

Symbolism, Popular Drama, and Politics and Art in Belgium, 1886-1910

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Joan Gross,

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Abstract: In her article "Symbolism, Popular Drama, and Politics and Arts in Belgium, 1886-1910," Joan Gross examines what effects the reign of terror in the Congo and the silence that masked it might have had on popular performance traditions and literary practices in Belgium. Gross examines a popular puppet play by Léopold Leloup and an essay by Maurice Maeterlinck, both of which are called *The Massacre of the Innocents*. The third text she explores is a parliamentary speech given by Émile Vandervelde in 1903 in which he protested brutal practices in the Congo. Gross explores the interconnections between these three disparate texts and situates them within fin-de-siècle Belgium where racism and socialism were reigning ideologies and symbolism became the favored literary style. Following Taussig, Gross suggests that symbolism and the use of the traditional narrative of *The Massacre of the Innocents* were literary responses to cultures of terror.

Joan Gross

Symbolism, Popular Drama, and Politics and Art in Belgium, 1886-1910

Introduction

The Nativity Play, about the birth of Jesus Christ, is commonly performed in puppet theaters throughout Belgium. The *crèche* scene of local peasants offering gifts to the new baby is perhaps the most refracted scene in the Christian world, and living in that world, it did not seem unusual to see it portrayed in a theater full of families with small children during the Christmas season. I was not quite prepared, however, for the following scene of the Massacre of the Innocents when King Herod, threatened by the rumor that a new king had been born, orders all male children under age two to be killed. Soldier puppets barging through the doors of private residences emerged with small plastic dolls shish-kebabbed onto their swords. Cries pierced the heavy theater air as other baby dolls were tossed roughly onto the stage.

After being introduced to the Massacre of the Innocents in the contemporary puppet theater, other Belgian versions of it came to my attention. I examine three of these texts in the present paper. Two of them are called *The Massacre of the Innocents*. One of these is a transcription of a puppet show performed by Léopold Leloup sometime before 1910 that depicts King Herod's biblical massacre of children. The other is Maurice Maeterlinck's 1886 allegorical narrative about the sixteenth-century invasion of Flanders by the Spanish Duke of Alba. The final text, the only one that depicts contemporary massacres, is not called *The Massacre of the Innocents*, but it describes situations in which innocents were massacred. It is a transcript of a parliamentary speech made by Jile Vandervelde in 1903 denouncing atrocities in the Congo. None of these texts refer directly to each other and each is of a different genre, but the connections are intriguing, and lead one to question whether The Massacre of the Innocents actually masked another massacre, more disturbingly present in the Belgian cultural unconscious.

In *King Leopold's Ghost*, Adam Hochschild wrote how Belgians were encouraged to "actively forget" the death of five to ten million Africans in the course of Belgian colonization (292-300). Traces of the horrific events brought to light by Vandervelde seem to appear in the other texts, though applied to different massacres in different historical periods. The two massacre texts that people listened to or read for their leisure treated events perpetrated on people who could be considered pre-Christians and pre-Belgians, rather than those perpetrated by contemporary Belgians and those in their employ. As something that could not be revealed, but also something that could not be completely silenced, images of the culture of terror reigning in the Congo appear to have invaded the Belgian psyche, only to find their way to expression through folk narratives.

The Massacre of the Innocents has been a solid part of Catholic European folk theater since the tenth century and puppets were often used to communicate biblical stories to the masses. Catholicism quickly became a central pillar of identity in the new Belgian state that came into being in 1830. It provided rare grounds for unity to this small country that was split in two by linguistic differences and ruled over the years by the Spanish Habsburgs, Austrian Habsburgs, German princes, France and Holland. Belgium's fractured past was smoothed over in history books by concentrating on the centrality of Catholicism. Charlemagne, Godefroid de Bouillon and Charles V, all defenders of the Catholic church and born on what became Belgian territory, offered a way to project the civilization of this newly imagined community back in time.

The nineteenth century was the heyday of racist discourses and of an evolutionary scheme that ranked the people of the world along a scale of savagery, barbarism and civilization. This "scientific" discourse served colonialism as a loyal handmaiden and enabled Europeans and Americans (the keepers of civilization) to subjugate and eliminate millions of people around the world (by the turn of the century Europe had colonized approximately 85% of the world). Belgium was late to join the ranks of colonialists, but when its king Leopold II plunged into Africa, he constructed a culture of terror that

horrified people around the world (see <<http://www.cobelco.org/Histoire/congo1text.htm#Haut>>). In the 1880s, King Leopold's ventures in Africa were of less note in Belgium, where only about 120,000 well-off, landholding men had the right to vote, than the burgeoning socialist movement. This captured the imagination of many young intellectuals including both Vandervelde and Maeterlinck. Vandervelde became the first leader of the Belgian Workers' Party which was formed in 1885 and he and Maeterlinck were founding members of the Circle of Socialist Students in Brussels where they were both studying law. The socialists began militating for universal suffrage and better working conditions. Liège, where Leloup was performing puppet plays, erupted in riots in 1886 and 20,000 people marched on Brussels. A series of improvements in the lives of the working class followed. At the same time, conditions for workers in the Congo became increasingly worse.

