6

A Critique of the African Picturesque in Georges Simenon’s Travel Reportages and Novels

IN THE SUMMER of 1932, Georges Simenon (1903–1989) departed for Africa with his wife Tigy and spent four months travelling through Egypt, Sudan, the Belgian Congo, Congo-Brazzaville, Gabon, and Guinea. The prolific young author, who had recently become famous with his Maigret detective series, was able to finance part of the journey by writing travel reportages for magazines. His main assignment was a series of articles for the photo-weekly Voilà, entitled “L’heure du nègre” (1932); it was published in six instalments right after the journey and accompanied by photographs taken by the author himself.¹ He also wrote a travel essay entitled “L’Afrique qu’on dit mystérieuse” (1933), which was published in the short-lived magazine Police et Reportage under the pseudonym Georges Caraman. Later Simenon returned to his West African travel experiences on various occasions. In his fiction, he used the spaces of his journey as settings in a series of three novels, Le Coup de lune (Tropic Moon, 1933), 45° à l’ombre (Aboard the Aquitaine, 1936) and Le Blanc à lunettes (Talatala, 1937) as well as in some short stories. The novels have been published together in English as African Trio (1979).² Later, Simenon

¹. The Voilà reportages were published from October 6 to November 12 of the same year.
². Simenon’s African novels are often classified together with the author’s other fictions in the category of “exotic novels” or “romans du monde” that he published in the 1930s and 1940s, and that were inspired by his travels. Simenon’s trip around the world that he made between December 1934 to May 1935 from New York through South America and Oceania to
Figure 5. Map of Georges Simenon’s travel through Africa in the summer of 1932 (drawn by Julie Scobeltzine) (© John Simenon and Éditions Omnibus).
returned to the travel experience in his memoirs, retelling parts of the journey in *Quand j’étais vieux* (1970) and *Point-virgule* (1979). The spaces in Simenon’s three African novels are carefully situated along the writer’s African journey as if to underscore the writer’s oft-repeated statement that he drew his fiction from memory and experience, not imagination. Simenon claimed that he did not have a good imagination, but instead a good memory, and he claimed to remember places and people that he used as the basis of his fiction particularly well:

> I have no imagination. Everything is taken from life. In the course of my travels, I met so many different types of people, I shared the private lives of so many people, that I need only look for what I need in my memory. Occasionally, I draw my inspiration from an actual occurrence. (1991, 11)

Simenon’s claim about not having any imagination should not be taken at face value but, nevertheless, in his African novels, the author drew much from the experiences of his travel. The first and perhaps best known of these fictions, *Le Coup de lune*, is situated in Libreville, the capital of Gabon, which was part of the writer’s itinerary in 1932. Many characters and events in the novel are also based on what Simenon saw or heard in Gabon. The novel starts at the harbor of the town, portraying the arrival of the protagonist, a twenty-three-year-old man called Joseph Timar from the French provinces. Unable to find the work that he thought was awaiting him in Libreville, the disillusioned Timar falls in love with Adèle, who is the owner of Hotel Central where he is staying, the only hotel in Libreville and one that Simenon knew himself. Timar then gradually learns that Adèle has had a number of affairs with local men and, moreover, is responsible for the murder of a black servant. Timar also meets a group of white settlers, who have the habit of organizing orgies in the bush with native women. At the end of one such excursion, the men abandon the African women in the forest without transportation.

*Le Blanc à lunettes* is similarly situated along the author’s journey. The novel begins with a description of the main character, Ferdinand Graux, and

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his voyage from Marseille, through Alexandria, Cairo, Khartoum, Malakal, and Juba, to his home on the tobacco plantations in the Congo. The main events take place there, in northeastern Belgian Congo, within a hundred kilometres from the town of Niangara. The third novel, *45° à l’ombre*, likewise, uses the places of Simenon’s African travels as the background and describes a boat trip from Matadi in the Congo to Bordeaux that the author himself took when he returned from Africa in 1932. Even the stopovers described in the novel correspond with the ports along the author’s route: Pointe-Noire in Congo-Brazzaville, Port-Gentil in Gabon (which is also the point of departure in the “L’heure du nègre” reportages), Port-Bouët in Ivory Coast, Tabou in Liberia, and then Dakar and Tenerife.

Simenon’s African novels, articles, and reportages are closely related in their themes. One key question in this regard is the relation between real and imaginary (or false) notions of colonial black Africa. Simenon’s reportages and novels alike make it evident that Western representations of Africa are often romantic and unrealistic, if not altogether misleading. The most common misconception, as the writer argues in his travel reportages, stem from Western fiction and film, and the government campaigns that promoted colonialism. Furthermore, similar misconceived notions were reflected in European tourism and colonial architecture, particularly in colonial administrative towns such as Khartoum, Juba, Stanleyville, Kinshasa, Libreville, or Matadi, and in the illusions of young colonisers, engineers, and tourists whom the writer had met in the colonies and whom he portrays in his reportages and novels.

In the “L’heure du nègre” reportages, Simenon depicts events and encounters in Libreville, Conakry, and elsewhere in West Africa, and poses questions of the colonial administration and mentality. He also describes his personal views and attitudes vis-à-vis colonial Africa, particularly when he had returned home, for instance explaining that he had departed from Africa hating the continent since he had grown tired of the uncomfortable living conditions in that climate. Back in Europe, however, he was soon consumed with nostalgia for Africa, thinking with respect of the white settlers who had made it in Africa and who preferred, to use Simenon’s wording, the rough and remorseless qualities of African life to living in the comforts of Europe. The same qualities that Simenon associates with the settlers also characterize his impression of the “real” black Africans of the forest, “naturally sweet, but cruel,” just like nature itself (2001, 415). The notion of “real Africans” is clearly exoticizing. This is perhaps surprising, given Simenon’s interest, in his reportages and fictions, to question European notions of the picturesque exotic. However, at the same time, the contradiction is yet another example of the
way in which early twentieth-century colonial conceptions and discourses were ambiguous.

The essay “L’Afrique qu’on dit mystérieuse,” less directly tied to the events of the author’s journey than the Voilà reportages, focuses explicitly on the question of misconceived notions of Africa. The essay is also more daring in its criticism of such notions than the Voilà reportages. In this essay, Simenon ironically presents the likely forms and trajectory of Western understanding of Africa, from the adventure novels read in childhood, or stories of great expeditions, to fictional films, misinformed journalism, and tourists’ and safari hunters’ overblown stories of the dangerous and exotic “heart of black Africa.” Simenon suggests that these legends and fictions reveal the Europeans’ desire to construct an image of sub-Saharan Africa as a mysterious world characterized by dangerous animals, cannibals, fierce Pygmies, wild sacred dances, cruel rituals, and nude black people. Simenon argues, moreover, that with regard to the Negros who are used to living naked, their nudity is only an outer difference that does not distinguish their life from the simple living conditions of the poor in Europe. In other words, the poor Africans’ lifestyle is not a form of their alleged primitivity, but perfectly justified by the living conditions:

Cela n’est pittoresque que de loin et surtout quand on se sert, pour le raconter, de mots exotiques. Sinon, c’est tout simple et cela paraît bientôt naturel, que les gens soient nus. (2001, 428)

This is not picturesque except from a distance and, above all, when one uses exotic words to describe it. Otherwise, it is all simple and seems natural that people would be naked. (my translation)

In his reportages and novels from the 1930s, Simenon mostly uses the term “nègre” for the Black Africans, but sometimes refers to them as blacks, and refers to Europeans in Africa as whites, or sometimes as colonists (“colons”).

In this same passage, Simenon suggests that the experience of the picturesque exotic requires a sense of a privileged and fundamentally misconceived distance from the object of observation. Specifically, Simenon’s critique of the picturesque involves the necessity to face the multitude of existing African realities, which, consequently, renders the privileged perspective of distance impossible. Furthermore, the author notes that “unfortunately, it is difficult to talk about the Negros in general, since they are different in each region” (“malheureusement, il est difficile de parler des nègres en général, parce que dans chaque région les nègres sont différents”; 2001, 428), and that Africa is
immense ("L’Afrique est immense," 2001, 433), not meaning immense in the sense of mysterious or picturesque, but in terms of sheer geographical space and the great variety of lifestyles. Simenon points out that a true image of Africa is simply inconceivable:

Un tableau vrai de l’Afrique?
Je n’y prétends pas. Il y a trop d’Afriques. C’est comme si on disait que l’Europe est un pays plat, sillonné de canaux, planté de moulins à vent, parce qu’on débarque en Hollande.

L’Afrique est multiple. Les conditions de vie changent du tout au tout quand on franchit seulement vingt kilomètres, pour la raison, par exemple, que la route cesse. (2001, 434)

A real picture of Africa?
I do not pretend to give that. There are too many Africas. It is like saying that Europe is a flat country, seamed with canals and dotted with windmills, just because one has landed in Holland.

Africa is varied. The conditions of life change completely within the space of just twenty kilometres, for instance, after the road ends. (my translation)

There is no one truth about Africa but multiple truths. To speak of what is typical to Africa would be comparable to seeing the whole of "Europe" as equal to some of its parts. The same argument is reiterated in “L’heure du nègre,” where Simenon explains that he had to give up the idea of drawing a full picture of Africa since there is an infinite variety of Africas, from the Africa of the colonial officials and timber companies to the Africa of the virgin forest, or the Pygmies (2001, 417).

