Preparations for Travel: The Naipaul Brothers’ Conradian Atavism

Rob Nixon

And I found that Conrad—sixty years before, in the time of a great peace—had been everywhere before me.
—V. S. Naipaul, “Conrad’s Darkness”

Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* has exerted a centripetal pull over Western representations of Africa unequaled in this century by the sway of any other text over any single continent. Journalists, historians, novelists, anthropologists, film-makers, advertising hacks and, most notably, travel writers, have drawn so routinely and with such license from the novella that the figure of Africa as a heart of darkness has become intelligible even to people who have never read any Conrad. The trope has accrued, in the process, a rhetorical force only distantly dependent on the context and form of its initial usage. The in-house tendencies of this figurative tradition have been fortified by their extension under certain circumstances to other, non-African regions of the tropical periphery (Caputo, Coppola, Didion). Yet such extensions have always been less insistent, with African nations being more obviously and routinely channeled through a succession of what Hayden White has dubbed “terminological determinisms” (White, 134).

The participation of travel writers in this neo-Conradian discourse has proved substantial and distinctively inflected. Writers implicated range from André Gide and Graham Greene in the colonial era through to V. S. and Shiva
Naipaul, Alberto Moravia, and Patrick Marnham in the period following
decolonization. In the case of the Naipauls, Conrad has exercized a particular
hold for several reasons. As a displaced writer, an immigrant and traveler
turned Englishman, and someone fascinated by the psychological dimensions
of colonial experience as well as by a notion of the “primitive,” he has provided
V. S. and Shiva Naipaul with their most direct point of entry into the main-
stream of British literature.

The Naipauls’ self-conscious affiliation with Conrad has resulted in their
projecting a tradition wherein the governing figure, the “heart of darkness,”
and a cluster of reiterated phrases around it have passed from one fin-de-siècle
fictional representation of an African colony into the “factual” rhetoric of
travel literature. In slipping from fiction to the literature of “fact,” this trope
and its constellation of phrases have accumulated a normative force, confining
Africa to an invented consistency that militates against certain kinds of infor-
mation as well as historically and regionally more specific representations. The
net effect is the image of a continent still debilitated by a measure of figurative
arrest.

The three regions that have preoccupied the Naipauls most—the Carib-
bean, India, and Africa—have all been overlaid to some degree with Heart
of Darkness. Trinidad is ranked by V. S. as “one of the Conradian dark places of
the earth,” as is India, by implication, in An Area of Darkness (Naipaul “Con-
rad’s Darkness” 203). But Africa is scored most deeply with this inscription: in
V. S.’s essays, “Conrad’s Darkness” and “A New King for the Congo: Mobutu
and the Nihilism of Africa”; in his Congo Diary—the title, like the river voyage
the book chronicles, openly imitative of Conrad; in his Central African novel,
A Bend in the River; and in Shiva’s travelogue, North of South: An African
Journey.

V. S. has written more directly than Shiva about this elective affinity
with Conrad. His description of the relationship is informed by his image of
himself as an exile, as a marooned, extra-traditional writer who resides in
England yet does not belong there. But Naipaul’s sense of affiliation to Conrad
goes well beyond that:

Conrad’s value to me is that he is someone who sixty or seventy years ago
mediated on my world, a world I recognize today. I feel this about no other
writer of the century. (“Conrad’s Darkness” 236)
And I found Conrad—sixty years before, in the time of a great peace—had
been everywhere before me... as a man offering a vision of the world’s half-
made societies as places which continuously made and unmade them-
selves, where there was no goal, and where always “something inherent in
the necessities of successful action... carried with it the moral degradation
of the idea.” (“Conrad’s Darkness” 233)

These statements hint at several dominant tendencies in the way both Naipauls
have appropriated Conrad. First, to “recognize today” a world which Conrad
wrote about sixty to seventy years back is to interpret that world as static—a central tenet of the Naipauls’ travelogues. On the “margins” of the globe, time is not of the essence; nations and cultures are impervious to change, bereft of history. One is therefore freer to represent such regions through Conrad’s language because in those parts of the world “then” and “now” are essentially interchangeable.

