

On the Application of Philosophical Knowledge in the Teaching of History of French Literature

Yi-qian XIANG

College of Foreign Languages and Cultures of Xiamen University, Xiamen, CHINA

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Abstract. Since the 16th century, philosophy, as one of the important enlightening factors in the creation of French literature, has been running through the history of French literature. Therefore, in the teaching of the history of French literature, we should appropriately make a clear explanation of relative philosophical knowledge, and particularly sort out the relationship between literary genres and philosophical concepts. Clear comprehension of relative philosophical knowledge will help students to thoroughly understand the ideological roots of the genre of literary writing, and further, on the whole, grasp the history of French literature. This thesis takes “modernity” and “Decadent movement” as examples to discuss how to infiltrate philosophical knowledge into the teaching of the history of French literature.

Introduction

The author of this paper has been teaching the history of French literature in Xiamen University (China) for many years and has used many teaching materials published in China and abroad. In general, most textbooks have carefully considered the selection and edition of contents, including representative authors and works. However, these textbooks coincidentally ignore the connection between French literary creation and philosophical knowledge.

In addition, in the four-year curriculums of French department in Chinese universities, there is no special course to introduce the history of French philosophy. Most teachers tend to follow the content design of textbooks in their teaching of the history of French literature and do not introduce some necessary knowledge of philosophy. Objectively speaking, there is a close relationship between philosophical knowledge and the history of French literature. Therefore, the author thinks that introduction and explanation of some philosophical knowledge plays an important role in the teaching of French history of literature.

Relationship between French Literature and Philosophy

The history of French literature is actually a history of philosophy. In other words, the history of French philosophy is also a history of literature. Especially in the more than 400 years from the 16th century to the first half of the 20th century, the connection between philosophy and literature was particularly intense.

The Renaissance in the 16th century brought the light of humanism to the community of French scholars. The French literary creation is full of humanitarian features. For example, in his best known works *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, François Rabelais introspects the harm of the rigid education system at that century, and put forward a more conceptive educational conception; Michel de Montaigne asks mankind's living conditions in his *Essays* with full freedom. In the 17th century, in the process of achieving the concentration of monarchy of Louis XIV, rationality gradually took the dominant position in social ideology. Compared with Baroque literature and aristocratic salon literature, classicism was the most important genre of literature. René Descartes puts forward his rational concept of “I think, therefore I am” and established the philosophy of “subjectivity” in *Discourse on the Method*. Blaise Pascal wrote *Thoughts* to explore the issue of human freedom.

The Enlightenment in the 18th century had a profound impact on French literary activities while bringing about great social changes. A. Léon-Miche said that the close connection between philosophy and literature during the Enlightenment period was unprecedented. Many philosophers wrote novels, poems or essays. The expression and dissemination of philosophical ideas often took the form of literary creation^[1]. Philosophers enlightened the public through literary creation, promoting rationality, equality and fraternity. Representative works include Voltaire's *The Huron; or, Pupil of Nature*, Denis Diderot's *Rameau's nephew*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, Montesquieu's *Persian letters* and so on. The dissemination of the concept of "natural human rights" by philosophers has greatly encouraged the confidence of the bourgeoisie onto the political arena.

In the 19th century, while the political power changed frequently in France, the industrial revolution further strengthened the dominance of the bourgeoisie. The proletariat appeared on the social stage and the values of the bourgeoisie began to be questioned. Influenced by the idea of change and innovation, a variety of literary schools were pouring in, such as: romanticism, realism, naturalism, parnassism, symbolism, decadent movement, etc. In the first half of the 20th century, with the outbreak of the First and Second World Wars, bourgeoisie's concepts were further questioned. At the same time, the living conditions of mankind remained a subject that philosophers continue to think about. Literary creation activities were also regarded as an important theme. The most important French philosophical school in this period is existentialism. The literary creation activities represented by Sartre and Camus can be included in this category.

In general, French Literature Movements correspond to philosophical thoughts. The comprehension of philosophical thoughts and literary activities will help students to understand more accurately the general characteristics of literary genres, such as the motivations of writers. During lesson preparation of French modern and contemporary literature, we noticed that the philosophical term "modernity" is a key word, and the mastery of the concept of "modernity" will help to understand the ideological roots of French modern and contemporary literary genres.

"Modernity" and French Modern Literature

Looking at the history of French literature from the Renaissance to the first half of the 20th century, we can find the fact that most literary creation is related to the concept of "modernity". That means: almost all literary genres are associated with modernism. "Modernism" lasted for more than four centuries and ended in the mid-twentieth century. Fiedler wrote: "We are living, have been living for two decades - and have become actually conscious of the fact since 1955 - through the death throes of Modernism and the birth pangs of Post-Modernism."^[2] With this time threshold, we can be sure that the "historical avant-garde" is the last "modernist" literary genre, which manifests as futurism, dadaism and surrealism. However, the new novels and the Theater of the Absurd appearing in the later period belong to the "new avant-garde", as part of the literary movements of "postmodernism".

