Near the beginning of his career as a novelist, Joseph Conrad wrote to his friend Edward Garnett:

To be able to think and unable to express is a fine torture. ... Now I’ve got all my people together [for *The Rescue*] I don’t know what to do with them. The progressive episodes of the story will not emerge from the chaos of my sensations. I feel nothing clearly. And I am frightened when I remember that I have to drag it all out of myself. Other writers have some starting point. Something to catch hold of. They start from an anecdote ... But at any rate they know something to begin with – while I don’t. I have had some impressions, some sensations – in my time: impressions and sensations of common things. And it’s all faded – my very being seems faded and thin like the ghost of a blonde and sentimental woman, haunting romantic ruins pervaded by rats. ... My task appears to me as sensible as lifting the world without the fulcrum which even that conceited ass, Archimedes, admitted to be necessary.

(C.L 288-89)

As Conrad scholars continue to discover, one of the ways the author dealt with this lack of a fulcrum to help move his impressions, sensations, and characters into artful shape was to borrow judiciously from other works of literature. Paul Kirschner undertook a study of Conrad’s debt to Flaubert, Maupassant, Anatole France, Turgenev, and Dostoyevsky in his *Conrad: The Psychologist as Artist* (1968), and the late Yves Hervouet pursued the major French sources in Conrad’s earlier work with his *The French Face of Joseph Conrad* (1990). As Kirschner wrote: “for the organization of his material (and some of the material itself) Conrad owed a debt to imaginative literature that is still far from recognized” (181). One French fulcrum that so far seems to have escaped scholars is Conrad’s debt in “Heart of Darkness” to Pierre Loti’s successful novel *Ramuntcho* (1897).
On the surface Loti (1850–1923) would seem to have been a very likely source for Conrad. A career naval officer who wrote about life either at sea – *Mon frère Yves* (1883), *Matelot* (1893), *Pêcheur d’Islande* (1886) to an extent – or in exotic foreign lands, Loti was certainly the contemporary novelist whose work most resembled Conrad’s in subject matter. He also achieved goals that would have pleased the English writer: elected to the French Academy at the very early age of forty-one and highly regarded as a stylist, Loti was also one of the best-selling French novelists of the era. (In 1908, Conrad told Ernest Downes that he would write more tales of the sea if English audiences had as much interest in the subject as Loti’s sales indicated that French audiences did [CLA 89].) Not surprisingly, Conrad knew and evidently enjoyed his French contemporary’s work. His acquaintance Émilie Briquel wrote in her diary after meeting Conrad that “like me he likes Pierre Loti,” and Ford Madox Ford mentioned Loti as one of the writers that Conrad read at sea (Hervouet 1990: 9, 239). Hervouet shows suggestive similarities between *An Outcast of the Islands* and Loti’s *Le Roman d’un Spahi* and *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* and *Mon frère Yves* (1990: 29-31, 47-49).

Once one gets past the subject resemblances between the two authors, however, one can see why Loti might not have appealed to Conrad as a model. Loti’s works are often highly autobiographical. He was less interested in developing other characters than in finding ways to convey his own impressions and sensations. When it came time to invent a motto for the stained glass windows he had put in the mediaeval Hall of his remarkable home in Rochefort, Loti chose “*Mon mal j’enchante,*” which among its various possibilities can be interpreted as “I sing of my sorrow.” His autobiographical novel, *Le Roman d’un enfant* (1890), while it often alters the historical truth, nevertheless focuses specifically on the author’s own childhood and adolescence.