Second, and relatedly, it is worth marking how V. S.’s syntax casts these societies—“places which continuously made and unmade themselves”—as the agents of their own cyclical destruction. Such places are without history and incapable of becoming full (as opposed to “half-made”) societies largely because they are locked into a hermetic system of self-destruction. To ascribe such a view to Conrad is at least contentious, for he tended to offset any notion of indigenous futility by dramatizing more fully and consistently the trauma of an intruding colonial violence.

The third point to be made here returns us to the epigraph of the chapter: “And I found Conrad—sixty years before, in the time of a great peace—had been everywhere before me. . . .” That “found” underscores an assumption basic not only to the Naipauls’ neo-Conradian writings but to the broader heart of darkness tradition as well. For on this view, to write about Africa, in particular, through Conrad, is not so much to choose him as an ancestor, but to discover him already in place. He may be back in time, but to spell out Naipaul’s spatial metaphor, his imprint lies on the path ahead, waiting to be “found” on arrival. And so Conrad is presented as neither an invented nor a chosen starting point but a natural one. Naipaul’s statement, then, portraits in miniature how this particular intertextual tradition is dogged by circular, self-confirming tendencies.

North of South: Tradition and Prefiguration

A productive if slightly oblique point of entry into the question of the prefigurative power of Heart of Darkness in the Naipauls’ work is provided by Shiva’s preface to North of South, an account of the journey that he undertook through East Africa in 1977. The preface incorporates the letter Naipaul sent to his English publisher before embarking on the venture. Anxious to see what independent Africa had really achieved, Shiva asked in the letter:

How wide is the gap between the rhetoric of liberation and its day-to-day manifestations? How much cynicism is there? How much apathy? How much sheer incomprehension? How much fantasy? What kind of Marxism is possible in Africa? The answers to such questions cannot, I believe, be found in the abstract speculations of theorists and professional revolutionaries—who often simply don’t see the world in which they live. The answers, I feel, can be found only by experiencing the heat and dust, so to speak, of the countries themselves.” (Shiva Naipaul 14)
Here Naipaul draws an opposition between the deceits of abstract rhetoric on the one hand and the dependability of concrete, immediate observation on the other. Such appeals to the primary authority of the traveler's empirical experiences are a staple of the genre: to travel is truly to see for one's self. Yet it is tellingly ironic that, at the very moment when Shiva is affirming the superior observational powers of the outsider and the ineluctable value of his direct experience, he reaches for the ready literary phrase, "heat and dust," the title of a European novel on a colonial theme (Jhabvala). At one point Shiva pronounces, in exasperation, that "Africa is swathed in words," but he for one is more finely attuned to the rhetorical forms of nationalist politics than to the no less straightjacketing conventions of colonial representation (Shiva Naipaul 47).

Shiva's effort in his preface to expose the real Africa beneath the indigenous people's veneer of rhetoric foregrounds a problem that recurs in neo-Conradian discourse. Repeatedly, a writer's appeal to the "heart of darkness" trope, far from consolidating his argument, mystifies it in an overdeterminedly figurative direction. Likewise, when Naipaul seizes upon the literary phrase "heat and dust" in trying to capture the undistilled essence of Africa, he unwittingly introduces a rhetorical filter scarcely different from the platitudes he has sworn to dispense with. As a result, his preface, ostensibly an asseveration of disinterested empiricism, becomes instead a showcase for his shaping preconceptions.

