KAREN BLIXEN'S *ANTHROPOLOGICAL METAPHORS*: A COGNITIVIST APPROACH TO HER AFRICAN MEMOIR

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Abstract: *Attempting to formulate a cognitivist approach to a specific category of metaphors used by Karen Blixen in her African memoir published in 1937, my article looks into the way the book "Out of Africa" enables real cultural meetings by allowing a direct reading of the African natives' or the other's mind in the way the other interprets and uses metaphorically different language instances/sequences in a given context. Irrespective if they are names or other words designating gestures, behavious or situations, such language instances/sequences as for example "Outis"* or *"to brass-serpent" are used as an efficient literary tool which could be called "anthropological metaphors" on account of their genuine contribution to one of the big themes of the book: the encounter of the other. Allowing access to an interesting linguistic transfer which offers us a unique transparency of the metaphorizing process, their analysis may even contribute to challenging the critique and further discussing the questions raised in literary postcolonial studies about this book.*

Keywords: *other; anthropological metaphors; cognitive; tenor and vehicle; African*.

Published in 1937 in English under the pen name Isak Dinesen, Karen Blixen's African memoir has been perceived by many[1] as one of the most famous books written in the XXth century, being more than once shortlisted for the Nobel prize, and has remained for the literary critics a literary text at the border between colonialism and postcolonialism, still igniting strong debate in the academic world.

In an article published some years ago by Clara Juncker, the author reviews all criticism faced by the book from the perspective of postcolonial criticism, concluding that, African secondary literature (especially by Kenyan critics such as Dominick Odipo), being full of hostility, tend to emphasize the author's attitude of sovereignity[2], whereas European and American criticism[3]

[1] Ernest Hemingway and Truman Capote among others.

[2] According to the quotes in Clarei Juncker's extremely well-informed article, many debates have been, by example, generated by the use of the first person singural possessive pronoun. Despite the many names used in the book, Africans are often called "my natives", remaining in many cases anonymous and invisible, and the panoramic view of the landscape suggests the imperial position of the colonialist and an attitude of cultural dominance.

[3] Sten Pultz Moslund discusses, for instance, the possessive pronoun in Blixen's landscape descriptions ("the grass was me, and the air, the distant invisible mountains were me, the tired oxen were me") as an "Othering that de-subjectifies, even de-anthropomorphizes the self, turning it into vegetation and animal and a mode-of-being that is fundamentally produced by Otherness.", to the conlusion that "Blixen confronts Eurocentric hierarchies of identity … by creating connections between becoming-Africa, becoming-other, and becoming human."

tends to focus on the infinite nuances and utmost complexity of the Danish author's relation to the Africans. Considered, on the one hand, an accomplice to the British colonial power, Blixen is on the other hand a witness and an opponent of it, being simultaneously a witness to, a participant in and a critic of the colonial project[4], which places her in a paradoxical position. This position is in its turn nuanced by other voices in the field of literary criticism, as for example that of Marianne T. Stecher's[5], who notices in Blixen's text an ideal of mutuality in the encounter between two races and cultures, captured in a unique historical moment. In postcolonial criticism, however, all questions pertaining to Karen Blixen's complicity in the colonial project remains an open case.

The contribution which my analysis could bring to this ongoing debate comes from a totally different angle. Indirectly, the criticism faced by the book from postcolonial studies could also be refuted by giving a cognitive reading to a certain category of metaphors used in the text. I have called them *anthropological metaphors* insofar as they contribute to one of the major themes of the book, which addresses precisely this anthropological field and the meeting between races and cultures. No doubt, encountering the other is one of the main themes of Karen Blixen's memoir, although this is far from being a documentary account, as many readers expected when the book was launched. Of course, Blixen is "both an anthropologist and a myth creator" (Oxfeldt 85), the book having thereby a unique literary formula, to which reference has been made as pastoral elegy, classical (paradise loss) tragedy, autobiography, travelogue, memoir etc., but it ultimately eludes all unitary classification and is considered a hybrid text – interesting not so much through the clear delimitation between reality and fiction in the author–heroine's life, therefore not so much through the construction of the self but, with the rise of postcolonial studies, through the way it describes otherness, the etnographical part of the book:

