Sharing Secrets

This chapter foregrounds the ethical dimension of reading through a meditation on reading "The Secret Sharer" as an experience of sharing secrets. This meditation leads to the hypothesis that the captain's narrative about his secret relationship with Leggatt itself contains a further secret, an implicit communication "whispered in the interstices of the narrative." I consider how an awareness of this secret transforms the understanding of the narrative, leading us to reconfigure the events the captain narrates. By looking for the secret in the captain's discourse, I am again postulating that discourse can simultaneously be story, that discourse can function not just as an important angle of vision on the action but also as part of the action itself. But determining the captain's secret and recognizing how its presence transforms the story he tells is only part of my concern here. I am even more interested in accounting for the ethics of entering the captain's and Conrad's audiences. If to read this narrative is, both metaphorically and literally, to become a secret sharer with the captain, then how does this secret sharing influence the ethical dimension of our reading experience? In answering the question, this essay also reconsiders the relations among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and readerly subjectivity. Rather than emphasizing the authorial audience's position in reconstructing an author's purpose, I argue for a more dynamic, synergistic model, one in which the lines between authorial agency, textual phenomena, and readerly subjectivity are not easily distinguishable.

"As long as I know that you understand. . . . But of course you do. It's a great satisfaction to have got somebody to understand. You seem to have been there on purpose. . . . It's very wonderful."
—Leggatt to the captain (135)
Reading Secrets: Ethical Questions

"The Secret Sharer": Conrad's alliterative title plays peekaboo with any reader who pauses to puzzle over its meanings. Pondering matters of event and character, we can see the following significations emerge: a secret shared; a sharer who is secret; and a sharer who reveals a secret. As a title, "The Secret Sharer" creates for the reader the expectation that the secret, the sharing, and the sharers will all be identified before story's end. Pondering matters of telling and listening, we can glimpse other, less immediately apparent significations: "The Secret Sharer" names the narrator, the narratee, and, indeed, Conrad and each of his readers. To narrate is to tell secrets; to read narrative is to share in them. "The Secret Sharer," c'est moi—et lui et vous.

These significations about telling and listening (or writing and reading) in turn call attention to the ethical dimensions of Conrad's narrative, both in its events and in its telling and reception. Secrets may be about matters honorable, shameful, or indifferent, may be revelations of virtue, vice, or mediocrity, but, regardless of their content, secrets always have some ethical valence. Furthermore, the keeping or telling of secrets also always has an ethical dimension. We keep or tell secrets to inform or mislead, to titillate or ingratiate, to submit or dominate, repel or seduce, protect or hurt.

In the case of Conrad's narrative, the ethical dimensions of the action are everywhere apparent: the reader's involvement in "The Secret Sharer" is built on the conflict between the captain's responsibility to his crew and his decisions to keep Leggatt's existence a secret and to help him escape. The ethical dimensions of the telling, by contrast, are not so immediately evident. Strikingly, the occasion of the captain's narration is left unspecified. Conrad does not have him indicate any motive for his telling, identify his narratee, or locate himself in space. Even the one marker of the narrative situation Conrad supplies—its temporal location—lacks precision: the narrator comments that "at this distance of years" (123) he cannot be sure that "Archbold" was the name of the Sephora's captain, but the distance is not measured by a specific number. Furthermore, although the narrator is very
aware of himself as an actor and frequently comments on his behavior, that commentary almost never comes from his vantage point at the time of the narration.

The unspecified occasion of narration is all the more noteworthy because Conrad has, by 1909, already created several works in which the occasion and audience of the first-person narrator are explicitly defined—and made crucial to the effect of the whole narrative. To take just the two most celebrated cases, in *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*, Conrad includes information about Marlow, Marlow's audience, and the occasions of Marlow's narrations in order to influence substantially the reader's understanding of Marlow's investment in the experiences of Kurtz and Jim. Indeed, our overall response to these texts involves the interaction of our responses to Marlow's narratives about Kurtz and Jim with our responses to Conrad's narratives about Marlow. In other words, by the time he is writing "The Secret Sharer," Conrad has already demonstrated that the technique of specifying narrative situations can extend the meaning and power of some narratives far beyond the meaning and power attendant upon the straight narration of their primary sequences of events.

The material of "The Secret Sharer" certainly seems ripe for such treatment: a young and uncertain captain, trying to establish himself with a suspicious crew, harbors and protects a fugitive from justice because the fugitive seems to be his second self; through his determination to help the fugitive escape and through a surprising assist from the fugitive, he manages to establish his authority with the crew, the ship, and himself. If Conrad had, say, employed Marlow to pass on the captain's story to a group of veteran British seamen, Conrad could have made this tale *Lord Jim Revisited*, with Jim's traits split between the captain and Leggatt, with Marlow once again posing the ethical questions about what it means to be "one of us" and with Conrad's audience attending to the interaction between the captain's narrative and Marlow's quest for its meaning.

