

"FRENCH LITERARY INFLUENCES ON JOSEPH CONRAD"

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Conrad scholars have grown used to looking for influences on his work in his Polish background, or his sea-faring years, or through contemporary English writers – and friends – such as Ford Madox Hueffer and Henry James. These influences have been amply documented in recent years

The once-fashionable area of possible influence from French sources, mined extensively by his first biographer, Jean Aubry(1) in the 1920's, has been ignored in recent criticism. With the notable exception of an important French-oriented study by Paul Kirschner(2) as long ago as 1968, the French side of Conrad's art has been allowed to lie fallow. And yet, no serious attempt that I know of, has been made to collect together, document, and assess, possible French literary influences on Conrad. We know from Kirschner of instances of direct borrowings, (some would say plagiarism in translation) from several French writers, and of their stylistic influence, but of the larger possible influence on his outlook we have little scholarly work that is not simply impressionistic.

Conrad left Poland for Marseilles when he was seventeen years of age. French was his first foreign language; it was not until he was twenty one that he began using English, as a crewman aboard an English vessel. The four year immersion in French life might be taken to correspond with his "university years", and we should seriously ask whether the literary side of that culture did not quite naturally have a formative influence upon him.

It is unlikely that Conrad read widely in French between 1874 and 1878; as a young apprentice seaman he would not have had the leisure time nor indeed perhaps the energy, and his accounts of the period indicate that his attention was wholly concentrated on gaining practical experience. However, it is probably that at the Café Bodoul, or at the "Bohemian" cafe, both of which he patronised in Marseilles, he heard poets reading from their works: members of the "Cercle Artistique" made a point of reading their poetry in the cafes of the port. It is also likely that he read some newly published books as a result of having heard them discussed by his acquaintances, but

he left no record of this.

Conrad had a lifelong addiction to tales of travel and adventure, but on his early voyages abroad French ships to the West Indies and South America he may have tried to improve his French by reading some more consciously literary works. His later references to Balzac, Daudet, Anatole France, Maupassant and Flaubert, for example, suggest that he had read them critically during the years he had spent at sea, attending as much or more to points of style than to the stories told. During the five years he was engaged on the composition of his first novel, Almayer's Folly (1889 to 1894), Conrad was absorbed with problems of literary style, and it seems reasonable to assume that much of his reading of French masters of technique took place then.

He also read widely, if not very deeply, in English literature while at sea, but in the English novelists he did not find what he wanted: "The national English novelist seldom regards his work – the exercise of his Art – as an achievement of active life by which he will produce certain definite effects upon the emotions of his readers, but simply as an instinctive, often unreasoned, outpouring of his own emotions. He does not go about building up his book with a precise intention and a steady mind. It never occurs to him that a book is a deed, that the writing of it is an enterprise as much as the conquest of a colony. He has no such clear conception of his craft."(3)

It was precisely the "clear conception of..... craft" in French novelists that attracted Conrad; moreover, the contemporary French attitude towards literary production was in keeping with Conrad's own philosophy of work. The French writers he most admired were men who did not rely on occasional bursts of inspiration, but sat down day after day Trollope-like to compose and refine their prose. In the eleven years between the time Conrad joined an English ship and started writing Almayer's Folly, he completely adopted his uncle Tadeusz Bobrowski's rather Calvinistic ethic of work. In his career, he doggedly studied for and sat successive examinations through to his Master's Certificate. By the time he set out to write, he had formed the idea that hard work was not only necessary, but also in some way a purifying corrective of falsity and illusion. (A remarkable number of Conrad's characters must occasionally undergo "occupational

therapy" by performing some usually manual task in order to preserve their sanity or their moral balance, in much the same way as Jane Austen's heroines must, at moments of great crisis, retire alone to their rooms for periods of reflection.)

It is not my purpose here to trace in any detail the stylistic influence of French writers on Conrad. Paul Kirschner's book has done that, although sometimes with rather strained parallels. It will be enough here to indicate broadly Conrad's interest in certain French stylists before looking at the ideas of life these writers held.