Conrad, of course, had very different aims in writing fiction. Although he certainly made use of episodes and individuals whom he had encountered in his own life, as J. H. Stape, for example, brings out in his recent biography *The Several Lives of Joseph Conrad*, Conrad was intent on giving life to characters different from himself. (Recall his previously quoted line regarding *The Rescue*: “Now I’ve got all my people together I

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1 *Azaydê* (1879) and *Fantôme d’Orient* (1892) are set in Turkey, *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880) in Tahiti, *Le Roman d’un spahi* (1881) in Senegal, *Madame Chrysanthème* (1887) and *La Troisième jeunesse de Mme Prune* (1905) in Japan, and *Ramuntcho* (1897) in the Basque region.
don’t know what to do with them.”) His autobiography, *A Personal Record*, is striking in that the author repeatedly stops recounting his own life to present that of some other individual. As Zdzisław Najder remarked in his Introduction to the Oxford University Press paperback edition of that work, “there is little of direct intimacy” (1988: xviii). An early reader was more blunt: “Too much about life in Poland and about Mr. Conrad’s uncle, and very little about himself” (cited in Najder 1988: xvi). Loti’s apparent openness and unguardedness about himself were to a certain extent a pose, of course, designed to draw readers in and make them take seriously what he was saying. Still, for Conrad, who was so guarded about his personal life and feelings, Loti would not have been a natural model, unlike the more apparently impersonal Flaubert and his disciples. The English author seems to have kept a copy of *Mon frère Yves* at hand when writing *The Nigger of the “Narcissus*,” as Hervouet shows, because Loti’s title-character, if very different from James Wait, none the less is also a problem sailor, but it is understandable that otherwise Conrad’s tales do not generally recall Loti’s.

An exception here would seem to be the latter’s *Ramuntcho*, which was published shortly before Conrad began work on “Heart of Darkness.” Abandoning his earlier fascination with primitive man, represented most notably in *Pêcheur d’Îleande* (1886) with his positive depiction of the Bretons in and around Paimpol (not far from Île-Grande, where the Conrads sojourned for several months in 1896), in *Ramuntcho* Loti gave expression to a growing fear of the primitive as it seemed to survive in the hearts of modern man. This was a theme that held considerable interest for French readers at the end of the century, particularly with the publication of Paul Bourget’s *succès de scandale*, *Le Disciple* (1889), and Maurice Barrès’s positive depiction of the supposedly pre-Christian qualities that he extolled in rural Frenchmen in novels like *Le Jardin de Bérénice* (1891), but it is one Loti had not treated before.

The French Basque region, the locale of *Ramuntcho*, would not have been an arbitrary setting for such a theme. Some of the most publicized recent discoveries of remains of primitive hominids who seemed to resemble their apelike ancestors as much as their human descendants had

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2 Hervouet found traces of Loti’s *Le Roman d’un Spahi* in “Heart of Darkness” (1990: 63), but made no mention of the striking similarities between Conrad’s novella and *Ramuntcho*. Neither do any of the more recent studies of that I have consulted.

3 On Barrès’s praise of this provincial primitivism and Loti’s reaction to it, see Berrong (2009).
been made in south-western France. In fact, some were made in the grottos near Sare, the principal model for Ramuntcho’s village of Echézar. These grottos were a popular tourist attraction in the last decades of the nineteenth century and associated the area in the mind of Loti’s potential readers with prehistoric men.

Loti associates the Basques with the primitive most clearly during the two journeys that the title-character and his friend Arrochkoa make inland from Echézar to the depths of the Basque region. Foreshadowing Marlow’s voyage upstream to the Inner Station, certainly, but in a tradition in French literature that had already seen Jules Verne’s *Voyage au centre de la terre* (1864), Loti depicts these as voyages through not just space but time, back to a primitive, potentially hostile world.

When the two travel to Erribiague, deep in the Basque interior, for a *pelote* game, the text remarks that “ils n’en avaient jamais vu de si vieux, de ces logis basques, ni de si primitifs” [they had never seen any Basque houses as old or as primitive as these] (I.16). Here there is “aucune
indice des temps nouveaux; un absolu silence et comme une paix des époques primitives” [no indication of recent times, an absolute silence like the peace of primitive epochs].

