

REVIEW

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The Collected Letters of Joseph Conrad

Volume 8: 1923-1924,

edited by Laurence Davies and Gene M. Moore.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

lxxii + 426 pp. £90/\$180

Volume 9: Uncollected Letters and Indexes,

edited by Laurence Davies, Owen Knowles,

Gene M. Moore, and J. H. Stape.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

xlvi + 373 pp. £90/\$180

Available as a 9-volume set 5,700 pp. £750 / \$1,475

AS THE WAD of unread pages of a novel becomes thinner and thinner we know that we are heading for an ending if not a conclusion. But we also know that the ending can be one of many varieties: marriage, death, escape, return to quotidian dullness, or a post-modern denial of closure. Reading the final volume of an individual's collected letters we know, alas, that there is only one conclusion – death. It is impossible to read Volume 8 of Conrad's letters without a constant awareness of this inevitable conclusion. But that volume is not the final one of *The Collected Letters*: Volume 9 includes newly discovered or newly available letters not in earlier volumes, new texts of letters published in previous volumes from texts other than holographs, a revised corrigenda and addenda for Volumes 1–7, and a consolidated Index. But it is Volume 8 over which the shadow of impending death falls, darkening even the most light-hearted of the letters.

And there *are* light-hearted letters here, ones reminding us that Conrad can be witty, ironic, facetious, leg-pulling, and just downright funny. Here for example is Conrad writing to Christopher Morley about his planned trip to the United States. “The truth is that event is on the knees of the Gods – a notably insecure place. Last time I made up my mind to come over they could think of nothing but starting a world war. They have no sense of proportion. It was squashing a fly with a steam-hammer” (5 February 1923; *CL8* 21). And here is a wonderful postscript added to a letter Conrad wrote to Eric S. Pinker (whose father had died in 1922 and left his son to carry on his business), just a couple of months before his death: “Do you know Watts is sending out a new ed (1924) of Letters to Watts. That’s all right – but why should he send a copy to *me*? Never done it before! Anyhow the collection reminds me of the bundle of testimonials the washermen used to bring on board ships arriving in Calcutta – quite as numerous and nearly as glowing” (22 May 1924; *CL8* 360-61). Even the familiar Conradian misery can be couched in a self-deprecatory, mocking tone. Writing to Hugh Walpole Conrad reports on a visit from Borys and wife, the former suffering from a cold or flu, and complains:

Jessie came out strong a[s] usual. I remained crocky, groggy tottery, staggering, shuddery shivery, seedy, gouty, sorry wretch that I am.

What is the most terrible is that the animal still keeps going and even cuts small jokes and expects his family to laugh at them.
(19 November 1923; *CL8* 220)

Which is reality, which appearance here? Is Conrad a man riddled with concealed sickness and depression who puts a brave face on things and cracks jokes to his family, or a man able of laughing at his miserable state by displaying his complaints in the absurdly extended list he provides for Walpole? Or is he, perhaps, both? Writing again to Eric Pinker, Conrad notes in an aside: “I am recovering my balance too. – I mean the mental – not banking” (16 June 1924; *CL8* 387). Eric Pinker may have been able to raise more of a smile in response to the quip than his father would have done fifteen years earlier, when Conrad’s banking balance was very much a matter of what is now known euphemistically as “negative equity.”

Volume 8 includes two particularly charming letters to young children. One to the then twelve-year-old Veronica Wedgwood regales its recipient with an absurd tale of a Corsican driver of a horse and trap

and asks her with tongue in cheek whether Cook's people ever showed her a vendetta (31 March 1923; 65-66). The other, to the eleven-year-old Lorna Watson, develops a conceit about the extreme heat that includes reference to a wagtail hardly able to put one foot before the other and dragging his tail behind him (15 July 1923; 133-34). Why, we may wonder, is there nothing like this in the fiction? Conrad's novels and short stories contain so few children, and the writer's pleasure in their company, testified to not only by his letters but also by the accounts of others, seems to have had little or no serious impact on his fiction.

