

# REMEMBERING AFRICA

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Edited by  
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**STUDIES IN AFRICAN LITERATURE**

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### *Stanley and Conrad: Founders of Alternative Discourses about Central Africa*

PIERRE HALEN

The literary and para-literary Western corpus concerning Central Africa is principally written in French, but also contains works in Dutch and in other European languages, among them English, Italian, German, Danish, and Norwegian. The Congo has been the object of extensive journalistic and literary exposure, particularly but not exclusively during two periods of political crisis: the Red Rubber Affair culminating in 1903–4, and the era of independence from 1959 to 1965 (including the “civil war”). Such a variety of testimonials should convince everyone that colonial, exotic, and postcolonial literary approaches must be thought of and conceptualized at a level of abstraction enabling the inclusion of a number of discourses about Africa originating in Europe. This accounts for my study’s theoretical basis. As for a diachronic perspective, it is also clear that there was an important international dimension to successive developments in writing, or more generally in the discourse (including films and other images) concerning Central Africa.

At the beginning of the 1980s the most urgent imperative was to concentrate energies on Belgian colonial literature in French, which had never before been studied seriously; nor had it been the object of the least inquiry since 1942. At best, one or two people were interested in a moralizing perspective, in racist stereotypes that needed to be denounced and were.<sup>1</sup> However, such a task, which consisted in isolating devastating quotations—which were generally chosen to represent the most egregious positions and simply extracted from their context to be placed on exhibit—

did not substantially contribute either to historical knowledge or to a theory of colonial literature; these critics failed to consider contexts, relationships, rhetoric, and structures. It must also be said that theoretical works about stereotypes, such as those of Ruth Amossy or Jean-Louis Dufays, were not yet available.

Thus, the first task was to formulate a general schema of the repertory of Belgian literature, a panorama essentially dedicated to the understanding of the principal directions taken by systems of representation which were even more complex, more varied, and less unified than they originally seemed. This first study was based on a certain number of narrative and thematic processes, in order to make an initial reconnaissance, enabling the exposure of contradictions and internal differences. Before I became familiar with Belgian colonial literature, all works of the genre seemed more alike than different. Only as I began my analysis could I perceive ruptures or internal conflicts. The main difficulty of the exercise was simultaneously recognizing historical divisions.

This first approach has been partially published in my *"Le petit Belge avait vu grand": Une Littérature africaine*. The book deals with a limited and obscure corpus, but it was one of a few extant works dealing specifically and systematically with a colonial literature in order to highlight its internal structure (see Ridley, among other works). Such a thematic study, as it was published in 1993, was, however, somewhat unsatisfying. Its theoretical component—above all concerning exoticism—which in fact drew on current works and those most easily transferable to another corpus, had to be reduced to a minimum because the editor gave priority to the literary work itself. These shortcomings may, however, represent an opportunity, because various reflections have since enriched the critical analysis of discourses on Central Africa. An essay that appeared in 1992, for instance, confirmed and completed a certain number of my previously elaborated convictions while enhancing the comparative context demanded by such subject matter. To further develop such concepts as "exotic," "colonial exoticism," "critical exoticism," "Other," and "Otherness," I now propose the following ideas.

### The "Perception of Distance"

My objective remains the elaboration of a conceptual framework allowing an approach in which the thematic and the rhetorical converge, along with methodologies based on history, the sociological theory of identities, and even anthropology. The study to which I will be alluding—Bernard Piniau's *Congo-Zaïre 1874–1981*—is rich in working hypotheses

that I consider particularly fertile with respect to such a perspective, although the author does not himself derive maximal benefit from them. Further, his argument lacks verification. He has nonetheless formulated a particularly enlightening hypothesis from which others may now profit.

