

Towards the Whole Person : the Significance of Physical Presence in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer"

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When you do not put your mind anywhere it pervades your entire self. And if it has spread through the whole body, when it enters the hand, it does the work of the hand; when it enters the foot, it does the work of the foot; and when it enters the eye, it does the work of the eye. To the extent that it permeates the parts it enters, their functions are fulfilled.

Soho Takuan, *Admirable Records of Unmoving Wisdom*¹

I

Towards the end of 1908, Conrad received a letter and subsequently a visit from Captain Carlos M. Marris that seems to have stirred his memories of the East. It reminded him of his readers out there who "[felt] kindly to the chronicler of their lives and adventures," and led to his subsequent declaration in a letter to James Pinter in October, 1909, that "they shall have some more of the stories they like" (Aubry, 2: 103).

"The Secret Sharer" was written, soon after Conrad made the declaration to Pinter, in December, 1909. Conrad began writing the story "on or just after his fifty-second birthday, December third," and completed it "by the fifteenth (Carabine 210)." Hence it seems legitimate to conclude that "The Secret Sharer," written only two months after the declaration, is far more likely to have been written for the fellow-seamen of his past than the other two stories included in *'Twixt Land and Sea* — "A Smile of Fortune" and "Freya of the Seven Isles" —, which were not written till about a year later.

"The Secret Sharer," written originally intended for seamen, is primarily concerned with seamanship. It tells the story of the experience of the first command, and as such it looks forward to another short story by Conrad, "The Shadow Line," published five years later, from which the following passage has been taken :

Captain Ellis ... had produced a command out of a draw almost as unexpectedly as in a fairy tale. But a command is an abstract idea, and it seemed a sort of 'lesser marvel' till it flashed upon me that it involved the concrete existence of a ship She was there waiting for me, spellbound, unable to move, to live, to get out into the world (till I came) A sudden passion of anxious impatience rushed through

my veins and gave me such a sense of the intensity of existence as I have never felt before or since. I discovered how much of a seaman I was, in heart, in mind, and, as it were, physically (108)

The captain of "The Shadow Line," who, like the captain of "The Secret Sharer," is about to assume the command of a ship for the first time, suggests that a command involves, firstly, "the concrete existence of a ship," and, secondly, not only the emotional and the mental, but also the *physical* existence of a seaman. Yet when we take a look at past criticisms of "The Secret Sharer," we find that few seem to give due consideration to either of these factors. They tend, on the contrary, to focus on the abstract aspects of the story, especially the mind, or, to borrow an expression from *Under Western Eyes*, "that part of [us] which [is] not [our] body" (280).² Albert Guerard, in his *Conrad the Novelist*, calls the story the "most frankly psychological of Conrad's shorter works" (21). While conceding that "it would be improper to forget ... that Leggatt is substantial flesh and blood" (23), he persists in regarding him as "some darker, more interior, and outlaw self (24)" to the captain. In "Legate of the Ideal," Daniel Curley shares Guerard's view that Leggatt is primarily a "double" rather than "mere flesh," but Curley, in contrast to Guerard, holds Leggatt to be "the ideal conception of himself that the captain has set up for himself secretly" (81). According to Curley, "Leggatt is a manifestation of [the captain's] instinctive nature, isolated and useless in the cabin," and "it is only when Leggatt slips back into the sea that the instinctive nature of the captain slips into its proper place as part of an integrated personality" (81). Similarly C. B. Cox sees "The Secret Sharer" as "a drama in which the captain by a supposedly heroic act rids himself of the dark side of his consciousness" (140). Although he too acknowledges that Leggatt is "a real flesh-and-blood seaman as well as some kind of alter ego for the captain" (139), he does not explore the significance of Leggatt's physical presence, as he believes that the "insubstantiality of the physical universe is for Conrad a simple fact which has to be accepted." According to Cox, "the captain's quest for self-identification will not be helped by his perceptions of exterior objects. He must seek to find himself in his subjective consciousness, where sense-impressions never entirely lose the aspect of hallucination" (144).

