the future of this planet. Death surrounds the earth, and there simply is no way out of the claws of death: “[...] from winter to winter. I wake, earlier in bed, fly corpses / cover gas lit sheets, my head aches, left temple / brain fibre throbbing for Death I Created on all Fronts [...]” (691) He suggests that the misguided policies and practices harm both the natural environment and human being themselves. Smog, cyanide, and chemical pollution are consuming American cities and turning them into wastelands, which is a fate that people are going to encounter in future.

Poe! D’jya prophesy this Smogland, this Inferno...
 Poe! D’jya know yr prophecies red death
 would pour thru Philly’s sky like Sulphurous Dreams...
 Red smoke, Black water grey sulphur clouds over Sparrows Point
 Oceanside flowing with rust, scum tide

boiling shoreward— (669)

Secondly, polluted images are also known as parts to recognize environmental pollution. It means that in the description of natural world under the influence of human civilization, Ginsberg portrays repetitively various gloomy sceneries as his poetic schemas, including the borax, muddy lakes, etc. For example, in “Chicago to Salt Lake by Air”, the polluted lake is a representative “part” of the polluted planet as a “whole.” In Ginsberg’s description, it could be seen clearly:

Detroit’s lake from a mile above chemical muddy,
streams of grey waste fogging the surface of the center,
more than half the lake discolored metallic—
the horizon edged with grey gas clouds from East to West unmoved by wind.
They fucked up the planet! (638)

He warns that the industrial civilization would lead to deforestation, air and river pollution, reduction in biodiversity, ecological balance, and other environmental degradations. In his recognition of poetic synecdoche, he emphasizes that humans should not possess dominion over the nature. “What right have I to burn gas air, screech overground rubber tired [...] / What prayer restores freshness to eastern meadow, soil to cindered / acres, hemlock to rusty hillside [...]” (703) In “Sonora Desert-Edge” Ginsberg’s rejection of progress-oriented ethics and “the American ways of life” featuring human beings’ supremacy over nature could be seen clearly. He argues that ever-expanding technological development would result in environmental disruption. Through the synecdochical discourse, he employs the “intrinsic language” in images to condemn American practices that result in environmental exploitation, making ecological awareness a central theme in his work to illustrate his opposition to technological advancements in American and even in western society.

4. Conclusion

This study focuses on the metaphorical and metonymic images in *The Fall of America* from the micro point of view, interpreting them as the tropological modes involved in Ginsberg’s cognitive discourse on the US 1960s. Specifically, it identifies these trope models not merely as rhetorical devices but also as cognitive operations and projection. These linguistic-rhetorical use of words are imbedded in Ginsberg’s discursive structures on the US politics, culture and society. Furthermore, it identifies the process, in which trope models constitute cognitive verbal operation moving away from their original meaning to contribute to through which all structures of experiences and cognition relate to each in different ways of knowing. That’s to say, it highlights how these projected images in the Ginsberg’s poetry functions as a means of his discourse of cognition.

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