Conrad’s narrator in “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow, will repeatedly describe the forest into whose depths he sailed as “primeval” (81 et passim) and at one point remarks that “going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world” (92). He also repeatedly remarks on the silence of the tropical forest (80, 93, 95 et passim) but, unlike Loti’s unnamed narrator, at one point exclaims that “this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace” (93). The English writer, after his trip up the Congo, did not need Loti’s text to suggest portraying Marlow’s voyage as a trip back through time; even contemporary anthropologists still thought isolated primitive societies existed unchanged from their prehistoric origins, just as Marlow remarks of his cannibal crew that “they still belonged to the beginnings of time” (103). Still, Loti’s depiction of his protagonist’s two trips to the interior of the mountainous, then isolated Basque region must have resonated with Conrad’s plans for the literary transformation of his own experience.

Along the river that Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa follow to get to Erribiague “des racines énormes s’y contournent, comme de monstrueux serpents gris” [enormous roots twist and entwine with others, like monstrous grey snakes], suggesting that this primitive, primordial world could be a hostile one. In “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow suggests the same thing using the same image, describing the unnamed river that he had to navigate to get to the Inner Station deep in the jungle as “an immense snake uncoiled,” “deadly like a snake” (52, 56), an image that Conrad could have created on his own or borrowed from Loti.

When Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa reach Erribiague, the similarities begin to push the limits of mere coincidence, however. The two, and especially Arrochkoa, start to revert to the primitive man evidently still inside them:

sous l’influence de ce lieu sans âge, les vieux instincts de chasse et de destruction se rallument au fond de leurs âmes. Arrochkoa

in Loti scholarship is followed here: quotations are referenced to his novel by part and chapter rather than by page number in a specific edition. Translations are mine.

8 Note that Loti chooses the verb rallumer, suggesting that those instincts had burned bright before in some unspecified past.
surtout s’excite, bondit de droite et de gauche, brise, déracine des herbes et des fleurs; s’inquiète de tout ce qui remue dans les feuillages si verts ... il saute, il saute; il voudrait des lignes de pêche, des bâtons, des fusils; vraiment il se révèle un peu sauvage.

(1.16)

[under the influence of this ageless place the old instincts for hunting and destruction are lit once again in the depths of their souls. Arrochkoa especially becomes excited, jumps to the right and the left, breaks and uproots grass and flowers; takes worried notice of everything that stirs in the very green foliage ... he jumps, jumps; he would like to have fishing lines, sticks, guns; he really reveals himself to be rather wild.]

Early in “Heart of Darkness,” Marlow recounts a similar episode: the Danish ship captain Fresleven, “the gentlest, quietest creature that ever walked on two legs,” once he went upstream into the dark jungle “started to hammer the chief of the village with a stick” (54). It is interesting to note that with Loti it is the “pure” Basque who, under the influence of a return to the primitive, reverts more to man’s violent origins. Ramuntcho, who like Conrad’s Kurtz is of mixed ethnicity – French and Basque, as Kurtz has a half-French father and a half-English mother (117) – retains his calm and is put off by Arrochkoa’s sudden violence, as Conrad’s Marlow is by Fresleven’s but as Kurtz, despite the fact that “all Europe contributed to [his] making” (117), eventually ceases to be. The latter goes from writing of the natives around him “Exterminate the brutes!” (118) to consorting with them. In this respect, it could be said that Conrad had less faith than Loti in modern European civilization’s power to control the primitive within man.

The second time Ramuntcho and Arrochkoa journey inland, at the end of the novel when they are going to Amezqueta to kidnap Gracieuse from her convent, the same images recur:

 Ils roulent vite; ils s’enfoncent au cœur d’une infinie région d’arbres. Et, à mesure que l’heure passe, tout devient plus paisible autour d’eux, et plus sauvage; plus primitifs ... les vallées deviennent plus sauvages.

