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Approaching Conrad through Theory:**‘The Secret Sharer’**

The theoretical turn in criticism, as everyone knows, began to make itself felt in Anglo-American literary studies some fifty years ago, and has profoundly shaped critical practice and language in the ensuing decades. It has left a decisive mark, too, on the institutions of literary criticism and education. Yet at the height of the ideological and methodological struggles that this revolution entailed, the proponents of “theory” enjoyed taunting their more traditionally-minded opponents by pointing out that their methods were just as underpinned by theory as the work of the most up-to-date poststructuralist. This was quite right. All enquiries in the humanities rest upon a theory about the object of enquiry, and a set of principles that governs the method of enquiry, whether this theory and these principles are articulated in the enquiry itself, or assumed *a priori*. An approach to Conrad’s novels which that sees them as lightly disguised reports on Conrad’s own adventures and moods, or one which that assesses them as vehicles for moral instruction, is just as theory-driven as a reading of their heteroglossia or one which that mines the novels for instances of the social construction of sexualities.

From the start, readers have been approaching Conrad through theory. When Sir Hugh Clifford chided Conrad for not knowing much about life in the Malay Archipelago, his criticism was based upon a theory of fictional representation. The early reviewers who hailed Conrad as

“the Kipling of the Seas” were deploying a theory of intertextuality. ~~And~~ those who grumbled that his later novels were not as good as his earlier ones were making a judgement informed by an idea, perhaps refined over a lifetime of reading, of what literature ‘should’ be.

So “approaching Conrad through theory” may seem to amount to no more or less than “approaching Conrad”. Still, the decades since the 1960s have put into the hands of readers a particularly varied, sophisticated and powerful set of critical modalities – some ~~of them~~ mutually contradictory – and this state of affairs has produced a rich critical literature that can help students ~~to~~ release a wealth of satisfying, provocative and perhaps unsuspected potentialities in the Conradian text. It has also fostered a self-consciousness about the grounds of literary criticism ~~which that~~ can now be taken for granted ~~in~~ most students of literature. This ~~chapter~~ discussion will set out to sketch what some of these modalities are and what they entail. Theory is not something to be chosen from the catalogue, and then applied to a literary text, like a paint colour. The reader has a duty to be responsible to the text, and sometimes this will require us ~~to~~ ~~wait~~ patiently to wait for the text to reveal what kinds of critical attention it will respond to (willingly or not). There is something a bit artificial about using a text to illustrate different critical approaches. But it does seem worthwhile to explore the relevance of theoretically-based approaches to a reading of Conrad’s work.

If we are to lift these critical theories out of the realm of abstraction and put them to work as criticism, we will need a point of focus. ~~In this chapter, that point of focus~~ Here that will be ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~ “The Secret Sharer”, a story Conrad wrote at the end of 1909 – taking a break from wrestling with the novel that would become *Under Western Eyes* – and included in the collection *Twixt Land and Sea* ~~(hereafter TLS)~~, published in 1912. It is a tale in which a ship’s captain who has just taken up his first command gives refuge to 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, feeling a strange affinity for the fugitive whom he calls his “double”, conceals Leggatt in his own cabin, keeping this a secret from his crew, and eventually enables him to escape by swimming to an island, just as the wind rises and the captain’s ship begins its own voyage. The captain narrates the story.

Criticism tends to lag behind creative work, and it could be argued that the theory revolution of the twentieth century was a belated attempt to rise to the challenge of the great Modernist writers, the contemporaries of Conrad and the generation that followed. Conrad himself has provoked some of the most distinguished work of leading critical practitioners as varied as the Marxist Fredric Jameson, the deconstructionist J. Hillis Miller, and the postcolonial humanist Edward Said, for example.¹ New critical languages have seemed to be required to try to account for modern literature, with its fascination with forms of subjectivity and the unconscious, its often broken rhythms and inorganic structures, its rehearsal of a crisis of authority in many forms, its ambiguous relation to history and tradition, its linguistic estrangement, its obscurities which seem to cry out for interpretation. In this sense, “theory” is a response to modernism.

