

The Ethiopia Metaphor: A Dialectic Myth of Africa

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'Myths solve nothing, arrange nothing', claims Frank Yerby in his novel, *The Man from Dahomey* ('Note to the Reader'). But since he is merely writing fiction about Africa he may be forgiven for such a careless attitude to myth. By way of contrast, let me quote a serious historian of Ancient Egypt, Barry Kemp, who has to handle myth rather more circumspectly:

All people's knowledge of most things—their everyday 'working knowledge'—is throughout akin to myth, and is in part truly myth. We cannot afford to be too dismissive of myth or patronising about it, for it is an inescapable facet of the human mind (Kemp 1989:6).

It is this elusive power of myth that shall concern me here, and myth not only as itself a form of knowledge or a cultural artefact that represents the world in a particular way, but more especially as a heuristic device, a way of actually processing our experience of the new and unknown in such a manner that we can begin to understand it. I want to suggest that certain myths that initially seem naive and even preposterous, may, because of their dialectic structure, actually encourage investigation and debate, and may thus even help us to see what otherwise might not have been seen at all.

I am in the broadest sense concerned with Europe's (or the West's) organising myths of Africa, and in particular I want to look at the Mediterranean and later European mythology surrounding a place—or indeed various places—called 'Ethiopia'. In the first part of the paper I shall attempt a rapid and even impressionistic sketch of what the ancient, classical, medieval and Renaissance world of Mediterranean Europe understood by the term 'Ethiopia'. I shall follow this with an equally brief look at what happened to this concept of 'Ethiopia' once Europe had established contact in the early sixteenth century with what was taken to be the 'real' Ethiopia of Abyssinia. I hope to consider, finally, what relevance all this may have for our understanding of the historical representation of southern Africa and its inhabitants from the sixteenth century onwards.

The most important point to make about Europe's Ethiopian myth is that from the very beginning it had a binary, dialectic structure. According to Homer (*Odyssey*

1.22-24) the Ethiopians were 'the farthestmost of men', and were divided into two, some living 'where Hyperion sets and some where he rises'. In the *Odyssey* they are the favoured of Poseidon; in the *Iliad* (1.423-4) they are visited by Zeus and all the gods, and they are called the 'worthy' (or 'noble') Ethiopians. A similar reference in Book 23.205-7 seems to endow the Ethiopians with the immortality of the gods, or at least with long lives. That Homer's apparently fanciful Ethiopia may have had its origin in the actual kingdom of Kush in Upper Nubia, of which record also exists in the Old Testament, and that its legendary reputation was successively taken over by the even more remote kingdoms of Meroe in the northern Sudan, Aksum in what is now northern Ethiopia, and later the Solomonic empire of Abyssinia, have been extensively argued (Thompson 1969,1989; Van Wyk Smith 1986; Munro-Hay 1991), and shall not detain me further for the moment.

Homer's suggestion that there were two Ethiopias ensured the longevity and procreative powers of his myth and allows us to speak not merely of an Ethiopian myth but of a dialectic metaphor or discourse of Ethiopia, an explanatory economy that would take on a life of its own. Homer made no distinction between his Oriental and Hesperian Ethiopians, but Herodotus, in attempting to turn mythology into anthropology, did just that. In reviewing Xerxes's army in Book 7 of the *Histories*, he refers to the 'eastern Ethiopians' as Indians with 'straight hair', while his 'western Ethiopians' are Nubians and others 'who came from the regions above Egypt' and 'are more woolly-haired than any other people in the world' (7.69-70). Earlier he refers to 'a great city called Meroe, which is said to be the capital of [these] other Ethiopians' (2.29), located

where the south declines towards the setting sun ... the country called Ethiopia, the last inhabited land in that direction ... [where] the men are taller, handsomer and longer lived than anywhere else (3.114).

Here was the stuff of debate and argument, a Derridean *différance* that would over the centuries seek resolution in various realities while developing into an ever more broadly dichotomised ethnography of Africa. Herodotus's attempt to explicate Homer's distinction as one between Indians and Africans found few successors. Actual Greek contact with Meroe after Herodotus's time and the development there of an African culture strongly influenced by the classical world, followed by the extensive exploration of the Red Sea coasts and inner North-East Africa under the Ptolemies (Burstein 1989; Shinnie 1967), gave currency to a purely African division of the Ethiopians. The Kushitic and Meroitic Ethiopians became the tall, noble and long-lived eastern Ethiopians of Homer's myth while the nomadic pastoralists further afield, of Nilotic and negroid origin, became the 'other' or 'western' Ethiopians of the Homeric paradigm (Romm 1992:50-55).

