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REJECTING THE CULT OF ARTISTIC MARTYRDOM: METAPHORS  
OF CREATIVITY IN ELIZABETH GILBERT'S "BIG MAGIC"

Creativity is one of the abstract, intangible concepts that are notoriously difficult to define and discuss. That is where the figurative language comes in handy, since metaphors allow us to talk about something abstract in concrete terms. Within the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) one regards metaphor as a

conceptual and not just stylistic phenomenon, whereby metaphors are understood as cross-domain mappings. A mapping is a set of correspondences between entities in a source domain and entities in a target domain. Evidence for the existence of conceptual metaphors is inferred from metaphorical expressions, or linguistic metaphors.

The subject of creativity deeply concerns not only artists, who devote themselves to creative pursuits, but also common people, since we all want to “unfold a certain beauty and transcendence” [1, p. 11] within our lives. In her book of creative non-fiction quite fittingly called “Big Magic” Elizabeth Gilbert addresses this subject using a wide range of metaphors, both conventional and original, to challenge some of the established perceptions associated with creativity and encourage a more light-hearted, playful and liberating attitude to it.

Conventional metaphors are instances of metaphorical language that are recurrently used to refer to certain things. Creative, or novel, metaphors are invented by the writer/speaker to “express a particular idea or feeling in a particular context, and which a reader/ hearer needs to deconstruct or ‘unpack’ in order to understand what is meant” [2, p. 4]. Novel metaphors are typically associated with literature, but may in fact occur in various types of discourse. Metaphors perform a number of important functions: “explaining, clarifying, describing, expressing, evaluating, entertaining” [2, p. 3], all of which apply to the metaphors found in Elizabeth Gilbert’s book.

Gilbert sets out to challenge the existing views that present the artistic experience as “one long, long suicide” (Oscar Wilde), describe it in terms of suffering, promote the image of the Tormented Artist. “The modern language of creativity,” she claims, “is steeped in pain, desolation, and dysfunction.” [1, p. 206] Yet, however deeply ingrained this attitude may be, it is counterproductive for the artist and the work they aspire to create. It destroys the artist’s psyche, even if it sometimes yields interesting artistic results. Elizabeth Gilbert offers a change of perspective and comes up with protective psychological constructs that are formulated with the help of metaphors.

The book abounds in ontological metaphors, or entity and substance metaphors, according to Lakoff and Johnson’s classification [3]. They allow us to talk about parts of our experience, events, emotions, ideas as discrete entities. The conventional ontological metaphor (CREATIVE) IDEAS ARE OBJECTS is verbalized consistently throughout the book. Relying on Lakoff and Turner’s typology of novel metaphors, we may point out that the author extends the conventional conceptual metaphor. By ‘extending’ we mean the mapping of elements from the source domain that are not conventionally mapped onto the target domain [4]. If we look at the titles of subchapters in the book, we see the following examples of linguistic metaphors: *An Idea Arrives*, *An Idea Grows*, *An Idea Gets Sidetracked*, *And Idea Goes Away*. Ideas are personified, they are said to have consciousness and will. More importantly, they are “driven by a single impulse: to be made manifest in our world through collaboration with a human partner” [1, p. 35]. If the artist or some creatively-minded person doesn’t collaborate with the idea, it can “grow tired of waiting” and “leave”.

Creativity itself is personified as well. It can “hide” [1, p. 163] from the artist and “come back”; people “murder their creativity” [1, p. 152] by demanding that their art pay the bills; artists often have to work hard so that their creativity could “play lightly” [1, p. 155]. Gilbert goes even further than that: she uses the word “genius” to refer to a divine attendant spirit that becomes the embodiment of inspiration. Ancient Greeks called them “daemons”, in ancient Rome they were referred to as “genius”, and were believed to live in the walls of an artist's studio, like Dobby the house elf, who would come out and invisibly assist the artist with their work. There is a world of difference, Gilbert suggests, between being a genius and having a genius. It alleviates the pressure put on the artist, because their success is the shared responsibility of the artist and the genius. “My genius,” she writes, “does not keep regular hours. <...> Sometimes I suspect that my genius might be moonlighting on the side as somebody else’s genius <...> like some kind of freelance creative contractor” [1, p. 73]. It comes and goes when it chooses, but the artist should be always ready to collaborate with it when the genius turns up.

The conceptualization of the artist as a partner leads us to the consideration of the BUSINESS MODEL in “Big Magic”. When the artist says yes to a creative idea, he or she “enters into a contract with inspiration” and may “set the terms” [1, p. 38]. It is important not to sign the creative contract of suffering, which Gilbert proclaims to be the most common one in contemporary Western civilization. The alternative approach that she suggests presupposes that the artist is “neither a slave to inspiration nor its master but... its partner” and “the two of you are working together toward something intriguing and worthwhile”. [1, p. 41]

Another important metaphor that is conventionally used when talking about creativity and inspiration is the CONDUIT METAPHOR, and Gilbert also employs it: “... ideas *do* move from soul to soul, ... ideas will always try to seek the swiftest and most efficient conduit to the earth.” [1, p. 57] The term “conduit metaphor”, proposed by Michael Reddy, implies that IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, LINGUISTIC EXPRESSIONS ARE CONTAINERS, COMMUNICATION IS SENDING [3]. What we find in Gilbert’s book is an elaboration of the conventional conceptual metaphor. Lakoff and Turner's notion of 'elaboration' captures those cases of creativity which involve “filling in slots in unusual ways rather than ... extending the metaphor to map additional slots” [4, p. 67]. Gilbert conceptualizes ideas as energetic life-forms that want to be made manifest, the artist is in that case a transmitter of some creative message sent from above.