(II.13)

[They move along quickly in their cart; they plunge into the heart of an infinite area of trees. And, as the time passes, everything becomes more peaceful around them, and wilder; more primitive; ... the valleys become wilder.]
The road that leads into the interior is
toujours sous la même voûte de chênes, de châtaigniers sans âge,
qui viennent tordre jusqu’aux rebords des sentiers leurs racines
comme des serpents moussus

[still under the same vault of oak trees, ageless chestnut trees, that
send their twisted roots like moss-covered snakes up to the edges
of the trails]

a suggestion of all-surrounding, ever-threatening menace that Marlow
will repeat more directly throughout his description of the last part of his
voyage upstream, which also sometimes moves under over-arching tree
branches.

When Ramuntcho finally reaches Amezqueta he finds Gracieuse very
much changed, as Marlow does Kurtz. Whereas the latter has evidently
given in to the violent eroticism to be found deep in man, Gracieuse, just
the opposite, has detached herself from any awareness of her body under
the influence of the nuns with whom she now lives. (She is somewhat
like Kurtz’s Intended in this respect.) This contrast goes to the heart of
the major difference between the two works. Ramuntcho is above all a
condemnation of the nature-denying, suffocating power of religion,
Loti’s reaction to the growing influence of the Catholic Church in France
at the end of the nineteenth century, a growth that triggered anti-church
works from contemporaries such as Zola and Anatole France as well.
“Heart of Darkness” is, instead, primarily a reaction to the extremes to
which nature can lead men who are not constantly distracted by the
routine preoccupations of civilization as we know it. Loti saw those
extremes and reacted negatively to them as well, unlike Barrès, but for
him the bigger threat was organized religion.

Some of the imagery introduced during the two inland journeys also
appears during Ramuntcho’s nocturnal contraband expeditions near
Echérzar which, if not situated in Ramuntcho’s inland “heart of darkness,”
is still high up in the mountains and repeatedly differentiated from the
modern European city of Biarritz down on the Basque coast that
represented the Basque region for many of Loti’s contemporaries, as it
and its sister cities along the Bay of Biscay still do for many French
people today. At the successful conclusion of one of these contraband expeditions, one of the “pure” Basques in the band exults with an *irrintziña*, a strange cry that Loti describes as

> le grand cri basque, qui s'est transmis avec fidélité du fond de l'abîme des âges jusqu’aux hommes de nos jours, et qui constitue l'une des étrangetés de cette race aux origines enveloppés de mystère. ... La nuit, cela donne la notion et l’insondable effroi des temps primitifs, quand, au milieu des solitudes du vieux monde, hurlaient *des hommes au guê de singe*. (1.8; emphasis added)

> [the great Basque cry, which has been transmitted faithfully from the depths of the abyss of the ages to the men of our day, and which constitutes one of the strange aspects of this race whose origins are enveloped in mystery. ... At night, it suggests a notion and the immeasurable fear of primitive times, when, in the midst of the solitude of the ancient world, *men with apes’ throats* let out shrieks.]

When Ramuntcho hears this cry “cette sauvagerie soudaine le glace” [this sudden wildness makes him freeze].

Whether or not Conrad himself heard such cries in the Congo or elsewhere, it would be hard to argue that Loti’s presentation of the *irrintziña* here and elsewhere did not help the English writer form the striking similar passage in “Heart of Darkness.” One morning as Marlow navigates his boat closer to the Inner Station, he hears

> a cry, a very loud cry, as of infinite desolation, [that] soared slowly in the opaque air. It ceased. A complaining clamour, modulated in savage discords, filled our ears. The sheer unexpectedness of it made my hair stir under my cap. I don’t know how it struck the others: to me it seemed as though the mist itself had screamed, so suddenly, and apparently from all sides at once, did this tumultuous and mournful uproar arise. It culminated in a a hurried outbreak of almost intolerably excessive shrieking, which stopped short, leaving us stiffened in a variety of silly attitudes, and obstinately listening to the nearly as appalling and excessive silence. (101-02)

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9 Biarritz as we now know it had been created just a few decades before by the Empress Eugénie, wife of Napoleon III, and owed its international reputation to her and then the rail line from Paris that was part of her husband’s massive development of the French rail network.
During a later contraband expedition after Ramuntcho’s return from military service, the narrator remarks that the “tension des sens” [tension of the senses] that the Basque contraband runners experience

leur cause une sorte de joie animale, elle double la vie des muscles, en eux qui sont des êtres du passé; elle est un rappel des plus primitives impressions humaines dans les forêts ou les jungles des époques originelles