Why, then, would Conrad eschew the approach that he had employed so successfully before? What effects and purposes are likely to be guiding his choice of this different technique, which leaves the
occasion and audience of the narration unspecified? More particularly, in this narrative of secrets, what is the relationship between the ethical dimensions of the captain’s story and the ethical dimensions of his telling? How does a reader’s effort to participate in sharing the secrets of “The Secret Sharer” implicate him or her in the ethical dimensions of the story and its telling? Just what is at stake for us when we try to be for Conrad what the captain is for Leggatt—the wonderful somebody who understands?

Detecting Secrets

Let us begin to answer by looking at Conrad’s structuring of the action. Conrad evokes and guides the authorial and the narrative audiences’ initial interests through his intertwining of two main instabilities: (1) The uneasy relationship between the captain and the crew. In command of his first ship, the young captain must prove both to his older, initially suspicious crew and to himself that he is a capable commander. As he says early in his account, “I wondered how far I should turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one’s own personality every man sets up for himself secretly” (107). (2) The uncertainty of whether he will be able to keep Leggatt’s presence a secret from the crew, from the captain of the Sephora, from everyone.

Conrad’s intertwining of these instabilities heightens the suspense we feel in the narrative and authorial audiences, because they pull in opposite directions. The more the captain devotes himself to setting the crew at ease by working closely with them and otherwise following the conventions of command, the more he increases the chances for Leggatt’s exposure. The more he gives in to his desires to protect Leggatt and his secret, the more he increases his crew’s doubts about his ability. Reading the final episode is so intense partly because the two instabilities fully converge there, raising the conflict to its highest point. As the captain brings the boat near the shore of Koh-ring, he simultaneously risks the two things he has been struggling mightily to maintain: Leggatt’s secret existence and the effective command of the ship. Conrad’s resolution is wonderfully efficient and—to the authorial audience—satisfying. The captain chooses to endanger the crew,
the ship, and his own future for the sake of Leggatt; when he manages, with the assist from the hat he had given Leggatt, to turn the ship in time and to pick up the land breezes, the very dangerous course he has taken becomes, in the eyes of the crew, incontrovertible evidence of his ability and his courage.

Even as Conrad’s structuring of the action evokes this sequence of instability, suspense, and satisfaction, his narrative discourse deepens and complicates our involvement in the captain’s story. As noted above, although Conrad indicates that the captain is looking back on his earlier experience, the captain only rarely speaks from his perspective at the time of the narration. As we have seen in chapters 3 and 4, this method of autodiegetic narration frequently accompanies unreliable narration, that is, a telling in which a significant gap exists between the values and/or the understanding of the narrator and narrative audience and those of the implied author and authorial audience. Although Conrad does not leave any clear signals that his norms are markedly different from the captain’s, both the narrative method and the focus on secrets invite us to ask whether there is more to this narrative than initially appears. More specifically, the technique and the subject matter encourage us to look for an important subtext, some secret whispered in the interstices of the narrative, perhaps even one that the captain himself may not be fully aware of. In other words, the technique and the subject matter authorize the authorial audience to search for a subtext.

The search yields two possibilities I want to consider here: (1) the captain has been having hallucinations, and Leggatt exists only as his fantasy; (2) the captain’s fellow feeling for Leggatt arises less from their common background and values than from their mutual sexual attraction. The first possibility, hinted at in the captain’s question of whether Leggatt is “visible to eyes other than mine” (134), is intriguing because it suggests a way of rereading the captain’s psychology. Rather than a reasonably healthy man facing a difficult set of circumstances, he becomes a seriously unhealthy one whose anxieties about his new command lead him to invent an imaginary friend whom he fully understands and whom he can shelter and protect. On this view, then, the narrative is a study in the development, complication, and final resolution of this anxiety.
This hypothesis, however, is difficult to sustain because it must explain away too much recalcitrant evidence. The greatest recalcitrance is provided by Archbold’s visit with its independent confirmation of Leggatt’s existence and of the main lines of his story. Other, more minor, evidence includes the steward’s hearing Leggatt’s movement at a time when the captain is away from his cabin and the appearance of the captain’s white hat floating in the sea after Leggatt leaves. Of course, it would be possible to argue that these events are all part of the captain’s fantasy, that the captain has used Archbold’s visit as the basis for his creation of Leggatt, and that after the event he has imaginatively re-created the version of that visit—and virtually everything else—that we get. In a reader response criticism that emphasized the reader’s role in creating the meaning of texts, these arguments might be sufficient to allow the hypothesis to stand. Within a rhetorical approach, however, some significant problems arise. Since the technique gives us the captain’s experience as he felt it at the time of the action, how do we explain—without even a covert clue from Conrad—that the captain encounters Leggatt before he encounters Archbold? More generally, the problem with this hypothesis is that it makes the subtext almost a complete secret, something that is pointed to only by the captain’s single moment of doubt, a moment which on other accounts is explained as a vivid sign of the strain the captain is feeling.