Conrad seems to have been most strongly attracted by the style of De Maupassant, but he also found in him a wry, ironic humour verging on the grotesque, and the two writers shared an interest in the "idée fixe". Maupassant's "L'Épreuve", "La Ficelle," and "Madame Hermet" are studies of fixed ideas – their central characters are obsessed by single ideas as are the protagonists of Conrad's Nostromo and Lord Jim. Maupassant wrote, "Fixed ideas have the gnawing tenacity of incurable diseases";(4) both he and Conrad in their works dissected and examined such obsessions as if they were tumours. Nevertheless, their conclusions were very different. Kirschner believes, for example, that Conrad's notions of isolation may derive from reading De Maupassant, but he fails to notice the essential differences in the passages he quotes as parallel:(5) in "L'Inutile Beauté", Maupassant has Roger de Salins say, "Thought, hatched and developed by a miracle of the brain cells of our head, all powerless, ignorant and confused as it is and will remain, makes of all us intellectuals eternal and wretched exiles on this earth."(6) Beside this Kirschner places a passage from one of Conrad's letters to Marguerite Poradowska (an unfair choice to begin with for most of Conrad's letters to her are marked by a self-conscious literary posturing): "It is the price one pays for the devilish and divine privilege of thought; so that in this life it is only the elect who are convicts – a glorious band which comprehends and groans but which treads the earth amidst a multitude of phantoms..."(7) Conrad is here expressing, although rather artificially, an idea that was central to his view of life; it is a purely gnostic idea, of a captive "elect" who suffer for their lack of human illusions. Roger de Salin's words, on the other hand, imply no idea of ethical order, but merely express in romantic terms the frustration felt by intellectuals at being

excluded by virtue of their superiority. The difference between these passages from Conrad and Maupassant, in the scope of their views on isolation is the difference between the Camus of L'Étranger and the Colin Wilson of The Outsider. To say that the former is derivative from the latter is hardly credible. Kirschner, I think, amply provides his case for a stylistic influence on Conrad from Maupassant, but fails to show any derivation of outlook or close similarity.

Of Flaubert's influence on Conrad, Hueffer wrote, "Our chief masters in style were Flaubert and Maupassant: Flaubert in the greater degree, Maupassant in the less."(8) H.-D. Davray, after a visit to Conrad, reported: "He cited passages with a sureness that showed an intimate knowledge of..... Flaubert."(9) Hugh Walpole early pointed out the alleged influence of Madame Bovary on Conrad's early works, but Conrad, who always denied this, replied to Walpole: "You say that I have been under the formative influence of Madame Bovary. In fact, I read it only after finishing Almayer's Folly, as I did all other works of Flaubert, and anyhow, my Flaubert is the Flaubert of St. Antoine and Education Sentimentale and that only from the point of view of the rendering of concrete things and visual impressions. I thought him marvellous in that respect. I don't think I learned anything from him. What he did for me was to open my eyes and arouse my emulation. One can learn something from Balzac, but what could one learn from Flaubert? He compels admiration, – about the greatest service one artist can render to another."(10)

It seems to me that Conrad's denial of Flaubertian influence has not been taken seriously enough; instead, the unimportant white lie has been seized on by several Conradian scholars who quote the letter Conrad wrote to Marguerite Poradowska in 1892 while he was working on Almayer's Folly, in which Conrad says that he had "reread Madame Bovary with respectful admiration", adding, "There you have a man with enough creative imagination for two realists. There are few authors so creative as he. One never questions of a moment either his characters or his episodes; one would doubt rather one's own existence."(11) It seems unlikely that Conrad would have forgotten, or even bothered to lie about, reading Madame Bovary if he had felt its influence while writing Almayer's Folly; assuming that he wrote genuinely to Mme. Poradowska and was not merely playing

the litterateur, the lie to Walpole amounts only to a repudiation of Flaubertian influence. Although many critics have claimed to perceive "undeniable similarities between Madame Bovary and Almayer's Folly in choice of subject and treatment,"(12) these seem to me less important in comparison with the multitude of differences between the two works.

Certainly, Conrad found Flaubert a congenial writer in many respects, and it is probably that he acquired from the French Realists (though not solely from Flaubert) and Naturalists the technical equipment of narrative exposition, and perhaps also his point of view, of ironic detachment from the fate of his characters. But these debts are of a technical and aesthetic order. His preference for La Tentation de Saint Antoine over Madame Bovary indicates his greater interest in a work of a mystical nature whose central theme is asceticism and the perception of evil. One of the sages whom St. Antoine visits with Hilarion to learn the secrets of Creation holds the view that, "The darkness having advanced as far as his kingdom, God drew from his essence a virtue that produced the first man... But the demons of darkness stole a part of man from Him, and that part is the soul.."(13) In such mystical dualism lay the attraction of Flaubert for Conrad.