What was at first merely a schematic geographical distinction and then a rough ethnographic one, soon became an essentially evaluative one. Agatharchides of Cnidus, whose work on the Erythraean (or Red) Sea provides us with the first extensive review of the information about inner North-East Africa available by the second century BC, limited the term 'Aethiopian' strictly to the Meroitic Nubians, perceived by him as a highly civilized race in contrast to all the peoples around them. As Burstein puts it: Agatharchides 'made Meroe the centre of Greek interest in the Sudan for the rest of antiquity' (Agatharchides 1989:21). He also put into common currency prototypical descriptions of the primitive non-Ethiopians:

They always live without clothes, and, as they have sexual relations with their women in common, they consequently consider the children who are born their common offspring (5.52b).

The terms used here are diagnostic and became standard tropes in the late-classical, medieval and Renaissance literature of primitivism.

Writing about a century after Agatharchides, Diodorus Siculus flattened out the former's careful distinction between Ethiopians and other Africans, and identified the Meroitic Ethiopians as Homer's 'faultless men ... the first to be taught to honour the gods' who 'from all time ... have enjoyed a state of freedom and of peace one with another' (3.2.3f). Even more importantly for the later mythography of Africa, Diodorus regarded these Ethiopians as 'the first of all men' (3.2.1f) and the origin of Egyptian civilisation. He thus formulated what Martin Bernal believes was an ancient Egyptian and Greek tradition, namely that the sources of Dynastic Egypt were essentially African and had first taken shape in Upper Egypt and Nubia, a view confirmed by much recent scholarship (Adams 1977; Bernal 1987; Hoffman 1980). The classical tradition of a noble and originally eastern Ethiopia in due course blended readily with a later patristic, medieval, and early Renaissance Christian myth that the Nile was in fact the Gihon of the Book of Genesis, flowing from paradise (Van Wyk Smith 1986). Ethiopia thus became the location of the earthly paradise, a tradition which in turn inspired or at least encouraged the later myth of Prester John's African Christian utopia, and finds expression in a pervasive cartographic tradition from the thirteenth century onwards which depicts the terrestrial paradise as located in east or southern Africa (Van Wyk Smith 1986, 1988a, 1988b).

If Diodorus exaggerated the noble Ethiopians in one direction, he did the same for his 'savage Ethiopians'. Generalising from Agatharchides's ethnography of specific peoples, he describes the 'great many other tribes of the Ethiopians' as 'entirely savage and display[ing] the nature of a wild beast'. They are 'black in colour and have flat noses and woolly hair'. They have 'a shrill voice' and cultivate 'none of the prac-

tices of civilized life as these are found among the rest of mankind'. They go naked or in animal skins, have their wives and children in common, and sleep where night finds them (3.8.1-5). None of this is new to us, largely because at almost the same time that Diodorus wrote, Lucretius produced his paradigmatic description of the primitive life in Book 5 of the *De rerum naturae* (5.1011-1090), which specifically invoked the features of nakedness, poor speech (or the lack of it), the commonality of wives and children and the absence of fixed abodes as the mark of the primitive. What had started with Agatharchides as a relatively innocuous ethnography of a particular group of African people now became and remained for many centuries—indeed, up to our own time—a fully-fledged discursive schema for representing the other. Lucretian primitivism has been extensively discussed (Lovejoy & Boas 1935; Burstein 1989), and I do not wish to take the theme further here, except to stress that as a trope of the primitive, along with the ethnography of the 'savage Ethiopian' on which it is based, it was always only one half of a dialectic paradigm that also included the 'noble Ethiopian', thus constituting a broad discursive range for European depictions of and debate about the people of Africa.

What this means is that Europe's discourse of Africa was never merely a matter of representing Africa and Africans as simply and irredeemably 'other', as cultural binarists inspired by Foucault and Said have tried to tell us. That it was not so can easily be demonstrated from the record. If we pursue the motif of the 'savage Ethiopian' down the West Coast of Africa, for instance, examining its shaping influence on the European encounter with these parts, it is tempting, at a first glance, to assume that John Matthews's (1788:159) infamous resume adumbrates the whole record:

Trace the manners of the natives, the whole extent of Africa from Cape Cantin to the Cape of Good Hope, and you find a constant and almost regular gradation in the scale of understanding, till the wretched Cafre sinks nearly below the Ouran Outang.