I broach this general theoretical question here because North of South contains a dense sub-text of allusions to prior European representations of Africa by writers such as Karen Blixen, Elspeth Huxley, Mungo Park, Alberto Moravia, and Winston Churchill. Inevitably, Heart of Darkness heads the list of what Shiva considers to be pertinent antecedent accounts of Africa. Furthermore, it alone of all the Western texts Naipaul mobilizes in his effort to define the continent, is a work of fiction. North of South is strewn with amputated bits of Conrad. In speaking of an avaricious shoe-shine boy, Shiva remarks how "His greed did not recognize any limits. Anything, everything, was possible: he had lost touch with reality" (56), clearly echoing Conrad's statement in Heart of Darkness that "Anything— anything can be done in this country" (46). A page later, Naipaul drops, in passing, the phrase "orgiastic frenzy" (57, cf. Conrad 51, 92).

This tendency is brought to a head by his concluding sentiments:

Black and white deserved each other. Neither was worth the shedding of a single tear: both were rotten to the core.... Civilized man, it seems, can no more cope with prolonged exposure to the primitive than the primitive can cope with prolonged exposure to him. Everywhere, in the New World, in the South Seas, in Australia, his lusts, released from constraint, gained the upper hand. He too became a caricature of all that he claimed to represent. In European literature, the figure of Conrad's Kurtz stands as the supreme memorial to the civilized man's vulnerability to the call of the wild. Kurtz,
who had written so eloquently and with such easy conviction of “Progress” (“By the simple exercise of our will we can exert a power for good practically unbounded”) and of the White Man as Benevolent Deity, had given way, by the end, to the mad visions born of the craving for total power. “... the wilderness had found him out early, and had taken on him a terrible vengeance....” His degenerate suburban heirs, ruling to the South, still speak of Civilization and its Values. But their bullets defend only a system of servitude and plunder. Hopeless, doomed continent! Only lies flourished here. Africa was swaddled in lies—the lies of an aborted European civilization; the lies of liberation. Nothing but lies.” (Shiva Naipaul 347-48)

Naipaul invokes Conrad to give moral ballast to his personal disdain and ethical hauteur, his confidence that he stands aloof from the global cycle of corruption which has left the crudely polarized “civilized man” and “primitive” locked in a fateful embrace. Through his loose habits of appropriation, the movement of this passage effects a seemingly natural connection between Kurtz then and Kurtz now (in the nonfictional guise of his South African “heirs”) and, without argument, posits all of Africa as a single, integrated ethical system. From there it is an easy step to characterizing Africa as constitutionally deceitful. In the passage as a whole, one senses that the shortage of logical connections is concealed behind a screen of pseudo-Conradian narrative that is little more than a disjointed collage pieced together from the most customary phrases. And so Marlow’s moral dilemma over the relation between lies and unspeakable truths is pressed, some seventy-five years later, into the service of a blanket dismissal of the entire continent.

There is one final Conradian passage in North of South that calls for scrutiny: “The Masai—a condensation of the dark heart of Africa—have consistently aroused the admiration of Europeans. They have seemed (borrowing the language of Joseph Conrad) “savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent” (53). These two sentences throw into relief much that is suspect in the way Conrad has been taken up by Shiva. First, here, as in the preface, we find him in hot pursuit of an essence of Africa as he tries to reduce the continent to an image and a phrase. In naming the Masai as a condensation of the dark heart of Africa, Naipaul betrays an incapacity to distinguish between a basic Western trope for Africa and whatever might be essential to the continent itself. And even if this essence were something more than the figurative vapor circling a version of Conrad’s dark heart, why indulge the essentializing impulse at all? How unthinkable it would be for someone to write in the 1970s of the heart (let alone the dark heart) of Europe, as if the continent as a whole could be held by a phrase which failed to respect proud national and regional differences. In most Western discourse Africa remains—in no small part because of the Heart of Darkness legacy—the most internally undifferentiated continent; it is still commonly treated as a great monolithic slab. Furthermore, Conrad’s words—“savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent”—were applied not to the
Masai but to a representative of a people who inhabited, in fiction and fiction alone, a region of the Congo thousands of miles from Naipaul’s East Africa and the better part of a century back in time. Thus, not only do these invocations of *Heart of Darkness* elide crucial differences between the authoritative claims of factual and fictional rhetoric; they also disregard significant geographical differences and historical changes.