This bias towards the mind seems to be partly attributable to the tradition of Western Christianity. In *Zen and the Bible*, J. K. Kadowaki distinguishes between the Christian and Buddhist (mainly Zen) tradition in the following words:

Learning through the body is a fundamental of Zen. It is a way which proceeds 'from the body to the mind' We can call it a method of practising with the whole 'body'.

Christianity took the opposite direction as it developed in the West. The Western way is to first reflect rationally, make a judgment, will to do something, and finally use the body to carry out the act. This way of proceeding can be called 'from reason to the body'. (10)

The word "body," as used by Kadowaki, "stands for the whole person as seen from its physical nature," and it "covers both the conscious and subconscious" (31). More-

over, the word, according to Kadowaki, is used in this sense “many times” in the Bible : “The Bible does not separate the body from the soul as the Greeks did, nor does it hold that the soul is noble and the body base Divine grace is given not only to the soul, but to the ‘body’ of the whole person” (122). Coming from a Catholic background, Conrad may quite possibly have been aware that in the Bible the word “body” was often used to indicate the whole person. Be that as it may, in contrast to the rather excessive concern with the mind exhibited in the criticism, the text of “The Secret Sharer” seems to manifest a strong awareness of the body.

II

As Jacob Lothe points out, there is a strong emphasis on the visual in the opening scene of “The Secret Sharer” (60). The captain, standing on the deck of his ship, looks first at the scenery on his right and observes “lines of fishing stakes” with the aspect of having been “abandoned for ever by some nomad tribes of fishermen (81)” ; then he looks towards his left and notes “a group of barren islets, suggesting ruins” (81); finally he turns his head and watches the tug till it disappears out of sight (81-2). Having thus ascertained that he is in possession of “the solemnity of perfect solitude,” which he regards as an essential condition of successful communion with his ship, he at last turns towards the ship : “And then I was left alone with my ship, anchored at the head of the Gulf of Siam. She floated at the starting-point of a long journey, very still in an immense stillness, the shadows of her spars flung far to the eastward by the setting sun” (82). Unfortunately, however, the captain’s expectation of what he calls “quiet communion with [his ship] (82)” is betrayed by the sight of the mastheads of another ship anchored several miles away, and subsequently by the disturbing sounds coming from his own ship.

The captain’s longing for communion with his ship stems from his unfamiliarity with it, having been appointed to the command only a fortnight before. He is “the only stranger on board (83)” and even “somewhat of a stranger to [himself]” ; yet what he “feels most” is “[his] being a stranger to the *ship*” (83; emphasis added). In the subsequent scene when he is again left alone with his ship during the anchor-watch, the captain has the first opportunity to observe her physical appearance at leisure : “the stretch of her main-deck seemed to me very fine under the stars. Very fine, very roomy for her size, and very inviting” (85). Encouraged by this observation of the ship’s appearance, he proceeds to soothe his feeling of strangeness by conjuring up comforting images in a way reminiscent of the captain of “The Shadow Line” who, rather optimistically, declares that “[his] mind’s eye [can] see [the road] on a chart, professionally, with all its complication and difficulties” (111).

I descended the poop and paced the waist, my mind picturing to myself the coming passage through the Malay Archipelago, down the Indian Ocean, and up the Atlantic. All its phases were familiar enough to me, every characteristic, all the alternatives which were likely to face me on the high seas — everything ! ... except the novel responsibility of command. But I took heart from the reasonable thought that the

ship was like other ships, the men like other men, and that the sea was not likely to keep any special surprises expressly for my discomfitures. (85)

Such a thought is a wishful thinking that contradicts with his earlier admission that he was "a stranger to the ship," "the only stranger on board" and "somewhat of a stranger to himself" and only serves to allay his apprehension that he might not "turn out faithful to that ideal conception of [his] own personality" (83). This reaction seems characteristic of the procedure that Kadowaki calls "from the reason to the body"; the captain forms an ideal conception of himself in the mind, then elaborates it in his imagination, and hopes that the body will act in harmony with the mind. Such an ungrounded conception of his own personality and the anticipatory vision of the coming voyage are likely to interfere with rather than to support his communion with his ship.

