

“The Secret Secret Sharer”**Douglas Kerr**

The subject of this essay is a secret.

“The Secret Sharer” was written late in 1909, after a visit from Captain Carlos M. Marris, of Penang, had revived Conrad’s memories of his own adventures in the East as a young man. It was also as a distraction or relief from his struggles with the novel that would become *Under Western Eyes* (Stape 170). “The Secret Sharer: An Episode from the Coast” was published in 1912 with “A Smile of Fortune” and “Freya of the Seven Isles” in the collection *’Twiixt Land and Sea* (hereafter *TLS*). It is the story of a young ship’s captain about to start a voyage on his first command, who shelters on board an officer from another ship, a man named Leggatt, who has killed a crewman and escaped by swimming from his own vessel. The young Captain, who has been immediately struck by an uncanny feeling of kinship for the fugitive whom he frequently refers to as his “double”, conceals Leggatt in his own quarters, unknown to his own officers and crew, and after several days arranges for him to make his escape by swimming to an island, just as the wind rises and the captain’s vessel begins its own journey. The story is the captain’s retrospective narrative.

The thick layer of criticism with which this story is barnacled has a consensus in its feeling that the relationship between the unnamed “young Captain” (as I must entitle him to avoid later confusion) and the fugitive Leggatt is what most needs explaining in this tale. “The Secret Sharer” is in many ways one of Conrad’s most straightforward stories, moving steadily forward in a linear fashion and observing, more or less, the classical unities. But the young Captain who tells the story is generally agreed to be an example of that Conradian trope, the unreliable narrator. I am not sure that criticism has taken the full measure of this unreliability,

however. In probing it, I intend to expose more than one extra level of secret sharing – and secret-sharing – in the tale.¹ In this I follow respectfully in the tracks of Robert Hampson, who nonetheless in his book *Conrad's Secrets* keeps pretty quiet about “The Secret Sharer”, for reasons which, appropriately, he does not divulge.

Form and content being indivisible, it is no surprise that this theme of doubleness or echoing is embodied in the tale’s narrative method in various tropes of similitude, repetition, and contrast. These doublings, which have been schematically represented in an “ethico-structural analysis” by Cedric Watts (29), provide much of the rhythm of a suspenseful, well-formed, symmetrical narrative which moves forward towards an exciting climax and satisfying closure with the escape of the fugitive, “a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny” (*TLS* 119). Indeed so shipshape is the story’s structure that Jakob Lothe (64-71) raises the concern that its squared-away structure, its tidiness and economy and pace, work to obscure or distract from the problematic and messy moral issues which ought to attend it. The tale ends triumphantly with a romantic image of heroic action, the proud swimmer: on the other hand, Leggatt undoubtedly is a murderer, and Lothe feels the moral ambiguity of the narrator’s strong identification with a blood criminal remains largely unresolved. I will return to this.

In a personal narrative, as Lothe observes, “the absence of a stable, correcting position of authorial authority presents difficult problems of interpretation” (71). This is certainly the case but it also presents a particular kind of author – a Conrad or a Henry James – with opportunities, and there is no doubt it was these opportunities that so often drew Conrad to personal, sometimes multiple narration. It is a method that is bound to raise in the frame of the aesthetic the question – or, as we might say, the questioning – of authority which in its moral and psychological and

¹ Part of the following argument was adumbrated in my essay “Approaching Conrad through Theory”.

political forms is recognised as one of Conrad's perennial and most urgent themes. Readers of a first-personal narrative are obliged to see and understand what happens as the narrator sees and understands it: other points of view in both senses (of vision, and interpretation) are the blind spots in this narration's representation of events. In some cases however, it is possible and instructive to recover those excluded stories. Deconstruction has taught us that all narrators are unreliable narrators, all acts of speech dependent upon something being silenced. Having its meaning by virtue of its difference from something it does not name, every utterance is haunted by its own contradiction. But some silences are more eloquent than others.