African nations fall so consistently foul of Shiva’s Manichean vision that a *New York Times* correspondent familiar with the region was prompted to remark: “One wonders how he failed to meet, or at least record, a single non-racist white or a single articulate, intelligent black” (Darnton 14). These deceptions of omission become most glaring when one observes that Naipaul’s ample curiosity about colonial writers’ views of black “primitivism” is nowhere matched by an equal interest in indigenous East African writers’ assessments of colonialism. Though Naipaul travels through three countries—Kenya, Tanzania, and Zambia—the sole black African text to which he affords any space is Meja Mwangi’s *Going Down River Road*. The absence of any mention of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o is especially eloquent. Where Naipaul allows himself to be waylaid by Conrad and Karen Blixen, he manages to bypass Ngũgĩ altogether, notwithstanding the latter’s status as one of the continent’s most celebrated living authors and a voluminous producer of novels, plays, and essays in which he assails precisely those colonial representations of Kenyan culture and history upon which Naipaul leans most heavily. He is also the founder of an innovative community theater which, at the very time of Naipaul’s visit to Kenya, had become the center of a smoldering controversy. One comes to recognize, then, that Naipaul’s appropriation of *Heart of Darkness* is part of a consistent preference for reading “Africa” through European representations of it. This partiality is complemented by a mistrust or incomprehension of insiders’ perspectives.

**Zaïre and Vidia’s African Atavism**

Perhaps, as one critic of Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* has suggested (necessarily tongue in cheek), Kurtz is “the biggest, fattest temptation to generalization in English literature” (Geng 71). That temptation lay more directly in V. S.’s than in Shiva’s path as he voyaged not through East Africa but, in commemorative fashion, down the Congo River once navigated by Conrad. Like Gide and Greene before him, and Moravia after him, V. S. Naipaul ventured down the Congo with a copy of *Heart of Darkness* cradled in his lap. On this trip, V. S. even more dramatically than Shiva, was drawn to Kurtz’s magnetic allure and allowed it to deflect his observations in the direction of a charismatic literariness which seems to make African “degeneracy” more intelligible. But this resonant style of figurative explanation can only succeed if more mundane political, historical and economic details are kept out of sight.
Naipaul's renavigation of the river generated three pieces: "A New King for the Congo: Mobutu and the Nihilism of Africa," A Congo Diary, and indirectly, the novel A Bend in the River. In an extraordinary passage in the first of these, V. S. reincarnates Kurtz in independent Zaire (which was officially known as the Congo until 1971). Writing of Pierre Mulele, a former Minister of Education who led a rebellion against the central government in 1964, Naipaul declares:

To Joseph Conrad, Stanleyville—in 1890 the Stanley Falls station—was the heart of darkness. It was there, in Conrad's story, that Kurtz reigned, the ivory agent degraded from idealism to savagery, taken back to the earliest ages of man, by wilderness, solitude and power, his house surrounded by impaled human heads. Seventy years later, at this bend in the river, something like Conrad's fantasy came to pass. But the man with "the inconceivable mystery of a soul that knew no restraint, no faith, no fear" was black, and not white; and he had been maddened not by contact with wilderness and primitivism, but with the civilization established by those pioneers who now lie on Mont Ngamliema, above the Kinshasa rapids. (Naipaul NKC 210)

Through this inventive legerdemain, Naipaul cancels in a gesture the entire twentieth century history of Congo/Zaire and reaffirms what we have been schooled to believe all along: that time is not of the essence in Africa, for nothing new can really happen there anyway. African history, he implies, and later reiterates in A Congo Diary (11, 13) is insistently repetitive to the point of stasis.