Western cultural history generally holds the view that the earliest modernity can be traced back to the Middle Ages. As an important philosophical idea, it should be manifested in the Renaissance in Europe as being respected for reason, science and progress. Therefore, the concept of "modernity" is mainly characterized by "subjectivity" and "rationality" at the beginning of its creation. The theoretical representative in France is Descartes, and at the social level it is advocated for science and progress. From the Renaissance to the mid-19th century, the notion of "modernity" was gradually unified at the social and literary level, and the main task of literary creation activities was to publicize the various benefits of "modernism" and promote the values of the bourgeoisie, especially in the early days of the Enlightenment.

From the mid-19th century, modernity has split between the social and literary levels due to over-estimation of "instrumental rationality"^[3]. During this period, the social-level modernity refers to the modernity as a stage in the history of Western civilization, which upholds the "modernity" of the early modern concepts, such as paying attention to time, reason, practicality and so on. It is "a product

of scientific and technological progress, of the industrial revolution, of the sweeping economic and social changes brought about by capitalism.”^[4]

The “modernity” at the literary level is manifested in the dislike and confrontation of the bourgeois standard of values by the intelligentsia’s class. Writers expressed their disgusted emotions through literary creations. From this perspective, the modernity of literary level is a rejection of the social-level modernity. In other words, the alienation of modernity by modern writers began with romanticism. “In the 1833 diary notes took his trip from Paris to Prague and included as such in *Mémoires d’outre-tombe*, Chateaubriand uses ‘modernité’ to refer disparagingly to the meanness and banality of everyday ‘modern life’ as opposed to the eternal sublimity of nature and the grandeur of a legendary medieval past.”^[5]

Since then, writers of decadent movement, symbolism, surrealism, anarchism and other genres showed a more distinct sense of alienation in their writing. Baudelaire has a description of “modernity,” as he wrote: “Modernity is the transitory, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable.”^[6] Until today this passage is seen as the most classic summation of “modernity” in modern western literature, art as well as aesthetic.

From the emergence of “modernity” to its fission in the middle of the 19th century, these changes have been shown vividly in French literary creations. This enables us to re-understand the history of French literature during this period from a philosophical perspective. At the same time, this provides teachers with a new theoretical basis for curriculum design.

Curriculum Design Based on “Modernity” and “Decadent movement”

Teachers can infiltrate the concept of “modernity” repeatedly in the teaching content. The author of this paper intends to take “Decadent movement” as an example to carry out the curriculum design. The selected work is *Against Nature* of the nineteenth-century French writer Joris-Karl Huysmans.

In course of the history of French literature in Chinese universities, the literary movements of the 19th century are always the focus of teaching. However, compared with romanticism, realism, naturalism and symbolism, the “decadent movement” has been during a long time regarded as a relatively isolated literary genre, and thus has not received due attention. Although the “decadent movement” has less influence than the previous literary genres, it can most precisely reflect the fission of the concept of “modernity”. Furthermore, it can not be totally different from any other genre of literature. Teachers can interpret the “decadent movement” from the perspective of “modernity”. That enables students to understand this literary genre in depth, as well as its relationship with other genres.

Theoretical Basis. According to the interpretation of the *Larousse encyclopedia*, the “decadent movement” means a group of “pessimistic and marginal French writers and artists (Corbière, Cros, Villiers of L’Isle-Adam, Laforgue) in the late nineteenth century, who have had in common the refusal of conformity and the search for a refined aesthetic.”^[7] The famous symbolist poet Verlaine, who is also an important contributor to *Le Décadent*, defined decadence as follows: “Decadence is a word of genius, an interesting discovery which will last forever in the history of literature. This seemingly vulgar expression is an extraordinary initiative. It is simple, straightforward and ‘handy’, that just offsets the derogatory side of the term; it sounds literary but does not be pedantic, it is flexible and hits the focus...”^[8]

In fact, the decadent movement appeared in France of the mid-19th century. After the failure of the Revolution in 1848, the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870 and the Paris Commune in 1871, there emerged a group of French intellectuals with decadent consciousness. Representatives include the Goncourt brothers, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Paul Verlaine and others. Their ideas were opposed to the modernity belonging to the bourgeoisie and the bourgeoisie’s thinking about unlimited progress, democracy, civilized comfort, so deceptive promises to them. These “Decadent” literati fostered their own sense of alienation in order to resist the bourgeois value system. Some of them were feudal aristocrats while others were bourgeois, but they generally missed the vassal status

of literary dependents in the period of the feudal dynasty. The Goncourt brothers referred to this decadent thought as “modern melancholy,” they asked: “Do you know if the sadness of the century does not come from overwork, movement, tremendous effort, furious labor, from its cerebral forces strained to the breaking point, from overproduction in every domain?”^[9] What is certain is the rapid economic and productive improvement of French society in the nineteenth century was precisely the reason for the decadent ideas, and the “modernity” had a negative impact on the literati during this period. This is in stark contrast to the positive role of modernity during the Enlightenment, while the intellectuals praised and promoted science and progress.

