

Defoe, and the Politics of Representing the African Interior

Peter Knox-Shaw

To talk of the way writers represent 'interiors of Africa' will not do, for the fact is that continental interiors come in the singular and take the definite article. Language favours the view that each continent has one body, and bound in with the corporeal metaphor there is a hint of soul. Continents, like bodies, house identities that have to do in some way with an interior, so that a phrase like 'the heart of the continent' is easily made to imply 'what the continent is at heart'. This stubborn personification is allied to a procedure deeply ingrained in all topographical writing, the metonymic trick of passing off a particular setting as representative of something wider; and for a variety of reasons it has met with less resistance in some contexts than in others. The history of exploration in Africa, and in Australia – a movement inwards from many coasts – seems to have been specially conducive to it, accentuating, as it did, the idea of a hidden and revelatory centre. In North America, on the other hand, where European penetration was almost entirely from the east, there was far less concern with stereotype: the feature of the interior perhaps most often dwelt on being its property to unfold, and unfold plurality. Geography provided its share of determinants also: in Australia where aridity prevails over a vast central area, the outback was known for generations as 'the Dead Heart'; in Africa the presence of both forest and desert in inland parts, gave rise to rival and complementary traditions from the time of Homer. Classical writers sometimes hedged their bets, bifurcating the continent into two Ethiopias, joined like Siamese-twins, but distinct in character, the one good, the other horrid.¹

These opposing or occasionally mixed images were still the stuff of discourse on Africa when Defoe produced his remarkable crossing of

¹Malvern van Wyk Smith, "'Waters Flowing from Darkness': The Two Ethiopias in the Early European Image of Africa', *Theoria* LXVIII (1986), 67-70. For a discussion of the convention of 'the dead heart' see Carolyn Bliss, *Patrick White's Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 1-6.