Vandervelde led the Belgian Worker's Party for many years and stayed active in Belgian politics until his death in 1938. Maeterlinck turned away from politics and became part of the symbolist literary group, winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1911. The puppeteer Leloup probably never met Maeterlinck or Vandervelde. Not only was their class standing different, but also they were from Flanders and he was a Walloon from Liège. Yet both Maeterlinck and Vandervelde had certainly attended plays like Leloup's. Vandervelde strongly supported working class performance traditions and helped form the Art Section of the Brussels *Maison du Peuple* where puppeteers often performed. Symbolists like Maeterlinck found themselves drawn to the aesthetics of the puppet theater, and wrote the first descriptions of puppet shows in Liège. Maeterlinck even wrote plays for puppets. All three men produced texts that echoed each other. It is to these texts that we will now turn, examining in particular, race, class, and terror.

Massacre of the Innocents in the Puppet Theater

Leloup's *Massacre of the Innocents* script was published in 1910, but I contend that it is very similar in structure to Nativity plays performed for decades before that. I know of one Nativity script that was written in about 1884 by the father of Victor Verrées and was still performed in a very similar form by Joseph Ficarrotta four generations of performers later, even though the Massacre of the Innocents scene is only indicated by a title (see Gross 188-96). Puppet theaters were primary sites of working class entertainment from the middle of the nineteenth century in both Belgium and Northern France. By 1899, Rodolphe de Warsage counted 50 puppet theaters in the working class neighborhoods of Liège (de Warsage 21). Four of them were on the 200-yard-long street of Roture where Leloup had his theater. Forty puppet theaters were counted by a lawyer in Antwerp as early as 1839 (Thijs 15). Ghent and Brussels had at least 31 and 22 respectively. The numbers reported quite likely fall far under the actual number since the small theaters were located in people's houses in the poorest neighborhoods. The puppet theater was on the rise at the same time as the Belgian Workers' Party and class consciousness pervades puppet performances, indicating the intertextuality of these discourse arenas. In fact, the author of the 1884 script mentioned above turned to puppetry after being banned from the mines for organizing workers. The physical and linguistic aspects of these puppets clearly divide the social classes. Noble puppets stand head and shoulders above the lower class characters and they speak in the nineteenth century declamatory French while the lower class characters speak Walloon or Flemish dialects. Lower class characters, called *tchantchès*, when given an order to perform some task will sometimes turn to the audience and say, "Have you noticed that it's always the same ones who do the work?"

In addition to the fundamental social class divisions, puppets were divided racially, primarily between light-skinned Christians and darker-skinned Muslims. By the 1890s Leopold's men were at war with the "Arabs." This was described as a humanitarian gesture, not as an important step in imperial expansion. Calling on medieval Christian wars against the Muslims that were widely portrayed in puppet theaters, Leopold dubbed his men in the Congo "crusaders" who battled against the cruel Arab slave traders. In actuality, the Arabs were islamicized Africans (from Zanzibar for the most part) who were Leopold's chief economic competitors (Fabian 35). The slaves "freed" by Leopold's crusaders

simply were called "freed" as they continued slaving for their new European masters. Very few Belgians were aware of what was happening in the Congo at the end of the nineteenth century, but from 1900 to 1910 a campaign against abuses there raged in the international press (Hochschild 297). King Leopold, with his long white beard, was shown in political cartoons surrounded by African heads and handless Congolese. The terrible images of forced labor, mutilations and massacres were roundly denied by the king who waged his own media campaign countering with stories of humanitarian aid and "healthy" economic development. The popularity of recounting ancient wars between Christians and Muslims indirectly supported Leopold's wars against the "Arabs." At the same time, the ruthless extraction of natural resources from the Congo and the concomitant loss of Congolese life did not find its expression on the popular puppet stage, at least not in any retrievable way.

One frustrating aspect of studying the history of working class ephemeral art forms is that we only know about them once richer literate people begin to take notice. Symbolists grouped around Albert Mockel were some of the first class-crossers to attend puppet shows in Liège. Mockel, who published Maeterlinck's work in his journal, *La Wallonie* (1886-1892), wrote about his experience at a local puppet theater in about 1887 (Piron 77-79). Leloup was among the most popular performers for this crowd and soon he began putting on shows especially for "Messieurs les nudians." The new bourgeois audience reshaped the structure of the puppet shows, insisting on complete performances rather than nightly installments of an epic play. One play that seems to have been already in this format was the Nativity Play, including the Massacre of the Innocents. This play rose in popularity and by 1898 it had become a bourgeois tradition to attend Nativity plays at the puppet theater on Christmas Eve. The earliest published "script" of a Nativity Play was "scrupulously taken down in shorthand" during a performance of Leloup's on Roture Street sometime before 1910 (Dietz 403-19). The scene of the Massacre of the Innocents begins with Herod's order and a march of soldiers who come to "execute" his order. The captain knocks consecutively at the doors of three commoners and demands to see their youngest children. In each case there is a misunderstanding, or perhaps a conscious thwarting of understanding, on the part of the commoner. In each case, the soldier uses his power to make the commoner obey and then kills the commoner's child. The first two distraught fathers say that they will complain to the king, not understanding that he gave the order.

