

Teksty Drugie 2014, 2, s. 109-124

Special Issue



CENTRUM
HUMANISTYKI
CYFROWEJ

Travelers and Colonizers: Contemporary Strategies of Describing Africa.

Justyna Tabaszewska

Przeł. Anna Warso

Justyna Tabaszewska

Travelers and Colonizers: Contemporary Strategies of Describing Africa

Journey as a source of inspiration, as a topic and as work of literature. Marco Polo, Humboldt, Goethe, Twain, and thousands of others. One needs to mature into traveling – journey represents much more than movement from place to place, more than tourism. ... A journey is a pregnant experience of the world, a way of learning its mysteries and truths, of finding answers to the question it poses. Journey understood in this manner is a reflection, it is a philosophical act.¹

The situation of journey always entails the question of its goal. Sometimes it would seem that the wandering itself is a goal that does not require further justification. In those cases, however, there arises the question of its cause. The place that the traveler seeks to learn about is not chosen accidentally, even if the act of choice itself was not fully conscious.² The question grows even more pertinent when the newly encountered space becomes

Justyna

Tabaszewska – PhD, author of a book *Jedna przyroda czy przyrody alternatywne? O pojmowaniu i obrazach przyrody w polskiej poezji* (2010). Recipient of numerous grants and stipends, interested in contemporary poetry and the poetics of memory.

1 R. Kapuściński. *Lapidarium*. Czytelnik, Warszawa 1990. 165.

2 G. Green Transl. by H. Olędzka. Instytut Wydawniczy Pax, Warszawa 1964. 22.

an object of description, as the reason for choosing a particular area directly affects its perception. The reason for making a particular journey is especially interesting when it results in a description that usurps the right to convey objective observations – which is what the literary reportage does.

I would like to discuss three descriptions of African journeys. The first one is part of *Rondo de Gaulle'a* [De Gaulle's Roundabout], a reportage series by Olga Stanisławska chronicling her yearlong journey from Casablanca (believed by Stanisławska to be an intermediary stage between the European culture and Africa) to Kinshasa. The second portrayal appears in the novels by Ryszard Kapuściński where he shares the years of his African experience. It was African experience, too, that resulted in two series of short stories by Wojciech Albiński. Different motivations that brought those authors to Africa and methods of description unique to each of them converge in one point: in the answer why it was this particular place that they found interesting. Why does the Dark Continent continue to fascinate and attract travelers, why does getting to know it become an experience so valuable that it is risking one's well-being and even life? What is the source of the "magic" of Africa expressed in the writing of Stanisławska and Kapuściński, one that with equal force affects those who spend in Africa large parts of their lives?

In order to answer those questions we must consider the image of the African land that attracted the writers along the possibility that they may have treated this image as a challenge to prove its stereotypical character. Such approach would be understandable especially in the case of reportage, representing a form of writing that cannot use fiction unless the conjured situation is used to express a general truth, or is necessary to introduce a (authentic) historical document.³ This image of Africa was shaped as a result of two types of contact – the continent attracted both travelers, eager to discover other cultures, and colonizers, whose interest was motivated by search for profit. Even today, Africa's phenomenon relies on its otherness which itself has been undoubtedly affected by the failed attempts to "civilize" it. Hostile natural conditions and resistance of the native peoples prevented the changes that took place across centuries from spreading over the entire African territory, and so they were always superficial and temporary (Kapuściński speaks of Africa's "eternal persistence").

Otherness conceived in this fashion is a characteristic trait of Africa. Despite centuries of domination, European culture did not manage to reshape it. The defeat is even larger, as it created hostility toward the white man among the inhabitants of lands that were colonized most brutally.

3 Compare: M. Wańkowicz. „O poszerzaniu konwencji reportażu.” [On Broadening of the Reportage Form] *Reportaż. Wybór tekstów z teorii gatunku*. Rzeszów, 1992.

The consequences of colonization affected not only the subjugated nations – the entire perception of Africa today cannot rid itself of the colonizer's complex that burdens almost every observer. The erasure of this complex seems impossible in a situation where the debt resulting from the years of exploitation of African land remains unpaid, or rather, can never be paid back as even the insufficient attempts at material help cannot take away the disgrace of colonization.