The features Have just listed can be found in Conrad’s work – in fact, we can find all of them in “The Secret Sharer” “The Secret Sharer”. But there are aspects of Conrad’s case that make certain critical modalities especially appropriate. The recurrence in his stories of certain psychological patterns and relationships have, from the start, attracted a criticism attentive to the psychology of both his characters and their author. The predominantly masculine Conrad world, typically a world of action remote from domestic life, has often put the question of gender at or near the centre of recent critical studies of his work. The foregrounding of storytelling itself in so

many of Conrad's tales has drawn critics interested in structure, voice and narrative, in questions of testimony and truth, and how readers respond to stories. And Conrad's early professional experience as a sailor, in the traffic of empire and trade around the globe, which provided him so much of the narrative capital for his fiction, has made him inevitably an important and controversial figure in colonial discourse analysis and postcolonial studies, and for students of politics, history, and geography. A work like "Heart of Darkness" – probably the most taught literary text in the world – stands at the intersection of virtually all the most important approaches in the current study of literature.

It is convenient to group the principal critical modalities according to their main object of attention, so we will talk about those that focus on the author, those that focus on textuality, and those most interested in the literary work's relation to history. Conrad's fiction has attracted criticism from all three orientations.

Author

Much early work on Conrad was author-based, resting on a theory that saw literature as above all an expression of the writer's experience, character and intention ~~of the writer~~. This kind of critical reading was probably the norm in the first half of the twentieth century as it had been in the nineteenth, and was the target of one of the early assaults in the "theory wars", Roland Barthes' 1968 essay "The Death of the Author". Author-based criticism seemed particularly suited to Conrad's novels, many of them explicitly taking their starting ~~point~~ in events in the writer's adventurous early life. Conrad ~~elaimed~~ claimed he was no good at making things up, and told an American interviewer in 1923 that that he simply "wrote in retrospect of what he saw and learned during the first 35 years of his life" (Ray, ed., 189). ~~see Last Essays, xlix: Not in fact~~

~~from that volume but from an interview in Martin Ray: change citation).~~ Biographers and biographical critics have traced the origins of many tales to episodes in Conrad's career, and the completion of the *Collected Letters* in nine volumes has afforded insight into what was in the author's mind as he struggled with his writing.

Psychological criticism often finds a key to Conrad's fiction in his early life in what, by way of shorthand, is called 'Poland' (that country at the time being, then divided into three and not on the map of Europe, with Conrad spending, in fact, little time in what we now think of as 'Poland'). His father's literary activities and devotion to the lost cause of Polish nationalism, the family's consequent internal exile to Russia, his mother's early death and then his father's, and later the young Conrad's decision to abandon Poland his homeland and go to sea – these can be seen as providing the emotional raw materials from which he fashioned a body of work that returns obsessively to questions of loyalty and betrayal, romantic idealism and its defeat, the need to cling faithfully to a given set of values and a doubt that any values, in the end, have a solid foundation. From his life as a seaman visiting far-flung ports and oceans, and later a ship's officer, derive the recurrence in his stories of questions of command and responsibility, the relation between men at close quarters, and all the political and ethnographic and communicative issues attending on the encounter between different cultures on unequal terms. The novels and tales are not a straightforward autobiographical record of his experiences, of course – nor, for that matter, are his autobiographical writings like *A Personal Record* – but a stern repudiation of the figure of the ordinary Author, as advocated by Barthes in 1968, would miss an important aspect of the work. Conrad's relation to the world of Marlow and Lord Jim is different in quality from that of J. R. R. Tolkien to the world of Bilbo Baggins. The murder that triggers the plot of ~~"The Secret Sharer"~~ 'The Secret Sharer' had its precedent in a widely reported crime aboard the

Cutty Sark in Eeastern waters in 1880. And like the captain in ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer”, in 1888 Conrad began a voyage from the Gulf of Siam on his first command, the *Otago*.

A psychologically-oriented author-based approach was taken by Albert J. Guerard, whose still valuable *Conrad the Novelist* (1958) mines the tales for fictionalized examples of “the un-English genre of the spiritual autobiography” (12). Borrowing from the theory of archetypes associated with C. G. Jung, Guerard finds some of Conrad’s major conflicts and anxieties shadowed in a number of his first-person narrative tales, including ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer”. These, argued Guerard, enact a ~~“night journey”~~“, a voyage through psychic darkness ~~which that~~ dramatizes a kind of introspection, a test of the self driven by insecurity and doubt: “We cannot achieve wholesome integration of the personality until we have made the archetypal journey into the self:” (31). Guerard sees the fugitive who is a double as presenting a challenge for the Captain in ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer”, confronting him with guilty aspects of himself that he must manage or dispose of before he can continue the journey of life. In teasing out this dark plot from the unconscious of the story, Guerard emphasizes the tale’s inward and psychological aspects ~~of the tale~~, and seems ready to identify the narrator with the author in a way that students are often warned against. But his approach convincingly relates this tale to a number of preoccupations and patterns to be found throughout Conrad’s fiction.

