

Enlightenment and the 'heart of darkness': (neo)imperialism in the Congo, and elsewhere

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'But one man haunts me: he fell about, raving, down by the river, wearing tatters of cloth, filthy multi-coloured bands on arms and legs, wide eyes staring through glassless welder's goggles, lost somewhere between initiation in the forest and 20th century Zaire' (Hyland, P. *The black heart. A voyage into Central Africa*. 1988)

That man, that multi-coloured harlequin, figures this essay. His ravings will surface more than once – as the fantasies of the colonist, the Western anthropologist, the writer, the researcher - and we too (a 'we' of solidary optimism) will perhaps look at his world, our world, through the 'glassless welder's goggles' of methodology and knowledge-production. But before we get there, we need to sketch the occasion of this writing, to introduce the performance.

Prologue

This essay addresses the 'state of qualitative inquiry' twice; first, as an allegory of a contemporary epistemological imperialism; second, as an experiment in thinking and writing otherwise. Lacking any manifesto, distrusting abstract envisioning, it offers a worked example not of the future but of the present reconsidered. The ambition is to be multi-disciplinary, to work the literary into that conjured literality, to address the present as a past-future, and to do so by way of analogy, juxtaposition and allegory¹. The subject is the modernity and madness of 'imperialism', past, present, historical and virtual. The setting is the 'chaosmos' of the Congo, starting with the trading 'stations' H.M. Stanley planted on that river in the late 19th century.

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Station 1



There is a current dispute between qualitative and quantitative research. It is international, acrimonious, and there are elements of state-sponsored support 'in the West' for a return to a kind of neopositivist quantitative inquiry and a further colonisation of private and professional spaces (Said, 1983). In the UK, a recent article by Oakley (2006) exemplifies this. It criticises a motley cast of UK qualitative researchers for their conservatism and resistance to 'key technologies' of Modernity (Oakley, 2006, p. 65), like RCTs and systematic reviewing. Behind some of this she detects 'postmodernism, a perspective on knowledge that appears to be particularly dominant among education academics in the UK' (p. 72). Basically, she decries 'resistance' to the new 'technologies' belatedly applied to the educational arena. They replace 'old tradition' (p.72), craft knowledge, and tribal territories. Modernity squares up to tradition, bringing order and reason to primitive thinking.

It is instructive to return to the last 'paradigm wars' between the quantitative and the qualitative, in the 1960s and 70s (Schwandt, 2000; Denzin, 2006). For example, a deconstruction of the manoeuvres made to 'inaugurate the new' (Stronach, 1997) in relation to educational evaluation and research (eg: Glaser and Strauss, Stake, House) saw a number of moves being made. In these, there was inevitably an emphasis on criticising the past and so constructing an oppositional paradigm. But in writing itself against the old, it limited the possibilities of writing itself into the new. As we enter a new cycle of epistemological dispute, it is important not simply to repeat these arguments, even if they were successful first time round. We need to continue to make moves in a dialectic (or some other sort of dynamic) that is *internal* to differences between qualitative approaches rather than a response to external difference.

Like Lather (personal communication), however, we have found it easier to pick and unpick arguments at the level of philosophy and epistemology, and more difficult to translate these into 'new' forms of ethnographic writing, poststructuralist (etc) 'cases', and different ways of orchestrating the interdisciplinary.

With this in mind we invoke other, far more important, contestations - this time in Africa, in the Congo - between the traditional and the modern, progress and regress, empire and its resistance. But there may be homologies of relation, if not of scale and significance; and the

accusation of bathos may distract us from a certain mimesis (Taussig, 1993). Such a ‘case’ may be, if we tell it right, an allegory of ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ empires, and of past and present in critical juxtaposition.

Station 2



‘The pupils sang in a language that was neither French nor their own tongue. It was a curious gibberish which the villagers took for French, and the French for the native language. Everyone clapped.’ (Droogers, 1980, citing Oyono, F., 1964. Ferdinand Oyono, Écrivain Camerounais.)