There are, however, a number of comments to be made about that statement, apart, of course, from expressing abhorrence at its offensiveness. The most pertinent argument to be brought against it is that precisely because such views were seen to devolve from ancient stock perceptions of the 'savage Ethiopian', they were constantly challenged by European observers who, alert to the dialectically constructed nature of the European response to Africa, invoked either personal experience or the myth of the 'noble Ethiopian', or a mixture of both, in order to project a quite different image of West Africa. Olfert Dapper describing Benin in the mid-seventeenth century, or William Snelgrave, Michel Adanson, Jean Baptiste Labat and C.B. Wadstrom describing Whydah, Dahomey, Senegal and other parts of Guinea in the eighteenth century, are just a few of the names one can invoke for more carefully nuanced ethnographies of

West Africa (Van Wyk Smith 1990). Thomas Winterbottom, for instance, writing in 1803 about several years of experience in Sierra Leone, specifically declared

the thick lips, flat nose, and particularly the woolly hair of negroes, circumstances on which the advocates for distinct races of mankind [have laid] so much stress, as of no great importance (1.196).

He went on to a personal testimony which, though cast in the progressivist assumptions of the Enlightenment, nevertheless explicitly resists the pressure of stereotypes:

In describing the disposition of nations who have scarcely emerged from what is termed a state of barbarism, observers are too apt to be led astray by individual acts of kindness or of injury, and ... decide upon their character with too little diffidence as well as discrimination. Thus to one people they attribute virtues too sublime to be consistent with human frailty and depravity, while others they accuse of vices altogether inconsistent with their small progress in civilisation If my testimony can avail ought in placing the character of the Africans in a more just and proper point of view, it will only be a grateful though inadequate return for many acts of kindness received at their hands (Winterbottom 1803:1.210-211).

A further point to be made about the John Matthews passage quoted earlier, and one which will take me forward to the next part of my argument, is that 'the wretched Caffre' he refers to was, of course, not the Xhosa and other Bantu-speaking peoples of southern Africa to whom this offensive term came to be applied from the nineteenth century onwards, but the Khoi, or so-called Hottentots. Indeed, it was the Khoi who at last came to bear the full brunt of the 'savage Ethiopian' tradition. Depicted almost from the moment of first contact with Europeans in the terms of Lucretian primitivism derived from Agatharchides—woolly hair, flat noses, clucking speech or speechlessness, nakedness, commonality of wives and children, and homelessness—the Khoi became living avatars of the absolutely 'other' in European ethnography: in the words of Father Guy Tachard who visited the Cape in 1685:

The south point of Africa is no less remote from Europe, than the manners of its inhabitants are different from ours (Tachard 1688:67).

Yet even this excessive othering by no means signals a monolithic discourse. Precisely because the stock description of the Khoi was recognised as the derivative classical caricature that it was, more careful observers could and did attempt to formulate much more compassionate and complex ethnographies of the Khoi. Key figures in

this regard were Olfert Dapper, Peter Kolben, Francois le Vaillant, John Barrow, and the latter's illustrator, Samuel Daniell, as I have argued before (Van Wyk Smith 1992).

The history of the eastern or 'noble' half of the myth or trope of the two Ethiopias has had a career at least as protean and persistent as that of the 'savage Ethiopia'. A full account of it would have to examine the tradition of a Christian Ethiopia as preserved in Mediterranean Europe, from the time of the conversion of the Kingdom of Axum in the fourth century (Munro-Hay 1991) down to the emergence of the Prester John myth in the late Crusades and its attachment to Abyssinian Ethiopia (Slessarev 1959). Such an examination would show that Edward Gibbon's famous conclusion that after the Islamic conquest of North Africa, 'encompassed on all sides, the Ethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world, by whom they were forgotten' (Gibbon 1870:2.788), only to be reawakened by the Portuguese in the early sixteenth century, will not hold. Christian or Abyssinian Ethiopia was never really 'lost' or 'forgotten', either as an actual place or as the subject of myth. The steady, if limited, exchange of information on the Mediterranean network of trade and pilgrimage, much increased at the time of the Crusades and culminating in the appearance of several Ethiopian embassies at various European courts from the thirteenth century onwards (Doresse 1957:2.230-234; Beckingham 1966), meant that the Portuguese had quite a shrewd idea of what they were looking for. Furthermore, the patristic tradition of biblical exegesis had endowed texts such as Genesis 2:13, which describes the paradisaical Gihon as 'the same ... that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia', or Psalm 68:31, which prophesied that 'Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hand unto God', with a symbolic import that ensured the continued mythic presence of the 'noble Ethiopia' in the European mind (Courtes 1979).