This is an issue raised already by Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. Marlow journeys up the Congo River following his childhood fantasy of filling “blank spaces,” of learning about and, in a way, conquering the yet unknown lands. He quickly finds out that the Dark Continent is explored mostly not out of curiosity or the need to share the achievement of civilization but because of potential material gains and the need to solidify the domination over the native peoples.⁴

Another problem of describing Africa, emphasized by Kapuściński in *The Shadow Under The Sun*, is the “mosaic” nature of its space, the impossibility of placing the continent within any sort of clearly defined frame. Kapuściński's Africa is characterized by eternal persistence, but also by constant motion, as in such harsh conditions it is mobility that the local population owes its survival to. Perhaps this is the quality that attracts reporters, as their literary form, through its complexity, is best suited to reflect the incomplete character of knowing Africa.

It is also the reason why an analysis of this literary form becomes a challenge, especially as the genre remains peripheral to the interests of literary criticism. This was pointed out by Kapuściński already in *Lapidarium* almost two decades ago:

What is the reason for the weak position of literary reportage? It is probably caused also by the fact that there are few writers practicing it. ... Why are so few interested in writing reportage? For starters, because in this case gathering information requires physical effort, good health, and often endangering one's life ...⁵

The position of the narrator is particularly problematic in interpreting literary reportage. The method of gathering materials is not without importance for their descriptive strategies. In her book, Olga Stanisławska does not desire to become someone special, convinced that this strategy will grant her

4 See: I. Watt. *Conrad w wieku dziewiętnastym*. [Conrad in the 19th Century] Transl. M. Boduszyńska – Borowikowa. Wydawnictwo Morskie, Gdańsk 1984. 266.

5 R. Kapuściński. *Lapidarium*. 178-179.

a perception of reality that is least burdened with stereotypes. But freeing oneself from the influence of stereotypes is impossible even when the narrator aim is to revise older perceptions. Reporters must take into account not only their own knowledge and experience but also the perceptions of the readers whose knowledge differs largely from theirs.⁶

The role of the media in the shaping of images of particular places leads many reporters to rely on those stereotypes so that they can be debunked after their existence had been brought to attention. Stereotypes cannot be ignored (even by the narrator), as much better cognitive results can be achieved through acknowledging the binary character of names that are used to describe space and emphasizing the difference between particular places and that which we grew used to associate with them.⁷

Already the choice of destination itself, the necessity to answer to the question why the journey takes place in this particular area is a cognition burdening factor. The specific nature of the situation of the author of *Rondo de Gaulle'a* forces to answer indirectly – her answer can be found in the reappearing recollections of the images of Africa in the works of Conrad and Blixen, as well as Greene and Forsyth. This literary context reveals the portrayal of Africa that Stanisławska tries to challenge and the conventions she enters a debate with. Her encounters with the inhabitants of the Dark Continent are both an ongoing attempt to combat stereotypes and an attempt to prove that as a reporter she did not yield to them.

Ryszard Kapuściński followed an entirely different path, admitting openly that his writing was more than an account of experiences, being a reconstruction of experiences.

He does not invent the story but relates events that took place in a certain fashion. However, he does not always discuss them as a direct participant (witness) which means that a reconstruction takes place, either from memory or based on collected documentary memories and reports of

6 The problem of perceptions was discussed by Ewa Rewers in *Post-polis. Wstęp do filozofii ponowoczesnego miasta*. [Post-Polis: Introduction to Philosophy of Postmodern City] Universitas, Kraków 2005. 10. "Perceptions often described as public refer to the most basic features of the natural and anthropogenic environment. Perceptions described as stereotypical present a simplified and selective image, often shaped by the media."