Furthermore, we may infer from the same passage above that to describe Africa’s realities truthfully requires not only precision about the particulars of the given place and culture, but also the ability to relativize one’s own perspective. In the summer of 1960, when Simenon was following the struggle for independence in the Belgian Congo, he looked up some photographs from his 1932 journey. The event is described in Quand j’étais vieux. Here the author again underscores his lack of interest in the picturesque, and his dislike for the distant viewpoint of the passing tourist. Simenon argues that whenever he lives in a new place, he prefers to see a tree as a tree, regardless of whether it might be a kapok tree, flame tree, or an oak. The point is that the particular is not important at the level of mere description, local color, and the picturesque. Rather, the particular is important in itself, as a sign of unique and
manifold reality. Furthermore, Simenon emphasizes in his memoirs the ability, gained during any longer sojourn in one place, to see oneself and one’s own world from a distance:

Le pittoresque n’existe que pour ceux qui passent. Et j’ai le tourisme en horreur.

Je ne cherchais pas le dépaysement. Au contraire. Je cherchais ce qui, partout, chez l’homme, est semblable, les constantes, dirait un scientifique.

Je cherchais surtout à voir de loin, d’un point de vue différent, le petit monde où je vivais, à acquérir des points de comparaison, du recul. (1970, 88)

The picturesque only exists for those who are passing through. And I loathe tourism.

I am not looking for a change of scenery. On the contrary, I am looking for that which is similar in people everywhere, or the constants, as a scientist would say.

In particular, I am looking for ways to see from afar, and from a different vantage point, the little world where I was living, to find points of comparison, from some distance. (my translation)

What is important for Simenon is the similar and constant between the cultures, while he also wishes to find points of intercultural comparison that would allow him to better understand the limits of his own world. Distance from home is more valuable than distance from the foreign culture.

From the notion of a heterogeneous multitude of African cultures follows also the possibility that the Africans may gaze back at the Europeans and their respective cultures, possibly entertaining similarly false notions of the West as the Europeans have of Africa. Simenon stresses the Africans’ capacity to create their own meanings out of Western institutions and culture that have been imposed on them. Similarly, the Africans both in Simenon’s essays and novels have the capacity to talk and look back, and to use the colonial system for their own purposes, despite the fact that Simenon rarely gives voice to Africans (real people or characters in fiction).4

4. Fraiture (2007, 206) draws our attention to the way in which Simenon’s novelistic trilogy set in Africa marks an important passage away from the author’s series of novels in the late 1920s that sought to affirm the superiority of the white race and the French nation.
The Archaic Africa

Yet another thematic connection between Simeonon’s travel reportages, essays and fictions is the notion of the Archaic Africa, a generalization that escapes the author’s outspoken emphasis on the importance of the particular and his critique of the picturesque exotic. What is important from our perspective is also that Simenon associates the notion of the archaic world with the experience of reality. The archaic, in some ways, guarantees the actuality of the real.

Common in both Simenon’s African fiction and nonfiction are certain emotional and mental states, forms of sadness (tristesse), fatigue, indifference, and madness that evoke for the writer the sense of the ancient Africa. We can see this, for instance, in that the qualities of African climate and landscape, connoting the ancient life forms, have the capacity to become mental states. Simenon argues in “L’heure du nègre” that it is not the other men, who make people commit crimes against each other in the African colonies, but Africa itself (“Ce ne sont pas les hommes qui empoisonnent. C’est l’Afrique!”; 2001, 404). Africa has this “poisonous” effect on people, regardless of their culture and skin color. In these reportages, thus, Africa occasionally becomes an agent, or a name for a kind of remorseless natural force, which may act upon people in unforeseen ways and bring about unprecedented changes in their behavior. This may be caused by the power of the sun, the heat, the moisture, or what Simenon calls the treacherous sweatiness (moiteurs perfides), and the monotony and immensity of the landscape. These weapons of African nature, Simenon claims, are also responsible for train line construction deaths in Western Africa, not the whites, the Africans, or the Chinese (2001, 396).

The African indifference and carelessness, or weariness (lassitude), and the white settlers’ disillusionment, easily deteriorating health, and haunting colonial madness, are recurrent themes in Simenon’s travel reportages and fiction alike. These themes are often closely associated with the idea of a forgotten archaic past. While Simenon rejects the African exoticism that is put forward in adventure novels and elsewhere in popular culture or the colonialist rhetoric (the so-called mysteriousness to which the title refers), he retains the mystery of the origins of human culture in a new belated form of exoticism. This means the sense of being the last witness to the archaic age:

[. . .] le dernier témoin d’un autre âge que nous avons déjà oublié, un âge où les hommes vivaient sur la terre comme des poux sur la tête d’un clochard, sans s’inquiéter d’autre chose. (2001, 435–436)
[...]
the last witness of an age that we have already forgotten, an age when
the men lived on the land just like the lice in a tramp's hair, without any
worries. (my translation)

Just like the lice in a tramp's hair that Simenon imagines here, living sim-
ply within the bounds of their own very small world, the Africans' child-
like laughter or a sudden fit of anger—to which Simenon refers in the next
passage—reveals to the author momentary glimpses of our forgotten ori-
gins. Another name given to this sense of the archaic African life in “L’heure
du nègre” is the Negro truth: “la vérité, la seule, c’est la vérité nègre” (2001,
412). The Negro truth implies to Simenon that behind the colonial facade of
Western beliefs and values, clothing, architecture, technology, and education,
there lies the unchanged African setting and the persistent traditional beliefs,
a primitive hut made of cut branches, a fire by this hut, and glistening bod-
ies (“le décor africain tel qu’il est resté à travers les siècles: une hutte de bran-
chages, un feu, des corps luisants”; 2001, 412). The striking persistence of this
lifestyle motivates Simenon to portray colonial administration and its civiliz-
ating mission as a kind of make-believe: Western presence in Africa is not only
revealed to be falsely modern and shallow, but also artificially superimposed
on a more lasting culture. This falsehood is further confirmed by another
form of illusion that interests Simenon in the reportages and that he portrays
in the court scene in Le Coup de lune: the Africans’ penchant for fabrications
within the institutions of the colonial rule. Similarly, in the essay “L’heure
du nègre,” Simenon claims that most of the affairs that the Africans bring to
the colonial court are “purely fictional” (2001, 391), concerning endless family
disputes of dowry, cheating, cuckoldry, or petty thefts, and intended in part
to ridicule the whites and their court.

There is a tendency in both Simenon’s fiction and nonfiction also to iden-
tify the black Africans, and sometimes also the white settlers, with African
nature through their imagined common characteristics. Such characteristics
include, for instance, the above-mentioned archaic qualities, including per-
severance and spontaneity, cruelty and indifference. It is also indicative of the
author’s tendency to anthropomorphize African space and nature so that the
Africans’ ability to talk back belongs both to geographical Africa, or nature,
and the people. In “L’heure du nègre,” it is Africa in both of these senses of the
term that rejects Europe, its values, ideologies and institutions, and does so in
a manner that is likely to shock the European listener: “Yes, Africa says shit
to us, and right it is” (“Oui! L’Afrique nous dit merde et c’est bien fait”; 2001,
419). This is the last sentence in the Voilà reportages and one that Simenon
Chapter 6

recalls in his memoirs involving the events of 1960, when he was following the Congo’s struggle for independence. Yet, it is also important to note that the line was originally a quotation from a skeptical older white settler, not from a black African. The speaker, whom Simenon describes in the reportage as an old white man, who has become “uncivilized” (“un vieux blanc décivilisé”; 2001, 419), spoke to Simenon, among other things, of the Africans’ long memory concerning the atrocities committed against them. He, further, evoked the prospect of their likely rebellion, and used the expression as if he were talking of the whole of Africa, not just one place or country.

It must be emphasized, however, that when Simenon refers to the supposedly eternal forces of African nature and lifestyle he does not ever seem to suggest that a Westerner like him could fully escape modernity and to “go native,” or attain a more authentic state of self through the African experience. At most, Africa may enable the Western traveller to reflect on what the modern society has forgotten and perhaps minimize the illusions that characterize the civilizing mission and the colonial government. As to the failures and fabrications of the colonial rule, Simenon (in the 1930s) is unable or unwilling to envision any alternatives.

The kinds of problems concerning truthful representation that Simenon raised in the essay “L’Afrique qu’on dit mystérieuse” and “L’heure du nègre” reportages—the Western misconceived notions of black Africa, the multiple African realities, the relativizing but also haunting quality of the reversed gaze, and the notion of archaic Africa—are investigated by means of fiction in his African novels. In what comes next, I will turn my attention to the ways in which Simenon’s novels probe the relation between real circumstances and misconceived notions of Africa and do it similarly to or differently from his travel writing. The question, therefore, is: How do Simenon’s African novels present and undermine the notion of African picturesque exotic? Before this question can be properly answered, however, we must consider the narrative situation in these novels, particularly pertaining to the changing distance between the narrator and the characters. Specifically, all general meanings concerning Africa that may be associated with these novels must take into consideration the relation between the narrator and the characters. For instance, what may be seen as real, imaginary, or false from some character’s perspective, or what some character openly voices as the truth or falsehood, can be something quite different for another character, let alone for the narrator. Finally, I will return to Simenon’s African reportages and

5. In the summer of 1960, colonial rule collapsed in the Congo and French Equatorial Africa; both republics soon became fully independent.
ask how fiction is implied in this nonfiction beyond the shared themes and spaces of their description. How does Simenon's nonfiction borrow from his fiction and how does it acknowledge or not acknowledge the borrowing?

