Gianna Zocco

Introduction: The Rhetoric of Topics and Forms

1

This fourth volume of papers emerging from the 21st World Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association (Vienna, 21–27 July 2016) comprises articles focusing on what are provisionally called “topics” and “forms” in the book title.¹ Thus, this volume promises to join two aspects that have often been viewed as a dichotomy: the level of literary content and the level of literary form – questions concerning the “aboutness” of a text and the contextual or world elements contributing to it on the one hand, and questions related to the intrinsic, aesthetic qualities of a literary work on the other hand. Studying a text’s motifs, themes, topics/topoi, clichés, *Stoffe*, myths, symbols, images, or discourses is typically seen as part of the former area of investigation, whereas the latter is linked to questions of style, structure, language, form, tropes, rhetorical devices, and so on. In literary scholarship, influential claims over the priority of intrinsic, formal approaches over content-oriented, contextual ones were made by representatives of literary schools such as formalism, new criticism, and structuralism, who typically accused thematically oriented fields of literary research for having a focus on the sources and influences of particular literary themes that was too simplistic and positivistic, and that necessarily missed the “*momento creativo*, che è quello che davvero interessa la storia letteraria ed artistica” [the *creative moment*, which is that which truly interests literary and artistic history] (Croce 1903, 78; my translation, emphasis in original). The defences of the criticized fields, however, often involve two lines of argument. On the one hand, it is argued that any act of reading literature is, by nature, thematic, and that the consideration of thematic aspects does justice to the experiences of “common” readers. Variations of this

1 Being a member of the organizing committee of the ICLA congress “The Many Languages of Comparative Literature,” and editing this volume of its collected papers, was a project that accompanied me through various cities and stages of my life – from Vienna, to New York, to Berlin, from the Department of Comparative Literature in Vienna, to maternity leave, to the Leibniz-Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung in Berlin. It was a pleasure to collaborate with so many people, and I wish to express my special thanks to everyone involved in this project. In particular, I am grateful to Hannah Schroder and Juliane Werner from the Department of Comparative Literature in Vienna for their efforts and support in the process of preparing this volume of papers.

argument (with differences in emphasis and intention) can, for example, be found in a volume on new approaches to literary thematics from the 1990s, in a now-canonical essay by Edward Said, and in one of the most recent introductions to the discipline of comparative literature:

Literary study cannot afford to ignore the theme. It is that through which we read and it is that around which one writes, the locus of artistic creation in its effort to balance tradition against originality, the point of intersection between fictional and nonfictional worlds. (Bremond et al. 1995, 1)

Texts incorporate discourse, sometimes violently. [...] Words and texts are so much of the world that their effectiveness, in some cases even their use, are matters having to do with ownership, authority, power, and the imposition of force. (Said 2009 [1983], 275–276)

Identifying the theme is our primary rapport with a work of literature. We ask: “What’s that book about?” We say that Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education* is about the adventures of a naïve, self-centered young man in a chaotic time – and that Tutuola’s *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is about the same thing. (Of course it is never *exactly* the same thing – but close enough for purposes of comparison.) (Domínguez et al. 2015, 68; emphasis in original)

A second line of argument frequently used for defending thematically oriented fields of literary research from the charge of mere positivism is the inner connect-edness and inseparability of content-related and formal matters within a literary text. Theodor Wolpers, one of the most distinguished scholars in the field of literary thematics, which René Wellek and Austin Warren (1949, 272) famously dismissed as “the least literary of histories,” makes this argument when he emphasizes the sheer complexity of the seemingly simple task of studying thoroughly the role of a single motif in literary texts:

Practiced in this way, motif analysis is the very opposite of any form of *Stoffhuberei* (pedestrian or trivial handling of subject matter, or subject-mongering). It is a highly complex approach, requiring not only full awareness of structural matters and matters of content and meaning but also a sound knowledge of genre history and literary movements. (Wolpers 1993, 87)

A related argument is made by Joep Leerssen, who – when reflecting on the “history and method” of comparative imagology, another field of literary research that Wellek (2009 [1959], 164) accused of “dissolving literary scholarship into social psychology and cultural history” – explains how the conception of Hugo Dyserinck’s influential “Aachen programme” of imagology (sometimes also called image studies) defies the criticism of “positivistic factualism” (Wellek 2009 [1959], 164):

