

The Stricken Series: Cambridge University Press's Edition of the Literary Works of Joseph Conrad

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Cambridge University Press's vast project to produce authoritative new editions of the literary works of Joseph Conrad is now well advanced; but the project is flawed. As I argued in my review of *Victory* for *Conradiana*, this is the *Titanic* of editions: big, costly, important, and disastrous. In this article, I add further evidence to support my allegation.

With the exception of two volumes, *The Secret Agent* and *Lord Jim*, the immensely industrious and conscientious editors of the Cambridge series made a big mistake. They thought they knew better than Conrad. The Cambridge editors show that Conrad usually accepted, by choice or acquiescence, the house styling and corrections that various publishers imposed on his work (sometimes he saw the changes at the proof stage, sometimes he did not); but these editors think that, on the whole, he should not have accepted the changes. They have therefore deleted much house styling and correction: "successive layers of non-authorial intervention affecting wording and 'accidentals' – punctuation, spelling and word-division". (I quote p. 307 of the Cambridge edition of *Notes on Life and Letters*, ed. J. H. Stape with the assistance of Andrew Busza, 2002.) The result is a Conradian prose which is often impoverished and is sometimes even ungrammatical and uncouth.

I am well aware that the Cambridge editors have done invaluable work

in bringing to light Conradian words, phrases, sentences and even passages which otherwise would have been lost. To take a big example: an entire paragraph has been reinstated in “John Galsworthy: An Appreciation” in *Last Essays*. To take a tiny example: all previous book editions of *The Secret Agent* say that Verloc’s shop-front was “heaving with vague piles of cardboard boxes and the shapes of books”; but the Cambridge editors replace “heaving” with “gloomy”, for a typist had misread as “heaving” a word which, in Conrad’s hand-writing, is actually “gloomy”. Yes, I congratulate the editors on their immensely industrious scholarly detective-work. Nevertheless, I deplore what, all too often, they have done to Conrad’s style. My criteria are: logical clarity and rhetorical effectiveness.

In this essay, I look closely at several volumes in the Cambridge series, taking them in chronological order of publication. While doing so, I invite your cooperation.

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I mentioned two volumes which form the exception to my general strictures: *The Secret Agent*, edited by Bruce Harkness and S. W. Reid, assisted by Nancy Birk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and *Lord Jim / A Tale*, edited by J. H. Stape and Ernest W. Sullivan II (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). In the case of both these volumes, the editors found a paucity of manuscript and typescript material, and they were therefore obliged to make fewer departures from the historic house styling than is customary in the Cambridge series. *The Secret Agent* volume took as its “main basis” the first British edition, published in London by Methuen & Co. It therefore accepted much Methuen styling, though sometimes that styling was over-ruled. *The Lord Jim* volume took as copy-text the serial edition published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* from October 1899 to November 1900.

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I now consider in detail the Cambridge text of *Almayer's Folly*, edited by Floyd Eugene Eddleman and David Leon Higdon. It appeared in 1994. This edition, the editors explain, “restores phrases, sentences, and larger blocks of material cut from the 1921 and subsequent editions”, and it recovers from the manuscript material “omitted or otherwise botched by the original typists” (p. 198). That sounds admirable; but, I submit, Conrad’s style has often been marred. For the sake of concision, I concentrate on the first five chapters. I invite you to compare these two sequences, asking yourself which has the better English. (Page numbers appear in brackets.)

Sequence A:

- A1 (5-6) There was no tinge of gold on it this evening for it had been swollen by the rains and rolled an angry and muddy flood [...]
- A2 (16) “Did you ask him to come here father?” inquired Nina not looking at him.
- A3 (17) the incessant lightning disclosed a turmoil of leaping waters, driving logs and the big trees, bending before a brutal and merciless force.
- A4 (19) Perhaps had she known of the high walls, the quiet gardens and the silent nuns of the Samarang Convent, where her destiny was leading her she would have sought death [...]
- A5 (19) Those dreams of the future were dispelled by the Rajah Laut’s “fiat” which made Almayer’s fortune as that young man fondly hoped.
- A6 (24) He longed to see her and planned a voyage to Singapore but put off his departure from year to year always expecting some favourable turn of fortune.
- A7 (33) At that point she usually dropped the thread of her narrative and

pulling out the little brass cross, always suspended round her neck she contemplated it with superstitious awe.

A8 (37): The torchbearers shook their torches scattering a shower of sparks into the river and the cortege moved off leaving Almayer agitated [...]

A9 (41): “All what I have said is true and there is nothing more.”

A10 (43-4): His men filed off and he followed them quickly closely attended by a thick set, savage looking Sumatrese, he had introduced before as the commander of his brig.