> As in travel literature in general, it is impossible to draw a straight line between fact and fiction. Traditionally this questions has been aimed at the text's autobiographical content, but with the advent of postcolonial studies, the question is more often aimed at its ethnographic content. In other words, the interest in Dinesen's depiction of her Self is replaced with an interest in her depiction of the Other (Oxfeldt 106-107).

However, irrespective if we consider or not the ethnographic theme as secondary in Karen Blixen's memoirs, it is worth noticing that the remarkable force in it comes from several sources. A careful examination of the text has

Thus, her meeting the Africans becomes "a 'human human' relation, of being human before being a self or having an identity" (see Moslund quoted by C. Juncker, op.cit., p. 97).

[4] A position further discussed by Lasse Horne Kjældgaard, op.cit.

[5] See Stecher's opinion further discussed by C. Juncker.

revealed to me the fact that the impression of huge authenticity it gives is based not only on landscape and character description but also on a new and unique mediation process, which enables and offers the reader a kind of direct recovery of the encounter with the African universe. I called this strategy used by Blixen *anthropological metaphors*. By using such *anthropological metaphors* as a strategy mediating cultural encounters, the Danish writer features a literary tool of great efficiency. This is even more visible when observing all the other mecanisms employed in the book for rendering alterity, starting with the descriptions of the natural, rural and urban landscape, continuing with the people variety, and ending with the group portraits and the animals.

These "anthropological" metaphors suppose using some sequences – names or other words designating gestures, objects, behavious, situations – whose interpretation by *the other,* in a given context, makes a cultural meeting really possible, allowing a direct reading of *the other's mind.* All these linguistic sequences appear in the text as metaphors, being analyzed as conceptual or cognitive metaphors, which suppose grasping an idea or a conceptual domain in *the other's* terms. Their appearance in the text triggers an interpretative-creative approach from the other, something revealing the functioning of their metaphorizing mind. The name *Outis* overtaken by Kamante from the discussion with the author-heroine about *The Odyssey* is a first illustrative example in this sense.

In the pages dedicated to the native child Kamante, which occupy one of the four subchapters of the First Part of the book, one of the scenes on which the author lingers for a few pages is the discussion about the writing of a book – a process followed with charming scepticism by the child. I will place the analysis of this discussion at the very center of this article's demonstration:

> (…) and then asked me gravely: "Msabu, what is there in books?"
> As an illustration, I told him the story from the Odyssey of the hero and Polyphemus, and of how Odysseus had called himself Noman, had put out Polyphemus' eye, and had escaped tied up under the belly of a ram.
> Kamante listened with interest and expressed as his opinion, that the ram must have been of the same race as the sheep of Mr. Long, of Elmentaita, which he had seen at the cattle-show in Nairobi. He came back to Polyphemus, and asked mei f he had been black, like the Kikuyu. When I said no, he wanted to know if Odysseus had been of my own tribe or family.
> "How did he," he asked, "say the word, *Noman*, in his own language? Say it."
> "He said Outis, " I told him. "He called himself Outis, which in his language means Noman."
> "Must you write about all these things?" he asked me.
> "No, " I said, "people can write of anything they like. I might write of you."
> Kamante who had opened up in the course of the talk, here suddenly closed again, he looked down himself and asked me in a low voice, what part of him I would write about.