Generally speaking, Conrad seems to have reserved his most facetiously playful tone for letters to children and women; to men he can be witty and ironic, but the ludic quality increases with other recipients. Here is the bulk of a letter to Florence Doubleday, wife of the publisher:

F. N. D.'s letter just arrived. Will you O Gracious Lady of the Hill tell the Powerful Lord, Your husband that this toothless and insignificant person – he who writes these words – can not possibly object to his hideous countenance (limned by an Incomparable Artist) being imprinted on various books as suggested.

But Oh! I am grieved that the I. A. [?]. has failed with Effendi.

The sands are running out – the post is going – the fleet messenger waits. (30 July 1923; *CL* 8 144)

The language mimics an assumed "Oriental" way of expressing oneself, a style developed, refined, and given wide currency by Ernest Bramah's "Kai Lung" stories. It would be nice to know whether Conrad had read Bramah, or whether the pastiche has its origins elsewhere. Volume 9 includes a much earlier letter to E. L. Sanderson, written nearly thirty years before, which seems to adopt a related style or register for the purpose not of mockery but of stressing the writer's solemn support of Sanderson's intention to propose marriage to the rather younger Helen Watson.

I am delighted with Your resolve. May propitious Fates attend you on your journey and may You begin it with favourable omens. I think anxiously about all this. I do not wish to argue you away from conscientious scruples – to combat hesitations that are caused not by unworthy and selfish considerations but by a serious sense of duty. Yet, I, standing a

little way off have the presumption to think that I see things in a more true perspective. (4 October 1896; *CL9* 35)

1896 is too early for the style to come from Bramah, whose first Kai Lung story was published in 1900, and anyway the pastiche here seems closer to the speech of Conrad's Muslim characters than to the Chinese stereotype of the letter to Mrs Doubleday. It is, however, striking to note how Conrad can slip in to this pseudo-Orientalist style while offering sincere advice upon a highly charged topic to the devoutly Christian Ted Sanderson.

Conradians interested in narrative technique will doubtless be given pause by the last sentence in the passage just quoted. How many times does Conrad's fiction present us with a narrator who, like Conrad himself here, is anxiously involved with the fates of those whose lives and actions are recounted, but who, none the less, by "standing a little way off" is able to "see things in a more true perspective"! One of the things these two volumes of letters confirm is that for all that Conrad professed himself ignorant about his own work, he actually has a sophisticated understanding of certain central literary-critical distinctions. The profession of ignorance is made bluntly in a letter to the Swedish critic Ernest P. Bendz:

Apart from the natural gratification one finds in meeting with such admirably expressed sympathy, I followed your analysis with no little curiosity. It is interesting to learn about one's self from a judge for whose attainments one can not but have a sincere respect. I will confess to you frankly that I do not know much about my own work. I can not defend myself from the suspicion that you make perhaps too much of its merits, while I see with profound satisfaction that you never question its absolute sincerity, both in its qualities and in its defects.

(7 March 1923; *CL8* 37)

Volume 8's editors are guilty of a rare slip here: the letter is described as "unpublished," but it is included in G. Jean-Aubry's *Joseph Conrad: Life and Letters*, II, 295–96, where, however, it lacks its final paragraph and renders the penultimate one as follows: "It is very obvious that I don't possess the English language in any exceptional way; but that is no reason to doubt my sincerity when I say that it has possessed and even shaped my thoughts. Idiomatically I am never at fault, and it is absolutely true that if I had not written in English I would

not have written at all.” The *Collected Letters* text has “an” rather than “any,” which rather lessens the excessive modesty of Conrad’s claim.

Conrad’s “confession” that he knows little about his own work can be set alongside his claim to F. N. Doubleday that “every volume of my short stories has a unity of artistic purpose, a mood of feeling and expression, which makes it different from every other.” That sentence ends one paragraph. The following opens: “Authors have many strange illusions about themselves; but I think that what I say would be visible to critical judgement, and even could be felt as a mere impression” (7 February 1924; *CL* 8 300). Here the distinction between the illusions that authors have about themselves and what is “visible to critical judgement” places Conrad in a line of critics and aestheticians ranging from Plato to W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley – and beyond.