A11 (47) Such were Babalatchi’s thoughts as he skilfully handled his paddle crossing the river on his way to the Rajah’s Kampong whose stockades showed from behind the dense foliage [...]

A12 (53): “You will overturn the boat Dain” – she whispered. –

Sequence B:

B1 (4): There was no tinge of gold on it this evening, for it had been swollen by the rains, and rolled an angry and muddy flood [...]

B2 (18): “Did you ask him to come here, father?” inquired Nina, not looking at him.

B3 (19): the incessant lightning disclosed a turmoil of leaping waters, driving logs, and the big trees bending before a brutal and merciless force.

B4 (22): Perhaps had she known of the high walls, the quiet gardens, and the silent nuns of the Samarang convent, where her destiny was leading her, she would have sought death [...]

B5 (23): Those dreams of the future were dispelled by the Rajah Laut’s “fiat,” which made Almayer’s fortune, as that young man fondly hoped.

B6 (29) He longed to see her, and planned a voyage to Singapore, but put off his departure from year to year, always expecting some favourable turn of fortune.

- B7 (41) At that point she usually dropped the thread of her narrative, and pulling out the little brass cross, always suspended round her neck, she contemplated it with superstitious awe.
- B8 (46) The torch-bearers shook their torches, scattering a shower of sparks into the river, and the cortege moved off, leaving Almayer agitated [...]
- B9 (52) “All that I have said is true, and there is nothing more.”
- B10 (56) His men filed off, and he followed them quickly, closely attended by a thick-set, savage-looking Sumatrese he had introduced before as the commander of his brig.
- B11 (61) Such were Babalatchi’s thoughts as he skilfully handled his paddle, crossing the river on his way to the Rajah’s campong, whose stockades showed from behind the dense foliage [...]
- B12 (69) “You will overturn the boat, Dain,” she whispered.

Sequence B is obviously superior. Its extracts are taken from the 1923 text of *Almayer’s Folly and Tales of Unrest*, part of the “Uniform Edition” of J. M. Dent & Sons, London and Toronto. (The text of the extracts is identical in the “Collected Edition” of *Almayer’s Folly* published by Dent in 1947.) The frequent fault of the Cambridge text is that too much punctuation has been removed: usually too many commas are absent. I emphasise that the Cambridge samples are only a small selection; a full list of apparent flaws would fill pages.

Consider A1: the lack of commas invites a rapid, even gabbled, reading, whereas the regular punctuation of B1 invites a slower, steady reading. B2 is correctly punctuated; A2 is not: indeed, A2 looks like a young person’s English test, the teacher’s injunction being: “Insert punctuation to render this passage grammatical”.

Inexcusably, A3 is wrongly punctuated, and there is no doubt about it. The second comma is wrongly placed, giving the false impression that the “turmoil of leaping waters” is “driving big trees” and is, peculiarly,

“bending before a brutal and merciless force”. The correct punctuation of B3 makes clear that while the turmoil of leaping waters is driving logs, the big trees are bending before a brutal and merciless force, the “furious blast of wind” mentioned earlier in the paragraph.

In A4, the absence of a comma after “leading her” is clearly erroneous, as it leads to the false sense “She would have sought death where her destiny was leading her”. The correct punctuation of B4 yields the appropriate sense. A5 is inadequately punctuated; B5 is correctly punctuated. In A6, the absence of commas invites a hasty reading; the commas of B6 restore dignity to the prose. A7 is so inadequately punctuated that the reader must mentally supply punctuation, resulting in phrasing like that provided in B7. In A8, the absence of commas renders the prose uncouth. In A9 we find more uncouthness: deferring to the manuscript, the editors have preserved the obviously bad grammar of “All what I have said”. Furthermore, a necessary comma is missing. A10 obviously needs a comma between “quickly” and “closely”, and the comma after “Sumatrese” is grammatically wrong. A11, under-punctuated, invites a hasty reading; the punctuation of B11 restores dignity. B12 is obviously more dignified than A12.

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The ensuing item in my survey is a much shorter piece, “A Familiar Preface” to *A Personal Record*.

Sequence A:

A1 (12) Almost all friendships of the writing period of my life have come to me through my books and I know that a novelist lives in his work. He stands there the only reality in an invented world amongst imaginary things, happenings and people.

A2 (13) removed by great distances from such natural affections as were

still left to me and even estranged in a measure from them by the totally unintelligible character of the life which had seduced me so mysteriously from my allegiance I may safely say that through the blind force of circumstances the sea was to be all my world and the Merchant Service my only home for a long succession of years. No wonder than that in my two exclusively sea-books “The Nigger of the Narcissus” and “The Mirror of the Sea” [...]