The third door that the captain comes to belongs to Gnouf Gnouf. The soldier asks him how old his son is, and he answers "66 years." "What!" says the captain. "Well, I meant to say 13 months" retorts Gnouf Gnouf in Walloon. "What does it matter to you? Even if my wife did have him 3 months after I returned from the Congo." The comment ostensibly referred to adultery committed by the woman back home, rather than to adultery and slaughter in the Congo. Still, when the play was performed in the early 1900s, there must have been some people in the audience who caught their breath at the mere mention of the Congo in the middle of the Massacre of the Innocents. The mix of humorous and serious discourse is a trademark of the popular puppet theater. One common source of humor involves misunderstandings between the elevated French of the soldiers and the language of the peasants which ranges from Walloon to regional French. In Victor Verrées's 1957 performance one of Herod's soldiers asks "Have you not children of the masculine sex at your house?" His elevated register of French is treated like a foreign tongue by the peasant, Nicolas, who asks the audience, "What language is that guy speaking?"

Another humorous technique amply used in the Massacre of the Innocents is the insertion of contemporary material creating anachronistic juxtapositions that lead the audience to see parallels between two different historic periods. In the scene just referred to, Nicolas then turns to the soldier and says, "Are you Algerian or Italian, you?" In 1957, new immigrants were arriving daily to work in the mines and steel industries of the Liège basin. It is the strategic mixing of time frames that allows puppeteers to make references to the present while performing the past. "The present" is relative since successful jokes may become part of the tradition, as the following one that several generations in one family of puppeteers have used in their Massacre of the Innocents: When a soldier asks the

commoner if he has sons under age two, the father responds that he has a black one and a white one. The soldier asks how that could be and the father answers that the white one always stays in his crib, but the black one gets out and plays in the coal bin. This was probably meant to elicit laughter from the audience as they were tricked into thinking one child was of African descent, only to find out that he had simply physically engaged with that very local product and the basis for the industrial revolution in Belgium, coal. Neither one of these references to "blackness" or the Congo directly address Belgian colonization in Africa. Other references to contemporary life and politics are far more direct. These references appear more like Freudian slips into the national subconscious.

Maeterlinck's Massacre of the Innocents

Marianne Muylle wrote that symbolists saw the night as a door to a dream world where the unconscious is liberated. They rejected rigid formal constraints in their desire to suggest the inexpressible through symbols (71). Mockel, who became a leader of the movement, urged writers to look to their own folklore to find legends and heroes elevated by the popular soul (Gorceix 74-77). As with the earlier German Romantics, this was thought to lead authors and artists away from artificiality. Also like the German Romantics, symbolists found their way to the puppet theater. Puppets were held to be pure symbols and were, therefore, preferred over live actors by symbolists like Maeterlinck. In 1897, he wrote three plays specifically for puppets.

Maurice Maeterlinck was born into a bourgeois family 1862 in Ghent. He had an early interest in poetry, but enrolled in the University of Ghent as a law student. In 1886 he moved to Paris, supposedly to study for his law exams. He only stayed for about 7 months, but in that time he joined the vibrant literary world of Paris, helped found the journal *La Pléiade*, and published *The Massacre of the Innocents*. He returned to practice law in Ghent, but did not like it and left the profession after a year or so. While Maeterlinck flirted with socialism, he never was a proponent of placing art at the mercy of social projects. He once said, "To create durable works is it not necessary precisely to raise oneself above one's epoch, to free oneself from the accidents of a civilization and the contingencies of the immediate actuality?" (Herbert 98). No one could argue that Maeterlinck's *Massacre of the Innocents* was not removed from the present in time, but was it removed in form? Colonial massacres similar to the one Maeterlinck describes were very much a part of his world. Humans are shaped by the discourses that surround them, and, whether or not they choose to address contemporary events directly, they are never "above their epoch" or "freed from their immediate actuality."

So, let us examine the first prose publication by the young writer who would win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911. Most of the literary criticism I have read concerning Maeterlinck does not know quite what to make of this piece, treating it as a youthful experiment that did not work. He himself seemed to be ambivalent about it, signing his first name differently and discarding the entire piece at one point. Its title comes from the biblical story, but Maeterlinck scholars seem to agree that his inspiration came not from the Bible, but from the composition that Brueghel the Elder painted circa 1564, a reproduction of which was found in Maeterlinck's study in Flanders. These two cultural representations are thought to be related because in both the painting and Maeterlinck's story, Bethlehem is transformed into a sixteenth-century Flemish village. However, as we have seen, this type of anachronism is common fare in the puppet theater as well, and Ghent had at least 31 theaters to choose from (Vandenbroucke 15-16). Just as Maeterlinck saw Brueghel's painting, he probably also saw the play performed in a puppet theater. In fact, given that Nativity Plays were already popular in the sixteenth-century, Brueghel himself might have been inspired by a popular drama (see Schmidt 223-24).