[causes a sort of animal joy in them, it doubles their physicality, in those men who are beings of the past; it is an echo, a reminder of the most primitive human impressions in the forests or jungles of the original epochs]

– again the primeval jungle and the still-part-animal men. In this setting the previously chaste Ramuntcho finds that, when thinking of his childhood sweetheart Gracieuse,

il la désire tout à coup avec ses sens, dans un élan de jeune sauvage d’une façon inattendue et souveraine.

[he desires her all of a sudden with his senses, in a sudden burst like a young wild man, in an unexpected and overwhelming fashion.]

As every reader of “Heart of Darkness” remembers, Conrad’s Marlow witnesses suggestions of heightened, unrestrained sexuality when he arrives at the Inner Station and suspects Kurtz of having indulged in it as proximity to the primitive and distance from the occupations of civilization caused in him “the awakening of forgotten and brutal instincts, … the memory of gratified and monstrous passions” (144). While Loti saw heightened sexuality as part of the primitive still within modern man, he did not share Conrad’s – or indeed most of his contemporaries’ – urge to cast moral judgment on non-normative sexual behavior. Marlow interprets Kurtz’s last anguished words as a moralistic condemnation of his involvement in such activity – “an affirmation, a moral victory paid for by innumerable defeats, by abominable terrors, by abominable satisfactions” (151) – but Loti gives neither Ramuntcho nor his nameless narrator any such moralistic commentary on the young Basque’s erotic feelings. The English novelist may have found confirmation of his link between the primitive and the sexual in the French text, but he had enough personal experience in Africa and
elsewhere, indeed enough knowledge of European fantasies on the subject, not to need Loti’s work to inspire him on this point. Nor would Loti’s text have supplied him with the moral censoriousness that he allots to Marlow and his condemnations of Kurtz’s “vile desires” (156).

It is only when Ramuntcho sees all this as in a landscape painting that the power and threat of the primitive element still in man strikes him with its full force, however. Later in the novel, as he waits quietly on the bank of the Bidassoa for a boat to take him to another contraband excursion,

[the estuary that is being covered by darkness and where the groups of human dwellings are no longer visible seems little by little [to Ramuntcho] to become different, then suddenly strange, as if some mystery were going to take place there; now he can perceive nothing more than the great, abrupt outlines, which are almost eternal, and he is astounded to find himself thinking confusedly about older times, about an indefinite and dark antiquity. . . . The Spirit of Past Ages]
that sometimes comes out of the earth on calm nights, when the beings who distract us during the day are asleep, the Spirit of Past Ages is probably starting to glide through the air around him; he doesn’t make it out clearly, because his artist’s sense, the sense of one who knows how to see, which no education has honed, has remained rudimentary; but he has a notion of it and is worried by it. . . .

Still, when the two enlarged and reddened horns of the moon slowly bury themselves behind the mountain, itself entirely black, the aspects of things take on for one inappreciable moment an unknown something that is fierce and primitive; then a dying impression of the first eras, which had remained no one knows where in space, suddenly becomes more specific for him, and he is troubled by it to the point of shivering. He even dreams without wanting to about the forest dwellers who used to live here long ago, long ago in incalculable and shadowy times, because suddenly, from a distant point on the shore, a long Basque cry rises up out of the darkness in a lugubrious falsetto, an irrintzina, the only thing in his homeland with which he had never been able to familiarize himself entirely.