The crossing over of genres—from fiction to travelogue—in Shiva's North of South recurs here in a slightly altered fashion. For, by reciting "Conrad's fantasy" at "this bend in the river," the passage alludes back to Heart of Darkness but also forward to Naipaul's own fiction, erecting a "factual" bridge between the two and drawing both of them closer to an interrupted but apparently consistent narrative of actual African events. But what events is Naipaul alluding to? Mulele's followers did kill many people, often cruelly, as did other Zairean factions; as did the 8,600 Belgian paratroopers who invaded the country to shore up corporate interests in the copper-rich Katanga province in 1960; as did the Belgian, American, South African, and British mercenaries who battled left-wing secessionists in 1964. One should be emphatic here: "The process of restoring the authority of Kinshasa was often accompanied by massacres comparable in scale to the assassinations by the rebels" (Crowder 729). And while the Mulelists' actions were violent, they were by no means without "restraint": they made a policy of respecting traditional chiefs while attacking officials whom they considered to be neo-colonial appointees (Fox et al. 103).

My point is not to vindicate the Mulelists' actions but to question the wisdom of equating Kurtz with the Zairean rebel leader in a fashion that sets up a causal relation between their locale and their morality, reinscribing that easy ethical geography whereby Kurtz's behavior and Mulele's become most intelligible as emanations of place. (Certainly, while associating Kurtz with Mulele,
Naipaul distinguishes them on one point: Kurtz was dragged down by African savagery while Mulele, far worse, was purportedly destroyed by his inability to entertain the prospect of civilization). Naipaul's word for this apparently endemic African degeneration is “nihilism”—a word he introduces in the essay's title and repeatedly uses to cement together Kurtz, Mulele, Zaire's President Mobutu, and ultimately the entire continent. Buttressed by invocations of Conrad, “nihilism” in turn fortifies Naipaul's thinking not only in the Mobutu essay, but in A Congo Diary as well. Mulele's rebellion is cited as an instance of this “African nihilism, the rage of primitive men coming to themselves and finding that they have been fooled and affronted”; the rule of Mobutu—“the great African nihilist”—embodies the same impulse but without the bloodshed (“New King” 208, 210).

Naipaul's notion of African nihilism is nourished in this essay by its connection to an ill-used Conradian pessimism. Blending Conrad's two African tales, Naipaul finds contemporary counterparts to the weak colonials, “unredeemed by an idea, not a sentimental pretence but an idea; and an unselfish belief in the idea,” people, in Naipaul's words, “too simple for an outpost of progress” (“New King” 207). Reading “An Outpost of Progress” as a timeless “story of the congruent corruptions of colonizer and colonized,” Naipaul is able to employ it here and elsewhere in the service of his leveling vision of Third World nihilism, a vision that is scrupulously pessimistic precisely because he insists, like Shiva in the final pages of North of South, that the corruption in the former colonies is equally the fault of those who did the colonizing and those who were colonized (The Return 75). Both Naipauls quite consistently disregard the sequence of corruption and the stubborn legacy of colonial decrepitude. Understandably, a more nuanced historical analysis might jeopardize their grand perception of Africa as the necessary home of nihilism and insanity.

The town prophesied in “An Outpost of Progress” did indeed appear and then vanish again, in Naipaul's view, for the want of “a deliberate belief” (“New King” 207). Through a rhetoric of analogy which is invested with a determining force, the failures of contemporary Zaire are made to speak of “the great African wound, “self-wounding and nihilistic” actions which are “part of no creative plan” (“New King” 218). Analogously, “the ideas of responsibility, the state and creativity are ideas brought by the visitor; they do not correspond, for all the mimicry of language, to African aspirations” (“New King” 218). I would offset this particular bit of racial slander by tendering that the “visitor” has brought other more damaging ideas.