Maeterlinck's *Massacre of the Innocents* begins on 26 December with a little boy running to tell the peasants at the tavern that the Spaniards have come and hung his mother and tied his nine sisters to a tree. The peasants ambush the guards, but the following week armed men arrive again, looking for children, and tying up resistant adults. Maeterlinck mentions more than once that the soldiers could not understand Flemish (this is similar to the Walloon peasant puppet characters who cannot

understand the French-speaking soldiers). When the priest pleads with a soldier in both Flemish and Latin, he "shrugged his shoulders lazily to show he could make nothing of it" (17) and then holding the child "by the leg, sliced off its head with his sword" (18). In both the puppet play and in Maeterlinck's narrative, linguistic misunderstanding or non-comprehension between the soldiers and the victims is clearly pointed out. Three more children are murdered by swords at the soldiers' next stop. Then they move on to a third house where they have to climb in an upper window, carrying the children out and killing them. Children bathing in a tub are the next ones murdered. The soldiers indicate that it is not their fault... only a job perhaps. They dutifully bring the children to the man with a white beard who ordered the massacre and kill them in front of him. Is it mere coincidence that this man shares the trademark white beard of Leopold II?

The slaughter spreads. Women run for the open country, men drag themselves on their knees after the soldiers who are carrying off their children. Maeterlinck's scene is one of horror and chaos, typified in the following excerpt: "(a) woman, in red, was kissing her little girl, who had no hands now, and kept lifting up the two stumps, first one and then the other, to see if she would not move" (24). Then the villagers spot the Baron leaning over the battlements of his tower and with uplifted hands they "made supplication to him as to a king in heaven," "But he only threw up his arms and shrugged his shoulders, as if to say he could do nothing" (29). "When all the children were killed, the tired soldiers wiped their swords on the grass and supped under the pear-trees" (30). The villagers held their dead children and sobbed.

With reference to this piece, in 1918 the critic Gladys Rosaleen Turquet-Milnes brings up the doctrine of "premonition" that was "so dear to Maeterlinck's heart" (25). She writes "This little prose narrative of the Massacre of the Innocents, though the scene is laid in Nazareth, reads singularly like a poignant page from Lord Bryce's Report on the German Atrocities in Belgium" (25). That a literary critic would leap mystically forward to an intra-European massacre in which the Belgians were victims, rather than invoking contemporary massacres of Africans by Belgians is typical of the racial politics of the time. Let us shift our gaze south at this moment and try to reconstruct what was going on in the Congo and how this might be known in Belgium because while things were certainly in the international press by the time Leloup performed, it is not clear how much Maeterlinck could have known in 1886.

Prior to any Belgian interest in central Africa, we should note that between 1700 and the 1860s 3.8 million slaves were taken out of the Congo and Angolan coasts, constituting 40% of the total Atlantic slave trade. From 1700 to 1820, Africa's major export was human beings (Klein 126). European slavers stayed close to the coast, buying slaves that were chased down in the interior forests by African traders. Forms of domestic slavery in Africa predated the European slave trade, but as the international slave trade declined, slavery within Africa increased and by 1850 there were more slaves in Africa than in America, probably close to ten million (Klein 129). In addition to the social disruption caused by the slave trade, European diseases like smallpox had been introduced that decimated native populations. By the 1870s the European outposts, called "factories," that dotted the shore of Central Africa were exporting ivory, not slaves. They used slaves, however, for transporting ivory and for agricultural work (Vansina 209).

In the 1870s Africa was in the news in Europe and Leopold II watched it closely. Leopold's father had made initial forays into acquiring Crete, Cuba, Guatemala, part of China, the Faroe Islands, and even part of Texas, but all these attempts were unsuccessful. The son was even more intent on obtaining a colony. By the 1870s he had set his sights on Central Africa and his cabinet went about gathering information for him. At the 1876 Brussels Geographic Conference, The International African Association was formed with Leopold at its head. The stated goal was to open up medical and scientific stations in the interior from which the slave trade could be abolished. Soon afterwards, Leopold wrote, "I do not want to miss the opportunity of our obtaining a share in this magnificent African cake" (Emerson 78-79). Leopold had been reading about Henry Morton Stanley's explorations in Africa and