*Congo-Zaire* appeared in the era of the National Conference on Sovereignty in the Congo, while attention was acutely focused on political vicissitudes; Piniau's study also escaped notice because its title is not sufficiently focused. Perhaps it disappeared in the vast quantities of material published on the topic since 1991, much of it written by exiled Zairian intellectuals who were both underemployed and anxious to involve themselves in reflections about the troubled fate of their country. This is, however, not true of Piniau's study, which was written before the disturbing events of the summer of 1991.<sup>2</sup>

The work's subtitle, *La Perception du lointain* (*The Perception of Distance*), suggests the scope of Piniau's argument: Referring to the Congo-Zairian situation to strengthen his case, he questions the ways in which distant "realities" are presented to us, via various "media," intermediaries, and distorting filters. Piniau is not particularly interested in literature, and I would venture to say that this is the particular merit of his argument. Rather, his study is concerned with the role played by the American news-broadcasting network CNN in Western perceptions of the Gulf War, which we remember as being transformed almost into a video game. Piniau concludes that given such news and information, political decision makers will evaluate the situation incorrectly and will come to the wrong conclusions. Thus, the primary focus of the study is the collective gaze through which the West envisages that which is remote from it and therefore thought to be "other." The subject is certainly fashionable, but we would be wrong to conceive of it only in literary or cultural terms. Piniau shows the geopolitical repercussions of this perspective for the whole planet. Above all, he demonstrates the central role of the literary imagination in this process.

The first part of *Congo-Zaire* is devoted to the literary representation of Central Africa, and it is this part which will retain our attention. Still, we shall not lose sight of the second, longer section, which concerns the domain of social communications, the representation of news items from the Third World before their transformation into often-inadequate political decisions. Piniau convincingly shows, for example, that during independence, literary imagery progressively replaces objective news in the Belgian press (in five daily papers: *Le Soir*, *La Libre Belgique*, *La Meuse*, *Le Peuple*, and *Le Drapeau Rouge*). He effectively demonstrates the inad-

equacies of a type of news reporting that, from the Left as well as from the Right, reveals itself incapable either of the objectivity (the object itself is neglected) or of the rationality (clichés and myths take the place of explanations) that one might expect. This, of course, had repercussions on political discourse at the time (Halen and Riesz). Piniâu's illustration of the new vitality that such discourse acquired in France during the Shaba Wars is certainly convincing. In the absence of serious news, imagination prevails, since political decision making is influenced by myths and "literary" fantasies. Such a clear demonstration of the relationship between literature and politics—a filiation that was facilitated by the press—is rare. Moreover, it is important to note that for once it is literature that determines society and, in so doing, inverts the pattern normally observed in the sociology of literature.

*Congo-Zaire* is thus a study of images (images of Blacks, images of Africa), but its originality is the analysis of a particular situation and the clear demonstration of the consequences of misinformation originating for the most part in egocentricity and myopia. The deficiency is both quantitative, due to the lack of serious information, and qualitative: The informant, instead of uncovering and explaining the object in question, attempts to illustrate his own perceptions and those of his public, that is, when the "special envoy" does not seek to justify his presence by presenting things in a dramatic light.

### Conradian Exoticism

The first part of *Congo-Zaire*, which is entitled *Le Fleuve (The River)*, shows a good deal of interest in the presence of Central Africa in European and Western literature. It deals with the evocation of Joseph Conrad's tradition, a subject whose wealth of examples and scope of repercussions are such that it alone could have formed the subject of the book. Piniâu clearly shows how some famous "writer-travelers" (he quotes the Frenchman André Gide, the Anglophones Graham Greene and V.S. Naipaul, the Italian Alberto Moravia, but a wealth of other examples could be cited) have made voyages in Central Africa with the works of Conrad in mind, when not literally in hand.

Of Africa the writers have only seen that which coincides with Conrad's representation, which is considered real. One may ask what actually forms this assumption of truth. Certainly, these authors knew that Conrad was, for a very brief period, captain of a small steamer plying the Congo River. They inferred that his *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness* were

based on personal experience, and they are correct in this assumption. On the other hand, non-Belgian writers came from communities or countries in which the Red Rubber Affair and the campaigns against King Léopold made an impact and where a negative image of the Congo came into being, an image that, because of the lack of another political crisis, was hardly diminished by a counter-discourse. When we think of Kuwait, is it not the images transmitted by CNN that come to mind, although the country is no longer as devastated as it was during the Gulf War? As for the way in which it was represented, the Congo has likewise remained in the state in which it was perceived during the diffusion of the last widely circulated images at the turn of the twentieth century. Reasons of an institutional nature also come into play, and they are, perhaps, the most important. In the case of Gide, the French reception and recognition, since the early 1920s, of Conrad as a great writer was influential. Moreover, as Sarga Moussa has shown, citing a previous voyage, preferably a famous one, is part and parcel of the rhetorical tradition of the travelogue. The writer-traveler identifies himself with a previous traveler. The allusion consequently becomes more important than the distant reality, because the consideration of the Other is not as important as that of the European reader, whose pleasure is increased when he finds himself in familiar territory (Conrad's narratives) rather than confronted with the unknown (the countries in question).