Highly sceptical about the reliability of the narrator of "The Secret Sharer", Brian Richardson in a useful essay shows how readerly suspicions may very well be aroused by the young Captain's immediate identification with Leggatt, his willingness to believe everything Leggatt tells him and to excuse everything he says he has done, his fulsome professions of understanding and sympathy. This goes beyond class and professional solidarity. The Captain's fussing over Leggatt extends to the highly partial account he gives of him, and ensures that we are very largely confined to his interpretation of Leggatt's narrative, which Richardson describes as "itself internally consistent but unable to account for the numerous anomalies, elisions, and contradictions that surround it" (314). The young Captain accedes unquestioningly to Leggatt's story of what happened on board the *Sephora*, an account not surprisingly very creditable to Leggatt himself, in which the killing of the recalcitrant crewman was a regrettable necessity, a manifestation of the decisive heroism with which Leggatt took action to save the ship in a storm. Immature, gullible and self-absorbed, the young Captain – as Richardson reads him – is the subject of a subtle, ironic comedy of quixotic self-deception and misprision that Conrad

attributes to the reading of too much romantic fiction (Richardson 318). In other words he is a thoroughly unreliable narrator.

Richardson's account of the tale, to which I am sympathetic, follows usual critical practice in focusing on the central relationship, the "secret sharing", between the young Captain and the fugitive Leggatt, which is certainly foregrounded both in the story and in the storytelling. Attention to the obvious, however, should not prevent us also looking elsewhere where there are other secrets to uncover. So let us consider the other shipmaster, Captain Archbold (if indeed that really is his name), a character in whom criticism of the tale has taken scant interest.

Archbold is the captain of the *Sephora*, from which Leggatt has escaped, and he comes aboard the narrator's ship in his search for the fugitive. Almost everything we know about Archbold's conduct as captain of the *Sephora* comes to us through Leggatt's narration, which can hardly be expected to be unbiased, though his protector the young Captain seems to swallow it whole. Leggatt describes Archbold as a poor leader of men, panicky in a crisis, under the thumb of long-serving members of his crew and – the implication that followed all captains who brought a wife on board – probably a henpecked husband. Leggatt says Archbold lost his nerve in the storm after the maintopsail blew away, so that Leggatt himself was obliged to take the situation into his own hands as first mate, and give the order to set the reefed foresail, a risky manoeuvre that saved the ship (*TLS* 105). The giving of that order is part of Leggatt's narrative in which he is a decisive hero and Archbold is a mediocre coward and an unworthy ship's master. Archbold, however, has already told the young Captain that he himself gave the order that saved the *Sephora*, admitting that he did so not in the swashbuckling adventure-story style Leggatt claims for his own action, but in fear and trembling because of the peril facing the ship

(101). One of these accounts is mistaken or a lie, and the young Captain accepts Leggatt's version, which confirms his own poor impression of Archbold.

He offers an unflattering and even contemptuous description of his visitor, and is barely polite to him. He hardly listens to the old man, interrupting him several times, and even pretending to be deaf and asking Archbold to speak up, for the benefit of Leggatt, hiding only a few feet away behind the cabin bulkhead. Taking his cue from what Leggatt has already told him, the narrator portrays Archbold as unprepossessing in appearance, confused and dull-witted in person, and incompetent in command of his ship. "A spiritless tenacity was his main characteristic I judged" (99). Yet if we pay attention, zoning out as far as possible the noise of the young Captain's derisive narration, to what Archbold actually says, it is far from contemptible. In fact he has qualities of maturity, responsibility and thoughtfulness that the narrator himself lacks. He is an officer who respects the law, is loyal to his ship and careful of his crew, and takes his duties seriously. The old man is hardly charismatic – "not exactly a showy figure" (99) – but his record speaks for itself. He has been thirty-seven years at sea, and his fifteen years' service as master of the *Sephora* testifies to just the bonding of master and vessel that the young Captain yearns for above all with his own ship: this has been shown to be the professional and existential problem that has been causing him anxiety before Leggatt appears, and that continues to haunt him throughout the tale – the Leggatt intrigue aside, it is his *agon*. There is nothing Leggatt could teach him about captaincy, whereas it is a problem Archbold must have confronted and solved in his own lengthy relationship with the *Sephora*. Archbold, incidentally, has been promoted on merit, whereas Leggatt secured his position as mate of the *Sephora* through class privilege, his family having "some interest" with the ship's owners, who forced the captain to take him on against his better judgement: Leggatt had made a

good show, “looked very smart, very gentlemanly and all that,” but Archbold confesses he distrusted him from the start (101).