The Wellek-imposed dilemma between “intrinsic” textual analysis and “extrinsic” contextualization did much to paralyse Comparative Literature worldwide. In the course of the 1960s and 1970s, comparatists tended to abandon image studies. The main exception was Hugo Dyserinck, who argued that national images and stereotypes need by no means be “extrinsic” to the text’s inner fabric, but instead permeate its very substance. [...] The ultimate implication here was that images concerning character and identity are not mental representations which are conceived by nations *about* nations but which, as articulated discursive constructs circulating through societies, are constitutive of national identification patterns. (Leerssen 2007, 23; emphasis in original)

Finally, a similar argument can be found in the already quoted recent introduction to comparative literature, where the authors note that the use of the term “material,” as in “thematic material,” easily misleads us into drawing too close analogies to more literary uses of the term: “Thematic material, then, is not simply the ‘stuff’ of which literature is made, as clay is the stuff of which pottery is made, but commands attention, shapes the imagined world into a world made of *these* possibilities, implies structure and consequence” (Domínguez et al. 2015, 76; emphasis in original).

2

Approaching content-related and formal elements within a literary text as internally connected, or even inseparable, is maybe the most striking parallel between the forty-two contributions collected in this volume. Although only few of them, such as the article by Tone Smolej, explicitly refer to fields of literary research such as imagology or thematics (also known as *thématologie* in the French-speaking and as *Motiv- und Stoffgeschichte* in the German-speaking countries), they share the precise focus on often unnoticed formal and content-related features of literary texts. Considering literature from genres as different as midrashic poems, travel writing, and detective fiction, they provide detailed case studies that cover a wide range of epochs and regions – from the Alexandrian mime in antiquity and the ancient Buddhist *Lotus Sutra* to Collodi’s *Pinocchio* and the *oeuvre* of Karl Ove Knausgård.

The priority that this attention to “the specific, idiomatic features of a text” (Domínguez et al. 2015, 75) is given over generalization and theoretical reflection explains why it appears appropriate to speak of a “*rhetoric* of topics and forms” in the title of this volume. Since its beginnings in ancient Greece, the discipline of rhetoric was not only related to the task of persuasion in political discourse, but also seen as the art or technique of the proper use of words in a more general

sense (*ars bene dicendi*; Quintilian). From the two-and-a-half-millennia-old “empire rhétorique” (Barthes 1970, 174), which – since Quintilian’s *Institutio oratoria* – included a comprehensive concept of rhetorical training structured across five canons, we can not just draw a direct link to the study of rhetorical figures, tropes, and literary styles prominently represented by the numerous contributions concerned with metaphor studies, cognitive linguistics, literary multilingualism, satire, and irony (see sections 1, 2, and 4 in this volume), but also discover a connection to more thematically oriented approaches to literature. While the former endeavour relates to the most-well known stage of *elocutio* in classical rhetoric, the latter can be traced to *inventio*, the method of systematic search for arguments, from which the category of *topoi*, or topics, is originally derived. Initially defined as the “places” (the literal translation of the Greek *topoi*) where certain arguments or ideas could be found, the meaning of *topoi* broadened over the course of the centuries, and came to include not only the places or storehouses containing such arguments, but also the arguments themselves. The most influential modern conception of *topoi* comes from Ernst Robert Curtius (1886–1956), a German professor of Romance philology at the University of Bonn, who was working on his magnum opus, *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter* (1948; trans. as *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 1953), as Hitler came to power. Redefining the *topoi* as stylistic and content-related “intellectual themes, suitable for development and modification at the orator’s pleasure,” Curtius saw them as granting “a new perception of the inner connections of European literature” (1973 [1948], 70). He believed that the comparative study of *topoi* such as the *locus amoenus*, the composition of a poem as a nautical voyage, or “the world upside-down” could demonstrate the age-long unity of European humanist culture at a time when this unity was being gravely threatened – if not destroyed – by the ongoing “German catastrophe.”