The problem is that Conrad's vision was itself an artistic construction whose basis was no longer the Congo, but instead was a Western subject in crisis. For him, Africa provided a decor of gradual decay and literally a world's end. Luc Resson, in his watershed study, points out the ambiguities of Conrad's representation and shows that his anticolonialist reputation is, in fact, undeserved. To this literary tradition we could add certain developments in film: The three adaptations of *Heart of Darkness* for the cinema or television have all emphasized the aspects of initiation, and even mysticism, of the tale. We remember the images of *Apocalypse Now* and the crisis that Francis Ford Coppola went through during the production.<sup>3</sup> Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, like the film, is based on an archetypal aspect of the colonial imagination: the myth of the Adventurer-King, as illustrated by the figure of Lawrence of Arabia, found in André Malraux as well as in the work of many other writers who were at once deeply troubled and fascinated by Robinson Crusoe's followers. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* is clearly an artistic projection of English colonialism; since the Native is considered nonexistent, it is possible to construct a European model of development without addressing the actual working relations. The myth of the Adventurer-King reestablishes the



presence of the Native, but only in terms of colonialism, representing him as a temporarily dominated barbarian ("L'Aventurier-roi"; Soubigou "Le Regard littéraire"). The white man, obliged to exist among those he considers his "others," must be eaten or elected King<sup>4</sup>; he cannot simply be a man among men.

Piniau, however, quotes neither Rasson's article, nor other existing texts—apart from a rather strange bibliography, he does not cite any book about Conrad, but rather Lomami Tshibamba's *Ngando* as well as Joseph-A. Cornet on African art. His argument is immediately useful, as it prepares the reader for the second part of the study, but more intuitive than academic. That does not, however, prevent it from being convincing, except perhaps when delimiting the theme (*Le Fleuve*) itself. The Conradian tradition is, in fact, present in Louis-Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, which does not evoke the Congo, and more recently in another way, in Anna Geramys's *Le Reste du monde*, published in the early 1980s. Conrad's objective is the progressive elaboration of a mysterious, dangerous, and primitive Africa, an Africa which—according to the concept proposed by Rasson—is essentially resistant (*rétif*) to Promethean efforts of both historical construction and humanism.

It is nonetheless true that the Congo River is a theater par excellence for such failure. It is the symbolic path of a journey back into time, the traditional image of a Heraclitean current involved, on the one hand, in a striking contrast between the smallness and vanity of European efforts to dominate it, and on the other hand, in the almost metaphysical gigantism dooming all efforts to naught. The little steamer is surely not a symbol chosen at random. Rather, it evokes precisely the positivist and technical doctrine that triumphed at the end of the nineteenth century, a positivism that is the dominant current in Auguste Comte's bourgeois philosophy and an optimism that is no longer possible after two world wars: Auschwitz and Hiroshima. In the imagery that pervades Henry Morton Stanley's stories, at least those recounting *The Congo and the Founding of the Free State*, the little steamer occupies a pivotal role of conquest and successful penetration, of technological prowess and superhuman feats, albeit with inverted values, that is, the reiteration of *Robinson Crusoe* outside of the artificial context of the island. Stanley's steamer symbolizes the positivist doctrine from which the entire colonial utopia stems—it wishes for a sort of transparency, a transparency realized in the twofold advance in Time (Progress) and in Space. Thus, in his 1903 essay dedicated to the study of geographical unknowns, Comte Gontran de Lichtervelde makes use of Terence's epigraph "*humanum sum et nihil humanum a me alienum puto*" and concludes:

