

Ivo Vidan

Thirteen Letters of André Gide to Joseph Conrad

I

In the collection of Conrad material which belonged to the late G. Jean-Aubry and is now at Yale University there is a series of thirteen letters of André Gide to Joseph Conrad. Unfortunately, they are not holographs but typed copies,* and I have not been able to trace the originals. Neither the publishers of Gide's works, nor Madame Catherine Gide, the owner of her father's copyrights, have been able to help me.¹ Since these letters are not generally known, I have decided to publish the existing copies. They form a valuable, occasionally moving document on the relationship between the two writers, a record of a friendship of great interest, especially to students of Conrad. They contribute something to placing Conrad against the background of his contemporaries; after all, Gide was the most important French writer with whom Conrad was maintaining direct contact. It is to be hoped that this one, as well as further publications may help to complete and round up the existing knowledge on the connections between Conrad and other writers of his time.

The *Nouvelle Revue Française* issue of 1st December 1924 bears the title "Hommage à Joseph Conrad" and is an eloquent tribute to the writer, who had died on June 3rd of the same year, by distinguished colleagues including, among others, Galsworthy, Cunninghame Graham, Maurois, Valéry, R. Fernandez. A prominent essay is by André Gide and it is much more than

* Typing errors and omissions are corrected in the handwriting of G. Jean-Aubry.

¹ I wish however to extend my thanks to Madame Catherine Gide for kindly consenting to let me publish the copies from Jean-Aubry's collection, as well as to Yale University Library; my special thanks are due to Research Librarian Miss Marjorie G. Wynne and the staff of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale.

a conventional obituary. It is, in the form of a personal remembrance, an attempt full of love and respect to sum up the dominant features of Conrad's personality:

Rien n'était plus cordial, plus pur et plus viril, que son rire, que son regard et que sa voix... Si grande que fut sa curiosité pour les replis ténébreux de l'âme humaine, il detestait tout ce que l'homme pouvait présenter de sournois, de louche ou de vil. Et je crois que ce que j'aimais le plus en lui, c'était une sorte de native noblesse, âpre, dédaigneuse, et quelque peu désespérée, celle même qu'il prête à Lord Jim et qui fait de ce livre un des plus beaux que je connaisse, un des plus tristes aussi, encore qu'un des plus exaltants.

Gide describes his first meeting with Conrad (which must have taken place in 1911).² In the company of Miss Agnes Tobin and probably of Valéry Larbaud, he visited Conrad at his home Capel House near Ashford, Kent, stayed with him for a few days, and returned again next year. It is difficult to say how many times they met after that. Nothing is mentioned in Gide's published papers, and though the letters exchanged between Gide and Conrad contain mutual invitations and promises of future meetings, on record there is actually only Gide's journey to England and Wales in 1920 on which Gide failed to visit Conrad, and the unsuccessful attempt of Conrad and his family to see the Gides at Cuverville during a brief stay in Northern France.

Yet Conrad must have been often in Gide's mind. In the contribution to "Hommage à Joseph Conrad" he mentions having been first introduced to Conrad's works by Claudel. At a dinner a guest had spoken enthusiastically of Kipling, whereupon Claudel, with a rather deprecatory smile, dropped the name of Conrad and mentioned some of his titles. Gide does not give the date of that event, which would be of interest because it could indicate when Gide might have started to read Conrad, but as early as 5 December 1905 Gide notes of Claudel in his journal:

Il parle avec la plus grande estime de Thomas Hardy et de Joseph Conrad; avec le plus grand mépris des écrivains anglais en general 'qui n'ont jamais compris que le rien de trop est la première condition de l'art'.

Conrad is rarely mentioned in Gide's correspondence with Claudel, Valéry and Arnold Bennett, but in the *Journal*, on the contrary, Gide frequently records his reading of Conrad's books — from July 1911 (when he mentions *The End of the Tether*, together with Hardy's *Mayor of Casterbridge*) to as

² Paul Claudel et André Gide, *Correspondance 1899—1926*, Preface et notes par Robert Mallet, Paris, 1953, p. 333.