3

While Curtius’s project was limited to European literature from antiquity to the works of Goethe, the majority of thematic studies in this volume are dedicated to European writers of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries such as James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Friederike Mayröcker, Aino Trosell, Marcel Beyer, and Kathrin Röggla. Several articles also cover works from non-European or not exclusively European contexts, among them the Chinese jestbook *Xiaolin Guangji*, young readers’ literature from francophone sub-Saharan Africa, the African American intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois, and the Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun. As the

term *topos* is explicitly referred to in only two of the contributions (Zlatka Timenova-Valtcheva, Alice Leal), and as other thematically associated terms such as “theme,” “motif,” or *Stoff* are used with equal rarity,² another observation is that, as Werner Sollors (1993, xii–xiii) already noted more than twenty-five years ago, “while one could probably argue that, *de facto*, thematic criticism has grown enormously, few scholars now seem to be willing to approach methodological issues of thematic criticism, or to look at their own works in the context of thematics.” The reason Sollors offers for this widespread tendency of “*undeclared* thematology” (2002, 219; emphasis in original) is the ongoing pejorative reputation of thematics and its continuing association with “mere” positivism, as well as the investigation of themes now tending “to travel under different colors,” including such “flourishing fields as post-colonial studies, cultural studies, ideological criticism, and New Historicism.”³ If we take this collection as a basis for expanding and updating this list of more appealing and at the same time more specific scholarly fields with a focus on thematic questions, the – in all cases interdisciplinary – areas of research related to the affective or emotional turn in literature (section 1), the study of literature in the context of migration and multilingualism (section 2, as well as the contributions by K. Alfons Knauth and Luciana Persice Nogueira), and ecocriticism (Oksana Weretiuk, Ewa Wojno-Owczarska, Doris Hambuch, Walter Wagner) are of further significance.

2 “Theme” is usually defined as the broadest and most abstract of the three terms, and means the fundamental idea or basic problem a literary text is about. (“Love,” as studied by many of the articles in section 1, is certainly one of the most central literary themes.) Motifs, on the other hand, are seen as smaller and more concrete, often only local, thematic units (examples drawn from this volume might be the scene of the ball studied by Zlatka Timenova-Valtcheva, or the glaciers and icebergs analysed by Walter Wagner). The term *Stoff* is only used in the German-speaking countries and means the basic narrative outline or plot that can receive different literary and non-literary actualizations (the term “paradigm,” which Nina Beguš introduces in her analysis of Pygmalion, is maybe a good translation). For a more detailed discussion of the different terms and their varying definitions, see Dahms (2013) and Zocco (2014, 47–49).

3 An additional reason for the widespread tendency of avoiding explicitly thematological terms could be the confusion and uncertainty resulting from the notorious incongruity of the field’s international terminology. As Hölter (2019, 140) points out, the German *Stoff* most likely corresponds to the English terms *theme* and *legend*, and to the French *mythe*, whereas the French *thème* is closer to the English and German *motif*/*Motiv*.

4

The first section of this volume includes eleven articles that share an interest in the role of emotions (in particular love) in literature, both in the sense of a – or maybe even *the* (see Just in this volume) – literary theme, as well as in relation to the formal and aesthetic means of expressing seemingly inexpressible, highly complex affective states, which – as Bethke asserts in her analysis of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* – would otherwise “have no stable place in the English emotion lexicon.” The historically specific intelligence that metaphors and other instances of figurative language offer about emotions was the topic of a group section (organized by Kathrin Bethke) during the congress in Vienna, whereas another group section (organized by Rainer Just) focused on the relation of language and love, considering the erotic dimension of language, as well as love’s desire for expressing itself through words. The four articles from each of these two sections include case studies on the literary expression of particularly complex emotions such as shame, sorrow, and the feeling of “worthlessness” (Nina Tolksdorf, Eleonore De Felip, Kathrin Bethke), and on love in contexts of autofictional and political writings (Stefan Kutzenberger, Gianna Zocco), as well as several more theoretically oriented investigations, which introduce concepts from cognitive linguistics and comparative metaphor studies (Richard Trim), psychoanalysis (Rainer Just), and (deconstructivist) philosophy (Tanja Veverka). These contributions are joined by three articles that were originally conceived as separate presentations but have a focus on related questions: on the use of the metaphor of the “Treasure Tower” as an immediate way of giving insight into the human condition in a sacred Buddhist text (Christiane Kazue Nagao), on the scene of the ball as a literary topos for the expression of “silent” emotions (Zlatka Timenova-Valtcheva), and on the role of music as another means of articulating otherwise inexpressible emotions in the work of Alfred de Musset (D. R. Gamble).