One notices similarities between Captain Anthony of Chance and Flaubert's Saint Antoine, and Flaubert's themes are echoed in Victory, but this is not to say that Conrad collected his most deeply felt views from Flaubert.

A number of other, lesser influences from French literature are discernible. Conrad greatly admired the novels of Anatole France, and he was obviously sympathetic to that writer's scepticism, although in his review of Crainquebille he regretted that the novelist was "something of a Socialist", and thus seemed to "depart from his sceptical philosophy/"(14) Conrad went on in the same review to make clear by comparison his own scepticism: "M. Anatole France is humane. He is also human. He may be able to discard his philosophy; to forget that the evils are many and the remedies are few, that there is no universal panacea, that fatality is invincible, that there is an implacable menace of death in the humanitarian idea. He may forget all that because love is stronger than truth."(15) The heavy irony of the last sentence shows the distance Conrad felt between his own and Anatole France's outlook. Conrad did lift whole paragraphs and even the bones of

characters from Anatole France, as Kirschner shows, but he made very different use of them, so that the "influence" of Anatole France on his work was approximately that of Holinshed on Shakespeare.

Conrad also wrote on and professed to admire Turgenev, a writer whose influence may be considered as "French" because of his close literary connections with France and French writers. Turgenev revealed his views on human character in a lecture delivered in 1860 in which he divided men into two basic types who differ by their relation to the idea; he called them the Hamlets and the Don Quixotes. (Conrad felt "vaguely flattered at the name of the immortal knight turning up in connexion with my own folly"(16) when his childhood tutor Pulman called him an incorrigible Don Quixote for wishing to go to sea.) For Turgenev, Don Quixote represented "faith in the truth.... existing outside of the individual... which is attainable only by constant devotion and the power of self-abnegation."(17) Hamlet, on the contrary,"..... is a sceptic, and always ponders about himself; he is ever busy, not with his duty, but with his condition..... he is conscious of his weakness; but even this self-consciousness is power: from it comes his irony, in contrast with the enthusiasm of Don Quixote."(18) Turgenev evidently ranked himself as a Don Quixote (he was obsessed by Cervantes throughout his life – in 1878 he "vowed never to write anything again, and threatened once more to devote himself entirely to a translation of Don Quixote"(19) Conrad, despite his tutor's hasty characterisation, was, in Turgenev's terms, a Hamlet, for he had no belief in the brand of external truth imagined by Turgenev (and Tolstoy), and "of self abnegation" he was exceedingly suspicious: "..... in my opinion, abnegation carried to an extreme... is not only profoundly immoral but dangerous, in that it sharpens the appetite for evil in the malevolent and develops (perhaps unconsciously) that latent tendency towards hypocrisy in the.... let us say benevolent."(2) An example of a "Don Quixote" in Conrad's work is Kurtz in "Heart of Darkness", who is roundly condemned by Marlow/Conrad for his outlook.

The Hamlet-figures in his work (e.g. Lord Jim and Axel Heyst) do indeed fit Turgenev's description; it might be said that in contrasting Jim with Captain Brierly in Lord Jim, for example, Conrad had in mind their superficial resemblance to each other in Turgenev's terms. But despite his interest in one of Turgenev's types, Conrad's outlook was nevertheless almost the

contrary of Turgenev's. This is disputed by Kirschner, who claims that their "general philosophical assumptions can sound strikingly close." (21) He later admits that, despite some possible borrowings, "if Rudin stimulated Conrad's imagination in Lord Jim, the difference in outlook is fundamental," (22) yet he goes on to surmise that Stein's philosophising (in fact so clearly based on Tadeusz Bobrowski's) may owe something to Turgenev's story "Enough", which Conrad read while he was working on the chapter of Lord Jim in which Stein appears.

But "Enough" shows Turgenev as concerned primarily with the artist's view of Nature; he was interested in the aesthetic relationship. Stein (and Conrad), on the other hand, were decidedly not interested in this facet, but solely in the ethical position of man and Nature. Where Turgenev saw in nature life, beauty and goodness Conrad saw death, ugliness and evil. Conrad may have picked up the butterfly image in Lord Jim from Turgenev's "Enough" but he also invented for himself the beetle image in the same passage. There is in Turgenev a deep love of nature, most evident in A Sportsman's Sketches and his autobiographical writings, amounting at times almost to Pantheism, which contrasts completely with Conrad's strange distrust amounting almost to fear.