Nor did the enigmatic Ethiopia of 'noble' Africans, the site of paradise and the empire of Prester John, dissolve once Abyssinian Ethiopia began to be opened up to the West. On the contrary, it can be shown that Abyssinia was at first vastly inflated both in the European consciousness and on European maps of Africa of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Randles 1959; Skelton 1961). In a paper which examines the relationship between the Jesuit Jerome Lobo's description of Abyssinia in the early seventeenth century and Samuel Johnson's *Rasselas*, I have previously surveyed several centuries' of constant debate about the country. In this literature the dominant theme was how to reconcile the fabulous land of classical and early Christian repute with the actual place encountered by embassies, explorers, and missionaries (Van Wyk Smith 1994). The resultant mythographic pressure is well summed up in Job Ludolf's complaint, expressed after he had read much of what had ever been written about Ethiopia:

Others there are, who to waste idle hours, and designing some fabulous inventions, or to represent the platform of some imaginary commonwealth, have chosen Ethiopia

for the subject of their discourse, believing they could not more pleasantly romance, or more safely license themselves to fasten improbabilities upon any other country (Ludolf 1681:1-2).

Ludolf cites as two major offenders the evidently fictitious Giacomo Baratti, whose *Late Travels ... into the Remote Country of the Abassins* (1670) may well have provided the source of Rasselas's 'happy valley' (Kolb 1958:13), and Luis de Urreta, who was described by Samuel Purchas as 'a Spanish friar and lier' and about whose history of Ethiopia (1610) Purchas remarked 'I know not whether his book ... hath more lies or lines' (Purchas 1625/1905:7.411). Ludolf could have mentioned several other works, and more were to appear after his time, such as Simon Berington's *Memoirs of Signor Gaudentio di Lucca* (1737) and the pseudonymous Drake Morris's *Travels* (1755), both of which invoke a utopian Ethiopia, and, of course, Dr Johnson's *Rasselas* (1759).

Merely to dismiss such works as at best moral or political allegories set in an exotic site or, at worst, foolish fabrications misses an important point. Their choice of Ethiopia is not accidental, but is evidence of the continued interest in and debates surrounding the location and identity of the 'noble Ethiopia' of the ancients. Such works are part of the fall-out of much more serious debates about the origin and nature of African polities and complex political structures that obviously did not conform to the alternative 'savage Ethiopia' paradigm. So, for instance, James Bruce's monumental *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile in the Years 1768-1773* (1790), while constituting the first serious and extended first-hand description of Abyssinia in English, grappled with the actualities of Ethiopian custom, court and culture even as Bruce also developed a bizarre historical theory to explain how the Ethiopians of Axum, ancestors to the people he met, could have founded first Meroe and then the glories of Dynastic Egypt. That Bruce was completely on the wrong track does not diminish the seriousness of his intent or his willingness to explain African realities in terms of indigenous rather than external dynamics.

Nor did such endeavours to square myth with actuality come to an end during the final European opening up and scramble for Africa. W.G.L. Randles showed long ago (1959) how the Shona culture of Monomotapa was depicted in terms strongly reminiscent of Prester John's Ethiopia by writers from Joao de Barros onwards, not only to compensate for the rapidly diminishing status of Abyssinian Ethiopia, but also as a way of comprehending a complex Bantu polity. At the time of the British Abyssinian Campaign of 1868 it was once again the ancient cult of a 'noble Ethiopia' and the Solomonic succession of Ethiopian kings that was invoked to explain the charismatic power of King Theodore II over both his subjects and foreign observers (Hotten 1868; Stanley 1874:270; Matthew 1947:188). John Buchan tapped into the same tradition for the enigmatic protagonist and apocalyptic theme of his political romance, *Prester John* (1910), set in the Eastern Transvaal. The myth suffuses the African ro-

mances of Rider Haggard, and it inspired the enormous international interest which the coronation of Hailie Selassie attracted in 1930, as evidenced by Evelyn Waugh's attempt to demythologise it in *Remote People* (1931). Moreover, it lies at the root of the millennialist and liberationist Rastafarian movement which the same event brought into being. Until well into the twentieth century Abyssinian Ethiopia has commonly been described as an archaic, patriarchal world frozen in biblical time. David Matthew detected 'aspects of the Christian world in Abyssinia which seems to suggest not so much Byzantium as the late Middle Ages' (1947:174). As late as 1972 Duncan Forbes thought that