Course Design. Teachers can design the course of 6-8 hours according to the quantity of the content, which does not include the pre-class preview. In order to fully interact in the classroom, teachers need to ask questions to guide students to think before class. A number of questions on this topic could be prepared for the student’s preview, such as: How do you understand the concept of “Decadent”? What do you think the shortcomings of “modernity”? What kind of story is told in *Against Nature*? What is the writing style of this work? When the course begins, teacher can organize students to discuss the above issues as the first step. And then teacher explains the key issues, including: How to understand the style of the decadent movement from the perspective of “modernity”? What is the “modernity” characteristic of *Against Nature*?

The style of the Decadent movement can be summarized as the refinement of style and the artificialism. Désiré Nisard, a 19th-century French literary critic, talked about the literary features of the decadent in his book, *M. Victor Hugo in 1836*: “The profuse use of description, the prominence of detail and, on a general plane, the elevation of the imaginative power, to the detriment of reason.”^[10] There are two main points in this passage: decadent literature pursuit of exquisite writing style; and decadent movement is not isolated, it has something in common with romanticism, because the works of romantic master Hugo showed the style of decadent literature. By the middle of the 19th century, more and more French intellectuals began to think about decadent literature, including a number of symbolism writers. In addition to Verlaine, there were Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud and Paul Valéry. In 1868, critic Théophile Gautier wrote a preface to *The Flowers of Evil*, pointing out that Baudelaire’s poetry has a decadent style, which is “an ingenious, complicated style, full of shades and of research, and constantly pushing back the boundaries of speech, borrowing from all technical vocabularies, taking color from all palettes and notes from all keyboards, struggling to render what is most inexpressible in thought, what is vague and most elusive in the outlines of form, listening to translate the subtle confidences of neurosis, the dying confessions of passion grown depraved, and the strange hallucinations of the obsession which is turning to madness.”^[11] This passage proves that decadent movement and symbolism do have some style in common.

Modernity Characteristics of *Against Nature*. This book tells the story of Des Esseintes, descendant of the aristocracy, tired of hypocrisy and exaggeration in Paris, decided to stay in a small town. There is no complete storyline, with each chapter revolving around a theme involving paintings, precious stones, flowers, and literature. The work is exquisitely crafted to depict sensual pleasures, and is therefore called the Bible of decadent movement.

The students are required to read the chapters of decoration turtle^[12] and plant’s transformation^[13], as well as to understand the preference of “artificialism” in the decadent movement. In guiding students to appreciate the texts, teacher should guide the students to understand the paradox of “modernity” manifested by the decadent literature. Des Esseintes, who does not like naturally growing plants, prefers plants that have been cut into bizarre shapes, and colors that fake real flowers into fake flowers. He was not satisfied with the faint color of his pet turtle, and let artisan inlaid various colored sparkling gems on the tortoise shell. His “most refined pleasure is perhaps to find out that nature can sometimes obey the arbitrary orders of human fantasy.”^[14]

In this book, much has been spent on depicting Des Esseintes’s devotion to artificial products, indicating Huysmans’s own dislike for natural products. These descriptions show the paradox of “modernity” in the decadent movement in the 19th century. In *Five Faces of Modernity*, Matei

Calinescu mentioned the paradoxes of aesthetic modernity in Baudelaire's existence, emphasizing that this paradox is mainly due to Baudelaire's treatment of the time: "On the one hand, he calls for a rejection of the normative past, or at least for a recognition of tradition's irrelevancy to the specific creative tasks the modern artist is faced with; on the other hand, he nostalgically evokes the loss of an aristocratic past and deplors the encroachment of a vulgar, materialistic middle-class present. His program of modernity appears as an attempt to solve this conflict by rendering it fully and inescapably conscious. Once such consciousness is attained, the fleeting present can become truly creative and invent its own beauty, the beauty of transitoriness."^[15]

In fact, another reason for this paradox is the complexity of modernity itself. The beginning of modernity was based on instrumental rationality, which represented human abilities to defeat nature and transform nature. Decadent literati showed two sides in front of the modern society. On the one hand, they hated the bourgeois way of life and values. They thought that the production of machines was alienating, and as a result they had a decadent psychology. On the other hand, they were obsessed with the human transformation of nature. The changes caused by human activities were attracting. As the title of the work of Huysmans, against nature is one of the essences of decadent movement. Baudelaire praised also in *The Flowers of Evil* the modernized Paris, which was transformed by Georges-Eugène Haussmann. After the content of the course, students can have a complete and clear understanding of the connection between decadent movement and modernity.

Summary

This curriculum design starts with the notion of modernity and introduces the origins of the decadent movement, its writing style, and its connections with other literary genres. Traditional teaching methods tend to simply introduce literary common sense. In contrast, the method of combining literature with philosophy has the following advantages: it meets the philosophical features of the history of French literature; it helps students to understand the genre, the writers and the works as a whole. Although in today's universities, literary lessons are often regarded as lacking in practicality and difficult to arouse the interest of students. However, as knowledge disseminators, teachers can make some new attempts. For example, with the application of philosophical knowledge on literature class, teaching and learning will become a love with wisdom.

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