Also separating him from Conrad is the fact that Turgenev's female characters are almost always stronger, more attractive and more sympathetically drawn than his men – a point of view decidedly alien to Conrad. One feels that Conrad was rather "pushed" into admiring Turgenev, principally by Constance and Edward Garnett (in 1900, Garnett sent his wife's translation of Turgenev stories to Conrad, commenting in his inscription, "Enough" is very like the philosophy of your novels.) (23) and also by Henry James, who had written a preface for a Turgenev translation, and whose critical judgement Conrad valued highly. Because of the Slav background they shared, Conrad and Turgenev were repeatedly compared in terms mutually complimentary. For these reasons, Conrad carefully excepted Turgenev when voicing his dislike of the Russian novelists. Indeed, Turgenev was in some respects more French than Russian. But many of Conrad's remarks against Dostoevsky, for example, nevertheless still might have been applied to Turgenev's writing. In any case, by 1900 Conrad's outlook can be said to have been fully formed, and although he

was always attracted by literature which expressed ideas, and occasionally made liberal use of ideas and images from other writers, it cannot be said that they contributed significantly to the formation of his attitudes.

Conrad apparently knew Balzac's work well.(24) Baines believes that he may have learned something of the technique of the time-shift from Balzac: for example, the switches in Amayer's Folly almost exactly parallel those in Le Curé de Tours.(25) But, as is so often the case in attempting to trace technical influences, Baines concludes that "this device.... is too common for it to be possible without concrete evidence to pin it down as an influence." (26) Certainly, the outlook reflected in Balzac's novels make him as different from Conrad as the style of their lives and personalities might suggest.

Conrad was also compared often during his lifetime with Pierre Loti, again chiefly for stylistic reasons. Loti's prose abounds in "Conradese" – "incomprehensible," "Profondeurs cosmiques," "vaques infinies" – that perhaps reveal some similarity of verbal usage; but Loti's novels are empty of all but style beside Conrad's; it must have pained Conrad to have had The Nigger of the Narcissus compared(27) by so usually perceptive a friend as Henry James with Loti's effusions. Of Daudet, on the other hand, Conrad had a high opinion (Hueffer claimed that Amayer's Folly was influenced by Daudet's style. Sometimes one wonders whether there is any French writer who has not been seen as an influence on that book). But, once again, the possibility of influence was purely stylistic.

Conrad's earliest exposure to French literature was through his father's translations of De Vigny and Hugo, and it remains only to examine their possible influence on him before turning to a more likely and important influence from Villiers de l'Isle Adam. It would seem that Conrad's appreciation of Les Travailleure de la Mer was neither literary nor philosophical – he read it for the same vicarious pleasure in travel and adventure that he got from Captain Marryat and the novels of Fenimore Cooper. It might be said that Conrad's novels produce the sense of uneasiness that has been remarked on in Hugo, but in Conrad there are specific and traceable reasons for that feeling, and his social, political and ethical outlook plainly differed widely from Hugo's. De Vigny, however, may have had some effect on Conrad's views indirectly, through the impact of his

ideas on Conrad's father, Apollo Korzeniowski. Apollo wrote a preface to his translation of "Chatterton" in which he "extolled Vigny's philosophy of life." (28) According to Roman Taborski's *Life of Apollo Korzeniowski*, (29) the preface contained a romantic defence of suicide, the very point against which objections had been made in Catholic France and Poland. De Vigny aimed in his work to combine poetry and philosophy in a manner that interested Apollo Korzeniowski, and perhaps also Conrad; in the preface Vigny wrote to his Collected Poems (1837), he claimed that his verses were "the first of their kind in France, in which philosophic thought is clothed in epic or dramatic form." (30) The seeds of Conrad's conception of the role of ideas in literature may therefore possibly be found in Vigny, as also perhaps the germ of his thinking about suicide; but it would be injudicious to emphasise any literary, and especially romantic, influence that might have been passed to Conrad directly from his father. On virtually all such matters Conrad consciously diverged from him.

Finally, Conrad's possible debt to Villiers de l'Isle Adam: a number of critics, following Katherine Haynes Gatch, (31) have pointed to the strong thematic parallels between Victory and Villier's Axel, which was published in 1890 and first produced in Paris in 1894. Reviewing the stage production for "The Bookman", Yeats wrote, "Seldom has utmost pessimism found a more magnificent expression." (32). To those who read Conrad's Victory as also a work of "utmost pessimism", the two works are identical in spirit, and there are many similarities of detail.