this, undoubtedly, is the Christian Church as it once was; as it was before the Reformation; as it was in Byzantine times (Forbes 1972:132),

a sentiment anticipated by one of the most eminent living Western authorities on Ethiopia, Edward Ullendorff, who describes a land 'forcefully reminiscent of the Old Testament world' in every respect (Ullendorff 1968:3). But perhaps the most sensational contemporary manifestation of the lasting powers of the myth of a 'noble Ethiopia' is the tragic recent history of Ruanda, where part of the trouble between Hutu and Tutsi stems from a tradition, actively promoted by nineteenth-century missionary anthropology, that the Tutsi were not of Central African or Bantu origin but formed a Hamitic aristocracy of Ethiopian origin (De Waal 1994). That myth could have such terrible results may condemn but does not discountenance the myth. On the contrary, its power and hence the need to take it seriously is only demonstrated the more devastatingly.

The impact of the dialectical trope of two contrastive Ethiopias on the early colonial mythology of southern Africa is not difficult to demonstrate. One can begin with the Adamastor episode in Canto 5 of Camoes's *Lusiads* (1572), where it is clear that Camoes configures Da Gama's encounter with Adamastor as a rite of passage, a transition from the 'savage Ethiopia' of one part of the tradition to the 'noble Ethiopia' of the other (Van Wyk Smith 1988a). This is obvious from the careful flanking of the Adamastor episode by two strikingly different encounters with the Khoi, the western one warlike and treacherous, the eastern idyllic and pastoral. Further evidence is to be found in the standard southern African topography of early Portuguese cosmography with which Camoes would have been familiar, according to which the Cape of Good Hope marked the southern limit of the boundary between Africa and Asia. According, for instance, to Duarte Pacheco Pereira, whose *Esmeraldo de situ orbis*, compiled between 1505 and 1508, was the first complete router or *roteiro* of the Portuguese sea route to India, the Nile was the dividing line between Africa and Asia. This was an ancient idea, but what was new was that Pereira placed the Mountains of the Moon, Ptolemy's sources of the Nile, at the Cape, and then argued:

At this promontory Africa comes to an end in the Ocean, and is divided from Asia; from this point the boundary of Africa runs due north following the course of the Nile, through the midst of the Ethiopias [note the plural] ... to Damietta on the Sea of Egypt (Perreira 1937:155).

Many early maps of Africa show this massively elongated Nile, and the myth of a southern African Nile source deluded both David Livingstone, who died in what is now Zambia looking for it (Livingstone 1874), and the Voortrekkers, who gave Nylstroom its name because that is what they thought it was.

Such a bizarre reading of southern African geography only makes sense if we acknowledge the power of the myth of two Ethiopias and assume a presupposition on the part of early writers that in southern Africa would be found an interface between two radically different Ethiopias or Africas such as once existed between the 'noble Ethiopians' of Kush, Meroe and Axum and the 'primitive Ethiopians' of the Sudan. Such a distinction is exactly what emerges from early southern African ethnography. As I have already indicated, the Khoi were persistently identified as the primitives of classical record. It was not accidental that by the end of the eighteenth century, when James Bruce sought a fitting analogy to distinguish the Galla of Somalia and southern Ethiopia from his 'true' Ethiopians he should have found it in the Khoi: the Galla 'greatly resemble the Hottentots' (Bruce 1813:3.243). By contrast, the Nguni peoples became candidates for the role of 'noble Ethiopians' almost from the moment they were first encountered. In the very year that Bruce published his *Travels to Discover the Source of the Nile* (1790), a reviewer of Francois le Vaillant's *South African Travels* surmised that the Xhosa were 'Cushites':

We strongly suspect that they have emigrated from Abyssinia ... and if we do not admit of their being Cushites, we may at least derive their customs from the navigators of Solomon, perhaps the colonists of that country (*Critical Rev.* 1790:43).