III

The theme of the relationship between the man and his ship in "The Secret Sharer" is reminiscent of *The Mirror of the Sea*, in which the theme of the special relationship between the man and the ship he works in is discussed in close parallel with the relationship between man and man. A ship is an "assemblage of iron ribs and plating, of wood and steel and canvas and wire," endowed with "character, individuality, qualities and defects," launched upon the water by one set of men and learned to know by another "with an intimacy surpassing the intimacy of man with man" (58). In other words, familiarity with a ship entails familiarity with its physical aspect, which the captain, engrossed in himself, remains unaware of. Ironically, however, by allowing himself, as a stranger to the ship, to make an unusual arrangement for the anchor-watch, the captain unwittingly puts himself under the obligation to learn to know a man in the very way that he should be learning to know his ship.

The fact that Leggatt is flesh and blood has been pointed out by several critics. When he puts his head over the rail to find out why the ladder does not come in, the first thing that the captain spots is "something elongated and pale (86)" floating by the ladder in the shadow of the ship's side; then he sees "a pair of feet, the long legs, a broad livid back immersed right up to the neck (86)," with "[one] hand awash, [clutching] the bottom rung of the ladder (86)"; and finally, "his face, a dimly pale oval (86)" and "the shape of his black-haired head" (86). These are all visual impressions of Leggatt's body, which seems to suggest that, contrary to what Loeth states (61), the emphasis on the visual is retained even after the discovery of Leggatt. Leggatt himself admits in a later scene that he not only did not mind being looked at by the captain, but even liked it (97). This act of seeing is itself closely connected with the body: "... if we say, 'I'm looking at the view,' this 'I' is unconsciously interpreted as the 'I' at the core of one's consciousness, in a word, one's soul.... Actually, the 'I' that is seeing is not merely the soul, not merely the body but the unity of body and soul that is my whole self" (Kadowaki 12). Already at this stage a kind of communication is being developed between the two men, for "human speech does not primarily depend on words. The whole body speaks first" (Kadowaki 13).

The captain's first words to Leggatt, spoken in a placid rather than exclamatory tone of voice, are prompted by a sudden feeling of incertitude evoked by Leggatt's body which, contrary to the captain's expectation, "[makes] no motion to get out of the water" (87). Leggatt, in his turn, is prevented from swimming away from the ladder by the unexpectedness of the captain's tone of voice. At first Leggatt holds a conversation with the captain only because "[he] wanted to be seen, to talk with somebody, before [he] went" (97). Speech, too, has a physical aspect: "... it is my body and the body of the other that are conversing together. The body of the other person turns its ears to my words and opens its mouth to address me" (Kadowaki 13).

The emphasis on the visual and the physical is maintained even after Leggatt is on board. When the captain returns with his spare sleeping-suit, he sees Leggatt "sitting on the main-hatch, glimmering white in the darkness, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hand" (88). Here it should be emphasized that when the word "double" is introduced for the first time, it is in reference to Leggatt clothed in the captain's spare sleeping-suit that conceals Leggatt's "damp body." Because of this initial use, not only the word "double," but other similar phrases, such as "my other self," "my second self," and "the secret sharer," carry connotations of the physical throughout the rest of the story, especially when they are modified by adjectival phrases indicating space, such as "the secret sharer *of my cabin* (104)," "my double *down there in my cabin* (106)," "that stranger *in my cabin* (109)," and "my other self *in there* (112)."