One of these ideas was colonialism, another the Cold War. To begin with, let it be stressed that the Belgian colonial legacy was particularly dismal. Of the 4645 most senior executive positions in the Congolese bureaucracy in 1960, the year of the country's independence, only three were Zairian (Crowder 718). In such a sprawling country, a strong bureaucracy was essential for any hope of national cohesion. Nor were the departing colonial administrators readily replaced: Belgian educational policy had left the country with a
total of seventeen university graduates, and not a single doctor, lawyer, architect, or professor (Mazrui 53). This dearth of trained personnel was just as strongly felt in the new army, for, at the moment of independence, the officers’ corps was entirely European. In sum, an educational shortage of that magnitude cannot be remedied in a decade or two.

The disarray occasioned by such paltry preparation for independence was compounded by the Cold War which, in the opening years of the 1960s, was at its iciest with American global policy also at its most interventionist. The United States quickly determined that Patrice Lumumba, the new republic’s first Prime Minister, would be unsympathetic to American interests, so the CIA had him overthrown and assassinated (Crowder, Ray, Njongala-Ntalaja). Even one of his bitterest enemies, the Katangese foreign minister Evaniste Kimbe, conceded that “only Lumumba might have been big enough to govern the Congo” and that there was no one to step into the breach (Mahoney 70). American and Belgian mining interests also instigated and sustained the secession of copper-rich Katanga, the country’s wealthiest province. Thus, for the first four years of its independence, Zaire juddered beneath a rush of largely foreign-sponsored secessions and uprisings and of accompanying incursions of foreign troops—Belgian paratroopers, international mercenaries, and United Nations forces.

As early as 1961, the United States had singled out Mobutu for support and ever since then, with the exception of a short interlude in 1974-75 when Mobutu undertook an abortive attempt to nationalize industry, Zaire has been a client autocracy under American patronage. Mobutu could simply not have sustained his lengthy rule without American funds. A 1975 document from the AID (part of the World Bank) Development Assistance Program for Zaire expresses the objectives for this support quite candidly:

(1) to maintain U.S. accessibility to raw materials which are in abundant supply in Zaire;

(2) to foster U.S. investment in Zaire so that we will have access to the Zaire market; and

(3) to sustain our political interests in Central Africa, bearing in mind that Zaire is the “bellweather” for political stability in this part of the world.

(Quoted in Gran 310)

The same document flies in the face of all the data by deducing that “there is also evidence that President Mobutu has a desire to use his power for the benefit of all Zaireans” (Gran 310).

Given this context, to what extent is the derelict condition of Zaire best explained by creating a composite character of Kurtz-Mulele-Mobutu and by elegant hop, skip and jumping between Conrad’s Congo of the 1890s and the Zaire of 1975 with almost no stops in between? To what degree do those imperious phrases—about outposts of progress, about enterprises without deliberate
beliefs and unredeemed by ideas—displace other less resonant, more complex explanations? And how far is Naipaul's perception of “a country trapped and static” predetermined by his insistence on tailoring Zaïre to Conrad's distant representations? Finally, precisely because Naipaul's fatalism about Africa is also an accusation, that of being stuck in time and unable to adapt to “visitors” ideas such as “responsibility, the state, and creativity,” one should insist that his isolation of nihilism as the continent's defining characteristic be tested, in this instance, against an understanding of Zaïre's historical and economic dependencies.

Nothing could be further from my purpose than to defend the heinous Mobutu, a man for whom the word kleptocrat might have been personally coined. What I do challenge, however, is Naipaul's portrait of Mobutu and Mulele as emanations of a timeless, stable African nihilism. A more historical, less bellettristic and less atavistic account of the construction of Zaïrean nationhood might have exposed Mobutu's corrupt leadership as an international phenomenon, not as an expression of some African essence. Mobutu is, to a significant extent, an interactive product of colonial and Cold War interventionism.