It will become important in this account that Droogers’ ethnography of the Wagenia is centred on the city of Kisangani, formerly Stanleyville, deep in the Congo interior at the limits of the

navigable river. Indeed it is in the dangerous wake of the 7 cataracts of the Stanley Falls that the Wagenia build their fishtraps. In the 19th century, Stanley was impressed by the Wagenia, who occupied what was to become ‘Stanleyville’. They were an ‘industrious and inventive people’ with whom he sought ‘partnership’ (Droogers, 1980, p.159-160). This was in accord with Stanley’s and King Leopold’s International Association strategy for the ‘Dark Continent’:

‘..the novel mission of sowing along its banks civilised settlements, to peacefully conquer and subdue it, to remould it in harmony with modern ideas into National States, within whose limits the European merchant shall go hand in hand with the dark African trader, and justice and order shall prevail, and murder and lawlessness and the cruel barter of slaves shall for ever cease.’ (Stanley, vol. 1, 1885, p. 24/60)²

As Pons noted in the 1950s, the Wagenia were ‘largely refractory to outside influences’ (Pons, 1969, p. 22), and continued to fish the rapids in the traditional way. They also continued to conduct elements of their ‘palaver democracy’ (Droogers, 1980, p. 48) wherein elements of the modern and the traditional were juxtaposed – urban/rural, fisherman/urban worker, Christian/pagan, ethnic member/*citoyen*. However, the initiation ceremonies that Droogers later recounts

² The two volume account of Stanley’s precolonial activities in the Congo region was an account of empire, of course, but much more an *act* of empire: ‘..the words of enterprise and of action, it is hoped, will move many a man out of the 325, 000, 000 of Europe to be up and doing’ (1885, vol.1, viii)

feature liminalities shot through by these other contexts. Ritual here is dynamic, concluded Droogers, constantly picking up designations from the modern – camp ‘Kennedy’, ‘Laboratoire Houston’– while retaining the structures of tradition, such as liminality, circumcision, incorporation:

‘He had a black line drawn, with ash or charcoal, from the crown of his head to his crotch, dividing his body into two halves. These two halves were painted in two different colours, mostly yellow and white, though sometimes also pink and white’ (Droogers, 1980, p. 164)

There is still an ‘incapsulation’ of the new within the old (Pons, 1969, p. 22). Later, Droogers notes further discrepancies. He recounts the parodic Archbishop, a small child with surplice and mitre, blessing the crowd to their vast amusement, and ‘journalists’ and ‘commentators’ giving burlesque accounts of events. The latter ‘perched atop the camp fence, gave a running commentary at the top of their voice, and often in a comical manner, on what was happening inside the fence’ (Droogers, 1980, p. 180). One liminality transects another, and an element of sympathetic magic attends these expressions of ‘policy borrowing’, as it might be termed elsewhere. Interestingly, the traffic between modern and traditional only succeeds in one direction. The old can borrow freely and entertainingly from the new, but when the new try to borrow from the old...

‘The first time the drum was played at a Catholic mass the entire congregation burst out laughing’ (Droogers, 1980, p. 361)

Finally, there is a further sense of things falling apart, methodologically speaking:

‘During one circumcision ceremony (...) one of the men called out loudly to those standing about that anyone wanting to know anything about the initiation should ask André’ [André Droogers, the anthropologist who sought to ‘record’ the ritual] (Droogers, 1980, p. 18).

That is to paint the ‘scene’ from the viewpoint of conventional ethnography. But if we return to the quotation that introduces *Station 2*, we can read an enormous condescension built into the punch-line, ‘Everyone clapped.’ The quotation follows a familiar joke structure: X mistakes something for Y; Y mistakes something for X; only Z knows the error of their ways and induces laughter from an audience, who then share in his superiority. In that spirit note the ‘blanks’

written into this account, as well as the hidden 'blanc' who writes it, the missing hand of a white narrator. What is written out (of the 'modern' possibility) is 'gibberish' as a pedagogical possibility, as part of a learning process or even a creolisation. What is also written out (of the 'traditional' possibility) is an ethnographic detail that Droogers notes but does not connect with his example: the Wagenia initiation ceremony involved the singing of songs that were *traditionally* incomprehensible. Initiation was not about instruction, as an informant told him: 'Camp is not for instruction, it is only aimed at making one a man' (Droogers, 1980, p. 266). So the 'curious gibberish' – those ravings of the 'in-between' - can be undermined both from 'modern' and 'traditional' perspectives. Taken together, these visions mock the god's eye goggles of the methodologist, and his claims to sort the One from the Other.