**Narrative Voice in the African Novels**

The narrators in Simenon's African fiction are heterodiegetic, meaning that they narrate in third-person and do not participate in the events of the fictional world. Furthermore, they are not personal characters, that is, they cannot be identified as persons. The narrators do, however, comment on the story indirectly by stylistic means and devices, such as word and perspective choice, or shifts and contrasts between different narrative modes, including contrasts between the predominant impersonal narrative voice and the citation of a character's thoughts in the first person through letters and diary entries. Only very rarely do the narrators voice opinions or make remarks directly. When this happens, it can be particularly significant (as I will show briefly).

With regard to the narrative mode in the novels, a key device in all the novels is the combination of internal focalization (the narrative renders the subjective experience and perception of a character) with the occasional brief presentation of the character's thoughts within the narrator's discourse (so-called free indirect discourse). In free indirect discourse, as it is traditionally defined, character's thoughts or speech is presented in his or her own voice without the quotation marks, tag clauses, or a shift into grammatical first-person discourse, but with the narrator's wording and syntax (Abbott 2008, 234; Prince 2003, 34). While indirect report of the characters' thoughts and emotions is the dominant form of presenting consciousness in these novels, accompanied by the direct discourse of dialogue, the intercepting questions and exclamations in free indirect discourse have an important function as well, for instance as a means of manipulating the distance between the narrative voice and the characters' perspective or mind. The typical function of free indirect discourse in these novels, as in much modern literature, is to render the main characters' states of mind, emotions, and perceptions clearer to the reader, and subtly reveal the limitations of the characters' perspectives. But there are other functions for this narrative mode as well, as we will see.

One significant feature in Simenon's use of free indirect discourse is that it rarely stretches beyond a few sentences at a time. This narrative mode is, however, used constantly and systematically with regard to the main characters thus giving the reader a limited and quite controlled access to their minds.
A good example of how the technique may emphasize distance between the narrator’s and the protagonist’s voices, is the moment in Le Coup de lune when Joseph Timar, infatuated with the hotelkeeper’s wife Adèle Renaud, tries to imagine Adèle’s and her husband Eugène’s life when they arrived in Africa many years ago:

Il pensait surtout à Adèle qui, alors que lui-même avait sept ans, aidait déjà Renaud à racoler des filles pour l’Amérique du Sud. Elle l’avait suivi au Gabon, à une époque où il n’y avait sur la côte que des bicoques de planches! Ils s’étaient enfoncés dans la forêt et, seuls blancs à des journées et des journées de pirogue, ils avaient entrepris de couper du bois et de lui faire descendre la rivière! (2010a, 25)

But always his thoughts kept harking back to Adèle, who when he was only seven had already been helping Renaud to recruit young women for South America. She had come with him to French Equatorial Africa in the pioneering days, when there were only log cabins along the coast. After days and days of travel in native canoes they had hacked their way through the bush and set about felling timber and rafting it to the coast. (1979a, 132)

The paragraph starts in indirect discourse revealing the contents of Timar’s thoughts. The second and the third sentences, subsequently, shift to a more direct mode, the exclamation points, which are missing in the English translation, marking the potential in the words, and their style, as a manifestation of the character’s emotional state. The beginning of the next paragraph, then, further confirms that the thoughts do not belong to the narrator, but to the character whose focal point we share (and as we did already prior to this passage). At the same time, the narrator takes ironic distance from these thoughts:

Pour Timar, cela se traduisait par des images naïves qui mêlaient aux illustrations de Jules Verne des bribes de réalité. Il suivait la longue route de terre rouge qui longe la mer et il voyait les cocotiers se dessiner moitié sur le ciel, moitié sur le gris plomb des flots. (2010a, 25)

The picture Timar conjured up was a medley of scraps of reality and illustrations to Jules Verne stories. He was walking along the red laterite road that skirted the bay. The palm trees stood out half against the sky and half against the leaden grayness of the sea. (1979a, 132)
The narrator’s evaluation of the character’s thoughts as naïve at this moment is quite exceptional in Simenon’s African novels. Note that the English translation leaves out the adjective “naïves” (in reference to the mental images that Timar had conjured up) and, furthermore, that the two sentences in the original are broken up into two paragraphs with three sentences. We may, in fact, take the judgement as an important cue for reading that could explain some of the protagonist’s consequent reactions and emotions, specifically those concerning his notions and “images of Africa.” Timar’s naïveté also provides the reader with a context, and an indication of his state of mind which offers us one possible explanation for the gradual disintegration of his mind in the course of the narrative.

The protagonist’s misconceived notions of Africa also become apparent in another, brief and subtle application of direct discourse. In the beginning of the fourth chapter, Timar is overtaken by a wave of disorientation as if swept away by a ground swell:

C’est au cimetière que Timar fut envahi à l’improviste par une vague de dépaysement, submergé, imprégné par elle au point d’en rester tout pantelant comme s’il eut perçu le choc d’une lame de fond.

Ce dépaysement, il l’avait cherché dans le pittoresque, dans le panache des cocotiers, la chanson des mots indigènes, le grouillement de corps noirs.

Or, c’était autre chose; la claire et désespérante notion du sens de ces mots:

—Pour quitter la terre d’Afrique, il faut un bateau. Il en passe un tous les mois et il met trois semaines à gagner la France! (2010a, 36)

It was in the graveyard that an immense homesickness descended on Timar, a sense of isolation like a great wave sweeping him off his feet, leaving him faint and gasping. At first he was inclined to attribute it to the strangeness of his surroundings: the feathery, golden-green palms, the surging crowd of blacks, their queer, singsong voices.

Then he realized it was something more; the full meaning of certain words had only just struck home. “There’s no escape from Africa except by sea. Only one ship calls each month, and it takes three weeks to reach France.” (1979a, 144)

Timar had expected to be disoriented by the African exotic and picturesque but, instead, he becomes conscious of the distance between Libreville and France. Perhaps, since this revelation takes place at a Libreville cemetery, the
experience is also associated with the prospect of death and the finality of his separation from home in line with the clichéd image of colonial Africa as the white man’s grave. The last two sentences of the passage, which are given to us as a direct quotation, may be something that Timar has heard and that he now remembers. At the same time, the narrator underscores, by giving the quotation, that Timar is thinking of the clear and hopeless meaning of these words (again, the translation is not very accurate). These thoughts may represent something he has heard from Adèle, the men at Adèle’s bar, the police officer who checked his papers upon arrival or other settlers, but they are filtered through Timar’s consciousness in this scene and for this reason can also be read as something that Timar says or thinks to himself with reflection and concern, realizing their fuller meaning. While there is no sign of the narrator’s evaluation of the protagonist’s state of mind at this point, it is possible to understand Timar’s feeling of immersion, and the unexpected force of the disorienting experience, in light of the narrator’s earlier judgement, as another potential reflection of naïveté that, for instance, easily confuses West African reality with illustrations from Jules Verne’s novels.

In some important ways, however, the limitations of Timar’s mind and perspective, and his sense of the diminishing scope and meaning of France (or Europe), are not unique to him alone. A more general relativization of the European viewpoint becomes evident a few pages later when Timar thinks of the map of France, which had haunted him in his mind in the morning of that day, while looking at the Atlantic Ocean that seemed to him like some flat pond:

Dehors, dès qu’il revit la mer, plate comme un étang, il retrouva une image qui l’avait hanté le matin, une carte de France, d’une toute petite France assise au bord de l’océan, une carte familière, avec des rivières, des départements dont il connaissait le tracé par cœur, des villes. (2010a, 40)

The sea was calm as a lake, and as he gazed at it there rose before his eyes a picture that had been haunting him all the morning—or, rather, not a picture but a map: the map of France. A tiny, compact fragment of the continent breasting the Atlantic. How familiar was that map with its towns, rivers, and départements whose boundaries he could have reproduced from memory! (1979a, 149)

Seen from this distance and against the flat background of the Atlantic, France appears small and the French settlers as old neighbours from this small coun-
try, strangely reunited in Gabon. Notice that here the translator, unlike in the previous examples, adds an exclamation mark to the last sentence in the quotation and thus gives it an impression of the character’s thought. The following exclamation,” They were all neighbours!” (“Ils étaient tous voisins!”), is ambivalently positioned between the narrator and the character; it might be possible to attribute these words to both. It also remains ambiguous as to whether the perspective is simply naïve (Timar’s confused mind sees the settlers as neighbours in a literal sense) or if it involves a more insightful observation of the implications of the relativizing distance from home, and a process of changing perspectives, which Simenon values in his reportages and memoirs.