Even if Conrad may claim that he does not know much about his work, then, he clearly knows a hawk from a handsaw and is well able to recognize biography passed off as literary criticism. Writing to Richard Curle, he points out the difference firmly:

After all, I may have been a seaman, but I am a writer of prose. Indeed, the nature of my writing runs the risk of being obscured by the nature of my material. ... That the connection of my ships with my writings stands, with my concurrence I admit, recorded in your book is of course a fact. But that was biographical matter, not literary. And where it stands it can do no harm.
(14 July 1923; *CL* 8 130)

Conradians have reason to be grateful to Curle, who regularly played the Boswell to Conrad’s Johnson and prompted a number of irritated but extremely valuable comments from the novelist.

Very shortly before his death, in a letter to Doubleday, Conrad refers to a two-and-a-half-page discussion of *The Rover* in *The Dial*:

I must confess that I have been extremely interested by what the critic, (Gilbert Seldes) was moved to say. I have seldom met two pages and a half of print that contained so much in the way of insight, comprehension, and I may add also misunderstanding; in addition to subtle feeling (all of a most intelligent kind). I feel half inclined to write a letter to the editor, but I have never answered any criticism in my life, so far, and I am loth to break the rule. Moreover I think that an author who tries to “explain” is exposing himself to a very great risk – the risk of confessing himself a failure. For a work of art should speak for itself. Yet

much could be said on the other side; for it is also clear that a work of art is not a logical demonstration carrying its intention on the face of it. (2 June 1924; *CL8* 373-74)

In Volume 9, a letter to S. S. Pawling written right at the start of Conrad's literary career is less nuanced and more irritated: "No! I can't concoct a wily paragraph. You must excuse me. All I had to say *about* the story I've said *in* the story" (2 June 1897; 49). Twenty seven years later Conrad remains unwilling to take off the cap of the writer and put on that of critic, while admitting that he has been tempted to do so and that "much could be said on the other side."

Another letter in Volume 8, to Eric Pinker, again reveals a sophisticated and subtle understanding of literary aesthetics in its comparison of literary art to the art of the film-maker. Conrad reports having

... sketched out the outlines of a lecture, or rather of a familiar talk, on the (apparently) extravagant lines: of the imaginative literary art being based fundamentally on scenic motion, like a cinema; with this addition that for certain purposes the artist is a much more subtle and complicated machine than a camera, and with a wider range, if in the visual effects less precise – and so on, and so on, for an hour; with a mixture of jocularity and intense seriousness, (which *may* do). (9 April 1923; 74)

Our pleasure at having this letter must be tempered by our regret at not being able to read or to hear the lecture!

That said, Conrad was by all accounts not an accomplished lecturer and confesses to the American lawyer and educator Robert Maynard Hutchins: "As to addressing an audience great or small! Well you can't teach new tricks to an old dog – and especially a sea-dog. I can yet talk with people – and even with young people; but talk *to* people is a trick I have never learned, and I shrink from performing it" (7 May 1923; *CL8* 92).

Again the comment strikes chords with those fascinated by the varied narrative techniques of Conrad's fictions. In the long letter to Richard Curle already quoted, Conrad again draws a contrastive analogy with an aspect of technological modernity in order to dispute a critic's claim that "there was no difference in method or character between my fiction and my professedly autobiographical matter, as evidenced in the 'Personal Record'":

My own impression is that what he really meant was that my manner of telling, perfectly devoid of familiarity as between author and reader, aimed essentially at the intimacy of a personal communication, without any thought for other effects. As a matter of fact the thought for effects is there all the same, (often at the cost of mere directness of narrative) and can be detected in my unconventional grouping and perspective, which are purely temperamental and wherein almost all my “art” consists. That, I suspect, has been the difficulty the critics felt in classifying it as romantic or realist. Whereas, as a matter of fact, it is fluid, depending on grouping (sequence) which shifts, and on the changing lights giving varied effects of perspective.