As they converse, the young Captain, not only because he is obsessed by his kinship with Leggatt, is obscurely aware of himself coming under Archbold’s scrutiny and being found wanting. This is not surprising: his behaviour towards the old man is snobbish and rude, an attitude carried over into his retrospective narrative of their conversation. He says he was hardly listening to Archbold, and as for the latter’s account of Leggatt’s murder, he censors it from the narrative record: “[i]t is not worth while to record that version” (100). He interrupts Archbold’s account of the storm with a hostile cross-examination whose purpose seems to be to confirm Leggatt’s version of events. Quite apart from his extraordinary pretence of deafness, his conversation is aggressive, with abrupt changes of subject and a disconcerting failure to cooperate, or indeed to respond with collegial courtesy to Archbold’s predicament. “My lack of excitement, of curiosity, of surprise, of any sort of pronounced interest began to arouse his distrust” (102). And yet if he looked at his visitor without the prejudice with which Leggatt has forearmed him, he might see in the older man an impressive role model of the leadership he aspires to – a commander at ease in his authority, mindful of his responsibilities, a man who can take decisions but is unwilling to take risks with his ship.

Feeling the loneliness of first command, anxious for a role model, the embodiment of “that ideal conception of one’s own personality every man sets up for himself secretly” (83), has the young Captain identified the wrong secret sharer? In a tableau *tête à tête* that recalls the many exchanges at intimately close quarters between the narrator and Leggatt, the young and the older captains face each other across the table. Which one is the ignorant fool? “And as I gazed at him certainly not prepared for anything original on his part, he advanced his head close to

mine and thrust his tongue out at me so suddenly that I couldn't help staring back" (100). Archbold's is demonstrating the expression on the dead face of the murdered crewman. But his sticking-out tongue (reminiscent of the face the dead Kayerts presents to his boss at the end of "An Outpost of Progress" (*Tales of Unrest* 99)) doubles as an uninterpreted gesture of mockery of this insecure young man who cannot see the model of authority that is staring him in the face.

What kind of a man was a ship's captain? Specifically, what were or should be the qualities of a British officer engaged in maritime service in the East? It is a question that brings into play questions of gender and ethnicity, character and conduct, and those "few very simple ideas" that were the basis of Conrad's ethics as a writer as well as a sailor (*A Personal Record*, 17). In the era of Conrad's career at sea, in which sail was being superseded by steam power, the contrast must have been particularly pointed between the romantic, charismatic captains of boys' stories, and the more prosaic, even bureaucratic professionals of the modern service.

The susceptible young Captain, on the threshold of his own career as a shipmaster, sees a kind of model in the athletic, dashing, and forceful Leggatt. He is, by his own account, a man who takes destiny into his own hands. He is something of a Nietzschean hero, who has little regard for the laws made to govern the conduct of lesser men, such as the man he killed, in his opinion one of those "[m]iserable devils that have no business to live at all" (88). Assuring the young Captain that he is unafraid of punishment, he justifies his running away on the haughty grounds that he has no desire to explain himself "to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen" (111). He is a gentleman, educated to be an officer in the Merchant Service at the *Conway* school.

Archbold is of a lower class, and unimpressive in looks and speech. He talks in clichés, and always seems a little out of his conversational depth: his equivalent on board is the earnest

but bovine first mate. He is respectable, bourgeois, irreproachable in his habits (teetotal, wife on board), and in thirty-seven years' service at sea has worked his way up to command of the *Sephora*, and captained her for fifteen years. A murder on board his ship is a challenge for a captain, and that the murderer is his first officer must be an embarrassment. Archbold plays by the book, locking up the criminal until he can be handed over to the forces of law for trial in an English port. "I represent the law here," he tells Leggatt (93), and this is a correct interpretation of his legal status as master: he embodies the system of justice which Leggatt despises, and he feels the same responsibility for the life of his murdered crewman as Marlow had felt for the African steersman who is killed in the futile skirmish in "Heart of Darkness". So Leggatt is imprisoned on board, to be delivered up in due course to the impersonal processes of the law.² Since he feels it is obvious that his own life is worth more than that of the man he killed, he boldly asks Archbold to leave the cabin door unlocked and let him escape: this, it seems, Archbold refuses to do.³ Later however, Leggatt makes his escape.