In *Le Blanc à lunettes*, free indirect discourse similarly illustrates the protagonist’s subjective experience of Africa while shifts between this narrative mode, indirect narratorial report, and dialogue alter the distance between the character and the narrator. However, what makes such shifts in this novel different from those in *Le Coup de lune* is their relation to longer stretches of direct discourse in Ferdinand Graux’s diary and letters that are cited in the text from the fourth chapter on. In the novel’s beginning, Graux’s subjective views of Africa are first revealed directly in conversation with fellow travellers or in free indirect discourse. Upon Graux’s return from Europe to his plantation, he sees himself as a villager returning to his true home. Exclamation marks (again missing in the English translation) and italics function once more as markers of the character’s diction, thoughts, and subjective feelings:

> Il était chez lui, vraiment, non pas seulement en Afrique, mais dans *son* Afrique! Une Afrique qui ne ressemblait en rien à ces déserts survolés par l’Imperial Airways et qui ne comportait plus d’hôtels ripolinés comme des maisons de santé. (2010b, 21)

> He was really at home here, not merely in Africa, but in *his* Africa. And this Africa of his was very different from the great empty spaces flown over by Imperial Airways. Here were no hotels so white and scrupulously clean as to remind one of hospitals. (1979a, 14)

Graux hands out salt briquettes to the local Africans as, the narrator informs us, one gives candy to children. He meets, by the roadside, Africans whom he

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6. In another reportage from the same era, “Europe 33” (1933), Simenon refers to “petite Europe” (Simenon 2001, 763).
knows, and also encounters a child that he had taken care of before. The following description of the protagonist’s feelings, as he identifies himself as an African colonial, creates potential ironic distance between the character and the narrator:

Il n’était plus Ferdinand Graux, mais Mundele na Talatala, plus sûr de lui que jamais avec ses lunettes, et il accélérait toujours davantage, comme pris de vertige a l’idée de revoir . . .

Son chez-lui, là-bas, à cent, à soixante, à quarante kilomètres. (2010b, 21)

No longer Ferdinand Graux, he had become once more Mundele-na-Talatala, bespectacled and self-assured, and he drove faster and faster, thrilled by the joy of nearing home.

A hundred, sixty, forty kilometers to go . . . . (1979a, 15)

The narratorial distance in the description, and potential irony, remains implied. It is implied, first of all, by the ambiguity in the protagonist’s African name, Mundele-na-Talatala, and which means—as has been noted in an earlier conversation between Graux and his fellow travellers—the white man with glasses. This is also an explanation of the novel’s title (Le Blanc à lunettes). “The white man with the glasses,” however, as the reader has also been informed, is not the only nickname Graux has, but the Africans also call him, among themselves, mockingly “the white man who is only a man with his glasses” (“le blanc qui n’est homme qu’avec ses lunettes”). The evolving events, secondly, cast Graux in an ironic light and thus, potentially, recall his second (mocking) African nickname. Graux’s affair with Lady Makinson, a diplomat’s wife and an adventuress, who has landed at his farm due to a broken propeller on her private airplane, transforms his calm world to the extent that Graux forgets his French fiancée and the development of his plantation.

On his way back to the Congo, Graux had been reading with interest such tedious books as Statistics for an Economic Survey of the Postwar Decade (“Statistiques pour servir à l’histoire économique de l’après-guerre”) and Recent Theories of Production and Distribution (“Réflexions sur l’économie dirigée et sur l’économie en circuit fermé”). Graux’s library at the plantation, consisting of books with similar titles, is a reflection of a model colonial settler, who is rational and hard-working but perhaps a bit dull. In the presence of Lady Makinson, Graux finds his whole past life to be unhappy, boring, even disgusting. The excitement and sense of adventure that Graux associates with Lady Makinson are reflected in and accentuated by her choice of reading,
Captain Scott’s travels (a likely reference to Robert Falcon Scott’s Antarctic expeditions), when she is staying at his farm.

It is then told that Ferdinand Graux has become a stranger to himself in the familiar landscape: “For though at this moment he was walking in familiar surroundings—surroundings that he, to a great extent, had personally created—he felt hopelessly estranged from them, as if some link had snapped between himself and his life’s work” (1979a, 45) (“Car voilà qu’il errait dans un paysage familier, un paysage qu’il avait en quelque sorte édifié lui-même et qu’il s’y sentait étranger!”; 2010b, 49). The emotional tie that he had imagined to have been forged between him and his plantation, the environment, and the animals, appears as what it really is: a self-edifying illusion. Again, the exclamation and question marks used in these passages brings us close to the character’s mind and emotional state. Graux looks at his favorite hippopotamus, which he has called Potam, in the river and perceives that: “How absurd he has been, idling away whole evenings watching a stupid hippopotamus and making believe they were becoming friends!” (1979a, 45). (“Comment avait-il pu passer des soirées entières à venir regarder un hippopotame et à croire que des liens d’amitié se créaient entre eux?”; 2010b, 49). Emilienne had earlier responded in her letter that she was almost jealous of Potam for the way he wrote about the animal.

Both _Le Coup de lune_ and _Le Blanc à lunettes_ focus, through brief moments of free indirect discourse and accompanying narratorial framing, on the limitations in the protagonists’ knowledge, experience, and emotional state, involving their misconceived ideas of African colonial life, or broken expectations. The novel _45° à l’ombre_ is different, to a degree, in that the protagonist, Doctor Donadieu, enjoys the privileged position of a more informed perspective. His portrait is also much less ironic. When Donadieu’s thoughts punctuate the dialogue in free indirect discourse, they often possess a certain authority, providing the reader with important insight into the events and the other characters’ motivations.

Out of the numerous instances of free indirect discourse that include Donadieu’s thoughts and speech, let us examine one instance near the beginning of the novel that illustrates the difference. Here the dialogue between Donadieu, the superintendent Neuville, and the ship’s main engineer, shifts to Donadieu’s mind for a few lines, perhaps just for one short sentence. His thoughts are given in free indirect discourse as he notices the captain and the two lieutenants who, at present, sit in the nearby bar:

Ils étaient assis tous trois à la terrasse du bar, devant des pernods. Dona-
dieu ne les avait pas encore aperçus. Mais ne se ressemblaient-ils pas tous, à tous les voyages? (2010a, 441)

All three happened to be sitting on the bar terrace with glasses of Pernod in front of them. Donadieu had not noticed them before. But didn’t everyone look like everyone else on all these trips! (1979a, 236)

It is possible that Donadieu poses the question to himself (the question is transformed into an exclamation in the English translation). The thought is revelatory not only of his experience as a ship’s doctor, but also of his ability, of which we will later learn more, to see what is specific in a particular situation. The next paragraph, again in more impersonal narration, gives the reader information about the captain’s and the lieutenants’ present concerns:


They were on furlough after spending three years in Equatorial Africa. The captain was wearing all his medals across the front of his white uniform jacket. He spoke with a Bordeaux accent. The two lieutenants, not yet twenty-five, were staring around looking for women. (1979a, 236)

The observation concerning the Bordeaux accent could belong to Donadieu, but the summary of the captain’s and the lieutenants’ background is clearly given in indirect discourse that is detached from the character’s thoughts. However, it is also quite possible that, even if it is not made explicit in the passage, Donadieu shares the same information as the narrator.

One of Donadieu’s traits, which is underscored in the novel and that relates to his particular capacity to know intimate things about other people and figure out what they are thinking, is his compassion for those who are weaker. The frequent references to God in the protagonist’s name evoke the same capacity. Donadieu’s friend had once told him that “People should call you God the Father!” (“On devrait te surnommer Dieu le Père!”; 2010a, 485). Donadieu, as we are informed, did not find this funny since he recognized in himself the “mania” of being concerned with others, their joys, or catastrophes. His interest in the Huret family, for instance, is also explained through a reference to the connotations of his name, that is, to play God: “Only Dona-
dieu believed he was God the Father” (1979a, 320). (“Il n’y avait que Donadieu à se croire Dieu le Père”; 2010a, 523). The protagonist once introduces himself “Donadieu. As in ‘given to God’” (1979a, 291) (“Donadieu. Comme donner à Dieu”; 2010a, 495). Further, it is revealed at the very end of the novel in an impersonal narrative voice that Donadieu lied to Jacques Huret about the severity of his fractured leg since he wanted to continue to play God (“jouer à Dieu le Père”; 2010a, 528).

In his ability to understand the situation of people around him, Donadieu stands out from the other characters. This quality, which also entails the capacity to see the particular in all people, likens him at some level to a narratorial position, or at least makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish between his and the narrator’s perspectives and knowledge. Donadieu’s interest in the others’ physical states or their states of mind is obviously part of his medical profession, but this interest also goes far beyond professional caring. He is, for instance, concerned about Doctor Bassot, who is going to be repatriated because of what is called his derangement of the brain. This concern is partly professional, but Donadieu also entertains the possibility, based on his personal observations and judgement, that Bassot is not as mad as all other people seem to think. As for the complex situation of the members of the Huret family, who are torn by broken illusions of colonial life, financial worries and a very sick child, Donadieu’s worries appear profound, specifically when it comes to the father of the family, Jacques Huret. For some reason that he cannot fully explain to himself, Donadieu decides to assist Jacques Huret, despite the suspicions that have been raised about Jacques Huret in the theft of Lachaux’s wallet (Lachaux is a rich settler on board the ship). The narrator explains that Donadieu associates with Jacques Huret the same feeling of premonition that he used to have as a child when he felt that someone was haunted by a catastrophe.7

In Donadieu’s case, thus, and unlike with Timar and Graux, the use of free indirect discourse does not highlight the limitations of the protagonist’s mind as much as it foregrounds the capacities of his mind. To some extent also the character’s personal history and experience explains why he is capable of having a quite different look on things from the other protagonists in Simenon’s African novels: the time spent in the colonies has profoundly changed Donadieu, broken his illusions, but perhaps also given him new insights that Timar and Graux do not have. It is quite possible, furthermore, to associate the Doctor’s keen attention to detail, sharp observations, and the

flexibility of his mind, to a genius of detection such as that of Simenon’s pipe-smoking detective, Commissaire Maigret. These characteristics liken him to the narrator even if there is no full identity between the two.