It is in those matters gradually, but never completely, mastered that the history of my books really consists. Of course the plastic matter of this grouping and of those lights has its importance, since without it the actuality of that grouping and that lighting could not be made evident any more than Marconi’s electric waves could be made evident without the sending-out and receiving instruments. In other words, without mankind my art, an infinitesimal thing, could not exist.

(14 July 1923; *CL8* 131)

Intimacy (but not familiarity) between author and reader (talking *with* but not *to* again, perhaps?), unconventional grouping and perspective, fluidity, shifting grouping and sequence, and finally “sending-out and receiving instruments” – this is narratological analysis of an extremely high degree of sophistication. Incidentally, so far as the receiving instrument of the reader is concerned, Volume 9 contains a second letter testifying to Conrad’s commitment to his belief in the essential contribution made by the reader’s creativity to the reading of a work of literature. To Nita B. Wall, Conrad writes: “Therefore I thank You for Your letter with perfect gratitude which is the more great because I know very well that only half of the book comes from the hand of the author – the other half is only to be found in the heart of some rare and precious reader” (22 March 1896; 25). A year later, Conrad repeats this belief to Cunninghame Graham (*CLI* 370).

So far as film and the cinema are concerned, Conrad is not altogether consistent. He had clearly seen enough films to be able to compare the “scenic motion” of the cinema with that of the writer, but in correspondence with Eric Pinker displays a sternly disapproving view of the new medium: “If we are going ever to get a share of that repulsive

cinema-swindle which is being rammed down the public throat, let us at least make it as big as possible" (CL8 207). This letter is dated 23 October 1923; three days earlier Conrad had suggested to Pinker that they wait four or five months before selling film rights to his fiction, as by that time *The Rover's* success should have increased their market value.

Many commentators have drawn attention to Conrad's inability to match his expenditure to his income, but this (quite correct) observation needs to be set against the writer's increasing skill at making as much money as possible from his work. A letter to Gordon Gardiner, for example, notes with regard to periodical publication that "The more obscure the periodical (providing it can pay something worth while) the better it is, in a way, from the point of view of eventual publication in book form" (29 July 1923; CL8 143). And in a letter to Aniela Zagórska, Conrad notes of his forthcoming trip to the USA that "in preparing to leave for America" he is poking his nose where he shouldn't: "But it's of course for the sake of my wife and children – to improve the state of my affairs" (11 April 1923; CL8 79).

And that takes us to Jessie. Generally speaking, Conradians are a peaceable lot and like to pat themselves on the collective back for the fact that their national associations have not been riven with feuds in the manner of certain other single-author associations. The subject that comes nearest to getting the adrenalin pumping and voices and hackles raised is that of Conrad's wife. Even before Virginia Woolf's description of her in a diary entry of 23 June 1920 as Conrad's "lump of a wife," debate has raged about Jessie and her marriage with Conrad. Some of the negative comments seem to me almost as extraordinary as the fact that they have not been more roundly condemned. (I have in mind those that sneer at her class origins and that comment on her obesity and progressively more crippled condition.)

These two volumes of letters will probably not close this debate, but they do contain what, for the pro-Jessie/anti-Woolf faction, must be deemed strong evidence for the defence. Volume 9 contains Conrad's letter to E. B. Redmayne in which he tells his correspondent about his wife-to-be: "I have known the girl for the last two years. She is a person rather in humble life – not pretty but very intelligent and with great qualities of heart. She is one of a numerous family and since the sudden death of the father had been helping the household by working at type-writing in the City" (23 February 1896; 23). Photographs from around this time suggest that Jessie was far from ugly, although such matters are subject to shifts of cultural and historical (not to mention gender)

convention and subjective valuation. Not enough attention has been paid to Conrad's insistence that she was not just intelligent but *very* intelligent and with "great qualities of heart." Even her defenders have rarely directed attention to her intelligence, but Conrad's frankness about her social rank and appearance make it unlikely that he would be claiming an intelligence in which he did not believe.