The story of the murderer and his escape draws on a real-life incident which, Conrad remembered in his "Author's Note", was "the common possession of the whole fleet of merchant ships trading to India, China and Australia" in the middle 1880s (6). But it is at the point of Leggatt's escape and Archbold's pursuit that Conrad's story appears to depart from the original anecdote. John Anderson, alias Sidney Smith, was chief mate of the celebrated clipper *Cutty Sark*, and like Leggatt, he killed a recalcitrant crewman on board during a storm. But his captain,

² The young Captain asks Archbold if he were not "very anxious to give your mate up to the shore people," making it sound like a betrayal: "To the law," Archbold corrects him (101:15-17).

³ Still, since the door is later left unlocked by the steward, who dislikes Leggatt but is a loyalist who has served under Archbold for seventeen years, it is conceivable that the captain is complicit after all in Leggatt's later escape. I believe subsequent events make this unlikely, however.

the youthful J. S. Wallace, then allowed Anderson to escape and swim to an American ship. Days later, Captain Wallace committed suicide, stepping off his ship into deep waters.⁴ It is hard to imagine the law-abiding and phlegmatic Archbold doing anything so melodramatic, and so it has been assumed that “The Secret Sharer” did not capitalise on this aspect of the *Cutty Sark* story, though it had borne fruit elsewhere in the suicide of Captain Brierly in *Lord Jim*.

I want to suggest, however, that “The Secret Sharer” did not pass up the interesting moral, ethical and professional dilemma of the *Cutty Sark* case, even if Archbold appears to be entirely orthodox in his dogged effort to recapture Leggatt, while the young Captain seems to have no doubt or hesitation about his own willingness to exculpate Leggatt, and to risk his own career in aiding his escape. Conrad’s tale harbours another secret, and this too is a secret kept from the narrator himself, so we will have to read round him to excavate it. Some thick description is called for, as we observe Archbold’s behaviour when he visits the young Captain’s ship, and we will need to ignore the narrator’s actual and narrative discourtesies towards him, and the damning rhetoric of character that dismisses the older man as unfocused, unintelligent, sick, and – the most extraordinary transference – having “the manner of an unpenitent criminal making a reluctant and doleful confession” (99).

If Archbold seems constrained and embarrassed, we could start by asking why (apart from the awkwardness of dealing with a very deaf and apparently unhinged host). A murderer has escaped from custody on his vessel. Where is he likely to have swum to? Archbold has searched the nearby islands. The mainland is at least seven miles from the *Sephora*’s anchorage, but the young Captain’s ship is a bare two miles distance, and visible in the night by its lights:

⁴ The incident took place in September 1880 when Conrad was serving on the *Loch Etive*, bound for Sydney. See Sherry, 253-69. Wallace, a young and successful skipper, bore no resemblance to Archbold in the story: Sherry (260-1) speculates that the fictional Archbold may owe more to Captain Joseph Lucas Clark, master of the *Jeddah*.

the sea is very calm. These topographical facts – of which Archbold reminds his host, hinting at suspicions he can hardly voice openly – mean that there is at least a good chance the fugitive would have struck out for the other ship. And since he has not been apprehended and returned, and since on a small vessel he could hardly remain concealed without the help of an accomplice, there must be the unpleasant possibility that someone on board the young Captain's vessel is harbouring him — and that therefore there are not one but two criminals on board the ship Archbold has boarded as the guest of his young fellow-captain. Quite possibly it is delicacy that ties the older man's tongue, and not stupidity as the young Captain rather crassly supposes. The visit is indeed what Archbold calls it, a “painful duty” (99).