wanted him in his hire. In January 1878, Leopold sent two emissaries to meet Stanley in Marseilles upon his return from his second exploration. By November a new commercial organization was set up called the Study Committee of the Upper Congo which three years later morphed into the International Congo Association. In 1879, as Stanley's much-read book *Through the Dark Continent* was published, he left on his third voyage to the Congo, this one financed by King Leopold. En route Stanley was given a more precise mission: he was to establish stations over as wide an area as possible and at each station a white man would become the absolute commander of the natives of the region (Emerson 89). Stanley and the French explorer De Brazza raced to see how many chiefs they could get to sign treaties with them. The French and British press reported on a public feud between the two explorers. Reading some of these articles, one could begin to get an image of the type of society that was developing in the Congo. Here, for instance, are excerpts from an article published July 10, 1883 in the influential French paper *Le Journal des débats*: "Mr. Stanley and his assistants... signed treaties with the black chiefs on the two banks of the Congo River... But these rights Mr. Stanley exercises in the Congo with a brutality that lacks the odor of sanctity.... It was easy to scare the various Black chiefs into signing treaties because they have no more value to them than a scrap of paper since they don't know how to read or write." "The terrorized blacks don't work any more, don't plant anymore; commerce is paralyzed and the indigenous people only look for a good occasion to attack Mr. Stanley and his escorts, enveloping all the whites, without distinction of nationality, in a communal hatred. ... This international association, that is only international in name, has soldiers in its employ, and what troops? Zanzibaris, armed with rapid fire rifles, as savage as the savages they are going to civilize" (qtd. in Marchal 62).

On 21 September 1883 in the Brussels journal *La Chronique*, Maeterlinck could have read: "The American Stanley is in the process of terrorizing the Congo. This meteoric reporter guns down and burns everything that is in his way... We sent Stanley to Africa to open communications and the only thing he opens is stomachs... It's not the Congolese that are savages, but the false Leather Bottoms that hawk assassination in the name of civilization" (qtd. in Marchal 63-64). This type of reporting was certainly outweighed by descriptions of the great philanthropic mission in the Congo. In 1884, Leopold got the United States and Germany to recognize the Congo Free State. Soon afterwards (25 February 1885) Leopold's position was strengthened enormously when thirteen countries signed the Berlin Act, recognizing the new state with Leopold II as its sovereign. It was to be a free trade zone where all powers were to seek to improve native conditions, to protect missions, to allow liberty of conscience and to suppress the slave-trade. Leopold (who never appeared at the conference) was lauded for his virtuous work in bringing civilization to darkest Africa. He was now the absolute ruler of a country eighty times larger than Belgium in Central Africa.

The anti-bourgeois sentiment and the desire to delve beneath the surface would seem to naturally lead the young symbolists to pay attention at some level to the dark underbelly of colonization. The socialist party which they supported certainly alerted them to the exploitation of the laboring classes, but the symbolists chose to only see the exploitation within the boundaries of Europe. While the socialist party was generally anti-colonial and the later surrealist movement which some symbolists joined made a public stance against colonialism, there was no direct denunciation of colonialism among the symbolists. It was the interior of their own minds and symbols that were not firmly rooted in time that attracted their attention. We should not forget that it was also an era when the Belgian intelligentsia was searching for its identity. Perhaps stories of colonial atrocities led some people to remember stories about Belgium being viciously attacked by foreign governments throughout the centuries. Maeterlinck had surely read the widely popular books of Henri Conscience that told of Flemish peasants throwing off foreign yokes. Nationalist historians saw the usefulness of such stories in creating a sense of Belgian nationality and had begun to construct history texts around Belgians throwing off one foreign dominator after another until they achieved independence. The fact that Maeterlinck chose to write about Belgian victims of colonial massacres in the sixteenth century within

the framework of the Christian Bible played into the project of Belgian identity formation, but the scene he described honed a bit too closely to contemporary scenes in the Congo.

Massacre of the Innocents: Colonial Politics: Rubber and Cut-off Hands

Largely through the hard work of the socialist deputy Vandervelde, the Belgian government was finally convinced that the image of the Congo projected by the king and his entourage "whitewashed" the brutal reality experienced by many Congolese. While "Massacre of the Innocents" does not appear in the title of Vandervelde's 1903 speech to the Belgian parliament, it seems to loom above it. Vandervelde was at the forefront of the political liberation of the working class in Belgium. He states in his autobiography that at the time that the first protests against forced labor in the Congo appeared, the socialists were working tirelessly for universal suffrage in Belgium. He admits that they were much more interested in white slaves than in black ones (1939, 70). Still, he was one of the very few public figures in Belgium who did not totally disregard the international protests. The fact that most of the protests were coming from across the channel led Belgians to slough off the complaints as mere inventions by the Liverpoolian merchants who wanted the Congo for themselves. It was true that things were not horrible everywhere in the Congo. Visitors were given itineraries that skirted the most heavily afflicted regions and then they could declare that the stories about massacres were a pack of lies. However, even reading these accounts gives one insight into the system that was in place in the Congo and it certainly did not follow the tenets of socialism that were bandied about in Belgium. Even without eye-witness accounts, anyone could have seen what Edmund D. Morel saw in the Antwerp harbor: ships arriving from the Congo laden with ivory and rubber and ships leaving for the Congo packed with firearms and ammunition. The Congo was not instantly profitable for Leopold, but after 1888 when rubber tires were patented, things began to change. In 1890 the suggestion was made to give the state a monopoly on ivory and rubber in order to provide the income for the war against the Arabs and for northern expansion. The suggestion was made by Captain Vankerhoven and Commandant Coquilhat (Vandervelde 1911, 37). This is the same Vankerhoven who told Roger Casement in 1887 that he paid his black soldiers 5 brass rods per human head to stimulate their prowess (Casement i). The American anthropologist, Frederick Starr was told that Vankerhoven's expedition needlessly destroyed whole towns in the district of Chumbiri and Bolobo, estimating that the population of that region was only a quarter of what it had been (Starr 102). Leopold's men consulted lawyers about how to legally create a monopoly in a free-trade zone. Among the jurists who were consulted on this matter we find none other than Edmond Picard.