Intelligence can be of difference sorts. The sort that makes one a world champion of chess or a Nobel prize winner in physics does not necessarily guarantee that one is possessed of what is now termed "social intelligence" (rather the reverse, one sometimes suspects). But there is weighty evidence that Jessie was possessed of considerable social intelligence – not of the sort to impress Virginia Woolf, whose own undoubted intelligence was on occasion vitiated by class prejudice of the crudest sort – but intelligence none the less. Jessie's decision not to tell her husband of their son Borys's secret marriage is a good example of it. Had Conrad known of the marriage he would almost certainly have called off his trip to the United States, as Jessie realized. By the time that he learned of it, the marriage was no longer so recent as to allow Conrad to react to it in an excessively negative fashion.

The letters Conrad sent to Jessie after he left for America and up to his return are frequent and moving. They make it crystal-clear that the two of them utterly hated being apart from each other. And it is not only Conrad's letters to his wife that justify such a view. Writing to his wife's physician, Sir Robert Jones, Conrad confesses: "It is an immense comfort to me to think that you will see Jessie the day after my departure. I think she will miss me – and I know that I shall feel like a lost sheep without her. I believe that there are many people ready to take care of me on the other side, but no number of them could make up for her absence" (19 April 1923; *CL8* 83).

As with the letter from 1896, there is no reason why Conrad would have felt obliged to say such things to Jones had he not meant them sincerely. In the year of his death, in a letter to both of the Doubledays, Conrad mentions the possibility of a trip to warmer climes. "Going south is not necessary, though it might do good upon the whole. But taking Jessie away from the surgeons who know all about her is not to be thought of; and going away without her would do no good either to her or to me" (7 January 1924; *CL8* 262). What possible reason would Conrad have for writing this if the sentiment did not come from his heart?

What more? Well, lots. Even though the period covered by Volume 8 is not one in which Conrad produced any great fiction, the letters are full of gems. Whether Conrad's life as a writer can be divided between "achievement and decline" is a matter for continued debate, but as a letter-writer there is, right up to the end, no decline. It is interesting to see how letters about his work may elicit only polite, short replies, while a letter from Captain Arthur W. Phillips, who served in the *Torrens*, inspires Conrad to dictate a letter that falls just short of two printed pages and that addresses his "fellow seaman" with great friendliness (12 January 1924; *CL8* 271). Discussions of Conrad's religious commitment will need to note the letter to Gordon Gardiner, in which he declines to become a member of the National Club as the club's rules refer to the need to maintain the Protestant reformed faith (the editors' helpful note provides chapter and verse), while Conrad observes that "I was born a R[oman] C[atholic], and though dogma sits lightly on me I have never renounced that form of Christian religion" (8 October 1923; *CL8* 190).

The editing of these volumes is, like that of their predecessors, impeccable. The footnotes are like icebergs: what we see at the foot of the page must be tiny in size in contrast to the immense labour and scholarly skill required to produce it. There are important re-datings of already published letters; earlier mis-identifications of persons mentioned in letters are corrected; and much additional information is produced.

To return briefly to the subject of Jessie Conrad, for example, a footnote to Conrad's letter to E. B. Redmayne of 23 February 1896 from which I quote above suggests on the basis of careful research that Jessie was not, as has been widely believed, a typist (or "typewriter" as the occupation was then termed), but a worker in a company that made typewriters (*CL9* 23 n. 2). Conrad's description of her, quoted above, "working at type-writing in the City" may indeed now strike the suspicious-minded as perhaps deliberately ambiguous in the light of this information. Who cares? Well, we should. First, because it suggests that Jessie's social rank was humbler than previously reported, and, secondly, because it means that the typescripts of Conrad's own work produced by his wife were not, as hitherto believed, typed by a professional, which has several implications about their accuracy.