Station 3



Thus far, Kisangani is the 'edge' of the navigable, a city on the periphery of forest and river, a vast distance from the normality and security of the imperial sea (Conrad 1897/1988, p. 121). It is a final object for imperial grasp. But it has a long history as a temporal edge as well. In the late 19th century, the upper Congo was mooted as a kind of last frontier for 'free trade', a prime

location for the global enterprise of 'Christianity and Commerce'.

A meeting in Manchester in October 1884 expresses that happy resolution of spirit and body. Manchester Chamber of Commerce was addressed by Henry Morton Stanley. Tribute was paid to Livingstone, who apparently 'fell a victim to Science' (1884, p3). Stanley was introduced as a man who had journeyed up the Congo in order 'to introduce civilisation, and to plant commerce' (p 4). He spoke on behalf of King Leopold's International Association of the Congo, arguing against Portuguese control of the Congo estuary, and promising rich cotton markets to the Manchester mills. 'The more trade thrives, the more benefits to mankind are multiplied, and nearer to gods do men become' (p 15). There was an efficient arithmetic to this proximity. If so many miles of African coastline currently yielded so much income, then how much more would the vast Congo hinterland supply? The answer was exact : 6 and ¼ million yards of Manchester cloth per annum (*loud cheers*). Christianity would stimulate demand for Sunday

Best cloth, and good Christian burial even more for shrouds. Seldom can Commerce have been so closely wrapped around Christianity:

'There are 40,000,000 of naked people beyond that gateway, and the cotton spinners of Manchester are waiting to clothe them' (p 27)

Stanley's writing is typified by a kind of imperial arithmetic that is constantly working out the size of the market, the depth of the river, the costs of access, the value of timber, and the possibilities of profit. The extrapolations are no doubt fantastic, but the precision remarkable, and in ways still familiar. The Congo becomes a quantified and accountable object. This is Imperialism as Science, and Science as Imperialism wrapped in Religion.

Nowadays, it would be easy to forget – and Congo/Zaire is *the* place of forgetting, as Fabian's *Forgetful remembering: a colonial life in the Congo*³ would remind us - that 1950s Kisangani was a large and prospering modern city. Pons declared himself the pioneer in its study: 'Stanleyville itself had never before been visited by a sociologist' (Pons, 1969, p. 4). He studied 'Avenue 21' in Stanleyville, producing a vivid ethnographic account of 'extreme tribal heterogeneity, the rapid growth of the immigrant population, and the system of urban administration' (p.5). He offered 'both-and' accounts of 'tradition' and 'modernity' and offered a 'situational selection' thesis. It was clear to him that indigenous groups in Stanleyville recognised both class and tribe, and related belief and behaviour to the categories of *kizungu* (literally, the place of the European - *muzungu*, and hence modern, civilised) and *kisendji* (traditional, uncivilised). The Wagenia were *kisendji*, although astute in the market for fish. Pons concluded:

'..there were in the neighbourhood few ingredients of deep social antagonism or of particularly exclusive alignments. The urban-rural links of members of most tribes had little or no economic content and thus offered no particular inducement to tribal exclusiveness' (Pons, 1969, p. 262)

³ Fabian identifies 'memory work' as 'work carried out as remembering and forgetting' (Fabian 2003: 490), drawing also on his study of Tshibumba, the Zairean street artist whose pictorial history of Zaire from Portuguese incursion to the 1980s featured in his remarkable *Remembering the Present* (1996; Stronach et al., 2007). In 'post-modern' Kisangani, the memorialization of the modern ceases.

There is an important lacuna in this account. Much later, Pons returns to Stanleyville/ Kisangani in order to update his research. He is unable to do so because of civil war, and is confined to a hotel until he can escape to the airport. Whence that war from nowhere, in terms of the account of 'social relations' that Pons produced? The same lacuna appears in Droogers' later study – in which there are elements of tradition, modernity, adaptation and change but nowhere in the analysis or contextualisation any substantial and connected account to the already numerous outbreaks of violence in and around the city. There seems to be something in the very polarity between the traditional and the modern that suppresses realities of violence and war.