7 See: A. Schaff. *Stereotypy a działania ludzkie*. [Stereotypes and Human Behavior]. Książka i Wiedza, Warszawa 1981. "The main therapeutic (and preventive) procedure relies on making people aware of the stereotypical nature of their views and attitudes, on making them aware of the difference between notional knowledge actualized in their consciousness by the verbal stimulus of the same sound (or graphical) shape and the emotional-volitional state, related to the stereotype." 144.

other people, as well as an inclusion of other non-fictional and fictional narratives.⁸

Such approach is clearly understandable if we take into account the dramatic difference between Stanisławska's and Kapuściński's descriptions – the latter were written as a result of many years spent observing Africa. This is why in *The Shadow Under the Sun* one finds remarks requiring knowledge that exceeds the described situations. Similar differences can be noted on the level of the work's structure – events depicted by Kapuściński are connected only by two elements: Africa and the person of the narrator. His descriptive strategy is entirely different from the one in Stanisławska whose reportage cycle, despite its non-chronological order, is internally connected by the situation of journey that from its very nature requires continuity. Kapuściński, describes Africa as a mosaic of people and events, a constantly changing whole that despite its variety has certain unchangeable features. As an example, Kapuściński mentions for instance its lack of history – conveyed orally, constantly modified by each generation history eventually transformed into myth.

But the perception of Africa does not always have to expose its specificity. In his short stories, Wojciech Albiński presents the readers with a continent viewed very differently. The universal character of Albiński's writing does not stand in contrast with the rather exotic scenery. This effect results mostly from the author's frequent references to the description of family ties – for instance in the eponymous *Kalahari*,⁹ portraying a father's journey through the harsh desert to see his son, suffering from cerebral malaria. The situation of illness so typical of the climate, resulting in a learning of other customs (including ones that are as strange to us as magic) is understandable even for a reader unfamiliar with African realities.

In his short stories, Albiński depicts Africa that he came to know during the years of work for the government in Botswana where he marked out land for roads, villages and mines. Biographical elements inform almost each of his stories. The author and the narrator often work in the same profession.¹⁰ Presented events are not an attempt to create a single image of Africa, but rather present its character. The situation of searching

8 E. Dąbrowska. „Od rzeczywistości do języka i tekstu.” [From reality to language and text] *Wędrować, pielgrzymować, być turystą.* [Journeying, Pilgrimage, Being a Tourist] Ed. P. Kowalski. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Opolskiego, Opole 2003. 97.

9 W. Albiński. *Kalahari.* Twój Styl, Warszawa 2003.

10 W. Albiński. „Mina” in *ibid.*

for an executioner (almost unthinkable in the largely abolitionist Europe, especially as the choice in question is made almost through competition) in *Królestwo potrzebuje kata* [The Kingdom Needs an Executioner] introduces the reader to an entirely alien world where the belief in burdening people with bad energy is so strong that it results in expulsion of foreign visitors (which results in a diplomatic crisis) and shamanistic practices enforced by the inhabitants (and fully accepted by the state). Once again, it is hard to resist the impression that the changeable, “mosaic” character of the Dark Continent is best conveyed through short literary forms that allow for the withdrawal of the narrator and a presentation of particular situations, observed and described in the tiniest detail but not assuming the right to more general conclusions.

Participation as a Cognitive Strategy

The unique character of reportage originates in the complicated status of the narrators who on the one hand, are obliged to retain utmost objectivity (they are not allowed to use fiction), but on the other, must be aware that their works have to reveal why this and not any other object of description had been chosen. The initial choice of Africa as the goal of the journey and object of cognition bears impact on the future strategy of describing the space – a doubly subjectivized space, not only due to the narrator’s pre-existent notions of Africa but also because of the randomness resulting from the situation of journey that enforces description from several positions: that of a passer-by, traveler or observer.