A few years later John Barrow produced an ethnology of Khoi, San and Xhosa which confirmed these analogies and became canonical for much of the nineteenth century. Of the San he wrote: 'The character drawn by Diodorus Siculus, of some of the Ethiopian nations, agrees exactly with that of the Bosjesmans' (1801:1.282). He tried to rehabilitate centuries of vilification of the Khoi, 'the many ridiculous and false relations by which the public have been abused' (1.151), but found the power of myth hard to combat. His Xhosa, however, walk straight out of the pages of Herodotus:

The men ... were the finest figures I ever beheld: they were tall, robust, and muscular; their habits of life had induced a firmness of carriage, and an open, manly manner, which, added to the good nature that overspread their features, shewed them at once

to be equally unconscious of fear, suspicion, and treachery. A young man about twenty, of six feet ten inches high, was one of the finest figures that perhaps was [sic] ever created. He was a perfect Hercules; and a cast from his body would not have disgraced the pedestal of that deity in the Farnese palace. Many of them had indeed very much the appearance of bronze figures (Barrow 1801:1.169).

Similar descriptions and heroic illustrations to support them can be found in the work of Samuel Daniell and Ludwig Alberti, and in George French Angas's famous lithographs, *The Kaffirs Illustrated* (1849).

The encounter between white and black on the Eastern Cape frontier did not, of course, remain a merely aesthetic one as the nineteenth century wore on. However, as a more conflictual and complex perception of the Xhosa developed among white observers, the paradigm of the 'noble Ethiopian' was simply transferred to the Zulu. Dan Wylie (1995) has demonstrated conclusively the excessively constructed nature of the white image of Shaka Zulu, and the extent to which it drew, right from the start, on classical and Renaissance teratology, involving figures from Saturn and Polyphemus to Adamastor. What is furthermore remarkable is the correspondence of many early representations of the Zulu to those of Meroitic Ethiopians. Here, for instance, is C.H. Caldecott writing up a group of 13 Zulus whom he and his father had taken to exhibit in London:

[The Zulus are] a fine, handsome race, bold, fearless, and commanding in appearance In shape tall, robust, and athletic, good-humoured, frank and pleasing in manner; and with a dignity of carriage and an openness of eye, indicative to the beholder of dauntless courage and perfect independence (Caldecott 1853:30).

We are approaching here, of course, the broader, persistent and complex myth of the Zulus as a proud warrior people, about which I do not wish to say any more than that it was variously bolstered by allusions to a northern or Ethiopian source of, or influence on, Zulu culture. The belief crops up in Hugh Mulleneux Walmsley's *Ruined Cities of Zululand* (1869)—his 'Zululand' is in fact the Manicaland of Monomotapa and Great Zimbabwe fame. Egyptian and Ethiopian avatars shadow Haggard's manipulation of the Zulu in his African romances, while Charles Barter's ambitious epic poem, *Stray Memories of Natal and Zululand* (1897), feels constrained to oppose widespread 'Suggestions of a northern clime' (87) in accounts of Zulu origins. What lies beneath such beliefs seems to be a substructural blending of anthropology, history and myth, a schematic attempt to make sense of the great Nguni migrations. That there was a long, slow movement of Bantu-speaking peoples from east to southern Africa is now generally acknowledged, as is the fact that, in Monica Wilson's words, the

Nguni show marked similarities in economy, local grouping, law, ritual, and symbolism with the cattle people of the Sudan, Uganda and Kenya borderlands (Wilson 1969:130).

The possibility of a strange confluence here of myth and scholarship brings me to a conclusion.

I would suggest that in the vast body of Western or European or early white colonial writing on Africa, the Ethiopia metaphor, the dialectic myth of two kinds of Ethiopia, constitutes a perceptual grid that has revealed new dimensions at least as often as it may have encouraged obfuscation. The persistence of this binarist construction of African difference demonstrates the need for myths that do not merely explain, but actually provide the discursive mechanisms for explanation and rebuttal. I believe that the Ethiopia metaphor provided a cognitive scheme through which (and perhaps only through which) non-Africans could articulate their response to people whom they perceived as very different from themselves. Although the polarising thrust of the paradigm of a 'savage' and a 'noble' Ethiopia encouraged excessively 'othered' views of African people often enough, its very excessiveness also generated debate and dissent, while its range could both elicit and accommodate comparative appraisal. Unless we assume that there is an essential Africa which must either be wholly captured by or wholly escape non-African discourses, we must accept the facilitating power of myth in transcultural representation. The question then is not whether the mythic perceptions that Europeans brought to bear on their encounter with Africans were 'right' or 'wrong' or 'good' or 'bad', or should have been different, but whether any meaningful engagement at all could have taken place without such explanatory mythographic grids in position.

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