Here Ramuntcho experiences an insight into the violent primitivism still present in his fellow man by seeing it as part of a landscape painting, one done in an Impressionist style: “ne se voient plus ... que les grandes lignes abruptes” [he can perceive nothing more than the great, abrupt outlines]. Because he is an artist himself, although “son sens d’artiste ... est demeuré rudimentaire” [his artist’s sense ... has remained rudimentary], Ramuntcho sees not just these “pure” Basques’ obvious current condition but their primitive origins as well, and he trembles: “il en est troublé jusqu’au frisson” [he is troubled by it to the point of

As Gustave Geffroy, the art critic and biographer of Monet, wrote “Monet voit l’ensemble des choses, cherche leur représentation par le moins de lignes possibles” [Monet sees the overall entirety of things, tries to represent them with the fewest lines possible] (1980: 114). Even more pertinent to this study, art critic Georges Grappe wrote of Monet that he “simplifie l’univers et ramène tout à ces éléments primordiaux qui gouvernent la nature” [simplifies the universe and brings everything back to those primordial elements that govern nature] (Geffroy 1980: 384). Is it coincidence that when, on the Intended’s doorstep, Marlow recalls Kurtz at “a moment of triumph for the wilderness,” he sees the scene in its “ominous and terrifying simplicity” (156), including “horned shapes” that echo Loti’s “two enlarged and reddened horns of the moon”? On the theorizing of Impressionist painting in Ramuntcho, see Berrong (forthcoming: Pt 1, ch. 6).
shivering]. It is a painterly depiction of the world that reveals its deep truth, and the artist’s eye that perceives it.

Again the similarities seem too specific to be coincidence. Conrad’s Mr Kurtz, whom Marlow describes as a painter (79), one with a “stare . . . wide enough to embrace the whole universe” such that he had “glimpsed truth” (151), reacts even more strongly to what his artist’s eye reveals to him about the primitive in man: “The horror! The horror!” (149). Because his “sens d’artiste” has moved past potential to creation (79), Kurtz is also able, like a practising painter, to make others see what he has discovered in the world. The Russian Harlequin who knew him in his last days keeps repeating “He made me see things,” “he enlarged my mind” (127, 140; also 125). Here Conrad makes Kurtz the powerfully revelatory and effective artist that Ramuntcho is still trying to learn how to become.

The idea that an artist has the power to see into such hidden mysteries of the universe and present them to his audience had been greatly promoted in French literature by Victor Hugo two generations before and was repeated in Conrad’s own time not only by other French writers but also by Claude Monet and some of that painter’s devotees. Georges Clemenceau, for example, the statesman and close friend of the painter, wrote in his book on Monet that the artist sat in his famous Giverny gardens for hours on end because

[c’est là que Monet venait chercher l’affinement des sensations les plus aiguës. Pendant des heures, il restait là, sans mouvement, sans voix, dans son fauteuil, fouillant de ses regards, cherchant à lire dans leurs reflets, ces dessous des choses éclairés, au passage, des lueurs insaisissables où se dérobent les mystères. … Voir, n’était-ce pas comprendre? Et, pour voir, rien que d’apprendre à regarder.]

(1928; rpt. 2000: 64)

[it’s there that Monet came to seek the sharpening of his sharpest feelings (sensations, which doesn’t translate well into English). For hours he stayed there, without moving, without speaking, in his armchair, rummaging with his eyes, trying to read in their reflections on the pond the undersides of the things that were exposed to light as they appeared in the course of constant change, glimmers impossible to capture in which mysteries hide. … Isn’t seeing understanding? And, in order to see, there’s nothing better than to learn how to look.]
The result of this study and consequent understanding of the world was that

le peintre nous découvre, comme par l’éclairage de l’ultra-
microscope, des profondeurs élémentaires que, sans lui, nous
n’aurions pas connus! (Clemenceau 1928; rpt. 2000: 122)

the painter reveals to us, as if by the light of a high-power
microscope, elementary depths that, without him, we would not
have come to know.

If, as Kirschner wrote with regard to Conrad’s use in “Heart of
Darkness” of Anatole France’s Les Opinions de M. Jérôme Coignard, “the
career of Mr. Kurtz illustrates the Abbé Coignard’s views with
remarkable precision” (1968: 231), Kurtz’s effect on the Russian
Harlequin illustrates with remarkable force the sort of power that Loti
and some of his French contemporaries hoped that Impressionist
painting, whatever the medium, could exercise on contemporary viewers.