> "I might write about the time when you were ill and were out with the sheep on the plain." I said, "what did you think of then?"
> His eyes wandered over the room, up and down; in the end he said vaguely: "*Sejui*" – I know not.
> "Were you afraid?" I asked him.
> After a pause, "Yes", he said firmly, "all the boys on the plain are afraid sometimes."
> "Of what were you afraid?" I said.
> Kamante stood silent for a little while, his face became collected and deep, his eyes gased inward. Then he looked at me with a little wry grimace:
> "Of Outis, " he said. "The boys on the plain are afraid of Outis." (Dinesen 47)

The presence of the *Odyssey* in this passage has a double relevance, providing the backdrop for a double reversal or inversion of meaning. First, Kamante's gesture of bringing up the thick volume to support his point that the book Msabu was writing could never become a solid bound book like the *Odyssey* shows a candid confusion, but his confusing the value of a book with the physical appearance of the object transgresses the purely humorous function. The boy's reference to the object designated by the word „book" in a context where the process of creating a book is described shows a first reversal of the meaning, an inversion on the sign – symbol axis, which prepares the ground for an even more significant transfer to come. Later on, when Kamante re-opens the discussion after a moment of silence and reflection, expressing curiosity about the content of such objects called books, his mentioning the *Odyssey* again will lead to a new inversion, this time on the metaphorical axis of language.

Msabu tells him about Ulysses' visit to Polyphemus and how he escaped from the Cyclops' cave by claiming his name was *Nobody* and then gouging out Polyphemus' eye. Sharp-minded and focused on concrete details, Kamante wants to know if Polyphemus was black like him, and learning that the equivalent of the name Nobody in Ulysses' language is *Outis*, he declares that, like all Kikuyu boys, sometimes when he went out alone with the sheep to pasture he was afraid of *Outis*.

Outis becomes this way, in Kamante's mouth, a metaphor of the unknown which scares and provokes fear. Nevertheless, what Kamante needs is above anything else a vehicle of the metaphor. The name is provided by a language that is unknown to him, but from Msabu's story, he knows that, in that language, it had been used as a trick to get out of an uncomfortable encounter with a dangerous form of otherness. For Ulysses, *Outis* had been the name of an ingenious negotiation, with his own survival at stake; by using it, in the dialogue with a frightening other, as a substitute for his own name, according to the rule of metaphor (one word for another), the Greek hero had transformed it into the tenor or target of a metaphor of success, of a victorious exit from a dangerous encounter.

The use of an anonymous formula as a proper name is the equivalent of a process of abstraction, making it impossible for the Cyclops to concretely identify the enemy by name and thus obtain the necessary help for eliminating it, which guarantees Ulysses' victorious exit from the Cyclops' cave.

Kamante, on the other hand, takes up the formula of anonymity for a reverse process, of making concrete an unknown enemy by naming him. For him, *Outis* is not the target or tenor, but the source or vehicle of the metaphor, an image through which one speaks of a reality for which he has no words, but which causes him fear, just like to the other native shepherds.

What we witness here is an interesting transfer, which offers us a unique transparency of the metaphorizing process. The two encounters with otherness that are invoked - that of Ulysses in the "Odyssey" and that of the native child in Africa - converge in the *Outis* metaphor coming from two directions, following the steps forward and backward from the concrete to the abstract and from the abstract to the concrete, steps that are also reminiscent of the analysis of the metaphorization process offered by the linguists and language philosophers Georges Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Human language is unconsciously metaphorical, mental processes are largely metaphorical, and abstract thinking is always built from physical metaphors.

In the current context of cognitive linguistics, already in its fourth generation after Lakoff and Johnson, everyone is well-aware that that the mechanism of metaphor's functioning hides the secret of language's functioning. On a very short note and without suggesting a complete overview of the multiple efforts to define and nuance the definitions of metaphor, I will only recall the initial, founding point of view, on which philosophers and linguists such as Paul Ricoeur, Eugen Coșeriu, Georges Lakoff and Mark Johnson insisted, although from different perspectives, that the metaphorical is a system-shaping category that structures our reality and influences our vision of the world. This represents the beginnings of cognitive linguistics, established as a research paradigm in the second half of the 20th century and becoming an important paradigm towards the end of the last century. As researcher Ana-Maria Dudău shows, the debate on metaphor took place for a long time between linguists who only treated the issue semantically, contributing to a theory of substitution in metaphor (the displacement of the meaning of a word based on a relationship of similarity with another) by insisting on the distinction between tenor or target (what one wants to talk about) and vehicle or source (the image through which one speaks), and supporters of the tension theory, who insisted only on the importance of context in revealing the meaning of a metaphor, which can be reached other than by circumscribing it to a specific context.[6]. Eventually, however, the two