A3 (14) should the open display of emotion fail to move then it must perish [...]

A4 (14) In a task which mainly consists in laying one’s soul more or less bare to the world a regard for decency even at the cost of success is but the regard for one’s own dignity [...]

A5 (17) No doubt one should smile at these things; but imperfect Esthete I am no better Philosopher.

Sequence B:

B1 (xv) Most, almost all, friendships of the writing period of my life have come to me through my books; and I know that novelist lives in his work. He stands there, the only reality in an invented world, among imaginary things, happenings, and people.

B2 (xvi) removed by great distances from such natural affections as were still left to me, and even estranged, in a measure, from them by the totally unintelligible character of the life which had seduced me so mysteriously from my allegiance, I may safely say that through the blind force of circumstances the sea was to be all my world and the merchant service my only home for a long succession of years. No wonder then that in my two exclusively sea books, “The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” and “The Mirror of the Sea” [...]

B3 (xviii) should the open display of emotion fail to move, then it must perish [...]

B4 (xviii) In a task which mainly consists in laying one’s soul more or

less bare to the world, a regard for decency, even at the cost of success, is but the regard for one's own dignity [...]

B5 (xxii) No doubt one should smile at these things; but, imperfect Esthete, I am no better Philosopher.

Sequence A is taken from *A Personal Record*, edited by Zdzisław Najder and J. H. Stape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Sequence B is taken from the 'Uniform Edition' of *A Personal Record*: London and Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1923. On the whole, the Cambridge text omits too many punctuation-marks.

The heavier Dent punctuation gives extract B1 a dignity lacking to A1. In A2 the lack of punctuation denies the reader the breathing-space provided by B2's commas. The hyphen in A2's "my two exclusively sea-books" is obviously wrong; the correct meaning ("my two books exclusively concerned with the sea") is made clear by B2's lack of a hyphen in "my two exclusively sea books".

In A3, the lack of a comma may lead the reader to the incorrect sense, "fail to move at that time"; the comma of B3 removes the unwanted ambiguity. In A4, the lack of punctuation solicits a gabbled reading; in B4 the punctuation restores a slower pace, and indeed dignity, to the wording. B5 has poise and dignity absent from A5.

5

The next item is *Heart of Darkness*. The two sequences are taken from what, in traditional texts, is Part I, following the division initiated by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.

Sequence A:

A1 (44) Only the gloom to the west brooding over the upper reaches became more sombre every minute as if angered by the approach of

the sun.

A2 (48) The North Pole was one of those places I remember.

A3 (51) the compassionate secretary who full of desolation and sympathy made me sign some document.

A4 (52) Rather surprised, I said Yes when he produced a thing like callipers [...]

A5 (53) I was going to take charge of a two pence halfpenny river steamboat [...]

A6 (54) The idleness of a passenger [...] seemed to keep me away from the truth of things within the toils of a mournful and senseless delusion.

A7 (57) one of the reclaimed [...] strolled despondently carrying a rifle by its middle.

A8 (57) He had a uniform jacket with one button off and seeing a white man on the path hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity.

A9 (57) He was speedily reassured and with a large, white, rascally grin and a glance at his charge seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust.

A10 (58) a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs which died out slowly.

A11 (59) While I stood horror struck one of these creatures rose to his hands and knees and went off on all fours towards the river to drink.

A12 (60) It was built of horizontal planks and so badly put together that as he bent over his high desk he was barred from neck to heels with narrow strips of sunlight.

A13 (62) Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep unless the body of a middle-aged negro with a bullet-hole in the forehead upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles further on may be considered as a permanent improvement.

A14 (62) White men with long staves in their hands appeared languidly from amongst the buildings strolling up to take a look at me and then

retired out of sight somewhere.

A15 (67) Then I noticed a small sketch in oils on a panel representing a woman draped and blindfolded carrying a lighted torch.

A16 (68) the indefatigable man with the moustaches appearing near us.

A17 (68) I could poke my forefinger through him and find nothing inside but a little loose dirt may be.

Sequence B:

B1 (46) Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun.

B2 (52) The North Pole was one of those places, I remember.

B3 (56) the compassionate secretary, who, full of desolation and sympathy, made me sign some document.

B4 (57-8) Rather surprised, I said Yes, when he produced a thing like calipers [...]

B5 (59) I was going to take charge of a two-penny-half-penny river-steamboat [...]

B6 (61) The idleness of a passenger [...] seemed to keep me away from the truth of things, within the toil of a mournful and senseless delusion.