Picard, lawyer, author, and literary critic, was the center of intellectual life in Belgium. He hosted the cultural elite, including Maeterlinck and Vandervelde, in high style at his house in Brussels every Tuesday. Picard was deeply involved in both socialism and the literary battle between social art and art for art's sake. When he took over the direction of the journal *L'Art Moderne* in 1881, Picard came out in favor of art being social, national and original, but by 1886 he had accepted the symbolist argument that called for art to be abstracted away from the present world. The indefinable itself was the proper subject of art, not the meaningless fragments of everyday life. Anyway, these lawyers decided that the state had the right to incorporate "vacant" lands and in that case they were acting as landowners, not merchants, and were not in violation of free-trade. "Vacant" land was defined as all the land unless it was privately owned (by Europeans, of course) or physically occupied by indigenous tribes. This decision might strike one as being diametrically opposed to the socialist teachings to which Picard was so attached, but for him there was no contradiction. He regarded socialism as idiosyncratic to the Aryan race and, therefore, it should not be imposed on others. Picard believed in the equality of people within a "race," but for him, "Semites, Mongols, and Negroes" should follow their own way of doing things (see *L'Aryano-sémitisme*). He does not reflect on the impossibility of this within the structure of colonialism. Picard wrote in *L'Aryano-sémitisme* that he was not interested in establishing superior and inferior races, only in demonstrating their essential differences, but in his earlier writings he clearly depicts Africans as an inferior race, comparing their behavior to that of monkeys (see En

Congolie 78).

If life had been difficult for the natives of the Congo before, as explorers forced them into submission and merchants swindled them out of their just returns, now Leopold's reign of terror really began. This is the situation described in Vandervelde's speech. Along with almost all of the land being considered vacant and claimed by the state, the fruits of the land also belonged to the state. The only thing still needed was the labor necessary to extract the fruits of the land, a lack that was quickly remedied. Reasoning that every state had the right to impose taxes and that the native Congolese had nothing to tax, then the only tax that could be imposed was the conscription of labor. One further colonial practice sealed the fate of the Congolese. Colonial agents were given bonuses for the most product delivered at the least price. So, if one could obtain rubber for nothing, that person was doubly rewarded. The natives resisted being coerced to work, so force had to be used; whipping, arresting the chiefs, taking the women hostage, installing armed sentinels in the villages, and organizing punitive expeditions against refractory populations. In order that the soldiers did not waste the ammunition, they were told to cut off the right hand of each victim. These were supposed to be cut off of dead people, but sometimes the living lost appendages as well -- either as a cover for spent ammunition, or simply to create terror.

These surgical removals were carried out by African soldiers of the Force Publique which was established in the Congo Free State in 1886 and by 1898 had grown to 19,028 (Stengers and Vansina 331). In that same year, Félicien Cattier, a professor of colonial law at the Free University of Brussels, published a book in which he states the folly in trying to maintain order with three whites in charge of 1500 native soldiers (plus their wives and children) spread over 10 villages. He then criticizes the excessive length of mandatory military service -- twelve years during which men are robbed of their liberty and taken far from their homes. After such a long estrangement, they become permanently alienated from their tribes, Cattier reasoned. Of course, many of these soldiers were already removed from their tribes. They were kidnapped, abandoned, or orphaned children of previous massacres who had been handed over to the missions. The missions were entitled to put the children to work, taking care of mission lands for a certain number of years. In exchange for this legal favor, the missions were also supposed to supply a certain number of young men to the Force publique (for further discussion on this, see Cattier; Nelson; Samarin.)