In all three novels, another important function of free indirect discourse is that it accentuates the effect of realism. André Gide, a longtime correspondent of Simenon’s and an admirer and sometimes critic of his work, has made evident this connection. Asserting in his *Journal* that there is a “profound psychological and ethical interest” in all of Simenon’s books, Gide explains that:

Les sujets de Simenon sont souvent d’un intérêt psychologique et éthique profond, mais insuffisamment indiqués, comme s’il ne se rendait pas compte lui-même de leur importance, ou comme s’il s’attendait à être compris à demi-mot. C’est par là qu’il m’attire et me retient. Il écrit pour “le gros public,” c’est entendu, mais les délicats et raffinés y trouvent leur compte, dès qu’ils consentent à le prendre au sérieux. Il fait réfléchir; et pour bien peu ce serait le comble de l’art; combien supérieur en ceci à ces romanciers pesants qui ne nous font grâce d’aucun commentaire. Simenon expose un fait particulier, d’intérêt général peut-être; mais se garde de généraliser: c’est affaire au lecteur. (Gide 1954, 321–22)

Simenon’s subjects often have a profound psychological and ethical interest, but insufficiently indicated, as if he were not aware of their importance himself, or as if he expected the reader to catch a hint. This is what attracts and holds me in him. He writes for “the vast public,” to be sure, but delicate and refined readers find something for them too as soon as they begin to take him seriously. He makes one reflect; and this is close to being the height of art; how superior he is in this to those heavy novelists who do not spare us a single commentary! Simenon sets forth a particular fact, perhaps of general interest; but he is careful not to generalize; that is up to the reader. (Gide 1951b, 287)

For Gide, the quality in Simenon’s work, as in *Le Coup de lune* that Gide claimed was the truest novel about black Africa to date (1979, 116), is the concentration on the particularity of the facts that they describe, the scarcity of direct commentary, and the ability to refrain from generalizations. Even when the particular facts may be generalizable, for instance in references to realities in colonial life in Africa, this is not made explicit.

Simenon’s realism of the concrete functions as a kind of antidote to his characters’ preconceptions and misconceived notions, including specifically the picturesque and the exotic that shape for instance Timar’s experience in
colonial Africa. As we have seen, free indirect discourse has an important role in Simenon’s African novels in subtly conveying a sense of the particularity of the characters’ subjective experience and, consequently, of the interpretation of details, or immersion in the surrounding reality. Appropriately, Jacques Dubois has argued that the observation and tireless search for the detail, and the sense of truth in the instant moment, may take two basic forms in Simenon’s realism. These involve interpretation (or interpretive anxiety) and immersion (or adhesion) (2000, 328). First of all, the notion of detail may be a synonym for interpretive anxiety and doubt that is generated by small incidents and particular traces in a layer of banality. Commissaire Maigret is sensitive to details and their particularity, and any suspicious traces and incidents, and he reacts to them as if he were a great collector of the particular (Dubois 2000, 327). From the particular, he infers what may be general, rather than the other way around. Secondly, the notion of detail may have the contrary meaning of immersion when a character, in a tense experience of surrounding reality, abandons himself to the world’s indifference and grants the world a kind of floating attention, directed by barely organized impressions, or the world of the others. Donadieu in 45° à l’ombre incorporates this ambiguity most fully, fluctuating between keen, analytic observations of a scholar-reporter and the self-abandonment and musings of a world-weary drug addict. The sea and the colonial Africa around him, further, connotes a particularly tense experience of reality that makes the experience of immersion quite realistic and inviting.

Sometimes it occurs, however, that certain rare objects in Simenon’s novels have an overriding symbolic meaning. Ferdinand Graux’s eyeglasses function in this way, ambivalently suggesting both his self-certainty and weakness. The glasses are an example of a metonymy, somewhat like Commissaire Maigret’s pipe that may be taken as a metonymy for the detective’s identity. Beyond identifying the protagonist, Graux’s eyeglasses symbolize the man himself and his characteristics, including the most intimate movements of his mind, such as feelings of passion, or shame and insecurity (not wanting to show himself without the glasses). At the end of the novel, when the perspective has shifted to Emilienne, Ferdinand’s glasses represent to her the man himself: “it struck her that there was some other change in his appearance; but, until she saw his spectacles on the tablecloth beside his plate, she did not realize why he looked so different” (1979a, 111) (“elle se demanda un instant ce qu’il y avait de changé chez Ferdinand, mais elle comprit, en voyant les lunettes posées sur la nappe, près de son couvert”; 2010b, 109). It is not made explicit to the reader what she has understood, however. It is as if by the mere sight of the glasses she can ascertain the essential, the inner workings of Ferdinand’s mind.
Narratives of Gradual Change

Beyond the mediating function of the narrative situation, and the use of free indirect discourse in particular, another important aspect that formally distinguishes Simenon’s fiction from his nonfiction is the processual nature of the narrative in the novels, particularly the role given to the gradual change in the protagonist’s state of mind and attitude in the course of the narrative. A comparison between Simenon’s reportages, essays, and memoirs on the one hand and African fiction on the other allows us to see a significant difference of degree in this respect, that is, the difference between telling stories in non-fiction and developing a character’s consciousness and processual experience in the novel.

Nonfiction travelogues certainly may focus on the changes in the traveler’s worldview and the perspective, as also occurs in the “L’heure du nègre” reportages. In his travel writing, Simenon frequently refers to his changed perception and mental state, but the novel format allows him to focus on the gradual transformation of a character’s mental state. In the novels, the characters’ mental and emotional adjustment, changing worldview, and sometimes their mental disintegration, are central elements of the story, and such changes and processes are further emphasized by the means of focalization, including shifts in focalization. For instance, Ferdinand Graux’s affair with Lady Makinson takes him through a series of changing mental states and phases of justification and self-definition. The narrator explains, before the affair begins, that any unforeseen event could shatter Graux’s peace of mind. The affair with Lady Makinson has just such a shattering effect, perfectly estranging Graux from his former life. When Graux first tries to reflect on his situation more analytically in his journal, he calls it “a moral crisis” and justifies the affair by referring to differences in moral laws and customs among different peoples and cultures. Later, when he realizes that he must give up following Lady Makinson and return to his plantation in the Congo, he sees his sudden passion differently, as a form of self-delusion, blaming his romanticism, and what he calls “the beast within,” for what has happened. The affair ends in shameful ridicule: Graux follows Lady Makinson to Istanbul, where she is reunited with her husband and family and no longer wants to have anything to do with him. When Ferdinand returns to his plantation at the end of the novel, his wish to commit himself to his previous life is clearly reflected in his behavior; for instance, he leaves his journal entries on his writing desk on purpose so that Emilienne can understand his regret and learn about the stages he has undergone.
Emilienne, through whom the narrative is focalized upon her arrival in Africa, gradually learns what has happened and what her fiancé has experienced. At the very end of the novel, a final series of shifts between Ferdinand’s and Emilienne’s perspectives occurs. While it seems that Emilienne now knows the essential facts about Ferdinand’s affair and experience, having also observed her fiancé’s regret, the novel ends with Emilienne’s misguided evaluation of Ferdinand’s state of mind, thus possibly pointing to a conflicted future for the two. Here Ferdinand suddenly embraces Emilienne and rests his head on her shoulder after she has asked him whether they should go to the town of Niangara to take care of Georges Bodet’s widow, Henriette. Ferdinand, whose glasses have slipped off in the embrace, and who does not want to show his face without them for some reason, says very gravely: “Nous irons à Nyangara...” (We will go to Niangara). The seriousness of the reply makes Emilienne laugh: “He said it so gravely that she couldn’t help smiling. From his tone one might have thought he was making a profession of faith” (1979a, 116) (“Et il disait cela si gravement qu’elle ne put s’empêcher de rire. On eût pu croire que c’était tout un programme, une profession de foi”; 2010b, 113). Emilienne misreads Ferdinand’s mind, however: “And really she did wrong to smile, for that day ‘Niangara’ meant, above all else, the bearded missionary with the meerschaum” (1979a, 116) (“C’ est elle qui avait tort de rire, car, Nyangara, c’était avant tout, ce jour-là, le missionnaire à la pipe!”; 2010b, 113). The reader shares with the narrator the privilege of knowing that this is a misunderstanding and, further, may also realize that the scene, with the fallen glasses, refers ironically to Ferdinand’s second African name, Talatala: “the white man who is only a man with his glasses.” At the end, the narrative thus moves from Emilienne’s subjective perspective to an impersonal viewpoint and a narrative voice that is more informed about Ferdinand’s present state of mind and his true intentions in wanting to go to Niangara (to marry Emilienne).