At this time, engineers are forging the last rails which, from Cape Horn to the Alaskan glaciers, and from the seas of the Far East to the Cape of Good Hope, must form the ring in the wedding between man and Earth. Through colonization, young adventurers multiply the fields open to their activity, the struggle for life is transformed into national expansion, the proletarian starts a family, the convict once again becomes a citizen, the disadvantaged climb back up the social ladder, individualism vanquishes collectivism, wealth increases, the world is unified, prejudices are dispelled, tolerance enters hearts and gradually the savage cannibal, the hereditary slave raises himself, thanks to august and generous initiatives, to the level of the dominant races. (80–81)

This excerpt is enlightening. We find ethnocentricity and racist stereotypes in it, but perhaps it is just as well, because the aim is precisely to rid the world of prejudice—"prejudices are dispelled." More important is the Promethean-colonial apprehension of the unknown territory, which proved a lurid fascination in all European countries of the time. Let us recall that the humanitarian mission, and the anti-abolitionist one in particular, developed within geographical societies; for a long time, both scientific discoveries and purposes of liberation motivated the exploration of the virgin parts of the map.

It is exactly this conception of "Progress," at once Promethean and humanitarian, that the Conradian tradition, also known as critical exoticism, opposes. It consists less of firsthand accounts of colonial and postcolonial Africa than of a literature in crisis devoted to illustrating the failure or unfeasibility of both humanism and positivist materialism. In this respect the tradition could also be described as "radical exoticism," insofar as within it, everything is a construct of Otherness—not Victor Segalen's Diverse, much less the Other as it is conceptualized in the discourse of "respect of differences" or "dialogue between cultures." Rather, it is the essential (primal) Other, of a metaphysical rather than of a human nature—something unlimited, which emphasizes the boundaries of the subject (Halen "L'Ouvert et le fermé").

The Congo Basin is the emblematic theater of a drama, the annihilation of History, indifferently drawn to its magmatic beginnings or to its chaotic end. As a result, there are a number of secondary topoi: the river itself, the opaque and impenetrable wall that is equatorial forest (*forêt vierge* or, better yet, *Urwald*)—this undifferentiated tangle of exuberant and putrid vegetation, the savage, either incomprehensible or beastly, the colonial, this fallen Prometheus, the whole forming a universe of non-

History from which, by definition, no evolution can be expected. Confronted with this non-History, every effort reveals itself vain. It is the mythical place in which man feels himself being overtaken by an Otherness that he is powerless to overcome. It first reveals an alteration of the colonist's faculties, and later estrangement. If he does not manage to escape, he is doomed either to death or to madness. This deliquescence is manifest in the protagonist of Henri Cornéllus's novel *Kufa* (1954), in which the would-be hero of a story of African liberation drowns, disappearing into the heart of the "black water" that is the Congo Basin's inland sea, in effect the center of the whole continent. The situation clearly represents a symbolic return to the womb, because of the hero's failure to establish either societal change or mature relations with European or African women.<sup>5</sup> Returning to the womb, renouncing the historical responsibility of language, and dreaming of losing oneself in a primitive state is the reverse of the Promethean colonial discourse.

Alain Buisine has shown that the desert was the mythological equivalent of the river for French colonial literature, as well as for writers such as Paul Bowles. The Conradian landscape uses the *Urwald* or primal forest to discuss a subject other than man in Africa; Conrad's humanist point of view can only be explained with difficulty. The two white protagonists of *An Outpost of Progress* are not only good examples of antiheroes, they are also the lens through which Conrad shows nature and man as distant realities that are impossible to analyze or understand:

They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect of things. The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like a great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible. Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow nowhither. It flowed through a void. Out of that void, at times, came canoes, and men with spears in their hands would suddenly crowd the yard of the station. They were naked, glossy black, ornamented with snowy shells and glistening brass wire, perfect of limb. They made an uncouth babbling noise when they spoke, moved in a stately manner, and sent quick, wild glances out of their startled, never-resting eyes. Those warriors would squat in long rows, four or more deep, before the verandah, while their chiefs bargained for hours with Makola over an elephant tusk. Kayerts sat on his chair and looked down on the proceedings, understanding

nothing. He stared at them with his round blue eyes, called out to Carlier, "Here, look! [L]ook at that fellow there—and that other one, to the left. Did you ever see such a face? Oh, the funny brute!"