Per la liberazione d'Olmitz
Cantata.

Gruppi al gran Dio si rende,
di il mondo regge e guida,
e che la gente infelice
in questo taluo.
Olmitz giacca orlata
scampio tamenò a morte,
ma si angio la sorte
in libertà torno.
In vana il Drago atteso
un cento squadre a conto
ho stappo al lo spavento
scangli al franco ogn'or.
Qualunque drugin mia forte
debbe a lui parare,
e divenir caduca
D'Europa il vinitor.
Di tanti suoi guerrieri
l'impetoso stuolo
tutto il nomeo suo to
rende vigion.
Io mi se' gonfio il telo
con la superba piuma
ho visto regias armee
corre e inondar corio.
Azzo il Drago indanto
di bellicoso Regno
primum cum vitigno
stragor e inezzeriv.
Altra diavol' piuma
nata l'ha smentita
la guida sua ne scappa
la vob' signatidiv.

Per la soccorra un Duca
un march a cor non sangue,
che già dell'orkl sangue
si l'elba rozzaggian.
he il comitor sangue
il suo gran colpo affata
ma tutto il tempo aspetta
proprio a traher.
In questo lato a in quello
or lo tormentar a stringe,
or l'apalorio finge
ne l'effidite all'or.
Or si dimosta avverso
timido or cambia l'oro
a tanto a posto a posto.
D'ognimor il usor.
Atkin a' d'anni subit
la piuma a pugnar l'epo
quattro infortuna a quattro
dicamar l'orkl poter.
e a riparar la in vano
a pena ogni arte in vno
che il suo super taluo
Doloso il suo proprio.
L'ora fa il Placido indant
i suoi castor' spingeri,
e uno i ubi fidi.
Drogi Pol Vinitor.
E il Drago che Duca
il suo castor' già vob'
risonda alubor il placido
fa l'ora ad il vob'.

«Canzone per la liberazione d'Olmitz» (Ms. sebenicense, recto)

All' impensato uento
per la turbaria via
fuggi l'angia, c'ognas
ma alla furia in san-
e Da seguaci sugi
nell' d'ing hyperata
la parvita narrata
sparsor più mio uahn.
Palla di fess mura
la liberata spant
fuga di hah accant
il piano nymar
(e uirgini e i fanciulli
cint' h' fira la chiama
e uolir l'ecato nome
Dal suo alto smarr.
Tal h' Kothukia un giorno
ora si giontato aspetta
quando il fenesto cogato
Dal suo timor matris.
Quando la Turba d'iuo
tutto più di rigora
quand' inni al uol spara
al Carl che la salta.
Se viao Citta felice
vota al gran Dio si vanta,
e la turba sopra ammatina
più fissa al tuo signor.
(e sua pietà mi credi
or è da h' a salubra
matris d' uirgini sagratar
passante il suo figor
Diny

«Canzone per la liberazione d'Olmitz» (Ms. sebenicenses, verso)

late as 13 March 1943 (when he registers his dislike of *Romance* as well as of *Nostramo*), and eight days later he is impatient with the slowness of *Chance* (in comparison to Dashiell Hammett!).

Neither the *Journal* nor the letters exchanged between Conrad and Gide say exactly at what point Gide undertook to direct the translation of Conrad's works into French, but in the entry of 23 September 1917 Gide writes in the *Journal* that, among other work waiting for him, he would study "la proposition d'une traduction de Locke et des traducteurs nouveaux qui se proposent pour Conrad". In November and December of the same year he is busy revising the *End of the Tether*, by which, on 22 December, he reports having been exhausted; however, a more difficult task had been to work with Isabelle Rivière over her translation of *Victory* and to struggle with her infantile ideas about translation.³ His own translation of *Typhoon* on which he worked in 1916 and 1917 and which he revised a few years later, was a labour of love performed out of his affection for Conrad. One believes that *Typhoon* interested Gide primarily as a linguistic challenge. The greatest literary excitement that Conrad had to offer him was undoubtedly *Lord Jim*. In one of his letters to Conrad printed below he calls it his favourite among Conrad's books, and at several points in the *Journal* there is evidence that Gide had *Lord Jim* in mind while thinking about crucial problems of human behaviour.