A more conventionally Freudian psychoanalytical reading of Conrad can find a strong basis in the clearly Oedipal feelings of the novelist for his father (see Johnson and Garber, 631-32). In the end Conrad turned his back on Poland and his father’s political beliefs, language, and even name (Korzeniowski), but at some psychic cost. The father was a figure of ~~strong~~ stern authority – and a precursor as writer – who set impossibly high standards for his son and deprived him of his mother, resulting in the kind of unacknowledged resentment, melancholy

and self-doubt ~~which~~ that Freud had discussed in the case of Shakespeare's father-haunted Prince Hamlet. This is a state of mind that might help to explain the apparently irrational anxieties of the young Captain in ~~"The Secret Sharer"~~ 'The Secret Sharer' about his own fitness for command among older and more experienced men. Does the decisive and virile intruder Leggatt correspond to the Captain's dream of manliness – "that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly",²² as the story has it (*TLS*, 83.8-10) – the kind of man he would like to be? Or, as Daniel R. Schwarz has suggested, perhaps Leggatt is unbalanced in opposite ways to the Captain, "a man of unrestrained id and under-developed superego",²² driven by his reckless desires and careless of authority, whereas the Captaincaptain is hyperconscious and so unsure of himself that he can't *do* anything. The Captaincaptain then learns from Leggatt how to act instinctively, and thus "his adult ego is created by appeasing the contradictory demands of the id and the superego," (Schwarz, 157) a mature balancing act between instinctive action and prudent reserve.

Schwarz historicizes the psychological plot by seeing it as dramatizing a *modern* split between mind and instinct: this is not simply a drama of the private life of an individual (author or character), but an episode in the psychology of modernity. Lacanian psychoanalysis is another way to move the insights of Freud out of the bedroom and into the world of society and politics. Lacan supposes psychic development to entail the eviction of the child from the imaginary – a prelinguistic state of mind in which no clear distinction is felt to exist between subject and object, child and mother – into the more austere realm of the symbolic order, a place of law, language, and difference, and the curtailment of desire. The point of transition between the imaginary and symbolic order is the mirror phase in which the child contemplates its own image and begins to form an apparently unified ego.

Lacanian criticism can find much in ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer” to ponder: the hesitation of the captain at the threshold of the (professional) maturity of command; his eagerness to identify with his double or mirror-image, and his final separation from him as he enters a new phase of his life; his nervousness in the presence of threatening and whiskery authorities such as ~~Captain~~ Captain Archbold and his own first mate (Leggatt, the double, is also a “mate”); his desire for insertion into the patriarchal order of command, and his simultaneous compulsion to flout its most basic rules by harbouring a radical transgressor; the strange doubleness of his speech, participating outloud in the official discourse of seamanship and captaincy (the Lacanian “word of the Father”) with the crew and Archbold, while carrying on an illicit dialogue, out of sight and in whispers, with the secret young outlaw who reminds him of himself. Josiane Paccaud (62) finds in the tale a story of “the subject’s accession to the symbolic after inner divisiveness and the unbridgeable gap between desire and its impossible object, between signifier and signified, between the speaking “I” and the psychic self, have been acknowledged.” And speaking of desire, this story is also one of the most explicit instances in Conrad of a recurring theme of male bonding, and it has significant sexual connotations, from the rescue of the naked Leggatt to his sharing of the captain’s bed. There is an unacknowledged but unmistakable undercurrent of homosexualerotic feeling in Conrad’s fiction, and this is sometimes traced, by a certain kind of biographical critic, to the author’s unconscious homosexualerotic attachment to a father lost in childhood.