In the closing words of the Mobutu essay, Naipaul writes:

To arrive at this sense of a country trapped and static, eternally vulnerable, is to begin to have something of the African sense of the void. It is to begin to fall, in the African way, into a dream of a past—the vacancy of river and forest, the hut in the brown yard, the dugout—when the dead ancestors watched and protected, and the enemies were only men. (“New King” 219)

But Naipaul matches this “African” atavism, which he reads into the very landscape, with an atavism all of his own. He can only make sense of his strange environment by imagining himself back into the position of Conrad in a reconstructed narrative in which Mulele and Mobutu are coerced into appearing as throwbacks to Kurtz. Recollecting his river odyssey, Naipaul notes in his diary: “Hard to believe in that thousand-mile journey—so repetitive the scenes, the dug-outs, the huts. The heart of darkness. The effect on a man of 1975, a journey undertaken deliberately: yet still with its elements of the mysterious, the dark” (A Congo Diary 41). At just such moments, when his perceptions and understanding are obstructed, Naipaul is most apt to draw on a Conradian phrase in an attempt to give definition to his experiences. For it is primarily his assurance in superimposing a deliberate, well-mapped itinerary of the imagination onto Zaïre that enables him to interpret the place with any confidence.

It is not surprising, therefore, to discern a note of alarm when he deduces that “History has disappeared. Even the Belgian colonial past. And no one, African, Asian, European, [in Zaïre] has heard of Conrad or Heart of Darkness” (A Congo Diary 13). For a Western outsider, Conrad's steamboat voyage is so obviously the route to follow—literally and imaginatively—through Zaïre, that
Naipaul’s realization of the insiders’ ignorance of Conrad and their capacity to do without Conrad’s mediations removes them and their society from the bounds of comprehension. Yet the crowning irony is that this very incomprehensibility does not cause Naipaul any self-mistrust; it does not challenge him to reconsider his relationship to Zaïre by throwing into relief the limitations of Conrad as an interpretive tool. Instead, Naipaul can contain his alarm by recasting his estrangement not as a relationship but as an attribute of the environment. And by substituting incomprehensibility for alienation, he can conveniently take deeper refuge in Conrad, confirming that author’s prescience by perceiving, all about him, an impenetrability which he interprets as an unchanging quality of place rather than an expression of the distance between a traveler primed by Conrad and a society both ignorant of the latter’s writings and bearing the scantiest relation to them.

As an appendix to the Naipauls’ reliance on Conrad to mediate between them and African countries, one should add that V. S. caused a considerable stir by threatening to sue the magazine Discovery (distributed only to holders of the American Express Gold Card) on finding that one of its writers had lifted, unacknowledged, the above cited passage equating Kurtz with Mulele. It is scarcely coincidental that the author of an article on Africa in a glossy travel magazine should have chosen to plagiarize precisely the bit of Naipaul that leans most heavily on Heart of Darkness, for it is exactly that handed-down Africa that Western tourists would find most exotic yet most consolingly familiar.

**Conclusion**

Even amidst the expanded range of representational options in the post-colonial era, the selectively transmitted, overdetermined components of *Heart of Darkness* have retained an aggregate force with the power to close off other discursive possibilities. The Conradian route has become so well worn in the representational history of Africa primarily because of a common perception of Conrad as trailblazer, but also because of visiting authors’ routine pursuit of each other’s tracks. Gide dedicates his travelogue to Conrad and journeys up the Congo; Alberto Moravia travels both their routes—one of his pieces, “Congo on my Mind,” is billed as “a voyage upriver, in the spirit of Joseph Conrad,” and a chapter in a second of his African travelogues is entitled “In the Footsteps of Gide”; Shiva Naipaul, in turn, defers to Conrad, Moravia and Huxley, and Huxley applauds Naipaul’s book in the *New York Times*.²

Some of these authors do, on occasion, edge toward pondering the implications of their tendency to use Conrad as a kind of base camp and each other as lean-tos along the way. Moravia comes closest to interrogating the problem of prior representation, of what Evelyn Waugh once called places that are “already fully labelled” (Waugh 13). Moravia’s account of his third voyage up
the Zaïre River in the imaginary wake of Conrad's steamer begins with an appropriate insight into the label's capacity to stand in for the locale itself:

