The use of Conceptual Metaphor in Karel Schoeman's *Another Country*

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Preview

There are two interrelated symbolic substrates running through Karel Schoeman's novel *Another country*. The first consists of a series of images that accumulate to form the conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. The second symbolic substrate consists of a series of images that portray the Jungian psychic process of individuation. In this article I limit my analysis to the metaphorical conception LIFE IS A JOURNEY.

Cognitive Literary Theory

The theoretical framework for this analysis is cognitive science which draws on the resources of disciplines such as psychology, computer science, artificial intelligence, aspects of neurobiology, philosophy, anthropology and linguistics. The general focus of this field is human cognition, as formulated in the following quotation:

> Cognitive scientists want to know how cognition typically works in normal adults, how it varies across individuals, how it varies across different populations, how it varies across different cultures, how it develops, how it goes wrong in neurologically impaired patients, and how it is realised in the brain (Von Eckhardt 1993:6).

Literature is also studied in cognitive science under the sub-discipline known as *cognitive literary theory*. Turner (1991:17) envisages the study of literature from a cognitive perspective as follows:

> Language is inseparable from conceptual thought; conceptual thought is inseparable from what it means to have a human body and lead a human life. A human being has a human brain in a human body in a physical environment that it must make intelligible if it is to survive. This is the

> ground, I think, of human cognition, and the source of the everyday conceptual apparatus we bring to bear in making what is usually automatic and unconscious sense of our worlds. This conceptual apparatus seems to be everywhere expressed in the substance and shape of our language, and to constitute the basis of our literature. The study of language to which I look forward would analyse the nature and processes of this conceptual apparatus, its expression in language, and its exploitation in literature. It would see literary language as continuous with common language, and meaning as tied to conventional conceptual structures that inform both common and literary language in a continuous and systematic manner. Our profession touches home base when it contributes to the systematic inquiry into these linguistic and literary acts as acts of the human mind.

According to Turner, literature should therefore be studied as the expression of everyday capacities in order to help us understand those capacities. He points out that literature lives within language and language within everyday life, which connects the study of literature to whatever is basic to human beings.

The assumption that the study of literary language can be used as a tool for understanding our world and ourselves forms the focus of Lakoff and Turner (1989). They claim that the use of metaphor is not exclusive to poetic language but that it is omnipresent in ordinary language and is a basic tool of human thought. Lakoff and Turner point out that we commonly use a variety of metaphors to talk about experiences, events and processes and that our conception of these matters is reflected by the metaphors we use.

The essence of metaphor is to understand and experience one kind of thing or experience in terms of another. Lakoff and Turner (1989:59) give the following description of this metaphoric process:

> ... aspects of one concept, the target, are understood in terms of ... aspects of another concept, the source. A metaphor with the name A IS B is a mapping of part of the structure of our knowledge of source domain B onto target domain A.

A domain is a system of concepts constituting a general field of knowledge structured in terms of mutual relations, e.g. the domain of journeys involve travellers, routes, types of paths travelled, destinations, places of departure, vehicles, companions, etc. The types and structures of domains are determined by culture. Using, the metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY means to have in mind correspondences between, for instance: a traveller and a person living a life; the road travelled and the course of a lifetime; a starting point for a journey and the time of birth; the destination of the journey and the purpose of life. Because we conceptualise life in terms of these correspondences

between a journey and life, it is possible to make sense of the metaphoric mapping of structure from the domain of journeys to the domain of life.

Metaphors are so commonplace that we often fail to notice them in everyday language. If, for instance, we refer to somebody's death saying:

> He passed away/He's gone/He's left us/He's no longer with us/He passed on/He's been taken from us/ He's gone to the great beyond/He's among the dear departed,

these expressions are all instances of a general metaphoric way we have of conceiving of DEATH AS DEPARTURE. This type of metaphor, underlying a variety of expressions, reflects our experience of something in terms of something else, and is known as a *conceptual metaphor*. To express our conception of all-encompassing matters such as life and death we usually have a variety of conceptual metaphors which may be used in both ordinary and literary language.

Although authors of literary texts use the same modes of thought as we do, they often extend, elaborate or combine the mechanisms of everyday thought in ways that go beyond the ordinary. By means such as these, literary language becomes richer and more complex than ordinary language, requiring more effort to interpret. This process of complexification focuses our attention on the theme of the literary text.

In the remainder of this article I want to focus on Karel Schoeman's novel *Another country* to analyse how he utilises interrelated metaphors to develop the theme of this novel.