Carlier, smoking native tobacco in a short wooden pipe, would swagger up twirling his moustaches, and surveying the warriors with haughty indulgence, would say—"Fine animals. Brought any bone? Yes? It's not any too soon. Look at the muscles of that fellow—third from the end. I wouldn't care to get a punch on the nose from him. Fine arms, but legs no good below the knee. Couldn't make cavalry men of them." . . .

Such profitable visits were rare. For days the two pioneers of trade and progress would look on their empty courtyard in the vibrating brilliance of vertical sunshine. Below the high bank, the silent river flowed on glittering and steady. On the sands in the middle of the stream, hippos and alligators sunned themselves side by side. And stretching away in all directions, surrounding the insignificant cleared spot of the trading post, immense forests, hiding fateful complications of fantastic life, lay in the eloquent silence of mute greatness. The two men understood nothing, cared for nothing but for the passage of days that separated them from the steamer's return. (92-94)

Conrad's recourse to descriptive saturation and his bringing into play ontological stakes are clearly perceptible. In particular, the adjective "fantastic" reveals the affinities of such an exoticism with a spirit of resistance in the face of positivist rationality, an attitude also seen in other contemporary European literary productions.

One can scarcely overstate the case: Conrad's tradition clearly predominates in evocations of Central Africa for European readers (or spectators). Interestingly enough, there are examples of his influence in literary works of the serious, as well as the trivial, genres. Such a varied following is a good indication that what we have here is a collective representation in which the whole of Western society attempts to describe the Other. This Other is not precisely the African, in whom no one is interested, especially since he might remind the reader of humanitarian problems or of his historical responsibility in regards to him—what Emmanuel Levinas described as a "Face" (*Visage*). But the Other is rather an object in whom the Westerner does not (want to) see himself or anything equivalent to himself. The Westerner must retain not only his own historical project and self-consciousness, but also history and

consciousness in general. Conrad's scorn for antiheroes such as those in *An Outpost of Progress* does not at all express a condemnation of colonialism, but only of two poor Belgians who cannot meet the expectations of the civilized world.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the Other is merely the figurative opposite of the only existing historical subject: an extra on the screen, or something dubious to fight.

The primal forest thus appears in the first lines of Michael Crichton's best-seller *Congo* as "the place where the bones are lying." As to why the Conradian rather than the positivist vision prevails, that may be explained by answering the question "why do we write?" or "why do we read?"—why do we reserve a place for the evocation of our Other, for our Monster, who symbolically threatens us (Grivel)? We triumph, or fail in trying, over the Monster—a creature nonetheless limited to the confines of a book—by an interposed hero. It is the phenomenon Charles Grivel refers to as the "production of fictional interest."

These reflections on Conrad lead me to a definition of what I will call critical exoticism. I conceive it, apart from geographic dimensions, as a view in which a referential object is seen as an Other: at times a simple inversion, at times a functional ethnic stereotype, isolated in its "difference," but at times also, and more fundamentally, a given, both unknown and unknowable. It is the figure of resistance to both appropriation and communication. Conrad's Africa thereby becomes eminently exotic. There is, however, yet another debate. Whenever one speaks of critical exoticism, under the influence of Segalen or of another *doxa* inspired by anticolonialism, such as the "respect of differences," there has been the tendency to see it, as in Gide or Céline, as an acceptable exoticism to the extent that it depicted an ineffective colonist and, therefore, it also criticized the colonial enterprise. Such an analysis is, however, both complacent and ambiguous; it says nothing of the fact that such an image of the African is even more pejorative than that of the fallen Prometheus on the banks of the Congo. If there is, in fact, an anticolonialism in Conrad, it is but a consequence of a more profound criticism touching the very notion of historical progress and the possibility of communication between humans.