Another dilemma is that with Pons and - especially - Droogers, the ethnographic record comes to an end. Kisangani becomes too dangerous a place for close-up writing, and returns to the kind of blankness that Stanley and Conrad encountered from their Western perspectives in the 19th century. Just as Congo/Zaire drops out of its first modern economy into a kleptocratic 'second economy' - a 'paradigm of informalization and criminalization of the state and the economy' (Petit & Mutambwe, 2005, p. 472, 467) so too does Kisangani in terms of any notion of a 'knowledge economy'. The blank is back, this time as political erasure rather than geographical remoteness.

Station 4



Painting 28
Victims of the Miners' Strike

'Something strange must surely lie in the vast space occupied by total blankness on our maps..' (Henry Morton Stanley, 1874, cited Hyland 1988, p. 207)

This is our recurring theme. The 'blank' of the Congo, the reiterative sense of a dangerous interior, of a darkness that Stanleyville typified perhaps better than any other place since it was Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

It was the 'Inner Station' of the emblematic figure of Kurtz. Raving at the end, 'his soul was mad' (Conrad, 1904, p.95), but somehow still connected to our Modernity.

And of course not just Conrad, for this blank, darkness, mystery, 'the horror' (Conrad, 1904, p. 100), was not just a matter for missionaries, colonists, and travellers. It even briefly attracted revolutionaries like Che Guevara. Guevara tried to make that blank a focus for world revolution.

He wrote that '[o]ur viewpoint is that the problem of the Congo is the problem of the world' (Anderson, 1997, p. 622), and sought to support revolution until warned off by Nasser (ibid.: 623), who advised him that he ought not play at 'Tarzan, a white man among blacks, leading and protecting them'. Again, a ghostly echo of Kurtz. More generally, the 30-year Mobutu 'kleptocracy' (Petit & Mutambwe, 2005, p. 469) owed its success over Soviet-backed opposition to the support of the West. Indeed, the US and Belgium were implicated in the murder of the democratically elected first Prime Minister, Lumumba.

Yet it is the literary traffic upriver to the periphery that has been far more influential in the West. Stanleyville/Kisangani is the setting for V.S. Naipaul's *Bend in the River*. Lindqvist's *Exterminate all the brutes* (1997) is a quotation from Conrad, who was the subject of Edward Said's doctoral dissertation (Said, 1966). Mark Twain earlier fulminated against Belgian oppression in the Congo (1905). Graham Greene's *Congo Journal* was the basis for *A Burnt-out Case* (1960). Kurtz's 'Inner Station' – that first literary Kisangani – has also featured symbolically in film (*African Queen*, *Apocalypse Now*). Nor are these merely historical references. Chinua Achebe has recently attacked the racist nature of the *Heart of Darkness*, a book which he feels remains an obsession for European and North American audiences (Achebe, 2006), while current web-sites seek to connect 'the heart of darkness' to the West's current demonisations of the Other, specifically, of course, Baghdad (eg: Charles, 2004)⁴. It is mysterious that the Congo should have acquired such a literary reputation for being so peripheral and so central at the same time: the neighbouring Zambezi, a watershed away, flows book-less to the sea.

So the 'periphery' turns out to be the farthest point of all edges, the centre of all peripheries and so the Same of all Others, an eccentric place of dark and enduring pilgrimage. Kisangani and the Congo River remain as much a metaphor of our times as for the late 19th century and for the 20th century. After all that, it seems unsurprising that Kisangani was further indicted as the dark origin of HIV/AIDS, a place where colonial lack of hygiene in relation to polio vaccination

⁴ One reviewer wanted the racist nature of Conrad's classic to be foregrounded, offering as a model Davis' recent recanting concerning its use (2006). But the neo-imperialism allegorised here would regard such a reduction of the debate to a consideration of the rights and wrongs of any canonical entry as another instance of the Letter to the Intended going astray (see Station 7). A racist text in a US college curriculum is one thing, an ongoing genocide another. Of course, it is the point of this piece that they are allegorically related, that the ambiguities in Conrad's text address a chasm and provoke a certain mimesis of relation, but a resolution that 'politically corrects' a canon ignores a myriad of other homologies that sustain the oppressive relation. The 'heart of darkness' is not corrected by such excisions, as I take Conrad to have also implied.

and postcolonial strife united to form the global virus.⁵ The West has a cultural fascination with that destination, that station as destiny. In literary terms this is a highly-populated blank, one that has an obvious imperial collusion built into it, in terms of certain versions of civilisation and backwardness, tradition and modernity, enlightenment and bestiality, but also – on a favourable reading of Conrad – a persistent unsettlement.

