

## REVIEW

John Lyon  
*University of Bristol*

### *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad*

*Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*

Edited by Owen Knowles

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010

lxvii + 475 pp. £75/\$125

---

IN WHAT AIMS – persuasively – to become the standard edition of the stories “Youth,” “Heart of Darkness,” and “The End of the Tether,” the critical voice of the editor in his Introduction is appropriately restrained and quiet, although that voice incidentally and intermittently reveals an *interpretative* inwardness and authority with these tales. The Introduction none the less eschews the temptation to offer new readings or to speak too immediately to our own critical moment in favour of a more enduring commentary largely limited to a summary of the tales’ possible sources and of their early critical reception, both individually and as part of a single book.

This volume can be seen as part of Cambridge University Press’s endeavour to rescue the vast *œuvre* of Joseph Conrad from the reduced fate that presently threatens it. Insofar as Conrad is now known by student readers, he is known for “Heart of Darkness.” Moreover, that novella is typically now encountered by such students in quite another editorial context – in the pages of anthologies of literature and in the context of critiques of imperialism, Conrad’s writing being accompanied by the texts of writers and critics ushering in post-colonialism.

Bluntly, Conrad is too often the imperialist foil to Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and a prompt to student exercises, prematurely political and insufficiently attentive to textual particulars, which pass correct-sounding judgements. That a Pole born in the Ukraine, whose national history had been predominantly a history of successive

invasions, should suffer such a fate is a heavy irony. In this impatient context, the great qualities of Conrad's writing in "Heart of Darkness" go unremarked. And, more mundanely for example, the stubborn particular fact that the recurrence of instances of the word "black" in the novella are as likely to insist upon nights of darkness as on racial stereotyping gains little attention. Contrariwise, the weakness of some of Achebe's writing goes unnoticed. A comparison made on aesthetic rather than political grounds is not to Achebe's advantage.

One conviction informing the editorial practice of Owen Knowles in his edition of these stories is of the achievement of the highly distinctive speaking voice that is Conrad's narrator, Marlow. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has been rightly praised for the descriptive richness with which he restores, not uncritically, a complex history and culture to the Igbo people of Nigeria – but one of many diverse groups in a whole continent that had notoriously once been deemed to be without history. Achebe's descriptions are wonderful; his dialogue, and his rendering of the speaking voice, however, are stilted. Achebe is attempting to appropriate Western novelistic traditions to realize the life of the Igbo people, and what Bakhtin has to say about the appropriation of individual words is also true of the appropriation of narrative conventions:

The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention.... And not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure...: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. (293-94)

"Quotation marks," are, indeed, Achebe's downfall in *Things Fall Apart*: his attempt to appropriate the conventions of novelistic dialogue into his new context leaves his characters too often in direct speech seeming the victims of unintentionally patronizing representation, speaking archaically and simple- (or staccato-) mindedly.

It is by no means, however, that Achebe's characters are incapable of complex, nuanced thought, as the complexity of their proverbs perhaps more securely realizes: it is merely that the naturalistic dialogue of the Western novel remains alien in Achebe's context. Such a failure would

have come as no surprise to a Conrad, who, although we may castigate him for particular representations – of race and gender, for example – was acutely and more generally aware of the perils of representation, of the failures of any fit between words and our worlds: “Kurtz – Kurtz – that means short in German – don’t it? Well, the name was as true as everything else in his life – and death. He looked at least seven feet long” (106).

Restoring “Heart of Darkness” to the more traditional context of Conrad’s works as a whole, as is happening here with the Cambridge Edition, may be one way of ensuring that readings of Conrad may, in the future, take forms other than pre-emptive policing. Indeed, this volume’s underlying editorial policy is, in textual terms, at once bold and old-fashioned since it seems driven by a desire to recover Conrad’s own writing unmediated by editors and publishers, and assumes a single ideal authorial text lying behind whatever actual texts we can manage to reconstruct. In particular, the Cambridge Edition becomes controversial since it now offers us a version of “Heart of Darkness” that readers have never before encountered.

Such editorial practice should cause Conrad’s readers to hesitate – something recognized in the full and painstaking textual discussions in this particular volume. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Joseph Conrad promises, according to the General Editors’ Preface, “texts that are as trustworthy as modern scholarship can make them” (xiii). Trust is one of those simple ideas that we might have expected Conrad to admire, but experience of Conrad’s writings suggests that trust for Conrad, when realized in the fullness of particular narratives, is likely to prove slippery, neither singular nor straightforward. Trustworthiness may prove difficult to attain in textual matters as in other areas of human endeavour. Similarly the whiggish view of editing and publishing implicit in that “modern scholarship” suggests scholarly progress in a way that might have raised the eyebrows of the sceptical, conservative Conrad. (How good a safeguard is modern textual scholarship? For example, despite all the scholarly effort expended, we seem as far from what Shakespeare may actually have written as we have ever been.)

