Joseph Conrad, “An Outpost of Progress” (1897)

After arriving at their trading station in Belgian occupied Congo and meeting their boss, who then departs with a cynical goodbye, the new managers of this “outpost of progress,” “Kayerts, the chief… and Carlier, the assistant…” meet the uncivilized and savage surroundings on their own, and they feel truly alone.

[5] The two men watched the steamer [carrying the boss] round the bend, then, ascending arm in arm the slope of the bank, returned to the station. They had been in this vast and dark country only a very short time, and as yet always in the midst of other white menj, under the eye and guidance of their superiors. And now, dull as they were to the subtle influences of surroundings, they felt themselves very much alone, when suddenly left unassisted to face the wilderness; a wilderness rendered more strange, more incomprehensible by the mysterious glimpses of the vigorous life it contained. They were two perfectly insignificant and incapable individuals, whose existence is only rendered possible through the high organisation of civilised crowds. Few men realise that their life, the very essence of their character, their capabilities and their audacities, are only the expression of their belief in the safety of their surroundings. The courage, the composure, the confidence, the emotions and principles; every great and every insignificant thought belongs not to the individual but to the crowd; to the crowd that believes blindly in the irresistible force of its institutions and of its morals, in the power of its police and of its opinion. But the contact with pure unmitigated savagery, with primitive nature and primitive man, brings sudden and profound trouble into the heart. To the sentiment of being alone of one’s kind, to the clear perception of the loneliness of one’s thoughts, of one’s sensations—to the negation of the habitual, which is safe, there is added the affirmation of the unusual, which is dangerous; a suggestion of things vague, uncontrollable, and repulsive, whose discomposing intrusion excites the imagination and tries the civilised nerves of the foolish and wise alike….

[6] The first day they were very active, pottering about with hammers and nails and red calico, to put up curtains, make their house habitable and pretty; resolved to settle down comfortably to their new life. For them an impossible task. To grapple effectually with even purely material problems requires more serenity of mind and more lofty courage than people generally imagine. No two beings could have been more unfitted for such a struggle. Society, not from any tenderness, but because of its strange needs, had taken care of those two men, forbidding them all independent thought, all initiative, all departure from routine; and forbidding it under pain of death. They could only live on condition of being machines. And now, released from the fostering care of men with pens behind the ears, or of men with gold lace on their sleeves, they were like those lifelong prisoners who, liberated after many years, do not know what use to make of all their freedom. They did not know what use to make of their faculties, being both, through want of practice, incapable of independent thought.