This also explains the contradictions in Gide, Georges Simenon, Michel Leiris, or Cornélus. On the one hand they generously follow the humanistic impulse, denouncing injustices in colonialism; on the other hand, they cannot help following the Conradian tradition of prodigious disdain for Africa, or, more precisely, the projection of their own desire to frequent Savagery.<sup>7</sup>

### Stanley's Tradition

Piniau also shows how, at the end of the nineteenth century, another discourse challenges Conrad's predominance in the European discourse about equatorial Africa: that of Stanley. Geographical exploration, which established the tradition we refer to as "anti-exotic," is an enterprise of mastery and knowledge. The following is only one quotation among thousands, from the third part of *Through the Dark Continent*, in which Stanley tells the story of his arrival in what is not the "heart of Darkness." This narrative is entitled "Suspense and Success" and "Among Friendly Natives"; it begins with the usual explorer's rhetoric.

*February 8.*—Thank God! An anxious day has terminated with tranquillity to long-disturbed minds. We are camped on a small jungle-covered islet in north latitude 1° 40' 44" by observation, and east longitude 21° 4' by acct. Opposite, at 500 yards' distance, on the left bank, is the village of Rubanga, in Nganza. On the right bank, at 1700 yards' distance from us, is the large town of Gunji. (364)

Then Stanley recounts the "pacific conquest" of the natives, and finally underscores the wealth coming from the exchanges.

The old chief nodded with his head. We raised our anchor, . . . and, snatching a string or two of cowries, I sprang on land, followed by the coxswain Uledi, and in a second I had seized the skinny hand of the old chief, and was pressing it hard for joy. Warm-hearted Uledi, who the moment before was breathing furiously hate of all savages, and of the procrastinating old chief in particular, embraced him with a filial warmth. . . . [I]n an incredibly short time the blood-brotherhood ceremony between the suddenly former friends was solemnly entered into, and the irrevocable pact of peace and goodwill had been accomplished! . . . We distributed presents to each native, and in return we received great bunches of mellow, ripe and green bananas, as well as of fish. It was agreed between us that we should encamp on this little islet, on which we find ourselves to-night, with a feeling as though we were approaching home. (366-67)

Such a discourse is to be seen in most colonial approaches in the true sense of the term, approaches which are essentially documentary and pre-

tend to a certain academic status. Conrad, the founder of critical exoticism, aims, conversely, at a lack of understanding, since what interests him is the Unknowable (or that which he considers as such), preferably putrescent, wild, and chaotic. In this rivalry, Conrad is clearly the victor in the West. His is work that interests literary scholarship (in Pierre Bourdieu's *champ de production légitime* (field of legitimate production<sup>8</sup>), although his writing is also of interest to followers of adventurous para-literature; these are his two paths to editorial success. Piniau also suggests that anthologies and reference works, in their quotations of Stanley, favor exotic passages (danger, combat, difficulties, and savagery) but leave out the "antiexotic" passages, although they are more abundant and more characteristic—land surveying, for example, and everything to which Piniau refers to as "realistic knowledge" (*savoir réaliste*).

As for Stanley's tradition, it belongs to truly colonial literature, whose impact was disregarded in the mother country and whose naturalist postulates, tied to a philosophy of history and a confidence in language which paid homage to the late nineteenth century, prevented pretensions to "modernity" of any kind. This partially explains why colonial literature on the whole, except in England, has been denied recognition and legitimization. No one expected that literature would remind the metropolitan reader of the profound governing principles at the heart of Western civilization since the Renaissance; rather, what was expected was a reflection of his Other. This also explains why it is so difficult to fight the stereotypes that even now characterize the most widely available literature, films, and comic books about Africa, all of which determine the various forms of media coverage.

### On Postcolonial Exoticism

Nothing has changed our overall perceptions of Africa. On the other hand, there are issues of development, development aid, dialogue between cultures, humanitarian aid, and partnership. African studies as a discipline have developed. As a result of a century of contacts whose opening of new channels of communication echoes de Lichtervelde's quotation I cited earlier, we do know more about Africa, and the formerly distant continent has drawn closer. Nonetheless, we happily return, as soon as possible, to the Conradian tradition. There are enough tragedies, famines, coups d'état, or civil wars to permit the return, both in literary representations and in the media, of the image of catastrophe of which *Apocalypse Now* is a prime example (it matters little that it was

filmed in Vietnam). Naipaul and Moravia are the postcolonial writers Piniau evokes. There are many others, among them, in Zairian literature itself Baenga Bolya's *Cannibale*, with its Conradian epigraph (Riva). Anna Geramys's *Le Reste du monde*, a wonderful novel about Burundi during the 1972–73 Hutu genocide, and *Les Fruits tropicaux* are prime examples of what becomes of critical exoticism in postcolonial literature. The works take up the anti-Promethean myth in its metaphysical dimension. As in Conrad, we see the rout of the Western concept of historical progress, the cost of which is hundreds of thousands of corpses on roadsides and in work camps, but from which Western heroes finally and innocuously withdraw, suffering no lasting consequences, with the possible exceptions of neurasthenia and self-destructive tendencies.