The captain's attentiveness to Leggatt's physical presence is manifested on several occasions in the course of the first conversation they hold on the deck. He remains attentive to Leggatt's presence even whilst Leggatt is relating the incident on the *Sephora*; when Leggatt confesses to having killed a man, the captain dismisses it rather lightly as a "fit of temper," whereas his attention is being drawn by Leggatt's dark head nodding imperceptibly in the dark. This visual image seems to leave strong impression on the captain by evoking in his mind the illusion that Leggatt's head silhouetted against the night is the reflection of his own. The captain's response to Leggatt's appeal that "[he] saw it all going on as though [he] were [himself] *inside that other sleeping-suit*" (90; emphasis added) is again suggestive of his strong awareness of Leggatt's physical presence, for what is concealed inside that other sleeping-suit is Leggatt's "damp body." Subsequently, when Leggatt is describing the conversation that took place between him and the captain of the *Sephora* just after the incident, the captain perceives that Leggatt's body and his own are placed in exactly the same attitude; and Leggatt's physical presence awakens in the captain the awareness of his own bodily existence: "He rested a hand on the end of the skylight to steady himself with, and all that time did not stir a limb, so far as I could see One of my hands, too, rested on the end of the skylight; neither did I stir a limb, so far as I knew. We stood less than a foot from each other" (91). Finally when the captain and Leggatt move down to the stateroom from the cabin, and the captain has a brief moment to himself when he is passing through the cuddy, to return on deck for his relief, what crosses his mind during this brief moment of solitude is not the story that he has just heard from Leggatt, but the

reflection that he and Leggatt are in an identical physical state. This spontaneous response seems to be another proof that the visual impression that the captain receives from Leggatt has endured longer than the verbal impression.

The immediate result of the captain's attentiveness to Leggatt's physical presence, and the need to conceal that object which holds his attention, through physical effort — "the strain of stealthiness, ... the effort of whispering" (98) —, is that it becomes an obsession with the captain, when Leggatt is absent from his view, to carry a lifelike image of him in his mind. All the time he is presiding over breakfast, the captain is "distracted ... almost to the point of insanity" by "the dual working of [his] mind": "I was constantly watching myself, my secret self, as dependent on my actions as my own personality, sleeping in that bed, behind that door which faced me as I sat at the head of the table. It was very much like being mad, only it was worse because one was aware of it" (100). During the conversation with the captain of the *Sephora*, the captain is again unable to clear his mind of the mental image of Leggatt's physical presence: "I looked politely at Captain Archbold..., but it was the other I saw, in a grey sleeping suit, seated on a low stool, his bare feet close together, his arms folded, and every word said between us falling into the ears of his dark head bowed on his chest" (102).

The captain's obsession with his mental image of Leggatt when Leggatt is absent from his view should not be confused with his fascination with the sight of Leggatt when Leggatt is present in his view, as in the following instance: "... I saw him back there, sitting rigidly on the low stool, his bare feet close together, his arms folded, his head hanging on his breast — and perfectly still. Anybody would have taken him for me.... I was fascinated by it myself. Every moment I had to glance over my shoulder" (101). In contrast to when it is haunted by the false image of Leggatt's body, the captain's mind when it is reflecting the genuine image of Leggatt's body, as it manifests itself to the captain's view from moment to moment, is like the mirror in the following analogy: "From ancient times in both East and West, man's mind has been likened to a mirror. When something comes in front of it, it is reflected, but when the thing goes away, its image disappears without leaving a trace" (Kadowaki 80).

IV

A ship that is still lying motionless is, strictly speaking, "not under command" ("The Shadow Line" 155). While his ship was lying motionless, the captain was able to devote his attention to Leggatt; however, shortly after the visit made by the captain of the *Sephora*, the wind rises and the ship at last makes a start. Once it is underway the ship makes a claim "upon [the captain's] thoughts and even upon [his] feelings" (109), just as Leggatt in hiding makes a claim upon his thoughts and feelings, and it is the captain's responsibility to meet this claim: "The genuine masters of their craft — I say this confidently from my experience of ships — have thought of nothing but of doing their very best by the vessel under their charge. To forget one's self, to surrender all personal feeling in the service of that fine art, is the only way for a seaman to the faithful discharge of this trust" (*The Mirror of the Sea* 29-30).