B7 (64) one of the reclaimed [...] strolled despondently, carrying a rifle by its middle.

B8 (64) He had a uniform jacket with one button off, and seeing a white man on the path, hoisted his weapon to his shoulder with alacrity.

B9 (65) He was speedily reassured, and with a large, white, rascally grin, and a glance at his charge, seemed to take me into partnership in his exalted trust.

B10 (66) a kind of blind, white flicker in the depths of the orbs, which died out slowly.

B11 (67) While I stood horror-struck, one of these creatures rose to his

- hands and knees, and went off on all-fours towards the river to drink.
- B12 (68) It was built of horizontal planks, and so badly put together that, as he bent over his high desk, he was barred from neck to heels with narrow strips of sunlight.
- B13 (71) Can't say I saw any road or any upkeep, unless the body of a middle-aged negro, with a bullet-hole in the forehead, upon which I absolutely stumbled three miles farther on, may be considered as a permanent improvement.
- B14 (72) White men with long staves in their hands appeared languidly from amongst the buildings, strolling up to take a look at me, and then retired out of sight somewhere.
- B15 (79) Then I noticed a small sketch in oils, on a panel, representing a woman, draped and blindfolded, carrying a lighted torch.
- B16 (80) the indefatigable man with the moustaches, appearing near us.
- B17 (81) I could poke my forefinger through him, and would find nothing inside but a little loose dirt, maybe.

Sequence A is taken from *Youth / Heart of Darkness / The End of the Tether*, edited by Owen Knowles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Sequence B is taken from the "Uniform Edition" text of *Youth / A Narrative / and Two Other Stories* (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1923).

In general, you will perceive that the heavier punctuation of Sequence B gives to the prose the clarity, dignity and precision lacking in Sequence A. Items B1, B3, B6, B8, B9, B11, B12, B13, B14 and B15 make this point. In B2 the comma removes an unwanted ambiguity: it makes clear that Marlow remembers that the North Pole was one of those places, whereas A2 may suggest incorrectly that the North Pole was one of those places that he remembers. In B4, the comma after "Yes" makes clear that the "when" has the meaning "whereupon" or "after which"; whereas A4, lacking that comma, permits the incorrect meaning "I said Yes after he

produced a thing”. B5’s “two-penny-halfpenny” invites the correct colloquial pronunciation, which was “*tupp-nee-hape-nee*” (I remember it well: it means “cheap and of poor quality”). A5’s “two pence halfpenny” removes the colloquialism; furthermore the absence of a hyphen linking “river” and “steamboat” may even solicit briefly the false notion that the river and not the steamboat is “two pence halfpenny”. In A6, the absence of a comma after “things” may give the erroneous impression that the truth of things may lie within “a mournful and senseless delusion”, whereas the comma of B6 shows that “the mournful and senseless delusion” holds Marlow away from the truth of things.

A7 permits the false reading that the man is “carrying the rifle despondently”, whereas B7 shows that he strolled despondently while carrying the rifle. A10 permits the incorrect reading, “the orbs died out slowly”, but B10 isolates the correct reading: the “flicker [...] died out slowly”. A15 invites the false reading “a panel representing a woman”; B15 makes clear that the sketch represents a woman. B16 shows that it’s the man (and not the moustaches) “appearing near us”. A17 may briefly permit the misreading “a little loose dirt may be inside”; B17 makes clear that “perhaps (maybe) there is nothing inside but a little loose dirt”. Repeatedly the strong punctuation of Sequence B clarifies meanings that the weak punctuation of Sequence A obscures.

6

The final comparison employs *An Outcast of the Islands* as its basis. Extracts have been taken only from the first four chapters.

Sequence A:

A1 (13) a thing of no moment to be done unwillingly yet neatly and to be quickly forgotten.

A2 (21) After [...] he rescued, as rumour had it, the yacht of some big wig

from home, somewhere down Carimata way his great popularity began.

A3 (23) The straitened circumstances in the house filled with small brothers and sisters sufficiently clothed and fed but otherwise running wild while the disconsolate widower tramped about all day in a shabby overcoat and imperfect boots on the muddy quays and in the evening piloted wearily the half-intoxicated foreign skippers [...]

A4 (25) “You can’t make him drunk,” he would add after a pause of stertorous breathing.

A5 (28) Could there be anything worse from the point of view of his undeniable cleverness.

A6 (30) His gaze travelled upwards from bow to bow noticing those that hung only by a thread but it did not go beyond her chin.

A7 (30) He had guarded her carefully from any bodily hurt and of any other suffering he had no conception.

A8 (32) “[...] Is this a madhouse.”

A9 (34) What else could he do.