That Conrad should have found this idea congenial is not at all
surprising. Already in later 1897, by which time Ramuntcho had been out
for several months,11 the English writer, in penning his Preface to The
Nigger of the “Narcissus,” which he first mentioned in a letter to Edward
Garnett dated 24 August 1897 (CL1 375), had begun with the lines:

A work that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art
should [be] a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of
justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth,
manifold and one, underlying its every aspect. … My task which I
am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make
you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.
(vii, x)

This sums up in English very nicely the aesthetic aim of Pierre Loti at
least since the publication of Pêcheur d’Islande in 1886 (and Monet at least
since the first Water Lily canvases), and shows that the artists did indeed
have more in common than one might imagine.

There are other similarities between the two texts that, given the
foregoing, are not likely to be coincidental either. Just as Ramuntcho,
upon the death of his mother, is left with a packet of letters and a

11 Ramuntcho was published in instalments in the Revue de Paris from 15
December 1896 to 15 February 1897, and then in book form in March 1897.
photograph of the father he never knew (11.8), so Marlow, after Kurtz’s
death, is left with a packet of his letters and a picture of Kurtz’s Intended
(148, 154), letters that might tell him more about the mysterious Kurtz as
the other packet might tell Ramuntcho about his mysterious unknown
father. Kurtz’s engagement was evidently disapproved of by his fiancée’s
family because he did not have enough money (159), just as Gracieuse’s
mother Dolores refused to let Ramuntcho marry her daughter for the
same reason.

Conrad certainly had several fulcra to help him in the construction of
“Heart of Darkness,” starting with his voyage up the Congo River in
1890. As Kirschner has shown, if sometimes Conrad turned to other
literary works to suggest how he might structure his own – recall, again,
his letter to Garnett complaining that once he had developed in his mind
the characters for The Rescue he didn’t know “what to do with them,”
what to have them do – other times he alluded to literary classics in
order to “bring … in overtones” that would enrich his own themes
(1986: 182-83). In Kirschner’s words, Conrad “chose as his masters
those men who would help him not only to perfect his technique, but to
define his ideas about human nature” (1986: 184). It is not surprising
that he should have made use of Ramuntcho to these ends in writing
“Heart of Darkness,” as Lotti’s recent novel for once dealt not just with
similar subject matter but with a theme and a strong reaction to it that
Conrad would crystallize for the English-speaking world with Kurtz’s
final, horrified cry. If, speaking of “Heart of Darkness” and Les Opinions
de M Jérôme Coignard, Kirschner could write: “Conrad, of course, had his
own experience in the Congo to draw upon, but Anatole France may
have helped him to interpret it” (1986: 231), might not the same be said
even more so of Ramuntcho?

To what extent the English writer expected at least some of his
readers to catch the allusions to Ramuntcho and thus its “overtones” it
would be difficult to say. Henri Pene du Bois’s English translation came
out in New York and London later in 1897, so it would have been
available to them for almost two years before the appearance of “The
Heart of Darkness” in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine in February–April
1899. It is certainly possible that Conrad might have wanted to enhance
the power of his own depiction of the primitive in man by tying it to that
of a then both well respected and widely read French author. Lotti had
done the same thing himself in Ramuntcho, after all, evoking memories of
Vautrin in Balzac’s Père Goriot when describing his character Itchoua in
order to emphasize the implications of a very cold-hearted homosexual
desire (Berrong 2003: 185). Conrad, evidently a great reader of Balzac, as Stape has pointed out (1997), could not have missed the allusions to that author’s most famous novel.