The presentation of gradual changes in the protagonist’s mind from various perspectives is similarly crucial in 45° à l’ombre, where the end of the novel reveals that Donadieu, despite his experience and unique capacities, has not been immune to the “madness” around him. When the boat approaches Tenerife, Donadieu projects his state of mind on the scenery. These sensations are triggered and accentuated by a larger dose of opium. Lying on his bunk, Donadieu perceives himself as being many people at once, living the multiple lives of the whole boat (“Il vivait une autre vie que la sienne. Il vivait dix vies, cent vies, ou plutôt une vie multiple, celle du bateau tour entier”; 2010a, 516). Without rising, he imagines in his mind’s eye the Tenerife port and scenery
which the liner has entered, attentive to all sounds around him, and thinks of the people who have most often fed his curiosity during the journey: the Bassot, Mme Dassonville, Lachaux, and especially the Hurets. These meditations give him the euphoric feeling of knowing everything and everyone on the boat, even entering the others’ minds: “He knew everything! He was incredibly intelligent! For example, he heard the click of the telegraph and knew that the captain was signalling for the ship to be slowed down because he thought he could see the lights of the pilot boat” (1979a, 314). (“Il savait tout! Il avait une intelligence merveilleuse! Il entendait par exemple le déclic du télégraphe, et il savait que c’était le commandant qui ordonnait de ralentir parce qu’il croyait apercevoir les feux de bateau-pilote”; 2010a, 518). As the scene also implies, Donadieu’s privileged perspective, like that of Maigret, is only privileged in relation to the other characters. It is never without some potential ambiguity. In Donadieu’s case, the irony in the scene is partly due to his drug use, which makes him vulnerable and renders his perceptions potentially unreliable. Further, the sensations of omnipresence in the scene highlight again the ambiguity inscribed in his name: “Donadieu” is a possible reference to self-aggrandizement.

When Donadieu finally gets up and looks out of the porthole, he perceives the scenery in terms of the opposition between African settings and Mediterranean Europe. The Europeanness of the scene is, moreover, associated with the sense of the real:

Par le hublot, Donadieu apercevait de vrais humains, des gens qui n’étaient ni des nègres, ni des colons, des gens qui habitaient là parce qu’ils y étaient nés et qu’ils y passaient leur vie. (2010a, 520)

Through the porthole Donadieu saw real human beings, people who were not blacks or colonials, people who lived there because they were born there and were spending their lives there. (1979a, 316)

It is not only that for Donadieu the people in Tenerife have a strong sense of reality and particularity about them, but that he sees, as we are told, real trees, roads and shops and cafés in Tenerife: “This was Tenerife—in other words, this was almost Europe, a mass of colors and sounds reminiscent of Spain or Italy” (1979a, 316). (“C’était Ténériffe, enfin, c’est-à-dire presque l’Europe, un grouillement de couleurs et de sons qui faisaient penser à l’Espagne ou à l’Italie”; 2010a, 520). The reality of the place and the people have to do with their Europeanness, while this quality also confirms, through the opposition between Africa and Europe, that the African colonial reality represents the
side of the unreal, the artificial, and, possibly, the undifferentiated. This creates an interesting contrast but also a sense of continuity with the author's travel reportages and essays where Simenon associates the real with the signs of the ancient Africa and the artificial with the colonial presence.

The perceptual position of the scene clearly belongs to Donadieu, but the passage is also given in impersonal, indirect discourse, with very brief lapses in free indirect discourse. If there is a citation of the character's words in the two sentences (“This was Tenerife” and “Donadieu saw real human beings”) the narrator's locution remains ambivalent; implied perhaps by the word “enfin” that is not translated into English, if understood as pointing to Donadieu's present thoughts. As to the phrase, “Donadieu saw real human beings,” it is even harder to identify the source of the voice. One clear alternative would be to think that the notion of “real people” is the narrator's interpretation of how the protagonist's perception is to be understood, the narrator thus mediating the character's perception. Yet, whether the association between Europeanness and reality is still within the partly delusional sensations that belong to Donadieu, and him only, remains open. The scene portrays Donadieu's capacity for empathy that likens him to a narrator, who can have access to his characters' minds. At the same time, his impression of the Tenerife port appears to be affected by a kind of reversed gaze, representing not only reality to the observer, but also a kind of European picturesque, the port standing for the whole of Europe.

Le Coup de lune, in turn, depicts two interrelated changes in the protagonist Joseph Timar's perception of Africa and Africans. These involve, first of all, the preconceived notion of the African picturesque and, second, of the Africans as part of the same exotic décor, not as real, individual people. Timar's arrival in Gabon and at the scene of the main events, Hotel Central, is conceptually framed by the protagonist's expectation of the picturesque:

Un bon moment que celui-là, parce qu'il y avait du pittoresque! C'était bien africain! Dans le café, aux murs ornés de masques nègres, où il mettait en marche un phonographe à pavillon tandis que le boy lui versait du whisky. Timar se sentait colon! (2010a, 13)

How thrilling it had been, this first taste of the tropics, the real thing, an outpost of France placed exactly on the line of the equator! The restaurant, whose walls were hung with African masks, was just as it should be, and as he cranked up a phonograph with a big old-fashioned horn, and the boy handed him his first shot of whisky, Timar felt like a seasoned “coaster”! (1979a, 120)
At first, Timar is, as we are told, “seduced” by the hotel’s colonial décor, the Negro masks and other features. The change of his mind in this respect, and the final abandonment of the notion of the African picturesque, is gradual. Here, at the novel’s beginning, Timar is the epitome of the kind of hopeful and idealistic newcomer to the colonies, who is ridiculed in Simenon’s reportages. Timar wishes to make a fortune, perhaps educate, and “civilize” the Africans, or study everything African, seeking thus, as the young colonial administrators whom Simenon portrays mockingly in “L’heure du nègre,” a way to penetrate into the Negro soul (“pénétrer l’âme nègre, le secret de l’Afrique et des rites ancestraux”; 2001, 406).

Simenon associates the sense of the picturesque directly with misconceived notions and naïveté at the beginning of “L’heure du nègre” where he describes a scene at the harbor of Port-Gentil where a group of almost naked black Africans are to be shipped to Libreville as cheap labor. The one hundred or more Africans who were herded there like cattle in the heat of the day, made a scene that, as Simenon claims, one might want to call picturesque. The Africans had worried looks and many of them were wounded. Some of them smoked using tin cans, and none had seen the sea before. Yet, Simenon writes, if this is picturesque, it would make a strange postcard or painting:

Du pittoresque, n’est-ce pas? Beaucoup de pittoresque, comme on en met dans les livres et même dans les atlas! Pittoresque de l’odeur aussi, âcre, écoeurante! Et de la crasse! Et de la déclaration que me fit un médecin.

« Il y en a quatre-vingt-dix-neuf pour cent de syphilitiques! A l’un il manquait deux doigts de pied, à l’autre, toute une main! » (2001, 380)

Picturesque, isn’t it? So picturesque, just like in the books and even the atlases! Picturesque smells as well, acrid, nauseating! And the filth! And the statement that a doctor made to me.

“Ninety-nine percent of them are syphilitic! One was missing two toes, and another, a whole hand!” (my translation)

If this scene is to be called picturesque, one has to accept, as Simenon suggests, the sharp and nauseating smells, disease, terrible heat, and the exploitation of the people as inseparable elements of the exotic scene. This, however, might make of the picturesque a horrific clichéd image, unacceptable as an aesthetic ideal.

The same dilemma of the temptation of the picturesque is portrayed in various places in Simenon’s African fiction. Timar’s first attack of unease
(malaise sournois) occurs on the same night as he arrives at the hotel and tries to come to terms with the strangeness of swarming insects, the need to wash himself in a small bowl and visit the bushes instead of a toilet. Soon, his initial impression of seductive colonial décor gives way to a sense of general hostility toward the environment outside the hotel. Subsequently, it is revealed that Timar becomes strongly attached to the hotel and its décor, no longer in the sense of the picturesque exotic but as the familiar, when the hotel is sold. It is increasingly difficult for Timar to leave Libreville to move to his and Adèle's concession outside town:

Tout ce décor qui, au début, lui avait été hostile et qu'il avait haï farouchement, il le voyait soudain avec d'autres yeux. Il le connaissait dans ses détails. Des choses futilles lui semblaient émouvantes, comme ce masque blafard façonné par les nègres, qui était accroché au milieu d'un mur gris perle. Le masque était d'un blanc cru, le mur peint à la détrempe et le rapport entre les tons d'une délicatesse rare. (2010a, 57)

These surroundings, which at first had seemed to him so appalling and which he had loathed with all his heart—he now was seeing them from a different angle. He had grown familiar with all their aspects, and much that had struck him as absurd or ugly now appealed to him in a curious way. The grotesque native mask, for instance, hanging in the middle of a wall. There was a subtle harmony between the tones of the mask and its background, vivid white on silvery-gray distemper. (1979a, 167)

Timar’s attachment to the hotel is motivated by a new sense of familiarity that implies a sense of comfort. The polished hotel counter, with its bottles and drinks, gives him the illusion of the security of a French provincial café. Part of what was thus the impression of the picturesque and the reason for the initial attack of unease has now become his comfort zone.