In the case of cultures entirely different from the one represented by the narrator, it is almost impossible to avoid the influence of preconceived notions. Stanisławska attempts to overcome their influence through direct participation in the described events, relinquishing her own subjectivity. Her role in the cultural circle she is learning about protects her both from loneliness and from subscribing to a particular social group which would hamper her contact with each encountered person: “It was a privilege – not to fit completely into any role, not to be a man or a woman only. To have access to both worlds, sitting with soldiers in the desert and with a young mother giving birth.”¹¹ This is why we can speak of the exceptional force of literary reportage – it is an account of experience whose authenticity is granted by the narrator: the participant and observer of events. Such cognitive method, however, is not objective at all – participation is a method completely engaging a particular person, a method whose

11 O. Stanisławska *Rondo de Gaulle’a*. Twój Styl, Warszawa 2001. 114.

results bear the mark of subjectivity that the narrator may not be fully aware of.¹²

Stanisławska is conscious of the fact that her experience cannot be expressed by the word, or that it loses a lot when it is. This seems clear already from the title of her book: Stanisławska's de Gaulle's roundabout is not in France and it is not a roundabout but a flat piece of desert between large dunes. A place like many others in Africa. But even this place has a certain characteristic feature: "None of us would recognize it the next day, as there is nothing about it that would make it different in our eyes from the landscape surrounding it. But this is where trails cross."¹³ A place that is difficult to find without a compass becomes the key element of every journey – it allows one to take a rest, protects one from getting lost. Words only complicate understanding, they are a burden that misshapes reality and that cannot be abandoned: "I look at the blank areas of yellow on my map, marked here and there with black stitches of letters. The utopia of maps is hopeless, the incompatibility of words and things absurd."¹⁴

The ability to communicate is necessary in the attempt to understand other customs, and this is why Stanisławska devotes a lot of attention to speech – it is through dialogue that she characterizes not only particular people but also a certain type of culture described precisely as a culture of dialogue, of openness to every person encountered. The incompatibility of words becomes a problem only in Stanisławska's relation with the reader, it is not an obstacle experienced in her conversations with the people met in Africa. The language she uses in her book changes depending on the events, accentuating their character, it seems to add what the author did not want to express explicitly. And language itself becomes an object of description and, at the same time, yet another factor authenticating the encounter.

The Situation of Journey and Perception of Reality

But it is not only language that determines cognition – the situation of journey as such influences the ways of perceiving reality, since every strange space is

12 Cf. H.-G. Gadamer. *Prawda i metoda*. Transl. B. Baran. PWN, Warszawa 2004. 112. „If something is called or considered an Erlebnis, that means it is rounded into the unity of a significant whole. ... Thus it is quite understandable that the word emerges in biographical literature and ultimately stems from its use in autobiography. What is called an experience constitutes itself in memory.” [English version based on the translation by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. *Truth and Method*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2004. 57-58.

13 O. Stanisławska. *Rondo*... 115.

14 Ibid.

immediately internalized and assessed.¹⁵ This is the cause of fundamental differences between descriptive strategies in Stanisławska and Kapuściński – the former is in constant motion, her reportages are an account of a wandering, and so the encountered people are met only to some degree, only to an extent. Nothing can be said about them apart from providing an account of the meeting because otherwise it would be easy to lose the sense of the journey that allows only to “brush against” another culture, not to learn about it in depth. Meanwhile, Kapuściński presents places that he had a chance to observe for a long time, noting the changes, emergence of new legal orders the activities of which he comments on. Consequently, a reater amount of commentary is not surprising – Kapuściński is an observer of Africa’s “eternal persistence,” its continuously changing history. Albiński’s situation is yet different, in his work, the categories of time and space are usually not determined clearly, the author does not want to distract the reader from the presented events whose meaning is in no way dependent on those categories.

Defining Africa as a place is, thus, another problem that renders an objective description impossible. It is a space that cannot be contained by a classical definition, since after we abandoned the conviction expressed by Einstein that a place “is a small part of the surface of the Earth recognized by its name,” its actualization being a “material object,” it has been noted that a place is something more and something different at the same time. The binary character of the notion becomes problematic in itself, even when it is fully conscious. In the case of literary reportage, it becomes even more complicated – it seems impossible to separate the subjective elements, introduced by the narrator, from the objective ones, shaped directly by the described space.¹⁶

The value of journey lies in the attempt to learn about (and consequently, in a way, “take possession of”) other cultures. It is the only chance to become aware of the differences between our preconceived notions of a place and the place itself. This is probably why travels to entirely new and exotic countries constitute perfect reportage material – both Stanisławska and

15 Cf. J. Słodczyk „Percepcja przestrzeni w badaniach geograficznych.” [Perception of space in geographical research] *Wędrować, pielgrzymować...* 17. “Evaluation of particular places in the geographical environment is dependent on several factors, such as: education, previous experiences, contemporary material situation, age and location of the person performing assessment. Perception is also influenced by the social environment surrounding the described unit, by its position and belonging to a certain circle.”