Textuality

The theory revolution was related to the academic professionalization of literary criticism, and like any professionalization it soon began to produce a stream of specialist technical language

and protocols. This was entailed by a perceived need to concentrate on “the literary” as the object of enquiry – what made literature different from other discourses – and this turned out to be largely a propensity for figurative language (symbol, metaphor, metonymy) and an unusual degree of textual organization, so that the form of the literary text was understood to be an essential part of its meaning or theme, and not just a container or vehicle for it. Once again, this critical formalism was particularly rewarding as an approach to modern writing, but might equally be seen as a response to the challenges that writing posed. Conrad has certainly proved a suitable object for formalist enquiry, particularly in the discipline of narratology. Conrad’s fiction was soon noted for its fondness for the tropes or devices of the “unreliable narrator”, where we can’t be sure the storyteller knows the truth of his story or really wants to disclose it, and of “delayed decoding”, a phrase coined by Ian Watt (1915-1976) to describe disorienting moments in a narrative where a subjective impression is narrated, but its cause or meaning is withheld for a while. Both devices “foreground” or draw attention to the subjectivity of literary representation.

Realism – in fiction or drama, painting or photography – is a style of representation that tends to conceal its own artifice, presenting its object or story as if it ‘really’ and naturally ‘just happened’, or happened to be there. In many ways Conrad is a product of the great realist tradition of the nineteenth-century European novel. But he is modern in the way he foregrounds the formal qualities of his stories, not concealing their processes and devices but drawing attention to them. We can see this, for example, in the way memory is not simply a storehouse of past events, but often an uncertain and sometimes painful *activity*, for his remembering narrators. We can see it in his use of unreliable and multiple storytellers, in the way that scenes of narrating – spoken or written – often become part of his stories, and the way gaps and digressions and

resumptions in the chronology of events keep reminding us that a story is something that is made, more like a machine under construction than a flower to be picked, fully formed by nature.

Narratology busies itself with uncovering the role of structures or patterns established through narrative method, and the implications of these things for thematic effect: that is, narratologists study the rhetoric of storytelling. How is a narrative text structured, how does it begin and move through time and where does it end, through what voice or voices is it delivered, what perspectives does it stage, which characters are accorded interiority so that we can see what they are thinking and which are estranged so that we only see from the outside what they do and say, how fast does it move, what does it concentrate on, what is it unwilling or unable to tell us? Novels like *Lord Jim* or *Nostramo* are textual machines of enormous complexity and richness. By Conrad's standards, ~~"The Secret Sharer"~~'The Secret Sharer' seems a quite straightforward narrative. It has a single narrator, (the Captain~~captain~~), a single plot, ~~not many~~ few characters, and it moves swiftly through the events of its simple story from beginning to end.

As its theme of doubleness might lead us to expect, a major feature of the tale's narrative method is its use of various forms of likeness, complement, and contrast. These doublings, which have been schematically represented by Cedric Watts (29), are combined with the principle of suspense, to produce a well-formed symmetrical narrative driving towards a strong conclusion and closure with Leggatt's escape. Indeed, so shipshape is the story's structure ~~of the story~~ that it leads the narratologist Jakob Lothe (64-71) to worry that its neatness and economy actually blur the moral or ethical issues it raises. After all, Leggatt is getting away with murder and the captain is an accessory after the fact. Leggatt makes an exciting escape, but the moral ambiguity of his mirror-relationship with the narrator remains largely unresolved.

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 no doubt just why Conrad was drawn to personal, sometimes multiple narration, for the essaying of authority in many forms is one of his recurring themes. In a first-person narrative, we see and understand events as the narrator sees and understands them ~~they are seen and understood by the narrator~~: other forms of vision and understanding are excluded in the structure in which this narration creates events. Deconstructive criticism sees its task as recovering those excluded stories. Deconstruction is a practice of skeptical reading. For deconstruction, all narrators are unreliable narrators, all acts of speech depend upon something being silenced. Speech depends upon difference: a thing is alive because not dead, feminine in that it is not masculine, a *tree* in that we recognize its difference from a *tray*. Every structure is framed through acts of exclusion, but, deconstructionists aver, the excluded always returns to unsettle it. Having its meaning by virtue of its difference from something it does not name, every text is haunted by its own contradiction. Strictly speaking, you never deconstruct a text, but show how the text has already deconstructed itself.