No wonder it is with reluctance and diffidence – interpreted by his host as “spiritless tenacity” (99) – that he comes aboard. He discovers that his counterpart is a novice captain, with a disconcerting manner of conversation, superficially polite but definitely unsympathetic, sometimes bordering on insolence and subject to erratic shifts of attention and unresponsive silences. At one point the young Captain is even ready to suggest to Archbold, a sailor of thirty-seven years' experience, that he has made a mistake and that the murdered man on the *Sephora* might have been simply killed by being struck by a heavy sea, an extraordinary theory which Archbold greets with astonishment. Alternately babbling, hardly paying attention, and retreating into what he thinks of as urbane nonchalance, even the young Captain has to admit that his behaviour must look suspicious and he has begun to arouse the older man's distrust (102). It would not take Dostoyevsky to see this as the demeanour of a man with a guilty secret, which is of course the case. As the interview progresses, the old man's eyes cannot help roaming from one closed door of the cabin to another (103). His host's unaccountable manners must be deepening Archbold's worst fears, especially since it is “almost certain that he had brought some

ready-made suspicions with him” (102), as is confirmed later by the mate, who says that the visiting crew from the *Sephora* let it be known they suspected that the fugitive was hidden somewhere on board, and got into an argument with their hosts on this point (104).

Consider at this point the psychology of “that weird situation” (102). Archbold has a strong suspicion that he has come aboard a ship that harbours not only the fugitive but also an accomplice, accessory after the fact of murder, and his host’s bizarre demeanour must be causing him to suspect who that accomplice is. But this is a fellow shipmaster. All the first part of *Lord Jim* is there to remind us of the bond that unites British ship’s officers, their *esprit de corps*, their loyalty to the ethics of service, profession and code, what Marlow calls “the solidarity of the craft” (*Lord Jim* 102). We remember the different but radical ways in which Captains Brierly and Marlow assume a kind of vicarious responsibility for Jim’s failure on the *Patna*. Now here before the veteran Archbold is a young shipmaster who may have jeopardised his reputation, his career, his future, even his freedom, by the rash act of harbouring a felon. Not only that, but the young man is in the first days of his first command, on the brink of a long voyage, is handicapped by the disability of deafness, and by all appearances may suffer from some mental instability (at least this is clearly the conclusion the young Captain’s own officers start to draw from his “ludicrous eccentricities” (106)). What should the old man do? Increasingly embarrassed, he gives the young Captain opportunities to come clean of his own accord by offering those hints – the mainland seven miles off; the *Sephora* within comfortable swimming distance of this ship – that might be an opening for the true story to come out. The one thing he cannot bring himself to do is to ask point-blank if Leggatt is aboard, for to do so would be to question openly the integrity of a fellow-officer. The young Captain meanwhile is congratulating himself on cleverly avoiding the straight question that in fact Archbold cannot ask. “I could not, I

think, have met him by a direct lie, also for psychological (not moral) reasons” (102). Hence his bizarre double performance of deafness and politeness, correctly viewed by Archbold as “a strange and unnatural phenomenon” (102).

In another abrupt change of subject, the young Captain now offers to show Archbold round the ship – “Here, for instance... is my bathroom” (103) – an invitation the old man accepts without enthusiasm. The tour will include the stateroom where Leggatt is hiding: the young Captain announces this in a voice as loud as he dares make it, and crosses the cabin with purposely heavy steps, to give the murderer notice of their coming so that he can hide, presumably in his favourite place behind the heavy jackets and oilskin coat hanging in the recessed part of the stateroom. This is what happens next.

He followed me in and gazed around. My intelligent double had vanished. I played my part:

“Very convenient – isn’t it?”

“Very nice. Very comf....” He didn’t finish and went out brusquely as if to escape from some unrighteous wiles of mine. (103)

I am unable to prove that Archbold has glimpsed Leggatt, or some sign of him, in the stateroom. But I cannot think of any other explanation for his breaking off in mid-word (the only incomplete word in the story) and his abrupt exit. There is some irony in the young Captain’s jocular remark that Archbold hurries out of the stateroom “as if to escape from some unrighteous wiles of mine”, when this may indeed be just the reason for his swift exit. It is a moment that acts as a sort of climax to the bedroom-farce element of the tale, in which Archbold appears like one of Feydeau’s husbands pursuing his erring wife to some bachelor apartment or hotel room where she has had to be hidden in the wardrobe by her young lover.

