

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE FOREIGN AND THE OTHER IN FELIX KANITZ'S TRAVEL NOTES ON BULGARIA

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Abstract: The paper examines the functions of representations of foreignness in Felix Kanitz's travelogues about Bulgaria. It presents the theoretical split in the postcolonial discourse of the traditional opposition of the *Own and the Foreign* in two new oppositions: the *Own – the Other* and the *Familiar – the Foreign*, which have different functions. The first opposition is important for building one's identity by distinguishing yourself from the other culture, the second is important for understanding the foreign culture and for shortening the distance with it. The examples given concern the subject of materialism of the Bulgarians, who are described as a sympathetic primitive culture.

Keywords: postcolonial discourse, Felix Kanitz, travelogues, Balkan cultures

Резюме: Статията изследва различните значения в представянето на чуждостта в пътеписите на Феликс Каниц за България. Тя представя традиционното теоретично разделяне на „свое“ и „чуждо“ в постколониалния дискурс в две нови опозиции: свое – друго и познато – чуждо, които имат различни функции. Първата опозиция е важна за изграждането на идентичност чрез разграничаване на себе си от друга култура, втората е важна за разбирането на чуждата култура и за скъсяване на дистанцията до нея. Дадените примери засягат темата за материализма на българите, описани като принадлежащи към симпатична, но примитивна култура.

Ключови думи: постколониален дискурс, Феликс Каниц, пътеписи, Балканите

Introduction

The European great powers directed their eyes to the Balkans, the Near and the Middle East in the nineteenth century. As a result, knowledge about the East was amassed, which contributed to the production of a political discourse about the Orient. A large part of the body of knowledge about the Balkans was gained by travelers who recorded their impressions of the lands visited in travel notes. These texts about the Balkan peoples have two functions. Firstly, they establish an image of the Balkans which serves as the contrasting foil to the West's protection of its own image. Secondly, they serve as a source of information when momentous political decisions had to be taken, which would decide the fate of the Balkan peoples in the Ottoman empire.

A case in point are the papers of the Austrian traveller Felix Philipp Kanitz, who visited Bulgaria as many as 18 times between 1860 and 1875 and wrote two volumes on the history, geography and the ethnographical national peculiarities of the Bulgarians. His detailed travel notes and the maps he made represent the main source of information about Bulgaria at the time of the Congress of Berlin in 1878. The travel notes give a one-sided picture of a backward culture and the images of things Bulgarian range from stigmatizing notions of the uncivilized to the romantic extolment of the primeval in a more primitive culture. Despite the claims to objectivity, the travel notes are not entirely free from fictionality and typifications. The resulting images are therefore fictional constructs and can make no claim to authenticity. Even if the author's will to objectivity is there, passages recur which turn reality into a representation of Bulgarian life, where the people are typifyingly portrayed along with their customs (e.g. in their most beautiful dress rather than in their workaday clothes), which is a distortion of reality and creates stereotypical images of the foreign. Because of the creation of fictional constructs, the problem of the authenticity of the images thus outlined will recede into the background, while as the use of the travel notes as historical documents, they should be treated with the utmost caution. What matters to me in this case is the functionalization of these images in the West.

The Foreign and the Other

Within the frame of postcolonial discourse, which sets out to account for the effects of colonialism, the usual dichotomy between the native and the foreign had to be redefined in the 1990s. Thus, two new structurally different oppositions were established – the Native and the Other on the one hand, and the familiar and the foreign on the other hand. They represent intersecting coordinates. In the former one can find identity – constructing, i.e. exclusive processes which demarcate and differentiate the Native from Other: This is essential for establishing one's identity. In the process of demarcation, the unfamiliar is differentiated from the native, and the rigid boundaries serve as identity assignments. The otherness of 'Other' helps us establish our own identity. (s. Figure 1)

In the opposition between the familiar and the foreign processes of understanding are at work, i.e. we are dealing with a hermeneutic notion here, which seeks to close the distance to the

foreign culture. This understanding leads either to equation of the foreign with the native when the unfamiliar is reduced to the familiar or to the rejection or differentiation from the utterly incomprehensible. This hermeneutic process involves either understanding and integration, which reduce the foreign to the categories of the native, or the exclusion and disregard for the utterly unaccountable, which cannot be understood and subsumed under one's categories.