Karel Schoeman's *Another Country*

Another country was originally published in 1984 in Afrikaans as *'n Ander land*, and was also translated into German and published in 1993 as *In Einem Fremden land*. The novel received a great deal of attention in Afrikaans literary circles: it was reviewed in all the major newspapers[1], several research articles[2] were devoted to the novel and it received four major South-African literary awards[3]. Critics' evaluation of the novel was generally very positive, although in some instances they were less

[1] See Bertyn (1984); Brink (1984); Britz (1984); Cilliers (1984); Du Plessis (1985); Olivier (1984); Van Zyl (1985); Venter (1985).

[2] See De Jong (1988); Ferreira & Venter (1995); Grobbelaar & Roos (1993); Renders (1987); Venter (1991).

[3] The novel was awarded the Old Mutual prize (1984), the W.A. Hofmeyr prize (1985), the Hertzog prize (1986) and the Helgaard Steyn prize (1988) as well as the Independant Award for Foreign Fiction in March 1991 after its publication in Britain.

impressed: André P. Brink (1984) was of the opinion that, despite its undisputed literary merit, the story suffers from defects such as 'boundless dullness, from a piling up of trivialities' and 'an irritating hyper awareness of the differences between Africa en Europe without developing the narrative potential of these differences[4]'; Marianne de Jong (1988) objects against the main character, 'Versluis' subjective experience' creating the possibility that 'the reader can interpret *'n Ander land* as stating that the white experience of Africa can only be relayed in the form and by means of white experience itself'.

Although critics focused on various aspects of the text, there is a general consensus about key issues like the following: the basic theme is Versluis' coming to terms with the inevitability of his own death; the story is slow moving and there is not much dramatic action; the main character has great difficulties in coming to terms with the differences between Africa and Europe; inter-textual relations between *Another country* and classical literary works like Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Devine Comedy* enrich the basic theme of the text.

The basic story in *Another Country* can be summarised as follows: Versluis, a sophisticated, well-read Dutch bachelor from the upper middle class, who suffered from tuberculosis, arrived in Bloemfontein in the late nineteenth century. At that stage Bloemfontein was considered a suitable climate for convalescence by people from Europe suffering from chest ailments. Versluis initially experienced his new surroundings as alien and disagreeable in comparison with the sophisticated city life in Delft that he was accustomed to, but eventually he came to terms with his surroundings, his illness and inevitable death.

A Metaphoric Reading of *Another Country*

I want to propose that the powerful impact of the story of Versluis' coming to terms with his own mortality and the alien country in which he finds himself can be attributed to the fact that the central issues in *Another country* corresponds to the composite conceptual metaphor LIFE IS A JOURNEY. For Versluis this started out as a literal journey, the one that he embarked on from Delft to Bloemfontein, and during which he lost consciousness as a result of his illness. The end of this literal journey is described in the first sentences of the novel:

> When the journey ended, he did not even know it: he was not conscious of the fact that they had arrived, and that the seemingly endless clattering and

[4] ... 'grenselose grysheid, van opeenstapeling van beuselagtighede' and ''n irriterende hiperbewustheid van die verskille tussen Afrika en Europa sonder dat dit werklik narratief ontgin word' (Brink 1984).

> lurching, creaking, swaying and shaking of the coach had abated (Schoeman 1991:1)[5].

The description of Versluis' recovery, as reflected in his own thoughts, and in the comments of the other characters in the novel, is formulated in such a way that a systematic correspondence is created between his return to life and the journey that he undertook. So, for instance, when Versluis first regained consciousness, Frau Schröder remarked '...you have returned to the land of the living' (p. 3). His own experience of this process is reported as follows through the narrating voice:

> After the long period of silence, the long withdrawal, he once more had to involve himself in conversation; out of this silent territory bridges led back to the other bank, to the world of other people, messages, gestures and obligations. He had to return, .../Back across the bridge to the old, familiar bank, to the well-known country, to life that had in his absence continued its uninterrupted course (p.6).

On the basis of our knowledge of the conceptual domain of journeys, we recognise that structure from that domain is being used here in connection with recovery, with coming back to life, and we understand that this must be interpreted metaphorically. Versluis' expressions and thoughts make sense to us because we think of death as departure, and because we know that Versluis has been so ill that in his own, and in other characters' experience he has been 'away' and has had to return to 'the land of the living'.