The young Captain, with increasing confidence, next trails his unhappy guest all round the rest of the ship, seeking to convince him that the fugitive is nowhere concealed. But if, unnoticed by his host, Archbold really has seen something incriminating in the stateroom, the old man's predicament is now far from a laughing matter. The secret of Leggatt's whereabouts is a secret no longer – or rather, unknown to the two younger conspirators who believe they have outwitted him, Archbold is now inward to it, a secret secret sharer (or secret secret-sharer). To the scandal of having found out a fellow officer in the act of helping a murderer to escape justice, there may be added the acute embarrassment, to the very orthodox Archbold, of having discovered the young Captain is concealing another young man in what in effect is his bedroom. No wonder the old man is in a hurry to get off this ship. After traipsing round on this futile tour of the ship's amenities, he draws a long, spiritless sigh, and, descending the ladder to return to the *Sephora*, still unwilling to call his host's bluff, he makes one more effort to get him to divulge what he is hiding: but the young Captain, like all stupid people who believe they have an advantage, responds like a bully.

“I say ... you ... you don't think that ... ”

I covered his voice loudly:

“Certainly not.... I am delighted. Good-bye.” (103-04)

I mentioned before that “The Secret Sharer” appears to have passed up the opportunity presented by the real moral and professional interest of the *Cutty Sark* incident, the conduct of the ship's captain who allowed his fellow officer to make his escape after the killing, but later himself committed suicide. But if it is the case in the story that Archbold actually becomes aware that the murderer is being concealed on the young master's vessel, the old man immediately becomes the moral centre of the story, indeed in a position somewhat analogous to that of

Marlow returning from Africa with Kurtz's reputation in his hand. Archbold could now, with a word, not only recapture the fugitive from justice, but also bring to an ignominious end the career of a young and foolish ship's captain who has committed a rash error of judgement, and furthermore has treated him, his guest, with rudeness and contempt, believing he has successfully hoodwinked him. (And in view of the young Captain's criminal folly, a few nights later, in risking his ship and crew to assist Leggatt's escape, perhaps Archbold ought to have spoken.)

The forbearance (for better or worse) of Archbold now emerges as the secret nested inside the other secrets of the tale, the young Captain's narrative remaining unaware of the real nature – and the real narrowness – of his own narrow escape. This ignorance constitutes the most fundamental unreliability of the unreliable narrator. If in spite of his respect for the law Archbold in the end lets Leggatt go free, in order to save the young Captain from Lord Jim-like disgrace, what would Conrad have made of this moral choice? We cannot be sure, as Conrad is of course not in the tale to be interrogated. There may be a clue in a letter he wrote on 14 June 1917 to A. T. Saunders, in which he says of the *Cuttie Sark* murderer that "his skipper had the decency to let him swim ashore on the Java Coast" (CL 6 99). What is clear is that Archbold's self-restraint goes unrewarded and unremarked, his moral and professional dilemma a secret in which the narrator does not share. Indeed it is his sad fate to be cast as a clownish figure in the story, his appearance on board affording what the critical consensus deems "moments of light relief" (Ford xxvii). He is described as an ageing mediocrity, with his "smeary, blue, unintelligent eyes" (99), his shambling gait and air of hesitancy and muddle. He cuts a poor figure compared to the narrator's starstruck description of the dashing Leggatt, whom he so childishly wants to resemble and impress. But while Leggatt undoubtedly causes the young man to jeopardise his ship, and risk the utter loss of his stake in "the solidarity of the craft", he may actually owe his

continuation in command and at liberty to the old captain he so despised, and will never see again. It seems a poor reward for this that one feature of the narrator's unreliability is that, "at this distance of years" (99), he can't even remember if Archbold really was the old fool's name.

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