Cattier was not the only Belgian to criticize colonial policy. The priest Arthur Vermeersch came out with the first Catholic protest and in 1900 Georges Lorand made a speech to parliament. Vandervelde states in *Souvenirs d'un militant socialiste* that he was there but did not intervene because he did not have sufficient documentation (72). By 1903, he was totally behind Lorand and began his parliamentary speech in that year by stating his opposition to colonialism as it reinforces the military, augments the power of governments over the sovereignty of the people, and can only be fruitful by subjecting the indigenous population to servitude (1903, 3). While the Congo was not technically a colony of Belgium, Vandervelde claimed that the Belgian government had a moral obligation to intervene because Belgium had signed the Act of Berlin, because Leopold was using the Belgian military to exploit the region, and because the Belgian state had financed the King's venture (4-5). So far, nothing evokes the Massacre of the Innocents, but when Vandervelde turns to describing life for the Congolese, the similarity begins. In *La Politique coloniale* he talks of "the acts of diabolical cruelty" which forced thousands of natives to leave their villages: men fleeing into the forests, and women and children seeking refuge in mission posts. One eyewitness found 80 human hands set to dry slowly above a fire (4). Vandervelde cites a letter written by a captain of the Force Publique in 1898 which talks of having to find 1,500 native porters knowing that many would die of poor nourishment and fatigue. The chiefs knew this too, but if they resisted sending their men, war was waged against them: "an atrocious war of perfected firearms against primitive lances and shields," says the author, emphasizing their childlike helplessness (15). The letter continues saying that the village chiefs cannot keep their men from running into the forest as they prefer to die of hunger than to work as porters. In

this case, the captain says "I am obliged to put these sad little kings in chains," liberating them only after they procured one or two hundred porters from their area. "Very often my soldiers find the village deserted: then they take the women and the children, the innocents" (16). Helpless and innocent, like the children in the Massacre of the Innocents. Photographs sent back by Protestant missionaries showed women in chains, handless children who survived, and a man staring at the severed hand and foot of his five-year-old daughter

(<<http://www.cobelco.org/Histoire/congo1text.htm#Haut>>). One thinks of Maeterlinck's image of the mother trying to revive her small, handless daughter. Could this be a mere coincidence?

As the rubber quota was raised, colonial agents were given *carte blanche* to use force. More prisoners were taken, more murders committed. The same captain in another letter to his commanding officer, wrote that he expected a general uprising, saying that the blacks were tired of being forced to carry loads, harvest rubber, provide the food for themselves and all the government agents, serve as soldiers, and maintain the roads. The captain was not enjoying his work. He wrote: "It's been 3 months that I've been at war, with a rest of about 10 days and I don't understand why I haven't fallen sick given what I've had to endure and the lack of creature comforts. The rainy season is upon us and all the roads have been transformed into deep and dangerous swamps. I have 152 prisoners up to now and I hope to return to the post mid June. I will let you guess whether my slaughtered soldiers would have made the enemy's blood run" (Vandervelde 1903, 18). Vandervelde tells us that this man was later found guilty of torturing women prisoners to death, of paying auxiliary soldiers with captured women, of torturing and killing porters who tried to escape into the forest, and of having his soldiers bring back cut-off hands of their recalcitrant victims. His punishment was a fine equal to the retirement bonus he received for providing loyal service. Vandervelde ends his speech citing the contempt in which they held France during the Dreyfus Affair and England during the Transvaal War: "Well Sirs, at the present time we see in France as in England, men who place the interests of their conscience above all other interests and in doing so, stand up for the innocence of Dreyfus and for the victims of the concentration camps.... My wish is that we can also find in Belgium men who seek enlightenment, all the light, and who with sentiments of true patriotism, force themselves to obtain for the poor indigenous populations of equatorial Africa a social regime that respects them as humans and that grants them rights" (22-23).

Would that I could stop on this high moral note, trusting the Belgian elite to seek the light of reality and bring the economic system in the Congo to an end. But systems are not easily dismantled (as shown in Marie-Benedicte Dembour's oral history of colonial agents). The slowness in reacting to what was happening in the Congo was due to the lucrative nature of the project and to the racist discourse of the time. Conditions improved only slightly when Parliament finally voted to take the Congo from Leopold in 1908. When Albert I took the throne December 21, 1909, his first official act was to promise reform in the Congo (Clafin 311). That same year, Vandervelde made his first trip to the Congo. His mission was to defend two American presbyterian ministers who had brought abuses against the Congolese to light (Hochschild 263-64).

Conclusion

In my exploration of the linkages between these Belgian texts, two colonial themes arose: the extermination of innocent people, often deemed members of "inferior races" and the role of terror in extracting submission and labor. Sven Lindqvist wrote that during the nineteenth-century European expansion, genocide came to be seen as the inevitable byproduct of progress. Savage and barbarian races would necessarily die out as the civilized ones expanded. Following this law of anthropological evolution, one could not avoid wanting to hurry inferior races on their way to oblivion. The genocides in the Congo were not unique. They were repeated by the British in East Africa, the Germans in Southwest Africa, and the French in West and North Africa. Lindqvist ties colonial conquests in with the development of better firearms. Each "improvement" coincided with the submission of new peoples to European governments, from the use of nitroglycerin in 1885 which improved accuracy, to

waterproof ammunition and automatic rifles, and eventually to the development of the dum dum bullet in 1897. These bullets were banned between "civilized" states since they exploded their casings and created large painful wounds. Consequently, they were reserved for big-game hunting and colonial wars (Lindqvist 52). Territorial expansion was seen as the very sign of civilization. The German anthropologist Friedrich Ratzel writing in the 1890s called it *Lebensraum*: Hitler was given Ratzel's book to read when he was in prison writing *Mein Kampf* in 1924. So, in *Exterminate All the Brutes* Lindqvist contends that genocide in the colonies provided a historical model for the extermination of Jews in World War II.