One of the central metaphors that features as early as the title is the MAGIC METAPHOR. Creativity is conceptualized through such words as “magic”, “wizardry” [1, p. 49] and “a force of enchantment” [1, p. 34]. When defining her notion of magic, Gilbert refers to “the supernatural, the mystical, the inexplicable, the surreal, the divine, the transcendent, the otherworldly” [1, p. 34]. This overlaps to a large extent with the RELIGIOUS MODEL, which unfolds throughout the whole book. The artist “is called” from an early age to create; poets may be likened to “monks” or “nuns” because theirs is a “devotional practice” [1, p. 3]. Gilbert describes the start of her writing career as “taking vows” [1, p. 139] and still honours these vows “with the fealty of a holy pilgrim” [1, p. 141]. Creativity can be regarded

as “an act of prayer” [1, p. 218]. And yet there are frames within this model that Gilbert vehemently rejects. In Lakoff and Turner’s terms, these are instances of “questioning”, which occurs when a writer points out the limitations or inadequacy of a particular conventional conceptual metaphor [4]. Gilbert refuses to conceptualize the artist as a martyr and the artist’s work as “a consecrated relic” [1, p. 235], whose sanctity has to be defended at all costs.

The conceptualization of creativity as martyrdom comes from the concept of life as suffering. Creativity, Gilbert claims, should not become “a suffering contest” (the GAME MODEL) [1, p. 210]. The metaphor she suggests instead is that of the artist as a trickster. This opposition (martyr versus trickster) lies at the heart of two approaches to life and creativity. Life is pain versus life is interesting; darkness versus light; a solemn and austere commitment to self-sacrifice versus a game to be enjoyed. For the trickster, the GAMBLING model (as a specific level metaphor for the generic level one of LIFE IS A GAME) comes to the fore. Artists, by nature, are gamblers. “Whenever you make art, you’re always gambling” [1, p. 105]. You may win or lose, but at least you will have fun.

Another source domain that Gilbert draws on to conceptualize creativity is LOVE. The epigraph to the book runs as follows: creativity is “the relationship between a human being and the mysteries of inspiration”. People who get engaged in creative pursuits “are in love”, they are “hot for their vocation” [1, p. 160]. Gilbert encourages the reader to stop treating creativity “like it’s a tired, old, unhappy marriage and start regarding it with the fresh eyes of a passionate lover”, “sneak off and have an affair with your most creative self” [1, p. 161]. When inspiration doesn’t show up for a while, one can try to “seduce creativity back to one’s side” [1, p. 164]. Yet the problem is that in our culture the artist is expected to and often does have an unhealthy relationship with his/her creativity. They don’t believe it to be reciprocal. In Gilbert’s words, writers love writing but they don’t believe that writing loves them in return. Sometimes they even feel that “writing flat-out hates them” [1, p. 204]. It is this deeply sick relationship, this addiction to suffering that Gilbert protests against.

Artists, and writers in particular, are known to treat their work as their baby, “the blood of my blood”. Gilbert evokes this PARENTING metaphor when she discusses the emotionally violent relationship many artists have with their work. Editing one’s work is then described in terms of “killing one’s darling” and “literary carnage” [1, p. 231]. But Gilbert insists, “It ain’t your baby” [1, p. 232]. This attitude is not helpful, it doesn’t allow the artist to take criticism, however constructive it may be. “You won’t be able to handle it if someone suggests that you might consider completely modifying your baby, or even tries to buy or sell your baby on the open market” [1, p. 233]. It may even lead to the author being unwilling to publish their work, because it involves letting the defenseless baby out into the cruel world. She suggests an alternative: your creative work is not your baby, “if anything, you are its baby” [1, p. 233]. CREATIVITY IS A PARENT is a novel metaphor that Gilbert puts forward by reversing the existing one.

Some of the other metaphors that don’t take a central place in the book, but are still worth mentioning, include the BUILDING metaphor. A BOOK IS A

BUILDING is a conceptual metaphor made manifest through a number of linguistic metaphors. Rewriting a book is like dismantling a house and rebuilding it all over again. A novel may be imperfect (as a “crooked house”) but it is good enough to be published (the walls are “essentially strong, the roof held, and the windows functioned”) [1, p. 179]. Gilbert believes that one shouldn’t mind the “slightly wonky angles”, because sometimes it makes sense to move on to the next project rather than rewriting the book indefinitely until it is immaculate.

To conclude, creativity may be conceptualized with the help of metaphors that are either destructive for the artist’s psyche (as a bad lover, as a killing field, with the artist being seen as a martyr, their work as a baby that may be taken away from them or even murdered) or empowering and liberating (creativity as magic, as a nurturing parent, as a generous lover, as a game in which the artist is a trickster). The other central concept that gets personified in the book is fear (the book’s subtitle is “Creative Living beyond Fear”). Fear and Creativity are “conjoined twins”, “they were born at the same time, and they still share some vital organs” [24]. This is something we must embrace if we intend to live creatively. And the alternative metaphors Elizabeth Gilbert suggests are the protective constructs that help to cope with this fear and even make it your ally. The conventional (CREATIVE) LIFE IS A JOURNEY metaphor is extended by Gilbert to show that embarking on a creative project is akin to embarking on a road trip, where the artist, Creativity and Fear are all riding together in one vehicle. Fear is allowed to have a seat, but not to be at the wheel. The artist and Creativity are the only ones who are allowed to drive. And they head off into “the terrifying but marvelous terrain of unknown outcome” [1, p. 26] where Big Magic may happen.

## REFERENCES

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