Piniau formulates a final position: the mythical representation of Africa in literature and in the media is proportional to the progressive abandonment of the historical project concerning reference (260). The action and even the possibility of action, whatever they may be, direct information and news: The practical or political impossibility of intervention determines misinformation and the eruption of fantasy, which is in effect a recourse to mythical and literary tradition, regardless of the object in question, since the message is nonreferential. Such a development, which seems mere common sense, allows one to explain a great many things, beginning with the disinterest of Belgian politicians in Congo affairs. In 1959–60 the sudden media exposure, beginning when it became obvious that something was about to happen and lasting as long as things were somewhat bloody, turned into fantasy rather than news when it was clear that European parties were powerless in the face of historical change.

Graham Greene's *A Burnt-Out Case* is a good illustration of this idea, because the action happens precisely between the events of Léopoldville in January 1959 and the independence of the country in June 1960, during the period in which the Belgian *colonie modèle* seems to be completely demolished. Querry, a world-famous architect, comes into Africa in search of an end: "I have come to an end of all that too./Too?/Like all the rest. To the end of everything" (16). However, he does not attain Paradise, called "*pendélé*" by his African alter ego, the other "burnt-out case" whose name is Deo Gratias. Charity finally emerges as the only sure value at the end of the novel. But we are not as far as it seems from Conrad, because this charity is as inefficient as it is tragic. Greene writes it clearly: "This Congo is a region of the mind" (5). It is the farthest place down on Earth, in extremis: "I've come to an end. This place, you might say, is the end. Neither the road nor the river go any further"



(110). The anthropological debate appears even in the first line, reducing to silence the historical subject inherited from the Enlightenment: "The cabin-passenger wrote in his diary a parody of Descartes: 'I feel discomfort, therefore I am alive,' then sat pen in hand with no more to record" (9; see also 186). Paradise, or *Pendélé*, receives an additional, contemporary meaning: the independence of the Congo is announced more and more clearly. It is nonetheless clear, even in 1960, when the novel is published, that independence will not bring salvation for anyone; the sickness that affects the beings as well as an environment described in Conradian terms (indifference, immobility, engulfment, muteness, etc.) is a hopeless leprosy. The "white steamer" goes further, but "[a] lot of effort it seemed for so slow a progress" (10), Africa's smell is "the sweet gangrenous smell of certain leprous skins" (18); Querry himself feels like a leper. The River has taken the circular movement that we shall find in Naipaul's *A Bend in the River* a bit later, and the Road, whose construction made the colonial heroes so proud, is today "narrow like a coffin or a grave" (30). Behind the religious "darkness outside" (176), behind "the green jungle wall" (26), which is moving just as in Cornélus's *Kufa*, "there was little in the forest to appeal to the romantic. It was completely empty. It had never been humanized, like the woods of Europe" (54).

Close to Piniau's views, Greene (who seems himself not completely informed, considering albinism a result of the solar influence) presents a journalist character—Parkinson—writing stupidities about landscape, history, and events: "They won't know the bloody difference" (98). He recalls Stanley, but in Conradian terms: "The eternal forest broods along the banks unchanged since Stanley and his little band" (97). He titles his paper "The White Man's Grave" (98). However, Parkinson's point of view, which is largely adopted by other characters—the colonists who want only to return to their "real" country and who "hate" the Congo—is neither Querry's nor Greene's opinion. Their discussions are more concerned with Man's grave in general, if Man can be defined, as it was by the Western *Lumières*, as the universal subject of history. In this way, the end of the *colonie modèle* functions as a wider metaphor for the World, in a literary intention that clearly bears the influence of Saint John and Blaise Pascal.<sup>9</sup>