A word gives a name to a place and can also transform the place into literature—which, in turn, is substituted for the place. After Homer, in certain parts of the Mediterranean you are no longer traveling in Italy or Greece but in the Iliad or the Odyssey. And it could be said that today, after Conrad, you are not just in Zaïre, or Malaysia, but in Heart of Darkness or in Lord Jim. (34)

This substitution could be described as a literary variant of the process whereby, in Dean MacCannell's terms, the marker of a tourist spot may come to take precedence over the sight itself (123-31). Once Western literary travelers enter "Conrad territory," they are expected to legitimate their experiences by invoking the verbal marker "heart of darkness," which stands as a guarantor that they were in touch with the real thing.

Although Gide never reflects as directly as Moravia on the prefigurative shaping of his experience through the literary labeling of the places he visits, he at least ponders, in the Congo narrative, the power of his anticipatory imaginings about the voyage. Given how steeped he is in Heart of Darkness and self-conscious about Conrad's precedent, this form of self-scrutiny clearly includes the impact of the novella upon his expectations. That much is suggested, for example, by Gide's remark that "My imaginary idea of this country was so lively... that I wonder whether, in the future, this false image will not be stronger than my memory of the reality and whether I shall see, Bangui, for instance, in my mind's eye as it is really, or as I first of all imagined it would be" (48).

The Naipauls, by contrast, are thoroughly disinterested in quizzing their own predispositions, among which the rediscovery of Conrad in Africa ranks highly. What one might have expected from their writings—but seldom gets—is at least an awareness of the accretive force of prior representations, of the power of dominant images to bond together and thicken into stereotypes. It is these precisely phrased stereotypes which they do not interrogate and which, as travelers, they allow to become their controlling preconceptions.

V. S. Naipaul, in his essay on Conrad, alludes to an analogous process of prejudgment, that of reading with set expectations, and argues:

We take to novels our own ideas of what the novel should be; and those ideas are made by our needs, our education, our background or perhaps our ideas of our background. Because we read, really, to find our what we already know.... ("Conrad's Darkness" 231)

What V. S. and Shiva seem reluctant to acknowledge is that in traveling as in reading, they can set out so well-wadded with received expectations that, when purportedly venturing into the "heart" of Africa, they proceed instead to voyage, once again, deeper and deeper into the imagined heart of Conrad's fiction.
NOTES

1 See also Naipaul's remark in A Congo Diary: "The Intercontinentals of Africa—the outposts of progress" (36). Naipaul has expressed a special fondness for "An Outpost of Progress" (a story which was, in a sense, a trial run for Heart of Darkness), declaring it to be "the finest thing Conrad wrote ("Conrad's Darkness" 232). Naipaul's affection for the story has been further described by M. Banning Eyre, in "Naipaul at Wesleyan."

2 In this context, one should mention three African travel books that appeared during the 1980s and build explicitly on Conrad's example: Joseph Hone's Africa of the Heart, Paul Hyland's The Black Heart: A Voyage in Central Africa, and Patrick Marnham's Fantastic Invasion. Although Marnham's book takes both its title and epigraph from Conrad, it otherwise skirts the most persistent enticements of the neo-Conradian tradition: the notions of Africa as a heart of darkness and of the continent as Kurz's turf. The P. B. S. documentary on the River Congo (broadcast Nov. 2, 1985 in the series River Journeys), also makes some of the obligatory bows to Conrad's text. The popular American travel writer, Edward Hoagland, has reflected glancingly (and uncritically) on the way Conrad's Africa has been appropriated by certain of the later writers.

3 In an inset accompanying Moravia's New York Times essay we can observe Conrad's insistent itinerary passing from the world of literary travelers into the world of tourists. According to the inset: "Some agencies specializing in custom travel will, however, put together a trip for those who wish to follow in the wake of Joseph Conrad. In New York, three such agencies are..." (68).

WORKS CITED

Apocalypse Now. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola.