The British consul Roger Casement published a report based on a trip to the Congo in 1903 that appeared soon after Vandervelde's parliamentary speech and had a great effect on international public opinion (<<http://web.jjay.cuny.edu/~jobrien/reference/ob73.html>>). Ten years later, Casement produced another report on colonial atrocities associated with the rubber trade, only this time the setting was the Putumayo region bordering Peru and Colombia. Michael Taussig bases his study of the use of terror in colonial regimes on this report. What led Taussig to examine the culture of terror was that, at first glance, it seems counter-intuitive. Why such slaughter in a political economy defined by labor scarcity? Leopold himself used this argument to refute the discourse about helpless Africans, saying "their hands are the one thing I do need." There were even plans at one point to bring workers from India to the Congo. Taussig solves the mystery by looking into the mysterious power of terror. He writes of the ineffability of the space of death in which officialdom strives to create a magical reality. The central point he makes in "Culture of Terror" is that Terror -- as well as being a physiological state -- is also a social one whose special features allow it to serve as the mediator par excellence of colonial hegemony. In the Belgian Congo, business transformed terror from a means to an end in itself. It was the means by which racial separation and hierarchy was maintained.

Johannes Fabian goes a step further in helping us understand the culture of terror by looking at the diaries of early explorers in Central Africa. They were also terrorized -- by fear of wild animals and people who they believed were cannibals, by tropical sicknesses, and by the knowledge that one out of three Europeans who went to the Congo died there. A hint of this terror is voiced in the captain's letter quoted by Vandervelde. Europeans in Africa passed many a sleepless night and tried to calm themselves with opiates and alcohol which sometimes led them farther into hallucinatory states. States of terror arise when humans feel preyed upon. This can lead to their becoming predators (Ehrenreich 46-47). States of terror -- whether induced by drugs, sleeplessness, sickness, or overactive imaginations -- most likely led to many of the atrocities described in these texts, as they do in every war. It is very easy for the terrorized to become terrorists. In this, we must also think of the African soldiers of the *Forces Publiques* whose early lives were defined by violence done to their families.

How does a population that wants to think of itself as doing good in the world process information about atrocities and massacres perpetuated or encouraged by their fellow citizens? We know the psychological toll such practices can have on the practitioners, but what about the effect on other members of the imagined community? When the truth is too painful to be told, or not allowed to be told, the multivocality of traditional genres may serve a purpose. The Massacre of the Innocents is reported rather perfunctorily in the Bible, but over the centuries, the popular imagination has elaborated it into a horrific parable of the abuse of power. When power is threatened, official culture lashes out, and even the most innocent are not safe. It is not the King himself (Herod, Phillip II, Leopold) who commits the atrocities, but people who work for him, people who are only carrying out orders and trying to succeed in the system. The banality of evil, as described by Hannah Arendt, is stated to various degrees in all three texts examined here. Taussig explains how this banality leads into a culture of terror whereby the torturers simply act in concert with large-scale economic strategies and the exigencies of production. They have to control massive populations and do so through the cultural elaboration of fear (469). "Cultures of terror are based on and nourished by

silence and myth in which the fanatical stress on the mysterious side of the mysterious flourishes by means of rumor and fantasy woven in a dense web of magical realism" (469). This is the defining feature of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*

(<<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/ConDark.html>>), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (<<http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/irvinem/english016/conrad/conrad.htm>>), and the three texts examined here.

I suggest that symbolism was a literary response to colonial massacres. Perhaps it became a far more important movement in Belgium than in France because of the particular hallucinatory experience of Belgian colonization of the Congo and the gap between that whispered reality and official Belgian discourse. Writers fled from the "contingencies of the immediate actuality" and into dreams and symbols. It is in dreams, however, that the unconscious is liberated and in Belgium it appears that the Congo loomed large in that unconscious. Growing Belgian nationalism in combination with a racialized view of the world inhibited these authors from critiquing colonial practices. Yet at the same time, contemporary massacres did leave a mark on their writing/performance.

The Massacre of the Innocents offered a traditional vehicle through which the puppeteers and Maeterlinck could depict horrible abuses of power without making any direct reference to contemporary massacres. But were these allusions intentional? The allusion in the puppet theater is much more subtle than political commentary normally is on the puppet stage and Maeterlinck does not appear to critique the Congo system elsewhere. Silence was imposed on Belgium, but the well-known horror of the traditional scene of the Massacre of the Innocents allowed one to say without saying. Rather than intentional counter-hegemonic moves, these veiled allusions can be seen as repressed images bubbling up through the Belgian unconscious.

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