[6] For further discussions, see Ana-Maria Dudău's article.

theories met, making integrative efforts as we can paradoxically find in both Paul Ricoeur and his living metaphors, expressions that recreate or re-describe reality through fiction, and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson with their so-called "dead metaphors"[7].

Keeping in mind, as a common point of all the references above, the fact that the way in which a metaphor rewrites reality can reveal something essential about how it is structured in the mind that produced it, we consider that taking over the *Outis* vehicle for the metaphorical expression of a previously unnamed reality can refer to an experience for which there was no sedimented name in the natives' mind, which appeals to a feeling of anxiety or fear and to a cunning action against it. It may even be the fear provoked by encounters with the anonymous exponents of colonialism, a fact confirmed by Kamante's questions about whether Polyphemus had been black like the Kikuyu people, and Ulysses had been part of the tribe or family of Msabu, so he had been white. So in light of this identification with Polyphemus through color, the fear of the small native shepherds seems to be aimed at meeting the other, most likely the European colonist, whose cunning and cunning actions they feared.

Thus, in the *Outis* sequence, as in the previous discussion of the "Odyssey", we are dealing with a reversal or inversion of meaning, but not on the sign-symbol axis, but this time on the vehicle-tenor axis, by reversing the source with the target of the metaphor. These inversions, however, play, in the economy of the Danish writer's African memoirs, the role of what I have called *anthropological metaphor*, offering that transparency that makes it possible to read the metaphorizing process, or a surprising way of accessing the mind of the other.

But this is not the only case of a masterful *anthropological metaphor* used by Blixen in realizing the theme of the encounter with otherness. Many other names used by the natives become equally original and effective tools, as are the recipes of Kamante, who, without knowing how to read or speak English, is given the role of chef and is taught by Msabu to cook according to various European recipes:

> ...he must have held all that he was ever taught stored up in his ungraceful head, according to some systematization of his own, which I should never know. He had named the dishes after some event which had taken place on the day they had been shown to him, and he spoke of the sauce of the lightning that struck the tree, and of the sauce of the grey horse that died (Dinesen 36).

[7] Discussed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their reference book *Metaphors We Live By* from 1980.

The names of the dishes that Kamante cooks, strictly for Msabu and her guests, refer to names that reflect the same operating principle of the metaphorizing process: a movement from the abstract to the concrete, the vehicle of metaphors related to the immediate universe, of the local fauna and flora and the meteorological events that cross it. Again, if abstract thought sedimented in language, as Lakoff and Johnson argue, is always constructed from physical metaphors, then the mind of the other, which is revealed to us here, is one that responds to the abstractions in the language it encounters by creating new metaphors, and their encounter sheds light on, or makes transparent, this very mode of metaphorizing functioning of the human mind. The fact that Blixen's writing highlights this process and accompanies the encounter between cultures with sequences of the birth of metaphorizing language is undoubtedly one of the big strengths of the way she realizes the theme of the encounter with otherness.

As it could have been expected, the names given to the Europeans by the locals are also the result of a metaphorization process:

> I have had an unsociable neighbour, who would never entertain a guest in his house, who was named Sahane Modja ,–One Cover. My Swedish friend Eric Otter was Resase Modja, – One Cartridge, – which meant that he did not need more than one single cartridge to kill, and which was a fine name to be known by. There was a keen automobilist of my acquaintance, who was called "Half man–half car." When Natives name white men after animals,–the Fish, the Giraffe, the Fat Bull,–their minds run upon the lines of the old fables, and these white men, I believe, in their dark consciousness figure as both men and beasts (Dinesen 100-101).