In the first weeks of World War I (on 15 August 1914) Gide wonders what his own possible reactions would be, should he find himself in real danger. How many soldiers are anxiously awaiting an event that should reveal to them whether they are brave? And he continues:

Et celui qui ne réagit pas comme *il voudrait* — dont la volonté seule est courageuse!...

Le désespoir de celui qui se croit lâche, parce qu'il a cédé a une défaillance momentanée — alors qu'il s'espérait valeureux. (*Lord Jim*).

Sixteen years later — on 23 february 1930 — after re-reading *Under Western Eyes*, he is interested in the kinship of that novel with *Lord Jim* and he regrets not having spoken to Conrad about that:

Cette *inconséquence* du heros, pour le rachat de laquelle toute sa vie, ensuite, est comme mise en gage. Car ce qui tire le plus a conséquence, ce sont précisément les *inconséquences* d'une vie.

³ André Gide, *Journal 1889—1939*. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Paris, 1955, p. 610. All mention of Gide's *Journal* refers to this edition, or to *Journal 1942—1949*, Paris, 1950. About Isabelle Rivière's translation cf. Conrad's letter of 19 May 1916.

On 2 August of the same year he returns to the subject:

A remarquer que les fatales *inconséquences* des héros de Conrad (je songe en particulier à *Lord Jim* et à *Under Western Eyes*) sont involontaires et gênent aussitôt grandement l'être qui les commet. Toute la vie, par la suite, ne suffit pas à les démentir et à en effacer les traces.

Evidently it is a problem which must have occupied a man whose ideal was openness to life and a permanent *disponibilité*. Had he not chosen a few lines from *Lord Jim* as epigraph to Book Five of *Les Caves du Vatican*, which contains the episode of Lafcadio's most famous *acte gratuit* and brings the *sottie* to its inconclusive end? The epigraph is taken from an exchange between Stein (whose English has been improved by Gide) and Marlow:

— There is only one remedy. One thing alone can cure us from being ourselves.

— Yes; strictly speaking, the question is not how to get cured, but how to live.⁴

How to live! Years later, driven by questions of this sort Gide undertook his journey to the Congo, and again the memory of Conrad is with him. *Heart of Darkness* gets several times mentioned in *Voyage au Congo*.^{4a} Gide compares his experiences with those of Conrad, who had travelled along part of his own route almost fifty years earlier; he remembers Conrad's observations, and remarks on their justness: "Aucune outrance dans ses peintures: elle sont cruellement exactes; mais ce qui les désassombrit, c'est la réussite de ce projet qui, dans son livre, paraît si vain".⁵ In *Le Retour du Tschad* he records that he had re-read *Heart of Darkness* for the fourth time: "C'est seulement après avoir vu le pays dont il parle que j'en sens toute l'excellence".⁶ But he does not go deeper into the significance of Conrad's work.

Conrad was twelve years older than Gide, and there is no evidence that Gide's writings, or indeed those of other authors of Gide's generation, had a particular appeal for him. Yet Conrad's seventeen letters to Gide, published by G. Jean-Aubry in *Joseph Conrad, Lettres Françaises* (Paris, 1930), reveal from the beginning a sympathy exceeded only in his letters to his

⁴ Cf. *Lord Jim*, p. 212, in the Collected Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad, published by Dent.

^{4a} *Voyage au Congo* is in fact dedicated to Conrad.

⁵ *Voyage au Congo*, in the edition *Oeuvres Complètes d'André Gide*, Vol. 13, 1937, p. 96—97 n. The project referred to is the railway line Matadi-Kinshassa which has been functioning since 1900; Conrad witnessed an early stage of its construction in 1890.

⁶ *Le Retour du Tschad*, in *Oeuvres Complètes d'André Gide*, Vol. 14, 1938, p. 125.