~~Brian Richardson is highly~~ skeptical about the reliability of the Captain~~captain~~-narrator of ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~ “The Secret Sharer”. ~~He~~ Brian Richardson sees his insistence on identifying with Leggatt, and his eagerness to lend him a sympathetic ear, assure him of his understanding, and excuse his crime, as very highly-suspicious. The Captain~~captain~~’s fussing over Leggatt, and his romantic identification and bonding with him, ensures that we have little more than his interpretation of Leggatt’s narrative, “itself internally consistent but unable to account for the numerous anomalies, elisions, and contradictions that surround it” (314). For all we know, Leggatt could actually be a murderous and lying thug, but the narrator is unwilling to

admit this possibility into his story. Rash, credulous, and egotistical, the captain – as Richardson reads him – is a comic figure, the subject of a subtle, ironic drama of self-deception and misprision ~~which that~~ is an instance of Conrad's mockery of the dangers of reading too much romantic fiction (with its childish semi-supernatural theme of doubles). (318). He is a thoroughly unreliable narrator and by no means to be identified as a surrogate for his author, or a vehicle for that author's doubts and anguish.

Richardson's reading sets out to uncover what the tale (or its narrator) has passed over in silence. His is not really a deconstructive reading, however, for he is arguing that the interpretive bias of the captain's story is a deliberate strategy, Conrad's ~~M~~modernist mockery of romantic gullibility. Deconstruction finds contradictions in a text ~~which that~~ are intrinsic, even unconscious. If ~~I~~ one were putting together a deconstructive reading of "~~The Secret Sharer~~" "The Secret Sharer", ~~I~~ one might start with ~~Captain~~ Captain Archbold (if that is, indeed, his name).

Archbold is the captain of the *Sephora*, from which Leggatt has escaped, and he visits the narrator's ship in his search for the fugitive. The narrator gives a highly unflattering description of Archbold, and is barely polite to him, interrupting him, hardly listening, even pretending to be deaf. In his loyalty to Leggatt, the narrator portrays Archbold as a muddled old fool and an incompetent captain: we should not take him seriously. Yet if you listen, through the noise of the ~~Captain~~ captain's derisive narration, to what Archbold is reported as actually saying, he seems to have qualities of maturity, responsibility and good sense that the narrator himself lacks. The narrator is obscurely aware of being assessed by Archbold and found wanting, as well he might be. He is unable to see in Archbold a model of the commander he aspires to be – legitimate in his authority, careful of his command, resolute but risk-averse in his leadership. Anxious for a role model, to embody the ideal conception of his own personality, has the captain identified the

wrong secret sharer? In a face-to-face tableau that recalls the intimate exchanges between the narrator and Leggatt, the two ship's captains sit opposite each other. 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.” (TLS, 100.30-33). Archbold's mimicry of the face of the strangled crewman doubles as an uninterpreted gesture of mockery of the Captaincaptain who cannot see the model of captaincy that is staring him in the face.

Genre is another dimension of textuality. Fictions exemplify, and may combine, existing paradigms which that are pre-set, as it were, with certain conventions and habits and horizons of expectation. Genre theory asserts that such paradigms may play as important a role as the author's individual intention in determining both the nature and the meaning of a text. Conrad made his name as a writer of adventure tales in exotic locations, and “The Secret Sharer” “The Secret Sharer”, with its tropical setting and its exciting narrative climax, in some respects marks Conrad's return to this sort of tale. It participates too in the genre of romantic introspection, and its subgenre of masculine maturation – a compressed *Bildungsroman*, concerned as this genre is with the hero's struggles to discover his identity, grow up, and find his proper place in his community or society.

Other genres jostle to be heard in the rich discourse mix of the tale's textuality, and help to give it that essential novelistic quality M. M. Bakhtin (301-331) described as heteroglossia, even though it has only a single narrator. There is a distinct note of Gothic in the dreamlike night atmosphere, the discovery of the apparently headless body of the murderer floating in the water, and in all the talk about uncanny and ghostly doubling. In the undignified hide-and-seek in the captain's quarters, there is even an incongruous accent of bedroom farce. The admixture of the

voice of farce to the generic polyphony of the tale might act as a check on our inclination to romanticize the relationship between the captain and the fugitive. Farce is an under-explored weapon in Conrad's generic armoury. It can be an unsettling presence even at life-and-death moments, such as the murder of Carlier in *"An Outpost of Progress"*, or of Verloc in *The Secret Agent*.