16 E. Rewers. *Post-polis*. 167. “The fundamental questions concern the shift from the universalist and objectivist notion of place as a point in the mathematical-cartographic systems to the discovery of place as a fragment of human experience. Put differently, it is about capturing the process of overlapping of two perspectives: the universalist-objective one and the situational-subjective one, outlining the space of human activity.”

Kapuściński relate their journey as a “clash” with otherness: “People here think that one cannot live differently, that there is only one life. But those who have traveled know that there are two lives, maybe even three, maybe four.”¹⁷

Alienation and the Experience of Otherness

Stanisławska does not hesitate to relinquish her Europeaness to be closer to Africa. She does not feel superiority and the otherness of what she encounters evokes respect and admiration, not alienation. Her own otherness is also received positively. But the consciously revoked literary contexts indicate that the problem could be conceived in an entirely different way. Joseph Conrad, believed to be the father of the myth of Apocalyptic Africa, considers the experience of unity with the dark people of Africa to be terrifying, discovering in it the element that may not create evil in itself but that calls it forth and allows it to exist. Immersion in Africa and its laws seems not only difficult but, first and foremost, dangerous. Joseph Conrad sees in Africa not only great opportunity, he sees in it the beginning of everything.

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there – there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. ... The mind of man is capable of anything because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future. What was there after all? ... truth – truth stripped of its cloak of time.¹⁸

The truth supposedly hidden in the jungle is so terrifying that Kurtz’s soul, struck by it, goes mad. “Being alone in the wilderness, it had looked within itself, and, by heavens! I tell you, it had gone mad.”¹⁹ It is a truth that Marlow fears to know and tainted by it, decides not to tell anyone. For Conrad, encountering Africa is the terror of encountering oneself. But even Conrad does not believe that heart of darkness is unavoidable, suggesting rather that it is a potentiality, a kernel nestled inside each of us, one that can take

17 O. Stanisławska. *Rondo...* 62.

18 J. Conrad. *Jądro ciemności*. Transl. I. Socha. Zielona Sowa, Kraków 2004. 41. [here after the original – AW]

19 *Ibid.* 75.

over the entire soul and destroy it when we are left entirely to ourselves, when the only signposts are those that we carry within us, when no law nor propriety bind us. This does not mean that gain is the only factor determining our choices – some of them are its direct contradiction. Stanisławska mentions a similar problem describing young people damaged by war and cruelty (the participants of Tuareg rebellion) whose ethical system has been warped as a result.

Karen Blixen presents an entirely different approach. She resembles one of the women described by Conrad who creates her own world by adjusting everything she sees to an ideal model. Blixen's whole book is a story of her, of her perception of Africa (which is why Stanisławska describes her as the creator of the myth of Genesis-Africa), opening with a somewhat fairy-tale introduction: "I had a farm in Africa at the foot of the Ngong Hills." Blixen talks about the native people with unquestionable fondness but it is a fondness delineated and restricted by a sense of separateness. The first sentence of the novel introduces an Arcadian atmosphere and presents her main object of description: the state of possession. Or rather, as Stanisławska observes, the impossibility of possession. This element, according to Stanisławska, unifies both great visions of Africa; at some point she experiences it herself (following her own wish to break the sequence of "identical days," leaving the friendly house of Lili Makate.)

In Stanisławska's journey, a breakthrough moment comes when her traveler status, instead of allowing her to be admitted to both the male and female circles, leads to complete separation.