An essential element of Timar’s initial notion of the African picturesque is his view of the black Africans as one mass of people. It is only outside the town at the concession that Timar realizes that the Africans are real, three-dimensional people just as the Europeans are. The first time Timar is able to see the Africans as individuals and not as part of the scenery, or as examples of exotic skin art, takes place by a river at the concession. This involves him imagining a reversed gaze, that is, the look of the Africans, who might see him as no more than a schematic white person, a representative of a race or a culture. Timar’s wondering about how the Africans may see him—the first phrase in the quotation—is not included in the English translation:
Timar se demanda s’ils le jugeaient, s’ils se faisaient de lui une idée quelconque autre qu’une idée schématique. Lui, par exemple, c’étaient la première fois qu’il regardait des nègres avec quelque chose de plus qu’une curiosité s’adressant à leur côté pittoresque, aux tatouages ou plutôt aux véritables sculptures de la peau, aux anneaux d’argent que certains portaient dans les oreilles, à la pipe en terre qu’un autre serrait dans ses cheveux crépus. (2010a, 84)

As for him, this was the first time he was observing blacks otherwise than as decorative figures, tattooed so deeply that the intricate patterns stood out in relief, some wearing big silver earrings or quaint objects fixed in unlikely places—for instance, that boatman with a clay pipe stuck like a flower in his fuzzy hair. (1979a, 196)

In Simenon’s fictions as in his reportages the Africans serve as backdrops to the text rather than as individual characters. Yet, while the Africans do not generally have a voice, the author and his characters are able to imagine a situation in which the Africans would be able to talk back to the Europeans. In the passage above, as the narrator tells us, the scene with the pirogue, naked and semi-naked rowers, the forest, the river, and Timar in a white colonial suit under a shade in the middle of it, could be very picturesque in a photograph, but the notion is once again discredited. Timar’s rejection of this notion is given in free indirect discourse, again marked with the exclamation point that is missing in the English translation:

Or, ce n’était même pas pittoresque! C’était naturel, apaisant. Timar en oubliait de penser à lui et même de penser. (2010a, 84)

Actually the impression it produced on Timar was less of picturesqueness than of something natural and restful which soothed his nerves, took his mind off himself and his perplexities. (1979a, 196)

Timar thus finds the situation to be all natural and comforting, distancing himself from the picturesque that, for the duration of this experience, appears as the very opposite of lived reality.

The most powerful effect of the scene for Timar, however, is not the blacks’ individuality, but the numbing tranquillity and sadness that seem to infantilize both him and the Africans. For Timar, the Africans are good but naive boys, who shout sharply when the pirogue passes a village or even a single
hut, while he himself feels like he is under these rowers’ protection, treated as if he were a child who is left in their care. Timar explains that

Un grand apaisement, voilà vraiment ce qu’il ressentait, mais c’était un apaisement triste, il ignorait pourquoi. Il y avait en lui de la tendresse de reste, sans objet précis, et il lui semblait qu’il était tout près de comprendre cette terre d’Afrique qui jusqu’ici n’avait provoqué en lui qu’une exaltation malsaine. (2010a, 85)

Above all there had come over him a great calm, though, for some reason he could not fathom, it was tinged with sadness. Yet some capacity for emotion remained, even if it lacked a specific object, and it pleased him to feel that he was on the point of understanding this mysterious continent that until now had brought out only his least healthy instincts. (1979a, 197)

Timar’s understanding of Africa and Africans is never free from contradictions. He remains deeply uncertain about his mission and identity as a coloniser, feeling greatly inferior and inadequate with regard to Adèle who has, among her many skills, the ability to speak an indigenous language. To extract revenge from all of Africa, as he says, Timar sleeps with a young virgin from a nearby village. However, the experience makes Timar feel deeply ashamed, especially when he learns that the girl’s father may be a man called Amami, who has been wrongly accused of murder. Moreover, we hear Timar lamenting, how he has not been able to act like a true coloniser, that is, to shoot ducks, beat up someone, or prohibit people from going to certain areas. Instead, he had given out all of his cigarettes to Africans. Timar believes he is but a passerby, a visitor, or Adèle’s protégé, unable to act like a true colonial settler.

The gradual transformations in Timar’s conception of Africa and Africans are intimately tied to another mental process: the slow disintegration of his mind. This process hastens as his suspicions of Adèle’s unfaithfulness grow and, especially, when it becomes evident to him that the above-mentioned Amami has been sentenced for the murder that Adèle has committed. At the trial, when Timar finds out that Amami is to be sacrificed in a tacit understanding between the white community and Amami’s father-in-law who wants to get rid of him, Timar protests deliriously, crying out that Amami has not killed the man, Adèle’s aide Thomas, but that Adèle herself is responsible: “It’s a lie! It’s a damned lie! He is innocent. It was . . .,” and “it was she who killed that boy. And you know it as well as I do!” (1979a, 219).
(“Ce n’est pas vrai! Ce n’est pas vrai! Il n’a pas tué! C’est . . . C’est elle! Et vous la savez bien!”; 2010a, 106). Timar is then taken down in a struggle and led out of the court.

Later, aboard a boat that is taking him back to Europe, Timar feels more listless than ever before, falling at times into an almost catatonic state, where he seems to ignore all external stimuli. He starts to repeat the words “There is no such thing!” (“Ça n’existe pas!”), sometimes laughingly out loud, sometimes silently to himself (2010a, 106–14). The meaning of these words is ambiguous at first, being possibly a reference to the framing of the man at the trial, Timar’s broken illusions, or perhaps his confused thought that he had been taken to the train station in Libreville (which does not exist). Another explanation that soon emerges is that these words reflect the state of his deranged mind where reality, and the West African reality in particular, is in question. Timar is worried that the Doctor may think he is mad, while admitting to himself that he has mad thoughts:

Il se rendait compte qu’il avait l’air d’un fou, mais il avait conscience de ne pas l’être. Il esquissait des grimaces de fou! Il avait des gestes de fou! Parfois même, dans sa tête, se bousculaient des pensées confuses de fou! (2010a, 109)

He realized he must look like a madman, yet he knew quite well he wasn’t. Of course he made grimaces and, now and then, crazy gestures. Sometimes, too, he found his head buzzing with mad ideas. (1979a, 222)

One of these confused thoughts seems to be the notion in the denial—“There is no such thing!”—that he could make something disappear simply by the force of the words.

The conclusion of Le Coup de lune that focuses on Timar’s deranged state of mind and manic behavior has the longest section of uninterrupted free indirect discourse in Simenon’s three African novels. The passage, consisting of sentences that often end with an exclamation point, follows closely Timar’s feverish mind as he goes through memories of Adèle, the young Negro woman he has taken advantage of, and the events in Libreville. These thoughts are accompanied by a sense of increased receptivity and capacity for intelligence. Timar claims to have antennas:

Et même plus intelligent que lui-même avant! Car, maintenant, il avait des antennes! Il devinait des choses trop subtiles pour la plupart des hommes. (2010a, 112)
Cleverer than he himself had been in the past, for now he had developed a sixth—or was it a seventh?—sense. He perceived things that were too subtle for the ordinary run of people. (1979a, 225)

Timar thinks that he can foresee things in the future, such as what will happen when he returns home to his family (getting married to his cousin Blanche and taking the job that would be offered to him). He also predicts how he would not be understood if he told about the beauty of the moment when twelve black rowers jumped in the river simultaneously with their canoes and then turned their eyes to him. Part of his denial of reality, thus, stems from the fact that the African experience would in a sense cease to make any sense once he settles down in France.

The last of his denials Timar repeats for more than a quarter of an hour as he paces up and down the deck: “There’s no such place as Africa. No such place” (“L’Afrique, ça n’existe pas! L’Afrique . . .”, 2010a, 114). The reader no longer has access to his mind, however, and thus it is impossible to say whether the protagonist wishes Africa to disappear, laments the likely misunderstanding of his travel stories at home, or whether the words are a reflection of his state of mind, where reality is being erased in a more fundamental sense.

Timar’s situation is the most dramatic instance of colonial madness in Simenon’s three African novels. The final source of this madness, as in the cases of Georges Bodet and Doctor Bassot, can be located in the African empire of unreason. By this I mean the notion, which is also put forward in Simenon’s essays, that Africa in itself is somehow damaging, destructive, and poisonous: “It is not the men who poison you. It is Africa!” (“Ce ne sont pas les hommes qui empoisonnent. C’est l’Afrique!,” 2001, 404). Simenon portrays in his reportages the same lethargy, indifference, and madness of Africa that increasingly affects Timar and some of the other characters. But Africa is seen as an empire of unreason in these novels also since the African experience is so consuming and intense for some of the characters and they cannot handle it. Africa marks the men in profound and lasting ways, and in many cases destroys them. As Simenon, in August 1977, comes to the end of his dictated

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8. Richard C. Keller refers to the Orientalist empire of unreason in Colonial Madness (2007, 2), his study of psychiatry in mid-nineteenth-century French North Africa. Bassot’s fate recalls Timar’s situation on the boat when he is being shipped back home. The mental illness each exhibits is also reflected in their speech: while Timar repeats endlessly that Africa does not exist, Bassot improvises with the sounds of the words. These may transport his mind from Africa to Patagonia in one, broken sentence: “Afrique . . . fric . . . n’en ai pas . . . papa . . . panpan . . . pentagone . . . Pantagonie . . .” (2010a, 483) (“Africa . . . cash . . . don’t have any . . . pennies . . . Pentagon . . . Pantagony”; 1979a, 279).
memories concerning his travel over forty years earlier, he again experiences a sudden immersion in the African landscape:

Tout à l’heure, en terminant ma dictée, j’étais complétement plongé dans l’Afrique telle que je l’ai connue. Je suis resté un bon moment immobile dans mon fauteuil, puis, par la porte-fenêtre, j’ai regardé le paysage presque sans le reconnaître. (1979b, 126)

Suddenly, having finished my dictation, I was completely immersed in the Africa as I had known it. I had rested in my armchair for some time without moving and then, when I looked out of the French windows, I hardly recognized the landscape. (my translation)

What happens is a form of profound disorientation in Simenon’s mind, created by his visual memories of African life and landscape that take over his mind for several minutes. What is noteworthy in this scene, however, given what Simenon repeatedly says of the picturesque in his writings, is that the vivid experience of Africa turns the familiar view into a picturesque image. While he looked out of his window in Montreux, the landscape suddenly transformed into a kind of postcard image, or a label on a can of condensed milk, with a French garden in the foreground, a lake with sails and, in the distance, mountains with snowy peaks. The most familiar view had become suddenly incredible and all too artificial, a form of the picturesque that Simenon so disliked.