This is an epistemological process of closing or widening the gap (alienation), which, however, does not affect the process of identity construction. When the processes of understanding stop, the gap remains fixed, which defines also the notion of the foreign or of the familiar. In the contradistinction to that, the identities become unfixed when the cultural differences change. The notion of the Other is connected to these dynamic processes of establishing identity. In both processes, that of understanding and that of differentiation, we find colonizing discourses, which “subordinate the incorporated or the excluded to the discourse of hegemonism” (Polaschegg, 2005, S. 42).

The definition of the image of the foreign has to do with the exercise of power by the constructor of the image, who imposes identity on the person portrayed. This condition has been described in detail by the critics of colonialism and is the essence of Edward Said's argument in his work on Orientalism as well as Maria Todorova in *Imagining the Balkans*.

According to them the Oriental and the Balkans respectively represent social construct which functions as the “Other” in West European culture. Said argues that, in order to establish a European identity, the image of the Orient is constructed as a negative one, and within the framework of this process more and more “Oriental” qualities are ascribed to the Orient, which is a foil for projecting a better self-image. The image of the Orient thus constructed serves to establish the West's identity rather than to reflect hard facts and, in this sense, it has to be seen as a fiction. According to Said, the existing power relationships provide the basis for the Western fictions and imaginary images of the Orient to underpin Europe's hegemonism, since they serve to construct identities. Viewed from the standpoint of theory, Said's propositions are about two different theoretical paradigms – of linguistic turns and of cultural turns respectively. The claim that the Orient performs the function of the Other is part of both paradigms, because, firstly, it is an

imaginary fiction, i.e. it is a linguistic construct, and, secondly, it exists as an image of Otherness, which has an identity establishing function.

Opposition	Effect	Identification question
The Native – the Other	Differentiation from the Other by setting boundaries and identity assignments (you are gifted, treacherous, diligent, disciplined etc.)	Who are you? Imposing identity to the Other to establish the opposite one as the Native
Differentiation principle DIFFERENCE	DEMARCATION from the Other	UNSTABLE IDENTITY
Opposition	Effect	Identification question
The Familiar – the Foreign	Extinction or increasing the distance by transforming the foreign in categories of the familiar	How do you live/ look like/ think? Description of the foreign cultural practises Understanding or Rejecting
Differentiation principle DISTANCE	Either EVIDENCE or need for RESEARCH	STABLE IDENTITY

Figure 1. The two oppositions

Said's position is that only the weaker social groups serve as the area on which collective images are imagined and projected. Two points follow from this: Firstly, the real object, the Orient or the Balkans, is replaced by a fictions image and thus is subject to domination by the power that defines it. Secondly, it becomes clear, that not only political speeches and actions but also art and scholarly studies of the Orient come to be seen as underpinning Western imperialism. (Polaschegg, 2005, S. 26)

This argument lends itself to criticism since in its own right, the distortion of an image or fictionalizing the 'other' does not entail an exercise of power. This is supported by the argument of the Arab literary scholar Sadik Jalal al-Azm that the European strategies for representing the Oriental cannot be seen automatically as a source or an expression of power since the Arab Islamic culture also differentiates itself from the West and measures it by its own yardstick and views it within some frame of otherness similarly to the way the West represents the Orient. Seen thus, as far as the Balkans are concerned, the emergence of Europe's hegemonism can be traced back to the different place that