After the arrival of a severely ill English woman at the hotel where Versluis resided, he felt so threatened by her presence that he requested the Lutheran pastor, Scheffler, to help him find more suitable accommodation (pp. 40-48). His subsequent move to Mrs. Van der Vliet's home is portrayed as an escape from some threat from which he has to flee in order to the start a new life. This new phase of his life is described as a road that '... extended once more before him' (p. 60). After he settled down in Mrs Van der Vliet's large, cool, well-cared for house he felt '...grateful for the silence and the orderliness of the house where nothing threatened or encroached upon him, where nothing disturbed him ...' (p. 71). This feeling of safety and peace did not last, however, for the symptoms of his illness remained and became more pronounced until eventually, he fainted at the ball and was told by Doctor Kellner that there was no cure for his condition (p. 180), and that he was in the process of dying. The remainder of the novel portrays Versluis' struggle to accept the idea of

[5] From here onward I refer to Schoeman (1991) by giving page numbers only as in (p.1), (p.10) etc.

dying. His struggle to accept his fate is also metaphorically equated with a journey, as is particularly evident in the last paragraphs of the novel:

> Once, when he had just arrived here; once, in another time when he had still been strange here, alienated from the country in which his stay, as he had thought, was to have been a merely temporary one - once, his walks in the evening had taken him to the edge of the town and he had hesitated there, wavering before the landscape that had lain open before him, unknown and unknowable, and an inexplicable fear had filled him at the sight of that emptiness. But there was no cause for fear, he thought as he began to walk slowly and without hurrying back towards the landau, leaning on his cane. The emptiness absorbed you and silence embraced you, no longer as alien wastes to be regarded uncomprehendingly from a distance; the unknown land grew familiar and the person passing through could no longer even remember that he had once intended to travel further. Half-way along the route you discovered with some surprise that the journey had been completed, the destination already reached (p. 311).

Acceptance of Destination and Destiny

Versluis' acceptance of death is very strongly linked with acceptance of 'the country in which his stay, as he had thought, was to have been merely temporary'. This country is in the first place the destination of his literal journey, in other words Africa, to which he came, in the hope that his poor health would benefit from the dry inland climate.

After he regained consciousness, Versluis became aware of his surroundings and was reassured by the discovery that what he had left behind was not as distant as he thought it would be, though at the same time he was confronted with the differences between Africa and Europe. So, while he was still drifting between sleep and wakefulness after regaining consciousness, he was lulled by the sound of well-known folk songs from outside, but then again surprised by the heavy roar of thunder, the clatter of hail on the corrugated iron roof, the call of voices in a foreign language, the presence of the black man in his room, he realised that this country '... is indeed alien, ... seas and continents separated him from all that was familiar, in spite of all appearances' (p. 5).

The duality of his new surroundings made it difficult for Versluis to come to terms with it, as is evident from passages like the following:

> The kind of life that he found in Africa was much like the one that he had left behind in Europe .... It was in any case a reasonably convincing

> imitation at the furthest reaches of the world, beneath a more relentless sun and alien stars, upon such dismal and desolate plains, and in the first days of his acquaintanceship with his environment he could not suppress a certain feeling of disappointment. Was this why he had embarked on his long journey, to find in an alien world a reflection of his own familiar one, only without the comforts and refinements to which he was accustomed? (p.25).
>
> If so much were not familiar, the things that were alien would not be so irritating by being unexpected, he thought to himself .... Finally one was no doubt grateful to discover so many things here in the heart of Africa that had survived the transplantation from Europe, but the process had occurred too half-heartedly ... (p. 38).

Versluis' difficulty to adjust to Africa was due to the fact that he was still trying to hold on to the world he had left behind and the fear to venture into the unknown world of his destination. He experiences elements like the heat, the dust, the blinding light, the crude Dutch spoken by the people as 'disturbing reminders of Africa' (p. 38), which breaks into the more familiar pattern he could relate to. He was still 'longing for the safe and familiar world at the other end of the globe'(p. 51) with comforts like

> blinds and curtains to subdue this harsh light, ... a tranquil room in which an armchair stood ready and the clock ticked away with a hardly discernible sound ... (p. 51).

In the early stages of the novel Versluis' experience of the African landscape is described as '...a terrain which he could not always deal with or assimilate easily' (p. 114), as something that filled him with aversion, revulsion, loathing and fear. He felt that he could never become a settler in this land, that his stay would only be temporary. However, he gradually learnt to accept the fact that he could not return to were he came from. When he for instance attempted to write to the Netherlands, he realised that there was '... really nothing to write to those that had been left behind, ... There was no road, there was no path along which a message could reach them across this distance.' (p.65). When he attended the ball organised in honour of the German Kaizer and realised that he was ill, Versluis was overcome by an urge to get away, but then came to the conclusion that it is no longer possible:

> But where could he flee? He wondered as he stood there drinking the water. Back through the night ... to Mrs Van der Vliet's house; to the rented bed? .... No, he thought, further than that, to the end of a journey that would take

> many days, a sea voyage of weeks, to the house that stood empty at the other end of the world, irrevocably beyond his reach (p.169).