The manuscript of Victory shows (33) that Conrad began by calling his hero Augustus Berg (the phonetic relation of the name is remarkably close to that of Axel's hero, Axel Auersberg) and only later changed it to Axel Heyst. Heyst was the son of a baron and philosopher whose nihilism (strongly suggestive of the pessimism which marked the thought of Villiers) led him to instruct his son to practise a life of detachment, and to hold the world and mankind in "full and equable contempt", while Axel Auersberg retreats to his mountain castle for precisely the same reasons, to live a life of contemptuous detachment. Both men were suspected of concealing a "treasure", although the only treasure they have is their solitude, and both fail to attain or retain their ascetic ideals through the intervention of a woman. Both end their lives in self-immolation.

As Miss Gatch-observes, "To Villiers' fellow-symbolists Axel's suicide... was an act expressive of enormous scorn of ordinary life and represented a victory over the two illusions, wealth and carnal love."(34) Axel, like Victory, is marked by strongly dualist elements: Count Auersberg has received his education from a "Rosicrucian adept:" (there were close ties between French Rosicrucianism and mediaeval French dualism), and in his early years he was "surrounded by strange alembics and by ancient tomes of Hermetic and Kabbalistic lore."(35) Axel and Sara de Maupers are repeatedly asked the question, "Acceptes-tu la Lumiere, l'Esperance et la Vie?"(36) and to this triad, of which they can accept only Light, they reply in dramatic negatives. Axel assigns the "business of living" to the lower orders in his lines, "Nous avons détruit, dans non étranges coeurs, l'amour de la vie... Vivre? – les serviteurs faront cela pour nous."(37) The echoes of ideas and expression are clearly evident in Victory: at the least, we may say that Villiers was a kindred spirit to Conrad.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to gain much insight into the mind behind Axel: after the death of Villiers, his family and aristocratic friends carried out a salvage operation on his reputation, the result of which was an official biography(38) in which he is made to seem the most orthodox and uninteresting of men. The care taken by his biographer, du Pontavice de Heussey, to assert (against the evidence of Axel) Villier's spotless Catholic faith amounts to deliberate concealment of the fact that he underwent a period of deep interest in heretical philosophy which lent a mystical colouring to his pessimism. In his Sardonic Tales(39) a collection of stories equating love with death and exemplifying the fin-de-siecle romantic manner, Villers quotes Goethe's last words ("Light..... light!") below the title of the first tale, "Olympe et Henriette," a story based on Pascal's theory of the relativity of good and evil. In "The Unknown" he writes of the illusion of sensual love: "..... everything on earth is only Illusion: and every passion accepted and conceived in sensuality alone soon becomes more bitter than death to those who have given themselves up to it."(40).

It would appear from Axel and Sardonic Tales that Villiers shared with Conrad strongly anticarnal feelings which were related to a broader revulsion against Nature, and that he rationalised these feelings within a markedly dualist world-view. A principal difference in his outlook and

Conrad's however, lies in Villiers' notorious snobbishness: his pessimism was retrogressive, looking back to an ideal and feudal world in which the higher social order of society alone could aspire to noble ambitions and ethical goals. Conrad, on the contrary, although somewhat snobbish personally, did not carry this over into his novels. When he wrote "What one feels so hopelessly barren in declared pessimism is its arrogance"(41) he was doubtless thinking of the sort of pessimism exemplified by Villiers. Conrad nowhere refers specifically to having read Villiers de l'Isle Adam, nor acknowledges any influence on himself of Axel, although it may be thought unlikely that he could have missed a major writer whose chief work was a cause celebre in the 1890's, and who was praised so highly by Arthur Symons. It is possible therefore, because of their proximity in certain aspects, that some of Conrad's attitudes received clarification, or appeared to him less unique, as a result of knowledge of Villiers, but it is also highly improbable that he felt a strong or guiding influence from the work of a writer whom he never anywhere mentioned.

In conclusion, then, while it may readily be granted that Conrad's technique and use of language were affected by contact with French literature, it is far from clear that he acquired from any French writers the attitudes towards life which make him seem "exotic" to English readers. It remains true, partly for reasons of style alone, that his work has a "French flavour". Apart from style altogether, this may be traced to the sympathy he felt for French attitudes generally, to the affinity he felt for the craftsmanlike approach to literature of Flaubert and his successors, and to the attraction French post-romantic ideas had for him. As in the case of Villiers de l'Isle Adam, other French authors may have helped him by their handling of ideas to clarify his own, and to organise them into acceptable literary forms. But it is not possible to point to any French writer, or group of writers, or to French literature as a whole as being a formative influence on Conrad's art.

NOTES

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