D. R. Gamble’s paper on the literary use of music to counter the inadequacy of language as perceived by Musset leads into the first contribution in section 2, which focuses on the role of sounds, noises, and incomprehension as elements of the acoustic dimension of literary multilingualism (Markus Huss). Based entirely on the congress section “Stylistic Phenomena in Multilingual Literature since 1900,” which was organized by scholars from Finno-Ugrian and Scandinavian studies (namely Johanna Laakso, Hannah Tischmann, Philipp Wagner, Antje Wischmann), the ten contributions in this section share the conviction that a closer understanding of literary multilingualism requires a consideration of the relationship between linguistic realities and their literary representations. They employ a broad definition of literary multilingualism that is not only based on the lexical but also includes syntactic, semantic, orthographical, visual, or – as

in Huss's paper – aural forms which often occur “on the borders between national languages” (Tidigs and Huss 2017, 217). Several contributions look at cases of literature in which such forms of multilingualism originate from the protagonists' (or one of their parents') belonging to the linguistic minority of Swedish speakers in Finland (Kristina Malmio), Finnish speakers in Sweden (Sophie Wenerscheid), German speakers in Denmark (Stephan Michael Schröder), or Danish speakers in northern Germany (Antje Wischmann), whereas Philipp Wagner investigates a contemporary Swedish novel in which multilingualism is related to the cosmopolitan characters' use of English. The disturbance of the “monolingual paradigm” (Yildiz 2012) and the deconstruction of the assumed homology between language, culture, ethnicity, and nationality, which many of the articles observe, remains a major issue in the subsequent contributions by Johanna Laakso, Hannah Tischmann, Elin Fredsted, and Robert Leucht and Jürgen Spitzmüller, which take us to examples of multilingualism in the context of minority and vernacular languages, dialects, and sociolects. Studying cases taken from modern Finnic minority literatures (Laakso), contemporary Swedish literature (Tischmann), Danish and German cinema (Fredsted), and a work by Alfred Döblin (Leucht and Spitzmüller), they observe a variety of functions multilingualism can take in such instances, ranging from questions of authenticity (Laakso) to the articulation of cultural concepts and the construction or figuration of individual, historical, and social *personae* (Fredsted).

While one could say that the articles in section 2 are interested in “une plus forte prise en compte du multilinguisme concret et de ses figures” section 3 begins with an article expanding the focus on multilingualism towards “l'imaginaire du multilinguisme” (K. Alfons Knauth). By this, Knauth means the representation of multilingualism in the mythologies and literatures of different cultures of the world, including images and symbols such as the Tower of Babel, the Roman god Mercury and his Greek and Egyptian predecessors, the bifid snake in Mexican mythology and the Bible, as well as the figure of the monstrous rhetorician *Ouyrdire* in Rabelais's *Gargantua et Pantagruel* and his (post-)modern successors. With Knauth thus tracing how images of multilingualism travelled between ancient and contemporary, mythological and modern worlds, the following five articles of this section focus on other themes, motifs, and figures that have taken distant and fascinating journeys through different times and cultures. Tone Smolej, Nina Beguš, and Irina Brantner all consider themes originating in Greek and Roman antiquity, namely the story of Antigone, the myth of Pygmalion, and the motif of the labyrinth, and they all trace these ancient themes to their more recent (or rarely studied) actualizations, including Anouilh's, Smolej's, and Žižek's theatre productions of the Antigone story; Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* and a relatively unknown medieval Silk Road tale; and European poetry of the first half of the

twentieth century. Magda El-Nowieemy then focuses on the image of the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria and questions of cultural identity that were not only discussed in Harry Tzalas's *Farewell to Alexandria* but have a predecessor in the ancient Alexandrian mime. Finally, Anat Koplowitz-Breier takes us to the Bible as a source for modern retellings. She studies the "midrashic poems" by seven Jewish women poets who have each found different ways of giving a voice to Abishag the Shunammite, the female protagonist who is silenced in the original text.