From a theoretical point of view, Piniau's proposition about the lack of historical perspective of any action changes the meaning of "distant." Physical distance is in fact of little importance, and in itself practical distance (difficulties in communication) does not suffice to explain either how or why a part of humanity subsides into Otherness. Distant is that which is felt or

seen as Other, that which, for one reason or another, is Otherness, that which is represented as inaccessible, and therefore as having mythical powers. Distant is what I put beyond my responsibility, no longer appearing as a Face (per Levinas), but rather as the frowning mask of some impulse or foreign divinity. On this basis, it also becomes clear that the medium—be it film, the novel, or literature, whether canonical or trivial—is not really relevant. One finally realizes that language, as long as it refers to Western civilization, has relatively little importance. Apart from the sociohistorical differences that distinguish colonial powers (or assistant colonizers, such as the Scandinavian countries) from one another, the Western imagination is unified in its common identity complex. This complex consists in development and extension, as well as in remorse due to the conscience of sin: the White Man's Burden and the White Man's Sob (Bruckner). It is, in effect, a Faustian narration, in which the Westerner's will to power and desire for punishment are projected onto a diabolical figure.

The opposition of exoticism and anti-exoticism is clear: if the Conradian tradition despairs of any action ever changing History, the Stanleyan tradition represents and takes part in History on the move. When an African novelist such as Bolya chooses to ally himself to Conradianism, he reveals neither a lack of understanding nor an adherence to a European fantasy about Central Africa. While he may hope to take part in a European sensibility that is more Conradian than Stanleyan and certainly more marketable in terms of "modern" literary legitimization, he joins, in fact, in a historical desperation more harmful to Africa than the imagery in which it is expressed. The fact is that he goes along with the game of primitivism (Jewsiewicki), the colonial-ethnological version of Afro-pessimism, forever assigning Africa to some irrationality. It matters little whether that is endearing or, as in this case, barbarous.

## Notes

I thank Frank Runcie for his assistance in translating this chapter.

1. See, for example, Jacquemin, *Zaire 1885–1985; Collection Negrophilia*.
2. In May 1991, various parts of Mobutu's army, because of the months-long lack of salaries, began to pillage houses, stores, and offices in Kinshasa. From there, the looting movement spread to citizens of the city and to other parts of the country, plunging it into the so-called transition time.
3. Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now*, starring Marlon Brando and Martin Sheen, was one treatment of the theme. Subsequent remakes include *Heart of Darkness*, the film-memorial directed by Coppola's wife on the basis of the produc-

tion pictures of *Apocalypse Now*, and Nicolas Roeg's *Heart of Darkness* (1994), starring Tim Roth and John Malkovich.

4. See Mannoni (11).

5. The character appears unable to assume any adult relationship with the young girl he meets in a village, who treats his fever and gives him some other comforts, but without any real communication, because of the language she speaks and the money he gives her. On the other hand, he is unable to accept that his mothering fiancée, who remained in Europe, has married a more serious man; the white woman he frequently sees in Africa asks him for a real relationship, which is her only hope of escaping her situation, but finally commits suicide. See Halen, "L'Ouvert et le Fermé"; "*Le petit Belge avait vu grand*" (187–246).

6. Let us recall the media battle that pitted a portion of British opinion against the Leopoldian Congo Free State at the end of the nineteenth century; the political stakes were clear (remember the dream of a railway from Cape to Cairo and the recent awareness of Katanga's wealth), but the battle took place on a humanitarian level, with the discussion of who had (or lacked) the dignity to become the official civilizer in this part of the world.

7. On Gide, see Porra; Sändig.

8. For an English translation of Pierre Bourdieu's work on art, literature, and aesthetics, see *The Field of Cultural Production*. Let us recall that Bourdieu differentiates a field of legitimate production, defined by the judgments of peers (writers, aesthetes, etc.), from a field of large production, defined by more material values.

9. Let us recall Jesus Christ's last speech to the disciples (John 15, 19) and last prayer (John 17, 14–16), as well as Pascal's *Pensées*, which oppose the only real human preoccupation, concerning redemption, to the many pretexts mankind can imagine for pursuing various occupations, which Pascal calls diversions (*divertissements*).

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