Finally, a text can be in dialogue not only with a genre but with other particular texts. The long list of intertextual relatives of *"The Secret Sharer"* includes Conrad's other first-person stories (notably the Marlow-narrated tales like *"Youth"* and *"Heart of Darkness"*, but also the as yet un to be written *"The Shadow-Line"*), romantic fictions centring on a *"double"* such as Maupassant's *"Le Horla"*, adventure stories for boys about perils surmounted by flood and field, the textbooks on seamanship Conrad studied for his master's certificate, and so on. Gérard Genette has shown how these intertextual relationships contribute to the meaning of a literary text. One of the most interesting of intertexts for *"The Secret Sharer"* is *Under Western Eyes*, the novel Conrad interrupted in December 1909 to write this tale.

History

Critical technologies with a historical orientation – including the often overlapping Marxist, postcolonial, and new historicist approaches – attend to the represented world of the literary text, and its relation to the play of historical forces at the time of its events or its composition. Texts are interrogated for their symptomatology and criticism of the work of such forces. Marxism has always regarded literature, such as novels, as part of the superstructure raised upon and expressing the base of economic relations and the struggle between classes. It has seen it as

either valuable inasmuch as it can help to exemplify the stresses and tendencies of historical process, or – all too often – an example of “false consciousness”, concealing the real truth of history (this is the way Fredric Jameson (206-280) reads the romance elements of *Lord Jim*). Historicist critical theory urges attention especially to the changing meanings in literary discourse of class, gender, and race or ethnicity.

Again, Conrad’s fiction seems particularly inviting to historical criticism, and it will be clear that even in dealing with author-based or textual criticism, as we have done above, we have already been engaging with the stories as historical texts. In particular, Conrad lived in and wrote about the great century of modern imperialism, and its expressions in trade, colonialism, and cultural encounter, from the Caribbean to the Malay Peninsula and from the time of Napoleon to the Great War. The world we inhabit today was formed out of that era and its aftermath – a postcolonial, global world. Conrad is one of the most valuable of reporters of empire, whether ~~you~~ one regards him as a critic or – as the late Chinua Achebe famously asserted – an apologist of the phenomenon.

Achebe reacted with anger to what he saw as the racist representation of Africa and Africans in “Heart of Darkness”. He argued that the criticism of the Europeans in that tale should not disguise or excuse what he saw as its demeaning portrayal of black people. Achebe was among the first to mount what would later be called a postcolonial critique of canonical Western literature, drawing attention to its complicity with racism, violence and oppression, and its reinforcement of a view of the world coloured by the aggression and arrogance of the imperial powers, even when it might seem to have no overt political agenda – a modality ~~which~~ that Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 206) was to term “latent Orientalism”. The other face of

postcolonialism is the promotion or rediscovery of indigenous expressions and traditions, resistant discourse, and the forging of new national identities.

The action of ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer” is set in the Gulf of Siam, but contains no Siamese or Cambodian characters at all, aboard or ashore, a fact that, postcolonial critics might say, speaks for itself. Siam (modern Thailand) was one of the very few nations never at any time formally controlled by a Western power, while the French colonial territory of Cambodia also had a coastline on the Gulf. But in this story, this ambiguous space with its shifting sandbanks ~~Siamese space~~ is appropriated as the picturesque backdrop for an exclusively English drama. In his opening description, the narrator is at pains to survey the scene commandingly, while emptying both sea and visible land of any signs of a living indigenous presence. This could be seen as an example of the trope of *terra nullius*, where travel writers and particularly explorers are wont to give the impression that the territory they traverse is empty of all but themselves.

The narrator describes the islands on the east side of the Gulf as “Unknown to trade, to travel, almost to geography”, virtually off the human map, though, he concedes, “There must be villages” upon them (112.9-11). The islands can provide a refuge for the fugitive Leggatt and therefore a solution to a European problem. “Although he has effectively stripped these Asian shores of any human agency – dehumanizing them, in fact, as Achebe felt that Marlow dehumanized the Africans in “Heart of Darkness” – the narrator has not, perhaps, completely erased their capacity for resistance or threat to this Western incursion. As he sails perilously close to the southern hill of the island of Koh-ring in the darkness, it seems to hang over the ship like a towering fragment of the night itself, a Wordsworthian instance of the terrifying sublime: “On that enormous mass of blackness there was not a gleam to be seen, not a sound to be heard.