The articles in section 4 have a common focus on literary languages of social critique and moral subversion. Whereas the first five articles share an interest in forms of satire and irony, the subsequent three contributions are united by their relation to ecocriticism and the environmental humanities – interdisciplinary fields of research that also connect to questions of morality and social critique, for example when they draw attention "to the convergences between colonial oppression and ecological degradation, to the unequal distribution of resources and risks, and in some cases, to First-World environmentalism's complicity in perpetuating conditions of socioeconomic injustice" (Heise 2017, 293). Antonio Leggieri's initial article considers satire, a form rooted in (especially Roman) antiquity and often approached through the Horatian/Juvenalian duality. Attempting to start a dialogue between Western and Chinese forms of satire, he considers the pre-modern Chinese jestbook *Xiaolin Guangji*, which prominently features debased images of magistrates, doctors, and monks, whose value systems are overturned. Georgia Panteli then takes us to a satirical tradition, often overlooked due to its classification as children's literature, in her partly Freudian reading of the satirical and subversive nature of Pinocchio's nose in Collodi's original text and some postmodern retellings. Two other satirical traditions are traced in the subsequent articles by Julia Bacskai-Atkari and Benjamin Boysen. While the former considers Lord Byron's *Don Juan* and subsequent verse novels as forms of multilevel satire originating from the depiction of the hero as a collector of roles he does not identify with, the latter focuses on James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, a text that makes its readers hear and experience "rampant laughter" and thereby deconstructs any ideology that opposes people's birthright to freedom. A more theoretical perspective on satire and its relation to irony is provided by Karima Lanius, who studies both concepts through an approach related to systems theory and the ideas of Rainer Warning, and concludes by emphasizing satire's relationship with morality. The next three articles of the section then take us to the field of ecocriticism, with the first two considering European examples. While Oksana Weretiuk studies the language of ecological concern in Eastern-European prose texts from Ukraine and Poland, and concludes that the global scale of environmental problems is more strongly accented than post-colonial issues, Ewa Wojno-Owczarska analyses works by the contemporary German-speaking writers Kathrin Röggla and

Marcel Beyer, and focuses on their particular stylistic means of addressing the “Apokalypse von innen” (Nitzke). Doris Hambuch’s final paper compares poems by a German, an Emirati, and a St Lucian writer, who not only share a tendency for “nature-centric” metaphors and explicit references to environmental threats, but also articulate the need of a global perspective in the context of sustainability.

The final section collects seven articles that all share a focus on the analysis of particular literary genres and styles. Kodjo Attikpoé’s initial article considers two cases of contemporary young readers’ literature from francophone sub-Saharan Africa, both marked by an unusual degree of complexity which he finds expressed through a humoristic language in the first case, and through the treatment of the theme of violence in the second. The literary traditions of francophone Africa are also considered by Luciana Persice Nogueira in her investigation of three novels by Tahar Ben Jelloun, which are marked by numerous intertextual strategies resulting in a kaleidoscope of cultural hybridity. Walter Wagner’s comparative reading of English and French travel writing then takes us from Africa to the more northern parts of the globe. Studying how travelogues of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries employ the category of the sublime in their depiction of far northern landscapes, he finds that the encounters with the silent majesty of mountains, glaciers, and icebergs constitute a major challenge to the possibilities of linguistic expression. The limits of literary language – and those of other forms of artistic representation – are also of relevance to Alexandra Irimia, who considers figures of absence in literature, the visual arts, and cinema, and compares how different media have their unique strategies of creating meaning from empty signifiers. Whereas Jesper Gulddal, in the following article, takes an unusual approach to the study of literary authors by focusing on the role of author characters – and the subsequent complex interplay between conflicting forms of authority – in two detective novels by Agatha Christie and Dashiell Hammett, Alice Leal investigates how language is not only the medium of but can also be a *topos* in fiction, which she shows in her reading of two works by Schnitzler and Borges expressing peculiar notions of language as well as of translation. Reflections on language remain a major issue in the final contribution to the section. Andrea D’Urso investigates the shared semiotic interests of two main figures of surrealism – the French Vincent Bounoure and the Czech Vratislav Effenberger – which can be observed in the collective work *La Civilisation surréaliste*, as well as in unpublished letters and documents exchanged between them.

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