In the great square men were sitting down in a circle – I sat behind them in darkness. In the center, women danced in rows, in unison, moving their hips forward ... I suddenly felt ashamed to talk to men. All women were dancing. And there I was, strange, non-existent among the people, no more than just a shadow.²⁰

Her alienation is not caused by a transient emotion. Leaving the circle, she meets a man who addresses her as "madame" – from that moment on he treats her as a "ma'am," someone deserving respect and care but both of these come from her separateness. This mixture of feelings reappears throughout Stanisławska's book more than once. Earlier, the narrator evokes the interest of the native girls being a guest from a different world in the presence of whom they can pretend to be someone else. Her very name indicates exotism, something fascinating, attractive but entirely alien. This attitude is best

²⁰ O. Stanisławska. *Rondo...* 89-90.

seen in the reasoning of an encountered girl who is just about to be married and who pities the writer for having to travel on her own, without protection from her husband, father or brother, without a person who would solve for her potential conflicts and dilemmas.

The sense of loneliness grows stronger when her conversation partners attempt to convince Stanisławska that they know her culture which is good and valuable, and centered around night clubs, make-up, and music. This evokes resistance in the author, as – in a way – they belittle the importance of the cultural circle she represents,²¹ but at the same time they are a source of knowledge about the mentality that has created this stereotype.²²

Still, those experiences of otherness result from the separateness of cultures, not from the impossibility to understand or hostility. It is the latter that at some point becomes unbearable for Stanisławska and causes her to finish her journey. Traveling along the Congo River grows challenging, and Kurtz's words begin to sound ever more sinister:

People here don't like strangers. One might think it is the jungle that made them so. Or perhaps it was the massacres and conquests, commerce and blessings? ...

– Trust me – he added – it's not easy to be a stranger here.

“The horror, the horror” are the only words whispered by Kurtz, the stranger of Conrad's story, as he dies in the jungle.²³

Otherness spares only those for whom jungle is a novelty, something different and unknown, but it defeated even Kurtz – a man “of generous mind” who entered it as if it was his own and wanted to rule it. Although he exercised absolute power over his station, he was eventually defeated, unquestionably obeyed by the native people but nonetheless a stranger.

In the discussed texts, the problem of alienation can be analyzed from two perspectives. On the one hand, the narrators are treated as the Other, as

21 E. Rewers comments on the problem: “Thus, the concept of multiculturalism not only strengthens the existing boundaries of reluctance and lack of understanding, but also helps – consciously or unconsciously – to develop ideologies basing on cultural fundamentalism, separatism, finally – racism. This is because acceptance for the multitude of cultures is not automatically accompanied by tolerance for otherness, its acceptance and true understanding.” *Post-polis...* 199.

22 Cf. Z. Benedyktowicz. *Portrety obcego*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Kraków 2000. 83. “Stereotypes reveal little about those they portray but a lot, even if only indirectly, about those who created them.”

23 *Ibid.* 159.

someone belonging to a different culture, and on the other hand, they cannot rid themselves of the same attitude toward the local people. Images, multiplied by both sides, express feelings and fears related to someone radically different from us.²⁴ Even today, we continue to describe Africa from the perspective of the “white man,” furthermore, a “white man” who recognizes not only his or her otherness, but also superiority. Ryszard Kapuściński is aware that this is what annuls the possibility of cognition and contact:

To describe the transformation of the white man into the WHITE man. White man in Europe is unaware of his whiteness. He does not think about it, does not live for that thought. In the Third World, however, he becomes, with time, increasingly white. He is separated and isolated by the fact that he is white but he will also strengthen his whiteness, as to him, it signifies superiority (or illusion of superiority).²⁵

Albiński describes the persistent racial divisions in a similar fashion, although from the position of Africa’s inhabitants, which seems to weaken the division and lessen the sensed differences. “– White? – asked Jean-Luis – Look into the mirror... African sun has already darkened you! You and your friend, Glen, are our brothers from the South”²⁶ But Albiński’s positioning is unique – his descriptions are written neither from the perspective of a traveler, nor a colonizer. The Dark Continent is much closer to Albiński than it is to Stanisławska or Kapuściński, and it is not because of the time he spent there but because Africa was where he worked. According to Ian Watt, it was work that provided protection from barbarism, brutally imposed civilization and pangs of conscience. It was through work that Marlow managed to resist the process of “nativization,” it was work that protected his ethics, although it was combined with a skeptical passiveness toward other people. It was, thus, a means that prevented a complete rejection of ideals as well as their full acceptance, keeping Marlow in constant state of tension. Similar tension can be seen also in Albiński, who cannot relinquish a certain dose of superiority toward those who try to live their lives differently.