A10 (34) he had lost his faith, the faith in his own success and he had destroyed it foolishly with his own hands.

A11 (35) “[...] You keep quiet while I talk. Can’t you!”

A12 (35) Willems submitted to the stronger will and the two men paced slowly up and down the resounding planks while Lingard disclosed to Willems the exact manner of his undoing.

A13 (39) Just as Lingard was beginning to fear that he would be unable to restrain much longer the violence of the younger man he felt Willems’ muscles relaxing and took advantage of this opportunity to pin him by a last effort to the rail.

A14 (39) He had the comfortable conviction that he would never see her again and that through her own fault only.

A15 (42) He blew the light out and stepping into the boat stretched quickly his hand towards Willems with friendly care.

A16 (42) The boat went off again to bring back the messenger and as soon as it was seen returning dark forms appeared on the brig's spars and the sails fell in festoons with a swish of their heavy folds and hung motionless under the yards [...]

Sequence B:

B1 (3) a thing of no moment, to be done unwillingly, yet neatly, and to be quickly forgotten.

B2 (15) After [...] he rescued, as rumour had it, the yacht of some big wig from home, somewhere down Carimata way, his great popularity began.

B3 (17-18) The straitened circumstances in the house filled with small brothers and sisters, sufficiently clothed and fed but otherwise running wild, while the disconsolate widower tramped about all day in a shabby overcoat and imperfect boots on the muddy quays, and in the evening piloted wearily the half-intoxicated foreign skippers [...]

B4 (20) "You can't make him drunk?" he would add, after a pause of stertorous breathing.

B5 (24) Could there be anything worse from the point of view of his undeniable cleverness?

B6 (26) His gaze travelled upwards from bow to bow, noticing those that hung only by a thread, but it did not go beyond her chin.

B7 (27) He had guarded her carefully from any bodily hurt; and of any other suffering he had no conception.

B8 (29) "[...] Is this a madhouse?"

B9 (32) What else could he do?

B10 (33) he had lost his faith, the faith in his own success. And he had destroyed it foolishly with his own hands!

B11 (35) "[...] You keep quiet while I talk. Can't you?"

B12 (35) Willems submitted to the stronger will, and the two men paced slowly up and down the resounding planks, while Lingard disclosed to

Willems the exact manner of his undoing.

B13 (41) Just as Lingard was beginning to fear that he would be unable to restrain much longer the violence of the younger man, he felt Willems' muscles relaxing, and took advantage of this opportunity to pin him, by a last effort, to the rail.

B14 (41) He had the comfortable conviction that he would never see her again, and that through her own fault only.

B15 (44-5) He blew the light out, and, stepping into the boat, stretched quickly his hand towards Willems, with friendly care.

B16 (45) The boat went off again to bring back the messenger. As soon as it was seen returning dark forms appeared on the brig's spars; then the sails fell in festoons with a swish of their heavy folds, and hung motionless under the yards [...]

Sequence A is taken from *An Outcast of the Islands*, edited by Allan H. Simmons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Sequence B is taken the first British edition of *An Outcast of the Islands*, published by T. Fisher Unwin of London in 1896. (This contained material excised from subsequent editions. Early reviewers complained that the novel was prolix.)

A1 and A3 are simply uncouth, for want of the punctuation supplied in B1 and B3. A2 is erroneously punctuated, confusing the sense. B3 is correctly punctuated and clarifies the sense. A4 presents as a statement what (as the context shows) is a question, correctly rendered in B4; and A5, A8 and A9 are similarly at fault in presenting questions as statements. A11 presents a question as an exclamation. B6 and B7 clarify the sense which is confused by the lack of punctuation in A6 and A7. B10 is clear and amply emphatic, whereas A10, being under-punctuated and unemphatic, weakens the prose. A12, A13, A15 and A16 are uncouthly under-punctuated, as B12, B13, B15 and B16 show. In A14 the lack of a comma confuses the grammar. I rest my case.

7

To conclude. For a long time, there has been a division between editors who believe that publishers provide a necessary service to authors, and editors who believe that generally, even when well-meaning, publishers tend to mar the authorial work. The former usually choose published editions as copy-texts, and sometimes prefer revised editions; the latter almost always choose manuscripts or other pre-publication forms, either as copy-texts or as significant sources of correctives to published versions. My position obviously reconciles both. I believe that the Cambridge editors were quite correct to see what pre-publication forms yielded, but they should have given more consideration to what was then contributed by the publishers.

What is needed now is a new edition of Conrad's literary works which not only includes the new textual matter admirably revealed by the Cambridge editors but also restores to the prose the dignity and lucidity which, at times, have unfortunately been removed by those editors.

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