Up to this stage the concepts 'place of departure' and 'destination' can be interpreted literally, but after Versluis fainted at the ball and was told by Doctor Kellner that there was no cure for his condition and that he was in the process of dying (p. 181), Versluis underwent a process where the acceptance of destination has to be understood also in terms of a psychic acceptance of death. This is reflected in Doctor Kellner's answer to Versluis' question as to whether he was dying:

> To accept the appearance of death; to accept the principle that you, too, have to die; to accept your own personal death as it draws gradually nearer - each of these stages constitutes a fresh crisis, and when the time finally arrives to die, then the crisis of dying is perhaps the easiest of all. To die is actually not that difficult ... But to accept the idea of dying, that involves a struggle, sometimes even a life-long struggle.

That this constituted a turning point in Versluis' mind, is proved by the resigned way in which he accepted the doctors words:

> There was nothing more Versluis thought ... That is all, he thought; that is all. It was actually very simple .... It was so simple, so obvious ... to tell someone that he was dying. And so simple to hear the news (p. 181).

That the doctor's diagnosis, and Versluis' reaction to it, represents the end of a phase in the novel is also structurally signified by the fact that it is placed at the end of chapter two. Chapter three portrays Versluis as resuming his life in the routine of Mrs Van der Vliet's home 'more slowly and deliberately than usual' (p. 182) as if he had a goal towards which he was working. He also locked away his writing desk and instructed the servants to remove the Dutch newspapers from his room, knowing that he would not read them again. This constitutes deliberate actions to cut his ties with Europe, and directly after these decisions had been taken, Versluis' thoughts about the African environment reflect his realisation that he had begun to accept it:

> His new environment had already begun to grow familiar to him - yes, he realised even this land with its severity and heat, even this town with its dusty streets and outhouses, its cows in back yards and its dogs in the streets. All its indolence, indifference and outlandish narrow-mindedness, he was growing accustomed even to these things, not to the point of acceptance, but at least to the point of forbearance (p. 183).

The metaphoric equation of death as the end of life's journey and Africa as the end of Versluis' literal journey is emphasised by the way in which the African landscape is portrayed towards the end of the novel. Versluis left Europe in winter, arrived in Africa in mid-summer, and experienced the change to autumn and eventually to winter, which corresponds with the time of his death. The changes that winter brought to the landscape are described as destructive, as reflected in Van der Vliet's words to Versluis:

> The winters here destroys everything, not like in the Netherlands where the rain still nourishes the earth. Whatever survives the drought here is killed by frost. There is no mercy (p. 236).

Furthermore, the coming of winter is portrayed as a process of transformation and refinement by which the landscape is stripped of everything that is excessive. As Versluis' physical condition deteriorated, he became acutely aware of this natural process of change and he associated himself with it, waiting along with the landscape for the inevitable outcome of this process:

> The country was changing, and day by day Versluis discovered ways in which it was transforming itself around him.(...) - each day it was refined further and the lines of the landscape stood out with greater clarity. The trees changed colour in the orchard, along with the willows along the spruit and around the dam, and the falling leaves were blown away by the wind, ... The severity of the sun had been tempered, and the white sky retained hardly any heat. Motionless the land lay stretched out, the wide, empty streets of the town, the houses in their cleanly stripped gardens. And the veld that surrounded them, bleached as white as bone beneath a lofty sky, sparse and cold, as it grew towards winter: without motion, without sound it lay waiting and increasingly he too found himself lowering his book to listen, ... (p. 246).

The terms in which the coming of winter are described, correspond to how we think of the process of dying. Versluis' association of what is happening in his own life with what is happening in the African landscape makes sense to us because this equation corresponds with the conceptual metaphors: A LIFETIME IS A YEAR and DEATH IS WINTER.

When Versluis had finally reached the end of his life's journey, his complete acceptance of Africa is signalled by his insight of becoming part of the earth in the same way as the plants of the barren winter veld:

> These tough, thorny plants, as colourless as the veld, the low bushes, the isolated windswept trees, had sent their roots deep into this earth, had anchored themselves amongst the stone, feeling along layers of rock in the dark earth for the last, scant nutrients. In this earth he thought, in this ground, among stones, among the twisted roots of these tough plants, in this country ... (p. 310).

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