24 Ibid. 24-25. “The image in question is not a faithful reflection of reality. It also is not an emotionally neutral systematization of exhaustive knowledge of psychology and cultural properties of neighboring groups. ... In the shaping of such images, tradition plays a much bigger role than the individual experience and judgment. An image of this kind is simply a stereotype.”

25 R. Kapuściński. *Lapidarium*. 17-18.

26 W. Albiński. „Obawiamy się buntu żandarmów.” [We fear the gendarme rebellion] *Królestwo potrzebuje...* 46.

The Myth of Africa and the Question of Identification with the Other

The unique position of Africa as an object of description originates in the conviction that encounter with it is never aimed only to satisfy curiosity or desire for the exotic. The choice of Africa as a destination derives from the belief that by understanding the cradle of civilization one can understand not only one's contemporaneity but also the future. This approach seems to be shared by Stanisławska and Greene, a similar one can be found in Conrad – the goal of Marlow's journey was to realize the childhood dream of filling the "blank spaces," of meeting the magical, mysterious place that fascinated him as a hypnotizing snake – it is also probably the reason why Marlow remembers the entire journey as a dream and nightmare.²⁷

Graham Greene explained his travel with the desire to understand the core of himself – we do not know whether Conrad's heart of darkness was supposed to be this center. However, contrary to Marlow, he begins his journey aware of its symbolic, metaphysical character. Marlow's journey has been taken to reach places never seen by a white man but we cannot forget that it also had an entirely pragmatic goal – this, perhaps, is the reason why he feels such a deep discrepancy between performed work and expectations regarding the discovery of unreachable places.

Stanisławska attempts to avoid formulating expectations regarding the places she describes. She does not hesitate to cross the boundary separating the "civilized" Africa from the "wild" one. She feels no desire to evaluate or classify that which she encounters. But even Stanisławska yields at some point. She cannot continue the journey after she realizes that what may await her, may as well be Conrad's heart of darkness. Then, words uttered by a customs official encountered earlier, dawn on her: having heard where Stanisławska was returning from, he looks doubtfully at the map depicting the river described by Conrad and says "You like monstrosity, ma'am." It is difficult to resist noticing the resemblance between this utterance and the "horror" seen by Kurtz in the moment of his death. Greene's Africa, on the other hand, is homogeneous, inherently coherent and all that fails to meet this criterion is seen as unnatural, a denial of Africa's characteristic features. It seems clear that this homogeneity results from primality, as division and differentiation concern already developed things.

Karen Blixen has a contrasting view of Africa. In Stanisławska's book, it represents an entirely different understanding of the continent. Blixen's approach is described by the contemporary author as a turn toward Genesis and Jungian archetypes. But Blixen saw in Africa exactly what she wanted to see – freedom from propriety, honesty, and selfless curiosity, attributing

27 I. Watt. *Conrad w wieku...*

all those features to the native people. Africa was supposed to be her escape and shelter, a return to the land of innocence.

Dark Continent is viewed highly subjectively not only by Blixen and Conrad whose ways of thinking about Africa influenced its contemporary reception, but also by the reporters. For an assessment of the influence of subjectivization on the reportage prose, it is important to note that it is precisely subjectivization that contributes to the unique status of literary reportage. If the latter is to be defined as a "journalistic account of real events, enriched with a detailed description of the environment, characterization of the participants and impressions of the reporter who conveys to the readers in a (not necessarily direct) way his attitude toward the portrayed reality,"²⁸ then we have no right to consider even an entirely subjective description of a situation to be a fault, as long as the reporter informs us about it.