Station 5



There was a ‘witch child’ case recently in the UK. The ‘Thames Torso’ was widely covered in the media as an example of ritualised sacrifice practised in the UK by African immigrants. TV Channel 4 made a documentary. The imagery was of the ‘Dark Continent’:

‘The documentary really encapsulates the broader message now being conveyed to the general public: the Thames torso is the tip of a massive and malevolent iceberg, pointing to a thriving underground transnational trade in African children and body parts for occult purposes’ (Saunders, 2003, p.57).

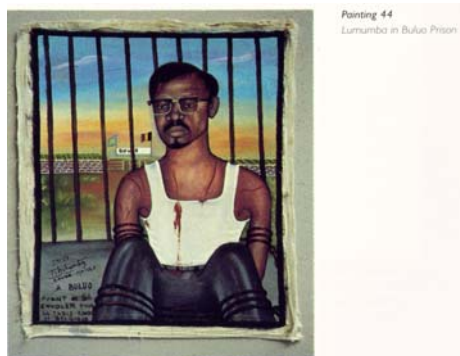
Saunders points to the demonisation of the ‘African’, and the depressing ‘heart of darkness imagery’ (Saunders, 2003, p. 64). The police identify the body as West African in probable origin but consult a white South African expert on ‘muti’ killings. 2000 miles and a thousand African cultures disappear. The homogenous assumption is clear. Nelson Mandela (presumably as *the* Collective African) is persuaded to appeal for information. The moral panic is directed at global flows of immigration, at the African as the definitive Other, and works the modern/primitive, darkness/light, them/us polarities:

‘A savage and superstitious Africa threatens to undo the moral fibre of a righteous Europe through globalisation’ (Saunders, 2003, p. 60).

⁵ See Chitnis et al (2000). ‘Origin of HIV Type 1 in Colonial French Equatorial Africa? *AIDS Research and Human Retroviruses*, 16(1), 5 – 8. They report but do not support that claim of origins.

Further 'witch child' sensations followed in 2006, when BBC2 broadcast 'Witch child', a documentary on 'Combat Spirituel', a Congolese witchcraft/Christianity sect that, again through immigration, was active in the UK. This time the white expert was Dr Richard Hoskins. Hoskins had long experience in the Congo, apparently, and pointed out that these brutal practices were condemned there – and were modern, 'evangelical' Christianised practices that a traditional *nganga* would not countenance. The expert condemns these racist interpretations as the light diminishes until only the gleam of his eye can be seen, and then a further fade to total darkness. This time the *Heart of Darkness* is visually performed as a kind of neo-imperial subconscious even as it is simultaneously denied in words.

Station 6



Today, Kisangani is a beleaguered town, cut off from the rest of the Congo, bereft of rail, road and river connections. It is a place of recurrent massacres, riots and coups, with around 20 different military and national groups engaged in war, plunder, and rape. It was a centre for conflict in 'Africa War I' and 'Africa War II', wars that remain a blank for almost everyone outside Africa. Estimates of casualties

vary greatly, but Scherrer reckons around 2.5 million dead in that region of the Congo (Scherrer, 2002, p. 53). The last decade has seen extensive interventions by Uganda, Rwanda, Rwandan rebels, Congolese factions, Zimbabwe, Namibia and others. Up to 200,000 troops have been involved, making the war the largest in African history, and the cause of massive displacements of peoples.⁶ Yet it is for the West *the* forgotten war, a blank.

Fabian argues that forgetting is an achievement peculiar to the Congo. We argue here that the 'missing' history and contemporary state of the Congo is just such an achievement in studious forgetting, driving a crucial moral manifestation of Modernity *almost* out of sight and mind. By so doing, we suppress recognition that such an imperialising periphery is central to our European and/or white selves, and has much to say about what lies inside the benign surfaces of our notions of the modern, the enlightened, the civilised, the educated, and the progressive.