We may summarize, then, with the observation that the processual aspect in the presentation of the protagonists’ changing worldview and state of mind, mediated through the chosen perspectives and narrative mode, and sometimes also the narrator’s evaluation of the characters, is a crucial element in Simenon’s novels. The processual aspect of the novelistic narratives is also reflected in the important role of memories of past events and thoughts of possible but unrealized patterns of action. For instance, mental disintegration and self-destruction always haunt the colonial experience in Simenon’s African fiction but do not necessarily become a reality. Displacement in the African colony and climate makes total alienation possible, and in Timar’s case, his estrangement extends to a wish to reject and negate reality altogether. In Le Blanc à lunettes, Ferdinand Graux’s and his fiancée Emilienne’s life remains shadowed by what has happened, and by the fate of the young Belgian Bodet couple, who accompanied Ferdinand from Egypt to the Congo when he returned to the plantation. Georges Bodet, frustrated by his work
in colonial administration, tries to kill his wife and then commits suicide. In 45° à l’ombre, where all events take place among European settlers and seamen on an ocean liner, the protagonist Donadieu is a witness to the illusions, madness, and greediness of the passengers around him, including the deranged Doctor Bassot. The colonial decadence is further reflected in this novel in Donadieu’s opium addiction, similarly to Lady Makinson’s opium use in Le Blanc à lunettes. Donadieu and Ferdinand Graux are not directly self-destructive, nor are they in any way deranged, but they are compared to others around them who have killed themselves or who suffer from colonial madness. Through these comparisons, self-destruction and madness appear as a virtual reality that could be theirs. For instance, as the narrator underscores in 45° à l’ombre, Donadieu and his colleague Bassot share many characteristics, such as the same profession and age, explaining further that they would have known each other as students had they studied medicine in the same city. Graux, in turn, compares himself to Georges Bodet and wonders, in his journal, if his fate would be similar to his, if he did not have his instinctive need for equilibrium.

**Conclusion: Voices of Fact**

Simenon’s fiction and nonfiction alike investigate the relation between real and imaginary (or false) notions of Africa, posing similar questions (but in different ways) of misconceived notions of picturesque black Africa, the difficulty of representing African reality, and the experience of immersion in the African landscape. The illusions involved in the colonialist ideology of the civilizing mission, and the naïveté of the new colonisers, are also frequently portrayed across the generic divide. The difficulty, and perhaps also the impossibility, in giving a truthful picture of Africa focuses a number of themes in Simenon’s works, such as the question of the relativizing effects of Western traveller’s and settler’s displacement, the necessity to come to terms with multiple African realities, and the haunting aspect of the reversed gaze, or the possibility of Africans talking back. Furthermore, what one may detect of the narrator’s attitude vis-à-vis the characters’ voiced opinions in the novels is, to a large extent, in line with the author’s outspoken ideas in his nonfiction.

In Quand j’étais vieux, Simenon explains that what he wrote in his travel essays enabled him to avoid certain topics in his fiction, such as the picturesque, or certain philosophical and political considerations:
En définitive, dans ces articles et dans d'autres, je me débarrais d'avance de ce que je ne voulais pas mettre dans mes romans, du pittoresque, justement, et aussi des considérations plus ou moins philosophiques ou politiques.

Je ne le faisais pas exprès. C'est instinctivement que j'ai adopté cette règle d'hygiène que je découvre seulement aujourd'hui (1970, 91).

All said and done, in these articles and in others, I relieved myself in advance of all that I did not want put in my novels, the picturesque, precisely, and also all more or less philosophical or political considerations.

I did not do it on purpose. I had adopted instinctively this rule that I have just discovered today. (my translation)

However, it is the dilemma of the picturesque and the problem of how to present African reality that unite the author's travel writing and fiction. The question that I posed earlier about how fiction borrows from nonfiction must also be reformulated in the light of my analyses. Simenon's travel writing does not necessarily give credence to his novels; neither are the novels illustrations of the ideas that are put forward in the reportages. As I have shown above, the difference between the genres that matters lies in the mode of narration, specifically with regard to the complexity of the narrative situation and importance given to the gradual development of a character's mind and worldview.

While Simenon's reportages and his fiction are clearly distinct in terms of their modes of narration, there are, however, some passages in his travel reportages, where the text approximates the narrative situation in the novels and seemingly acknowledges the imitation. The question of narrative situation and voice becomes particularly important in the essay “L'Afrique qu'on dit mystérieuse,” where the author engages the readers from the beginning in a kind of conversational discourse through an ongoing series of asides. This commentary involves assumptions concerning the readers' views or experiences, and rhetorical questions directed to the audience: “Evidently, you have read” (“Evidemment, vous avez lu”); “Possibly, next, you are curious to know” (“Peut-être, par la suite, avez-vous eu la curiosité”); “After all, not that long ago, you have seen some films” (“Enfin, il n'y a pas bien longtemps, vous avez vu des films”); “Imagine now that we are two old friends” (“Imaginez maintenant que nous sommes de vieux camarades”), etc. Most of the assumptions concern shared notions of Africa and travel in Africa, such as the notion of the picturesque, and kinds of books and films that the writer and the reader supposedly both know. Furthermore, while the author refers to his actual travel experiences between Cairo and Lake Victoria, he also creates for himself a kind of hypothetical narrative voice that could be called pseudofictional.
The pseudonym Georges Caraman that Simenon chose for this text accentuates the distance between the narrative voice and the actual author. Yet, this effect also stems partly from the ambivalent use of the first-person plural form nous, with the result that it is not clear who is included in “us.” “Us” might involve the writer and his actual companion (Simenon’s wife Tigy perhaps), or other travellers, but at times “nous” seems to refer to the author and his potential readers, or the European settlers in general as an imaginary community. At one point in this essay, for example, Simenon writes that “we” look for reasons for the black Africans’ strange indifference or childlike laughter. Simultaneously, he further argues, “we” may be using language that is incomprehensible to the Africans:

Alors, nous cherchons des explications à leur indifférence, ou à leur rire enfantin, ou à leurs colères subites. Nous discutons avec eux et nous ne nous rendons pas compte que c’est nous qui avons tort d’employer un langage incompréhensible. (2001, 436)

So we look for explanations for their indifference, or their childish laughter, or their sudden anger. We have a conversation with them and we do not realise that it is us who have made the mistake of using an incomprehensible language. (my translation)

This “we” indicates as much the general Westerner as any particular travelling companion or reader.

At the same time, as the first-person plural remains ambivalent, the address of the imagined narrative audience becomes increasingly complex in the course of the essay. This is since it is quite possible to imagine an audience that would be willing to distance itself from the addressed reader, since the latter is characterized and caricatured by the misconceived notions of Africa, and rather sides with the author himself. This is to suppose a reader, who is able to share the author’s ironic views of the picturesque exotic. The actual reader’s wink at the author behind the naïve readers’ back becomes possible, for instance, when Simenon invites the reader to imagine the great white hunters of whom we read in the newspapers: “Your imagination is at work. You say that the mister is a famous hunter, and he is not afraid of anything, etc . . . , etc . . . . “ (“Votre imagination travaille. Vous vous dites que le monsieur est un fameux chasseur, qu’il n’a pas froid aux yeux, etc. . . . , etc. . . .” ; 2001, 423). The white hunters’ bravery is wholly fabricated, however,

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9. Simenon used this pseudonym in several articles for the weekly Police et Reportage in 1933.
as is soon explained. The reader is, then, invited to reject similar false notions concerning the dangerous animals, primitive people and beliefs, the mysterious Pygmies and other prototypical African legends, or “our” films and literature that abound with such notions. For those who do not have the time to see Africa themselves, Simenon recommends in this essay the next colonial exhibition: “Moreover, if you do not have the time, there will be a colonial exposition in three years” (“Au surplus, si vous n’avez pas le temps, il y aura dans trois ans une exposition coloniale,” 2001, 437). It is, however, unlikely that we should take his word at face value and participate in the audience who is thus addressed. After all, we do not want to be like the “bad journalist” or tourist or anyone, who is naively looking for impressions of the picturesque exotic or bases his or her views of the colonies on the self-serving presentations of a colonial exhibition.