Consequently, the experiences of journalists introduce the element of authenticity to the portrayed events. This does not relieve the reporters from the genre requirement to produce a "well documented account of real events."²⁹ The latter, however, does not exclude the possibility of turning reportage into artistic prose by adopting a chosen narrative strategy, or by focusing partly on the character of the reporter, his ways of establishing contacts with other people and gathering information.³⁰

It seems that by concentrating precisely on those factors, Stanisławska tries to minimize the influence of stereotypes. Journey as an attempt to find oneself in the described world lasts as long as long she feels a sense of community with the encountered people. It would perhaps be worthwhile to consider, whether the sense of connection Stanisławska experiences is really desired by those other people, whether her participation is not an attempt to invade the area that will remain forever alien to her. Is it, perhaps, an instance of voyeurism?³¹

28 K. Wolny-Zmorzyński. „Reportaż.” [Reportage] *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów*. [Journalism and the world of media] Universitas, Kraków 2004. 174.

29 *Ibid.* 181.

30 Z. Żabicki. *Proza...proza...* [Prose... prose...] Warszawa 1966. 148.

31 Compare: E. Rewers. *Post-polis*. „To identify with means, first and foremost, to identify with the Other. Often, this strategy leads as far as to affixation, to an apparent death of the identifying subject stripped of the possibility of choice. ... But to identify with may also mean: to answer the question 'who can be identified with to reaffirm one's own identity?' ... At the basis of appropriation, as well as identification, there lies the claim for recognition. The difference is in the omission of the other person, within the culture entitled to affirmation and assignment of identity, that all strategies of appropriation attempt to erase.” 293-294.

The author of *Rondo de Gaulle'a* took upon herself a particularly difficult task, trying to subjectively describe the journey in a way that would debunk the stereotypes that characterize our attitude to Africa. But Stanisławska did not manage to free herself from those – even the act of overthrowing stereotypes is a testimony to their strong presence in the cognitive process. It is hard to resist the impression that the experienced events were reconstructed to reaffirm the author's position with even more force. The initial myth of otherness and separateness of the Dark Continent is juxtaposed against the experiences that contribute to another myth – the myth of complete identification and familiarization within other culture. It seems that the writer remains on the border between “identification that reaffirms identity” and an attempt to appropriate someone else's life. What Stanisławska perceives as a proof of her assimilation (the possibility to participate in situations closed to particular groups within a community) is, in fact, an argument for her otherness – not belonging to any specific group within a society means not belonging to any group, to remain a visitor, an observer that gets to see only as much as others want him to see.

Kapuściński's position was similarly complicated: as a correspondent, he was separated from the new culture from the onset, firstly as a stranger, secondly, as someone who evaluates. Hence, he was also granted special rights. But in this case, his role of a reporter was a factor enabling an objectivization of reporting (especially by separating information from commentary).³²

The transparency of the observer and event participant is a fiction, especially when they describe the experiences as something special and rare. And this is, after all, how all of the discussed writers talk about their contacts with Africa. One clearly cannot see fault in their belief that there is a unique value in the possibility to observe Africa. It becomes equally clear why most of them yielded to the illusion of unmediated encounter – after all it is awe and admiration that shaped their perception of the described events. But while feelings such as those encourage subjectivization, it is not too high a price for giving the readers a chance for a contact with something entirely alien.

As a result of the unique position of literary reportage as a genre, described events become closer to the audience through the person of the narrator without losing their real presence. The road to understanding the phenomenon of the description of Africa is impossible for those who do not have actual contact with it. What shaped the perception of this continent in reportage prose was not an attempt to deal away with the stereotypes (destined to fail from the onset) but with the distance. The illusion of unmediated encounter

32 Cf. W. Pisarek. „Kodeks etyki dziennikarskiej.” [Journalist code of ethics] *Dziennikarstwo i świat mediów*. 430.

seems to be retained on purpose, as it is the only way to bring the alien space closer to the readers:

At any rate, it is not by chance that literature is the place where art and science merge. ... The written word and what partakes of it – literature – is the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity.³³

Translation: Anna Warso

33 H.-G. Gadamer. *Prawda i metoda*. 238. [156]