The clearest evidence that Conrad did indeed expect at least some of his readers to catch the allusions to Ramuntcho and think about the implications of the similarities and differences between the two texts is the last scene of his novella, which the English author modeled obviously and extensively on the last scene in Ramuntcho, the title-character and Arrochkoa’s meeting with Gracieuse in Amezqueta (II.13). The two young Basques arrive at the convent at dusk, as Marlow does at the home of the Intended (156). Like him, they must first knock at a door to be admitted, though Loti’s “porte de la paisible maison” [door of the peaceful house] becomes, in Conrad, the far more menacing “high and ponderous door” (155). Like Marlow, the two are shown in and asked to take a chair (157). In the convent parloir, the room reserved for conversations between residents and visitors from outside, everything is a sensuality-denying white; in the “lofty drawing-room” into which Marlow is shown he notes that “the tall marble fireplace had a cold and monumental whiteness” (156).

When Gracieuse sees the two young men she lets out “un cri de joie” [a cry of joy], which will become the Intended’s “exulting and terrible cry, … the cry of inconceivable triumph and of unspeakable pain” (161-62) she lets out upon being told that Kurtz’s last words were her name. The Intended, like Gracieuse, is dressed in black (156), and like the young Basque girl has golden hair (160). Like Gracieuse she expected this visit: “I heard you were coming” (157), she tells Marlow, just as Gracieuse tells the two Basques that she had expected to see them when they were playing a pelote match in a nearby town. Still, the Intended’s almost inhuman cry highlights the great distance between Loti’s naïve young woman and Conrad’s monstrous mourner. Whereas Gracieuse, because of the oppression of institutionalized religion, has learned to forget her sorrow at losing her beloved – “elle ne semble même plus souffrir” [she doesn’t even seem to suffer anymore] – the Intended suggests that she will go on suffering Kurtz’s loss forever: Marlow remarks that “she carried her sorrowful head as though she were proud of that sorrow, as though she would say, I – I alone know how to mourn for him as he deserves” (157). One position seems no more human than the other. Indeed, the Intended would seem to be even less human, in that her life-denying devotion is apparently of her own choosing,
whereas Arrochkoa suggests that Gracieuse was coerced by their mother, Dolorès, into entering the convent (II.3).

Ramuntcho, seeing Gracieuse’s apparent acceptance of his loss and indeed the loss of all carnal pleasure, finally gives in and decides not to try to talk her into joining him for marriage and flight to America. Marlow gives in as well, “bowing my head before the faith that was in her” (159), and decides not to tell the Intended the truth about Kurtz. Ramuntcho then leaves the claustrophobic world he has known but cannot live in for the New World, a “fuyard triste” [sad man in flight]. Marlow leaves much the same way: “it seemed to me that the house [of the Intended] would collapse before I could escape” (162). The Intended’s bizarre self-sacrifice to a foundationless ideal confounds him as much as Gracieuse’s renunciation of real life for an ideal of virginity confounded Loti.

Just as Ramuntcho sets off for “l’immense nouveau plein de surprises et abordé maintenant sans courage” [the immense new world full of surprises and approached now without courage], so the primary, unnamed narrator of “Heart of Darkness,” at the end of Marlow’s tale, looks up and contemplates “the tranquil waterway leading to the uttermost ends of the earth [that] flowed somber under an overcast sky – seemed to lead into the heart of an immense darkness” (162). If Ramuntcho sets off on his voyage “without courage,” Marlow’s listeners, after having heard his story, are likely to be even more apprehensive about sailing into the world that he has now made them see.

Given all the parallels between the two texts in their last scenes, it is very difficult to believe that Conrad did not hope that at least some readers would come to his novella with an awareness of Loti’s novel and, being led to recall it, read all of its power and at least some of its concerns into the English writer’s already powerful text. If they do, the Intended, though she is strange even in isolation, becomes, set off against Gracieuse, as terrifying as the “savage and superb” native woman whom she at one point recalls for Marlow (160), and in fact considerably less human.

The English novelist may not have actually needed his French counterpart’s narrative to construct his own. He was, however, able to find elements and structures in it that helped support and enhance what turned out to be, with their help, one of Conrad’s and indeed English literature’s finest works of art.
Works cited


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