I have one query regarding a note, which, given the editors' scrupulousness and erudition, I present with much the same sort of confidence I would exhibit were I facing the prospect of a round in the

ring with George Forman. But here goes. A letter to Hugh Walpole opens as follows. “Thanks for yours of congratulation and condolence (nicely dosed) upon the N York sale stunt. It’s puffectly ridic’lous. But – I didn’t laugh. On the other hand I didn’t curse. I lay low and did nuffink” (18 November 1923; CL8 219). The editors link “puffectly ridic’lous” to Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which includes the line: “Who ever heard of a state prisoner escaping by a hickry bark ladder? Why, it’s perfectly ridiculous.” This is a reasonable suggestion. But “I lay low and did nuffink” is surely a borrowing from Joel Chandler Harris’s Brer Rabbit stories. The editors note that “nuffink” is “pure stage Cockney,” but a footnote to a subsequent letter from Conrad to F. N. Doubleday on 20 November 1923, glosses the line “Did Quinn enjoy his triumph lying low like Brer Rabbit ...?” (CL8 223) with a reference to Chandler’s work. This gloss should surely be extended to the letter of 18 November.

A final small pleasure. Who, we may now ask learned friends, wrote the line, “The passage was good; but travelling by sea is a silly business anyhow” (CL8 89)? Answer: None other than Joseph Conrad, writing to his son Borys on 6 May 1923.

Let me close where I started, with death. In a letter to an American journalist, Russell F. Gore, in Volume 9, Conrad is able to joke about impending death: “I do not know when I shall depart on my last journey, and still less do I know what will be my destination, but you may be sure that if St. Peter shows any reluctance to open the door I shall use your name without scruple” (31 July 1920; 229). Conradians may feel that if the various editors and publisher of *The Collected Letters* meet with any similar reluctance on the part of the gatekeeper to heaven then they should be able to present the volumes of the project with which they have been associated with confidence that they ought to weigh heavily on the right side of the scales.

Twenty-five years have passed since the first volume of these letters was published, and the completion of this splendid, indispensable edition is something for which both editors and publisher must be allowed to feel proud. No doubt, this is exactly the sort of project that in coming years will be made available in electronic rather than printed form, allowing corrections and additions to be inserted where they belong rather than in a final volume. But I am glad that we have this work in

printed form. A book is easier to work with and to read from cover to cover, and students who take these volumes off the library shelf to search for a comment or a reference are more likely to go on reading than they are with a text on a screen, however sophisticated these may in time become.

I suspect, too, that without the support and prestige of Cambridge University Press it is doubtful whether such a massive editorial project could have been carried through to successful completion. It is certain that without the dedication of a team of such outstanding editors the human race would have lived and expired without so much of the valuable information that these volumes contain, and with many false attributions and inaccurate transcriptions forever uncorrected. It is sad that Hans van Marle, who contributed so much behind the scenes to this project, and Frederick R. Karl, its Founding Editor, did not live to see the edition completed. Its other editors will, I hope, forgive me for mentioning Laurence Davies, too, by name as the only editor involved in all nine volumes. Unless the laws of gravity are different in the next world, he will hardly be able to *wave* these volumes at St Peter when he approaches the heavenly portal. But if he is gripping them all as he approaches the saint, then they must surely help to persuade the holder of the keys to escort the scholar's staggering form through to a paradise in which letters are never lost, owners never difficult, and handwriting never ambiguous.

An anonymous wit once wrote that "In Heaven there'll be no algebra, | No learning dates or names, | Just playing on a golden harp | And reading Henry James." But St Peter was a fisherman on this earth, and if he holds the key to the celestial library we can expect to find there not only Conrad's works but also this splendid edition of another sailor's letters on the paradisaal shelves. If we mere mortals had as many merits and as few faults as they do, then heaven would be a far more crowded location.