⁶ The Rwandan genocide amounted to between half and a million people. It was belatedly recognised as such, though still dominated in western public consciousness by similar though far less substantial events in the former Yugoslavia. The UK press expressed particular horror that genocide could happen *in Europe*. Yet Europe has a strong claim to be both the home and heart of genocide from the 15th to the 21st century (Lindquist, 1997).

It expresses an authoritarian violence, both symbolic and real, pointing both inwards and outwards. Perhaps it is the heart of darkness in the split centre of our enlightenment narratives, just as it was for the sincere double-talk of Stanley and Livingstone. But we can double that double-talk by recognising that the Conradian metaphor is *mysteriously* insistent and pervasive. In the 1980s Hyland undertakes his journey into the 'black heart', puzzled by his 'search for the unmarked grave of a man who never lived' (Hyland, 1988, p. 136). Conrad expressed some of that inexpressible mystery in the figure of the harlequin, mute, alien, multi-coloured, incomprehensible, yet accepted as symbolic of a mystery, and a horror, that is Ours rather than Theirs – '[t]he unrepresentable as empire' (Casarino, 2002, p. 24)

In the novel, Kurtz died. Marlow carried his letters back to the Intended (Kurtz's fiancée), back to Brussels, one of the places where this story begins, ends and recurs. In a striking interpretation, Mulhern (2006) points to that meeting of Marlow and the Intended. She is distraught at the loss of Kurtz's genius – to her and to mankind. He represented enlightenment in humanity. Marlow knows otherwise, but his answers are both straightforward in terms of what he believes and made in the knowledge that *they will be misread by the Intended*:

'He conveys his truthful evaluation in words he knows she will translate into her illusion, which will thus persist in the authorised version' (Mulhern, 2006, p. 15)

Drawing on that particular deception, we would agree that Marlow knows the Intended will retain her illusion, and extend the thought to claim that Conrad also knew that *his* Intended – his readership – would do likewise. But not without a certain irresolvable tension in that 'authorization' that would give the story enduring life as a kind of half-erased nightmare of the European self.

Station 7

In 1988 a flight from Africa arrived in Brussels. Two dead African children, aged 14 and 15, were found in the wheel-bay when the plane landed. They also had a letter with them. It said: 'Please, help us. We are suffering enormously in Africa [...] we Africans, especially we, the African children and youth

are asking you to set up a great, effective organisation for Africa so that it might make progress' (Ferguson, 2002, p. 559).

Ferguson notes the scandal of mimesis, as well as the understandable anger that many Africans might feel that a plea would be made in such plaintive, colonial terms. But it is a different kind of repetition that we point to here, one that is connected to Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return. Milan Kundera tells the following story as an illustration of the 'unbearable lightness of being'. His analogy comes from Africa.

'Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty means nothing. We need take no more note of it than of a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment' (Kundera, 1984, p. 3)

Epilogue

The seven 'stations' of this essay echo the seven cataracts of the Stanley Falls, and other less secular 'stations', elsewhere. The illustrations that introduce each of these stations are taken from the artist Tshibumba's pictorial history of the Congo. That history, produced amidst the violence of Congo/Zaire, is also allegorical. As Fabian puts it, 'vociferous silence' (1996, p. 306; Stronach et al., forthcoming) attends its narratives. In particular, the murdered first Prime Minister, Lumumba, is represented as a crucified symbol of the Congolese people. He stands for peace, progress and unity. More than that it is hard to say without self-contradiction: an allegory unpacked is an assault on the agency of the reader.

If this account of the 'heart of darkness' has a point that allegory does not indicate, it is that the methodological handmaidens of Modernity were in cahoots with various forms of 'empire', 'direct rule' and 'indirect rule' (Mamdani, 2002). That remains the case, even when empires implode and colonise the metropolises. Without compelling new ways of telling stories 'postcolonialism will remain a purgatory penetrated by nonrevolutionary violence' (Mamdani, 2002, p.17; Marcus, 1998), and such violence, both symbolic and real, will always happens here as well as there.

'These people here are all dying – oh, I don't mean of leprosy, I mean of us. And their last disease is hope' (Greene, 1963: 61)

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