The captain may have "understood" Leggatt well, but now he is asked to learn to know his ship "with an intimacy surpassing the intimacy of man with man." However, not only does the captain's obsession with Leggatt's mental image persist, but it is even intensified to the point that the captain finds himself suffering "the strain of stealthiness" and making "the effort of whispering" when he is on deck. Moreover, the mental impression of watching Leggatt in the cabin so weakens the physical impression of the actual conditions on deck that the captain is unable to respond to them with sufficient alertness :

There are to a seaman certain words, gestures, that should in given conditions come as naturally, as instinctively as the winking of a menaced eye. A certain order should spring on to his lips without thinking ; a certain sign should get itself made, so to speak, without reflection. But all alertness had abandoned me. I had to make an effort of will to recall myself back (from the cabin) to the conditions of the moment. (110)

If it is Leggatt who drives the captain to this obsession with mental impressions, it is also Leggatt who effects its cure. On the fourth day out, when the steward unexpectedly opens the bath-room door to hang a damp coat, Leggatt squats himself down in the bath and escapes discovery. The captain, who hears the bath-room door open at the table, is relieved but so mystified by Leggatt's escape that, when he sees Leggatt again, he for a moment confuses the visual impression of Leggatt's body with the mental image that has been haunting him to the point of insanity when Leggatt is absent from his view ; and significantly it is Leggatt's physical gesture that convinces the captain of the genuineness of Leggatt's bodily existence as opposed to the falseness of his mental impression:

I went slowly into my dark room, shut the door, lighted the lamp, and for a time dared not turn round. When at last I did I saw him standing bolt-upright in the narrow recessed part. It would not be true to say I had a shock, but an irresistible doubt of his bodily existence flitted through my mind. Can it be, I asked myself, that he is not visible to other eyes than mine ? It was like being haunted. Motionless, with a grave face, he raised his hands slightly at me in a gesture which meant clearly, 'Heavens ! what a narrow escape !' Narrow indeed. I think I had come creeping quietly as near insanity as any man who has not actually gone over the border. That gesture restrained me, so to speak. (113)

The captain realizes that while Leggatt has narrowly escaped discovery, it is he himself, and not Leggatt, who has narrowly escaped being driven to insanity through his obsession with mental images : "Whoever was being driven distracted, it was not he. He was sane" (114).

After this incident following Leggatt's narrow escape from discovery by the steward, there are no more indications of the captain's obsession with mental images. On the other hand, Leggatt's physical presence continues to engage his attention, and its resemblance to his own persists in awakening in him the awareness of his own body. It is this awareness of his own body and his newly acquired capacity to detach himself from

misleading mental visions that enables the captain to overcome his last ordeal and finally establish a perfect communion with his ship.

When the captain returns on deck after the last handshake with Leggatt, he is at first unable to feel whether the ship is standing still or not (120). He has the impression that the ship is so close to land that she is "gone too close to be recalled, gone from [him] altogether" (121). He is not misled by this mental impression, like his first mate, who wails: "She will never weather, and you are too close now to stay. She'll drift ashore before she's round. ... She's ashore already" (121-2). Nevertheless, the captain remains "a total stranger to the ship": "In that smooth water and light wind it was impossible to feel the ship coming-to.... I did not know her. Would she do it? How was she to be handled? I swung the mainyard and waited helplessly.... What would she do now? Had she way on her yet? ... It was impossible to tell — and I had not learned yet the feel of the ship. Was she moving? What I needed was something easily seen ..." (122).

The circumstances in which the captain discovers his hat are strongly reminiscent of the circumstances in which he discovers Leggatt. The first discovery is made "in the shadow of the ship's side" (86), heralded by "a faint flash of phosphorescent light" (86), while the second discovery is made "within a yard of the ship's side" (123), also on "the shadowy water," and heralded by "a faint phosphorescent flash" (122). For this reason the hat, if it does represent anything, seems to represent not so much "the personality," as has often been pointed out, but "the person," especially the "naked body" of Leggatt. The hat is closely associated with the body also because it is "the expression of [the captain's] sudden pity for [Leggatt's] mere flesh (123)" with which he has become familiar. It seems proper that a hat with such a strong association with the body should save the ship by serving the captain "to help out the ignorance of [his] strangeness (123)," in other words, to help him overcome his unfamiliarity with the body of his ship; for the perfect communion of a seaman with his ship demands most of all "that his senses [are] like her senses, that the stress upon his body [makes] him judge of the strain upon the ship's masts" (*The Mirror of the Sea* 38). It is at this point that the captain for the first time *feels* the ship; and thus becomes connected with her through his senses:

And I watched the hat — the expression of my sudden pity for his mere flesh. It had been meant to save his homeless head from the dangers of the sun. And now — behold — it was saving the ship, by serving me for a mark to help out the ignorance of my strangeness. Ha! It was drifting forward, warning me just in time that the ship had gathered sternway.