By contrast, the hypothesis that the authorial audience is supposed to recognize the secret of the homosexual attraction is quite persuasive. The text abounds in evidence—some overt, some not so overt—that invites us to catch on to the secret. The captain’s very first glimpse of Leggatt is charged with a sexual electricity: “I saw at once something elongated and pale floating very close to the ladder. Before I could form a guess a faint flash of phosphorescent light, which seemed to issue suddenly from the naked body of a man, flickered in the sleeping water with the elusive, silent play of summer lightning in the night sky” (110). Other elements of the scene also invite attention to its sexual undertones, even as the surface of the text attends more to Leggatt’s apparent rising from the dead, his transformation from corpse into living man. The captain’s gaze follows the line of Leggatt’s naked body from foot to neck: “With a gasp I saw revealed to my stare
a pair of feet, the long legs, a broad livid back immersed right up to the neck in a greenish cadaverous glow” (110). When the captain thinks that the naked man is a “headless corpse,” he involuntarily drops the cigar he is smoking out of his mouth: a loss of potency and heat. When he realizes that the man is still alive, the heat returns: “the horrid, frost-bound sensation which had gripped me about the chest” passed off (110).  

More generally, the captain’s consistent gazing upon Leggatt’s body suggests that a likely source of their “mysterious communication” is their mutual, unspoken recognition of their attraction: “I, . . . coming back on deck, saw the naked man from the sea sitting on the main hatch, glimmering white in the darkness, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands” (111). Later the captain says of Leggatt that “with his face nearly hidden, he must have looked exactly as I used to look in that bed. I gazed upon my other self for a while” (120). Furthermore, the captain arranges matters so that he must bathe before Leggatt’s gaze: “I took a bath and did most of my dressing, splashing, and whistling softly for the steward’s edification, while the secret sharer of my life stood drawn up bolt upright in that little space” (122). After this description, we may feel compelled to ask: If he did most of the dressing, splashing, and whistling for the steward’s edification, for whom did he do the rest of it?  

This evidence speaks strongly of the captain’s attraction, but what of Leggatt’s? The narrative perspective necessarily limits our access to his thoughts and feelings, but his part in the “mysterious communication” between the two, especially his confidence that the captain would understand everything, suggests that he too feels the unspoken bond. And one of his early speeches strongly suggests that the attraction is mutual: referring to his naked arrival at the ladder of the *Sephora*, he tells the captain, “I didn’t mind being looked at [by you]. I–I liked it. And then you speaking to me so quietly—as if you had expected me—made me hold on a little longer” (119). As the story continues, the evidence for the secret becomes less covert. The first night, the captain reports that “we stood leaning over my bed-place, whispering side by side, with our dark heads together and our backs to the door” (115). Later, he tells us that at night “I would smuggle him into my bed-place, and we would whisper
together, with the regular footfalls of the watch passing and repassing over our heads. It was an infinitely miserable time” (131). Why “infinitely miserable”? Perhaps because of sexual frustration. Perhaps their intimacy stopped at whispering, for fear that other expressions of it might become loud enough to alert the watch and expose them both.

The ellipsis in Leggatt’s comment about the captain’s wonderful understanding that I use as my epigraph contains this description: “And in the same whisper, as if we two whenever we talked had to say things to each other which were not fit for the world to hear” (135): what is this but the love which dare not speak its name? Finally, the captain’s overt description of their final communication—significantly nonverbal—is charged with the language of desire: “our hands met gropingly, lingered united in a steady, motionless clasp for a second. . . . No word was breathed by either of us when they separated” (140).

The hypothesis encounters no significant recalcitrance, and attending to this subtext has significant consequences for our response. As flesh-and-blood readers, we have our own, sometimes highly charged, responses to representations of homosexuality, responses that range from homophobia to celebratory identification. Second, as members of the authorial audience, attending to this secret alters our understanding of the action. Part of the captain’s anxiety about his acceptance by the crew now becomes anxiety over whether they will suspect his sexual orientation. Archbold’s talk about why he never liked Leggatt can now be seen as rooted in—may even be a coded way of voicing—Archbold’s suspicion that Leggatt was homosexual. The captain’s initial negative response to Leggatt’s request that they maroon him on one of the islands becomes the response of the selfish, unfulfilled lover. His need to take the ship as close to Koh-ring as possible then becomes his way of atoning for this selfishness. Leggatt’s words about knowing that the captain understands come to encompass the whole situation—why Leggatt decided to come on board, why he confided in the captain, why their bond is so strong, why they don’t speak about it overtly or act on it differently, why he must leave. The captain’s giving Leggatt his hat becomes a substitute for giving him a ring or any other token of remembrance and identification that one lover gives to another. Leaving the hat in the water becomes
Leggatt's way of giving the ring back and a powerful symbol of their unconsummated relationship: the good that they do each other does not depend on possession.