All these are metaphors in the vehicle of which one can read, as the author herself does, a predilection of the native mind for the animal world. However, the best illustration of the metaphorizing process in which a cultural reversal and transfer are involved and visiblecomes with the natives' bestowing the status of *brass-serpent* upon the author-heroine herself. Her own turning into a symbol, as the author-heroine experiences, feeling the Kikuyus have an instinctual way of doing it, is "because of their gift for myths" and because "the Native mind works in strange ways, and is related to the mind of bygone people". This eventually gets a name in the author-heroine own analysis:

> I was well aware of the process, and for my own use I had a word for it,–in my mind I called it that they were *brass-serpenting* me. Europeans who have lived for a long time with Natives, will understand what I mean, even if the word is not quite correctly used according to the Bible (Dinesen 101-102).

The *brass-serpent* metaphor is not limited to herself, it is applied to many other Europeans living in Africa and having a position of forerunners in different concrete life situations:

> Lord Delamere was a brass-serpent of the first magnitude. I remember that I once travelled in the highlands at the time when the great pest of hoppers came on to the land. (...) To the Natives this was a terrible blow (...). Their hearts broke, they panted, or howled like dying dogs, they ran their heads against a wall in the air before them. I then happened to tell them how I had driven through Delamere"s farm and had seen the hoppers on it, all over the place, in his paddocks and on his grazing land, and I added that Delamere had been in great rage and despair about them. At that same moment the listeners became quiet and almost at ease. They asked me what Delamere had said of his misfortune, and again asked me to repeat it, and then they said no more. (...) I did not, as a brass-serpent, carry the weight of Lord Delamere, still there were occasions when I came in useful to the Natives (Dinesen 102).

This process of symbolic investment, rendered transparent enough to make it possible to encounter the native mentality, acquires a metaphorical name which is, this time, the creation of the author-heroine, apparently contaminated by the freshness of the natives' metaphorizing mind.

The vehicle of the metaphor, borrowed from the Old Testament universe, clearly shows an interpretation of an unknown world in terms of a familiar one, but we are again dealing here with an inversion: The serpent raised by Moses in the desert, target or tenor of a metaphor of salvation, becomes the source or vehicle of the new metaphor, which the author-heroine creates to express *the other's* behaviour: the investment of Europeans as pioneers in various issues or areas of existence that raised problems for them.

Having that transparency that makes it possible to read the other's mind in its very metaphorical movements, from abstract to concrete and from concrete to abstract, *Outis* and the *brass-serpent* are true metaphors of cultural encounters. If the native mind seems to move with a greater predilection from the abstract to the concrete, as we have seen through the examples given of the other metaphorical names, we have seen that the process is not foreign to the European mind either.

The priority of the vehicle or tenor of the metaphors can be reversed on both sides, so in the construction of these *anthropological metaphors* there can be no strategy of establishing a main and a secondary in the sense of cultural primacy. This fact may also constitute a response to the postcolonial criticisms of the book, confirming the point of view of Abdul Jan Mohammed and of those who see Blixen as "the absolute exception in the universe of European colonists, so reluctant to recognize the otherness of the natives" (Abdul Jan Mohammed 152). Moreover, as Susan Brantly points out, "acting as a buffer between the natives on the farm and the official government agencies, including the police" (Brantly 78), Blixen will be carried away by

her deep feelings of love for the natives and for Africa to the point of almost total merging with the African landscape.

Through these metaphors, as well as through her direct descriptions and reflections, Karen Blixen allows a view from both sides; her book has a transparency that allows access to both the European's view of native otherness, and the natives' view of European otherness – an argument that supports the claim that Blixen truly succeeds in formulating an ideal of reciprocity in the encounter between two races and cultures, despite the criticism brought to her by postcolonial studies.

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