Unless producing multiple texts, any editor must make single choices and solve textual problems. Readers and reviewers have the luxury of remaining sceptical and open to a range of possibilities. Textual criticism can never be a science: the most we can ask of an editor is a principled eclecticism, and it is perhaps the case that this volume pushes its eclecticism, which Owen Knowles declares explicitly – “deliberately

eclectic texts” (322) – rather far. Knowles is attracted to a version of Conrad’s writings uncomplicated by the process of publication. Yet such a possibility proves problematic since, even before the three stories that make up this volume were written, the constraints and requirements of the publishing world were encroaching upon Conrad’s creativity. Thus it is likely that he had earlier thought of this volume as including what later became *Lord Jim*, and, thus, perhaps, as a collection centred on the figure of Marlow. Yet *Lord Jim* grew to novelistic proportions excluding itself from the volume with *The End of the Tether* now added under the pressure to meet the publisher’s timings and proportions.

As Knowles notes (xxviii), Conrad justified the unity of the new volume of three tales on the artistic grounds that they charted the ages of man, but it is a justification that seems to have come after the fact. The volume’s title is also problematic. The editor is attracted to Conrad’s early thoughts, yet he is obliged to give this volume – originally entitled in 1902 *Youth: A Narrative and Two Other Stories* – the title *Youth, Heart of Darkness, The End of the Tether*, a title that first appeared only in 1946, some twenty years after Conrad’s death. Knowles argues that his chosen title is “a clearer and more informative alternative to the original historical one” (xxvii). Perhaps another way of saying this is the more overtly expedient argument that the title needs to allow readers to find “Heart of Darkness” and that such a need reflects a change of emphasis, since its first publication, in the way readers receive this volume.

Also odd is Knowles differing valuing of Blackwood’s and Blackwood’s readers. As an editor he works to relieve Conrad of the firm’s house-style, its heavy punctuation in particular. Yet, in his Introduction (xxviii-xxxiv) he writes persuasively of the difficult, changing relationship with the publisher and with the readers of *Maga*, the publisher’s magazine, in ways which suggest that Blackwood had a shaping, creative role in Conrad’s writing. Hence, it seems odd to work, as an editor, to efface those relationships, however difficult. Questions thus arise. Is it possible to disentangle what Conrad wrote, or wanted to write, from the involvement of the publishing process? And, if it is possible, is such a disentangling desirable?

None the less Knowles produces a detailed and compelling case for his textual choices, a case that merits brief summary here. (Indeed, so scrupulous is the editorial practice that this reader has noticed only one possible error. Conrad’s first son, Borys, was born on 15 January 1898. Knowles quotes Conrad saying that *Youth* is “exactly a month younger

than Borys” and adds “and so belonging to mid-December 1897” (259). Should this not rather be mid-February 1898?)

The three tales were first published together in book form in England in 1902. Knowles argues that this book involved a further round of the publisher’s editorial corrections – in addition to the publisher’s prior intervention in the serial publication of all three tales – and that this weakens the case for the first book edition as copy-text for the Cambridge Edition. Knowles thus treats each tale on its own terms. In the case of *Youth* a manuscript and a single page of revised typescript survive. The manuscript, however, is a rough draft “casually and lightly punctuated” (305) and with narrative incidents – notably the spontaneous combustion aboard ship – underdeveloped. Hence, Knowles chooses the serial edition of “Youth” as copy-text, despite its having been subject to Blackwood’s house-style, with the single surviving page of typescript used to determine accidentals in the corresponding section of Cambridge text.

For *The End of the Tether* there is an incomplete surviving manuscript, but this is a rough draft and again is “lightly and casually punctuated” (307). Hence, Knowles again chooses the serial edition as copy-text, despite his seeing it as presenting difficulties similar to the serial edition of “Youth.” “Heart of Darkness” is the unusual and more complicated case. Two documents survive: a portion of revised typescript and an almost complete manuscript. Parts missing from the manuscript coincide with the early part of the tale recorded in the typescript. According to Knowles, the manuscript of “Heart of Darkness” is unusual for Conrad in being altogether more than a rough draft. For example, “its own more expressive types of punctuation are refreshingly light, and its sometimes unconventional use of dashes, commas, and semi-colons truer to the erratic rhythm of Marlow’s excited speaking voice than more formal systems of pointing” (307). The editor, then, produces a conflated text, adopting the typescript as copy-text for the tale’s first fifth, and the manuscript for the remainder. What results is a version of “Heart of Darkness” that, *as a whole*, has never before existed.