the notions of the foreign and the other have in the consciousness of the European and the Balkan peoples. No matter how much the Balkan peoples construct their own distorted images of the West, they cannot rid themselves of the formative power of the Western view. On the contrary, even today they struggle for European recognition and equality. Unlike the Arab world, the Balkans do not differentiate themselves from Europe but seek integration. Thus, they are much more exposed to the Western mind-set and institutions than the Orient, which eventually models the Balkans after the fashion of Europe. Proof of Europe's hegemonic power over the Balkans is the fact that only the West sees the Balkans both as the Other and as the Foreign and is interested in it only as an object of study. This does not hold good of the Balkans, since Europe is the other, by which identity is established, but it is not the foreign, which does not presuppose the necessity of any study or scrutiny of it. Europe is always visible and familiar. As regards study and scrutiny, the relationship between the Balkans and Europe is a one-way process from Europe to the Balkan countries. From this perspective the key question is: to what extent can one find in Kanitz psychological colonizing models for projecting images of the Bulgarian, which strengthen the native hegemonic image?

With that end in view I propose to call attention to just one aspect of the content of his travel notes – the materialism of the Bulgarians as a mark of their cultural backwardness. As co-ordinates, the foreign and the other feature in Kanitz's travel notes on Bulgaria. The attempt is made there to maintain a balance between the integrative approach of understanding and the exclusive approach of differentiation from the Other. The author's original intention is cultural transfer, which can be seen also from the claim to objectivity implicit in the subgenre of travel notes. Kanitz tries to close the cultural distance and to account for the foreign using his own categories of understanding. The text features numerous examples of this he tries to bring Bulgarian culture closer to his own by referring to Bulgarian history, which more or less sheds light on phenomena of his own times. Despite the lack of precision in presenting Bulgarian history, Kanitz manages to effect a cultural transfer. It should be mentioned that Kanitz comes across as benevolent and feels sympathy for the Bulgarians, whom he defends from the attacks of the other peoples.

The materialism of the Bulgarians in Kanitz

The depiction of the Bulgarian way of life, dress, crafts and rural economy in an impartial tone of voice constructs the image of a backward society, where there is will and talent but not

enough governmental structures which would ensure a better education and innovation in industry. The Bulgarians have fallen behind particularly in the animistic treatment of diseases, which is based mainly on superstitions and the practice of magic. In Kanitz's materialism is connected with being uncivilized and reveals a primitive response to reality. It is the result of an insufficiently developed spirit, of the lack of imagination and of higher spiritual aspirations.

These characteristics of the development of the Bulgarian people are displayed mainly in their national heroic epic insofar as it exists at all. Kanitz depicts the Bulgarians as people for whom possessions and property are most important and whose eyes are fixed on material things more than is the case with the Turks. The neighboring people consider them to be diligent, skillful and enterprising, but also obtuse "äußerst dumm". Kanitz emphatically sets aside such allegations and puts them down to the lack of knowledge about the Bulgarians.

Obwohl Serben, Türken und Romanen dem Bulgaren bezüglich der nothwendigen Eigenschaften zur Begründung eines Gewerbe und Industrie treibenden Städthums weit nachstehen, ist derselbe merkwürdigerweise bei ihnen als dumm verschrien, eine Meinung, die sich wahrscheinlich einzig durch seine frühere übergroße Duldsamkeit jedes Unrechts traditionell verbreitet und auch das Urtheil vieler oberflächlicher Reisenden beeinflusst haben dürfte. (Kanitz, 1875, S. 50)

This passage shows how he justifies and defends the Bulgarians as tendentiously depicted in an article of 1860 in "Ausland" magazine, where they are alleged to be indolent, greedy, free-loading, feckless, unworthy, treacherous and submissive to the authorities.