With his attention no longer distracted by Leggatt's presence, and given the opportunity to give himself wholeheartedly to the ship, the captain achieves communion with his ship with his whole person, though, ironically, in circumstances quite devoid of that "solemnity of perfect solitude" that he once believed to be an indispensable condition of such perfect communion.

The foreyards ran round with a great noise, amidst cheery cries. And now the

frightful whiskers made themselves heard giving various orders. Already the ship was drawing ahead. And I was alone with her. Nothing ! no one in the world should stand now between us, throwing a shadow on the way of silent knowledge and mute affection, the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command. (123)

V

"The Secret Sharer" is primarily a story about the relationship of a seaman to his ship. Hence the title of the story is suggestive not only of Leggatt with whom the captain shares his efforts, thoughts and impressions, but also of the ship to whom the captain owes "the fullest share of [his] thought, of [his] skill, of [his] self love."

As it has been shown here, one of Conrad's works that has left a strong impression on the story is *The Mirror of the Sea*. *The Mirror of the Sea* was published three years before "The Secret Sharer" was written, in October, 1906; and it is based "not only on the author's personal memories but also on his specialist knowledge as a seaman" (Najder in "The Secret Sharer" vii). It seems that in writing "The Secret Sharer," Conrad relied rather heavily on the theories of seamanship that he had himself put forward in the memoir; sometimes even to the detriment of the story. One such example that has attracted the attention of many critics is the circumstances in which the captain risks sailing the ship dangerously close to the shore in order to enable Leggatt to swim safely ashore. The captain does this, not so much because he wishes "to give [Leggatt] a convincing demonstration of moral support" (Cox 148), or because he needs "to put both himself and his ship to an extreme test as a necessary preliminary to his taking effective possession of it as its captain" (Daleski 182), but because, according to Conrad's theory, "it is not what your ship will *not* do that you want to know to get on terms of successful partnership with her; it is, rather, that you ought to have a precise knowledge of what she will do for you when called upon to put forth what is in her by a sympathetic touch" (27-8).

If *The Mirror of the Sea* is responsible for some of the weaknesses detected in "The Secret Sharer," it is to *Under Western Eyes* that the story owes its merits. The significant relation of *Under Western Eyes* to "The Secret Sharer" has been frequently pointed out by the critics. *Under Western Eyes* was begun in December, 1907, but was not completed until January, 1910. As "The Secret Sharer" was written while the writing of *Under Western Eyes* was still in progress, it is not surprising that some of the themes explored in the novel are reflected in the story, one of which is the theme of physical presence. The theme of physical presence runs strongly through *Under Western Eyes*, as it does through "The Secret Sharer." However, whereas in the novel the theme is closely involved with other equally important themes, such as the theme of time, in the short story it seems to stand out in relief, occupying a more dominant position there than in *Under Western Eyes*. While this, on the one hand, makes the exploration of the theme in "The Secret Sharer" less subtle than that in the novel, it also makes it more accessible to the reader. In relation to *Under Western Eyes*, one of the merits of "The Secret Sharer" lies in its function as a preliminary to the theme of physical presence.

Notes

- 1 Soho Takuan (1573–1645), *Fudochi Shinmyo-roku*, qtd. in Kadowaki 78.
- 2 This tendency is not confined to criticisms of “The Secret Sharer.” In an article on Jacques Derrida, Nicholas Tredell criticizes post-structuralism and deconstruction in the following words : “Post-structuralism and deconstruction exemplify a failed rebellion which is also a revolt against reason For all their attempts to exorcise it, the ghost of Cartesian reason — of a mind split from a body, from emotions and instincts — still haunts them (95).”

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