In emending his copy-texts Knowles legitimately draws upon the evidence of other variant texts of the tales. He incorporates later authorial revisions up to and including those made for the first English book edition of 1902. Other emendations address obvious errors and omissions and famous textual cruxes. The emendation that extends throughout the text, but most in evidence in the cases of *Youth* and *The End of the Tether*, is that of punctuation. Here the aim is “to ameliorate, if

only conservatively, the deleterious effect of an intrusive house-styling upon Conrad's generally sparer and sometimes unorthodox punctuation" (308). Decisions about punctuation are informed by an immersion in the evidence of punctuation in all surviving manuscripts and typescripts of Conrad's *Blackwood's* stories between 1898 and 1903; by scrutiny of the evidence of the publisher's copy-editor at work on the single page of surviving *Youth* typescript; and by a study of the publisher's copy-editor at work on a manuscript by Neil Munro at the same historical moment. The most immediately noticeable change from other texts of Conrad to be found in this Cambridge Edition is thus a welcome lightening of commas.

What this means is that, particularly in the case of the eclectic copy text of "Heart of Darkness" and of punctuation generally, the Cambridge Edition produces versions of Conrad's texts that, were the author alive today, he might find himself reading, albeit in respect of minutiae, for the first time. Yet Knowles's practice is more persuasive than his editorial policies and procedures when described in summary, in the abstract, and in general terms. A point has been made above to quote the editor's own words in respect of punctuation: when considered in general terms one might wonder how one differentiates between punctuation that is light, casual, and unsatisfactory, and punctuation that is light, idiosyncratic, and richly expressive, not least of Marlow's speaking voice. However, for this reader, the proof of the text is in the reading.

First, on the value of reading an edition where every textual decision is fully detailed and, where appropriate, argued: the textual apparatus accompanying this scholarly edition is commendably full and open and testimony to years of work that allow Knowles to speak of such textual matters with authority. But the value of the Cambridge Edition is to be found also in reading afresh Conrad's own tales in texts that move altogether more fluidly and rapidly, and where the reader's mind does not snag – as was so often the case with "Conrad" in the past – on seeming solecisms that send one off speculating about authorial idiosyncrasies or copy-editors' errors or curiosities of transmission.

Two examples must be allowed to adumbrate what we owe to Owen Knowles's editing. In "Heart of Darkness," Marlow sailing up the Congo, gradually realizes his boat is under attack: "I threw my head back to a glinting whizz...." The sentence, as previously encountered in texts of the tale, is undoubtedly odd with a word perhaps missing, and, for example, provoking conjecture over eye-skip over the letter *a* – "to avoid

a glinting whizz.” Knowles’s brilliant detective work has resolved this textual crux, not by finding straightforward textual evidence of the “correct” reading, but by showing how, in the haste of revising his own writing, Conrad had let his original word slip from his grasp:

90.27 **dodge]** ED OM **MS-** The awkwardly constructed sentence in MS ‘I threw my head back to a glinting whizz’ is the result of a slip during hasty revision. Conrad originally wrote ‘I dodged to’ and when revising to ‘threw my head back to’ failed to carry over the verb ‘dodge’. Such slips are common during his hasty composition, and here the cancelled manuscript version supplies the required verb. (423)

And so, in a way that does not distract the reader’s mind from the puzzling Congo incident to puzzle over the text, the Cambridge Edition now reads: “I threw my head back to dodge a glinting whizz...” (90).

The second example is of how Knowles lightens the punctuation around the direct speech of Charlie Marlow in accord with Conrad’s own practices. In most editions, following the practice of *Blackwood’s*, inverted commas introduce every paragraph of Marlow’s oral narration, with the result that the ubiquitousness of such marks blunts the reader’s attention. The Cambridge text restores Conrad’s own sparer practice, recording with double inverted commas, only the beginnings and endings of Marlow’s speeches. Owen Knowles intimates at various points in his edition his admiration for Marlow’s speaking voice: by a seeming minor alteration of accidentals this editor brings home more clearly to readers just how terrifying are those few moments when that voice breaks off or breaks down.

#### Works cited

- M. M. Bakhtin. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981.