Moralisch steht der Bulgare tief, sehr tief, tiefer als eine andere Nation der Türkei. "Es wird ihm für Ackerbau und bürgerliche Beschäftigung jede Neigung abgesprochen. Er ist arbeitsscheu, „kann er seinen Hunger ohne Anstrengung seiner colossalen Muskeln stillen, so thut er das gewiss, und man sieht oft kerngesunde Kerle ohne alles Fehl, welche sich auf den Bettel verlegen“. Der Bulgare besitzt keine Kindesliebe; nirgend würden so viele Kinder ausgesetzt, – diese würden von gutherzigen Türkensfamilien aufgenommen, die sie erziehen und als Hausgenossen behandeln (!). In keinem Lande erfolgten so viele Übertritte zum Islam. Alle Bedrängnisse der Bulgaren durch die herrschende Rasse werden abgeleugnet. Der Bulgare kennt nur eine Leidenschaft, den Gelddurst, der Zerlumpteste trägt Geld auf bloßem Leib. Und „das ist die Nation, welcher zuletzt von den Panslavisten die Zukunft des Orients verheissen wird! (Kanitz, 1875, S. 50)

Kanitz rejects all that as Greek manipulation of the public in the West. However, all that he writes after that, benevolently and in a favourable light, confirms the words of the rejected article, since the exclusive mechanisms of otherness operate there. Regarding the materialist mind-set of the Bulgarians, Kanitz expresses his opinion in a passage dealing with their hospitality.

Im Allgemeinen ist der Bulgare gastfreundlich. Er fühlt sein Haus durch die Beherbergung eines Fremden geehrt und wird Alles aufbieten, um diesen auf's Beste zu bewirthen. Dabei ist er aber von einem gewissen speculativen Momente nicht immer frei. Selten wird er, ungleich seinem moslim'schen Nachbar, ein Gastgeschenk zurückweisen. Ja oft geht er noch weiter und überrascht seinen Gast beim Abzuge mit einer förmlichen Rechnung; falls dieser naiv genug wäre, im Vertrauen auf die vielgerühmte orientalische Gastfreundschaft, diese nicht aus eigenem Antriebe angemessen zu vergelten. (Kanitz, 1875, S. 49)

Anyone who considers himself to be moral has a duty to society, which is deep-seated and turns upon the strong faith in a transcendent power. This finds expression either in religiosity or in superstition. The calculating hospitality or the neglect of one's own children (he describes such cases) therefore are the result of a deficient sense of duty to God, man and one's ancestors, which hinders the Bulgarians from sharing their possessions with foreigners. This includes also the partial disregard for the belief that one must not make money out of one's friends and relatives, while a symbolic ritual exchange of gifts is customary. Kanitz fills up whole pages with descriptions of semi-primitive religiosity, which only superficially makes contact with Christianity.

The image of the materialistic Bulgarian is completed by the fact that he not only gives priority to his possessions and material well-being, which results in the lack of any poetical sense or refinement. The Bulgarian pragmatism and love of lucre outweigh the desire for non-material creative activity. Kanitz emphasizes that circumstance twice when he draws a parallel to the Serbs whose epics are more poetical than the Bulgarian

Sein Aberglaube ist aber ein wesentlich anderer als jener des Serben oder Occidentalen. Es fehlen ihm, wie wir gesehen haben, alle poetischen Anklänge, er ist von seinem rohen Materialismus erfüllt, der in dem von türkischer Anschauung beeinflussten Volksglauben zu wurzeln scheint, als führe der Tod den Menschen in eine andere Welt, in welcher er sein physisches Leben nur einfach fortsetzt. (Kanitz, 1875, S. 80)

If we do not take into consideration the problem of the verdicts of these reflections, as I have pointed out about, and if they are assessed according to the model for constructing images of the foreign, the following conclusion can be drawn. While the geographical and historical descriptions reveal inclusive, i.e. hermeneutic, approaches to the foreign, which are an attempt to close the distance to the foreign by rendering Bulgarian life in terms of categories familiar to the public in the West, his anthropological observations are images of the Other, from which the native is

differentiated. Thus they serve to establish identity and can be seen as expressions of hegemonic power.

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