It was gliding irresistibly towards us and yet seemed already within reach of the hand-” (116.26-28). The reversal of agency in thats sentence (because, of course, it is actually the ship that is gliding towards the island) seems to intuit the possibility of an irresistible postcolonial resurgence.

The *Sephora* is bringing coal from Liverpool. We are not told what cargo the narrator’s ship carries, only that ~~it~~ she is headed back to England after a long voyage. How can we best replace ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer’ in the history of Victorian commerce, infrastructure, the professions? These sailors are not military or administrative personnel; but they are doing the business of empire along the trade routes of the world. What sort of English men were engaged in this service, and what was required of them? It is a perennial Conrad theme, implicating both gender and ethnicity. And just as he recorded, with some melancholy, the supersession of sailing ships by steamships, so in ~~“The Secret Sharer”~~“The Secret Sharer’ we can see dramatized, and perhaps romanticized, a change in the nature of service at sea ~~which~~ that is of some moment in the history of Britain and ~~its~~ her empire.

We find the Captaincaptain at the moment of the formation of his identity as a master. What kind of a ship’s officer will he be? Leggatt provides him with one model, Archbold with another. Leggatt is dashing, intuitive, brave, a romantic and athletic individualist with a heroic self-conception. He is prepared, in Nietzschean spirit, to break the law and not regret it. He tells the Captaincaptain that he is unafraid of punishment, but would disdain explaining himself “to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen” (111.2) He is a gentleman, the son of a Norfolk clergyman (like the hugely heroic Horatio Nelson), and (like the Captaincaptain himself) a *Conway* boy, who has trained for command at the nautical equivalent of an English public school. He got his berth as mate of the *Sephora* through family influence.

Archbold has none of Leggatt's glamour, or his eloquence. He is of a lower class, unprepossessing appearance, and respectable and probably pious habits (teetotal, wife on board), a career sailor of thirty-seven years' service. When Leggatt kills a man on board his ship, Archbold plays by the book, imprisoning him so as to deliver him to justice in an English port. Here we can see Conrad deviating significantly from the original case, or anecdote, on which Leggatt's story is based. For after John Anderson, alias Sidney Smith, killed a man on board the famous and romantic clipper *Cutty Sark* during a stormy passage, his captain, the celebrated J. S. Wallace, allowed him to escape and swim to an American ship. Days later, ~~Captain~~ Captain Wallace committed suicide, walking off his ship into shark-infested waters. (TLS, Introduction, xxxvii). The prosaic Archbold would be quite incapable of either of these melodramatic actions.

In this case we can, in the manner of New Historicist criticism, both acknowledge that the past only comes to us mediated through texts, and read the literary text as producing history. "The novel is a discursive event. It does not *reflect* history. It *is* history." (Colebrook, 38). The *Cutty Sark* story, subject at the time of much sensational journalistic copy; (see Sherry, 253-269), casts ~~Captain~~ Wallace as a dashing, tragic, even mysterious figure. The *Sephora*'s captain in Conrad's story is a humdrum professional, reliable, predictable, law-abiding but far from romantic. He is a modern sailor for a bureaucratic age. ~~"The Secret Sharer"~~ "The Secret Sharer" has a historical self-consciousness that sees clearly which way the wind was blowing for the swashbuckling gentlemen-heroes of an earlier phase of empire. The tale resolves itself, as stories so often do under the optic of New Historicism, into a pattern of subversion and containment. Leggatt's transgression is a romantic challenge to the order of things, but his escape only confirms that the future belongs to the likes of the prosaic Archbold. The ~~Captain~~ captain's secret aiding of Leggatt is itself a gesture of subversion of the rule-bound modern profession, but at the

same time an acknowledgement of its authority. Archbold returns to his command. Leggatt is seen at the end swimming off, with a last romantic flourish, into legend or at least into history.

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NOTES

1. See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Miller's *Poets of Reality and Fiction and Repetition*, and almost all of Said's literary-critical works from *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* to *On Late Style*.

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[†]~~See Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, Miller's *Poets of Reality and Fiction and Repetition*, and almost all of Said's literary critical works from *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* to *On Late Style*.~~