The ethics of attending to the secret of homosexual attraction are fairly complex.\(^1\) The narrative's treatment of the relationship certainly valorizes it: the action is structured so that the authorial audience's pleasure and satisfaction in the story depend on acceptance and approval of the bond between the captain and Leggatt. Furthermore, the uncharacteristically triumphant ending sends a strong signal about how this story endorses that bond and the actions to which it leads. And, as I suggested earlier, Conrad makes the authorial audience yet another "secret sharer"—in the sense of sharing in the secret and in the sense of sharing it secretly. That is, we not only share the secret but do so without any explicit revelation of it. It is debatable whether the captain realizes that his narration reveals the secret. This point is worth dwelling on not for the sake of trying to settle the question but for the sake of assessing the captain's self-understanding after the events. If he is deliberately conveying the secret to readers astute enough to hear it, then he becomes more self-aware and sophisticated as a narrator than his silence about the narrative occasion suggests. If, however, he is inadvertently revealing the secret, then we recognize that although he may have passed a critical test of his captaincy, he still needs to face other fundamental questions of identity.

Conrad's relation to the homosexual secret is even harder to pin down. If we opt for the understanding of the captain as in control of his narrative, we will also see Conrad as carefully in control behind the captain. If, however, we see the captain's revelation as unwitting, we may decide that Conrad has planned it that way or that Conrad himself is not fully aware of the homosexual subtext. In fact, articulating the secret and specifying the evidence for it helps to illuminate one of the fault lines in rhetorical reader response: the one running between the authorial and the flesh-and-blood audiences. On the one hand, the evidence points to a design on Conrad's part that the authorial audience needs to discern; indeed, without such a pattern of evidence, I would not suggest that this secret is a plausible one. On the other hand, I can't help wondering how much my perception of this secret
is a consequence of my historical moment, in particular, the way in which the gay studies movement has made me and numerous other academic readers especially attuned to representations of same-sex desire. Is the secret constructed by the implied Conrad or the flesh-and-blood critic? I don’t fully know. Furthermore, there is a sense in which, within the rhetorical approach, it is not all that important to know. When the situated subjectivity of the reader encounters the otherness of the text, the analyst cannot always definitively locate the boundaries that mark off flesh-and-blood and authorial audiences—or more generally, reader, text, and author—from each other. The synergy among these different elements of the rhetorical transaction is precisely what the rhetorical approach wants to acknowledge.

In any case, Conrad’s strategy of suggesting that there is a secret in the captain’s narration without calling explicit attention to any particular secret can be seen as a sign of his confidence in his readers. On this view, Conrad is not only complimenting his audience but subtly collaring us to share his positive view of the captain and Leggatt. Nevertheless, even this very positive construction of the ethical dimension of reading this story is complicated by the very reliance upon secrets. If homosexuality must remain secret, how can it be genuinely valorized? To participate, as the story asks us to do, in the secretiveness surrounding homosexuality is to be complicit with the forces who would repress homosexuality entirely. For this reason, I find it hard not to become a partially resistant reader of Conrad’s text. But the nature of that resistance is itself further complicated by other responses that arise from Conrad’s technique for representing the dynamic between the captain and Leggatt.

**Guilty Secrets**

As some readers have no doubt already noticed, there has been a conspicuous absence from my discussion to this point: I have not said anything about Leggatt’s taking the life of another man. I use the phrase “taking the life” rather than “murdering” because Conrad’s treatment of the event allows for our reasonable doubt. Leggatt tells his own story, making it clear that the man died at his hands, but he does not take full responsibility for the death:
We closed just as an awful sea made for the ship. All hands saw it coming and took to the rigging, but I had him by the throat and went on shaking him like a rat, the men above us yelling, "Look out! look out!" Then a crash as if the sky had fallen on my head. They say that for over ten minutes hardly anything was to be seen of the ship. . . . It was a miracle that they found us, jammed together behind the forebits. It's clear that I meant business, because I was holding him by the throat still when they picked us up. (113)

The most striking feature of Conrad's handling of this event is that the captain never explicitly says how he thinks about it and never directs the narratee how to think about it. In reading the report of his conversation with Archbold, we can infer that he has been unwilling to admit Leggatt's role in the man's death. "Don't you think," he suggests, "that the heavy sea . . . might have killed the man?" But Archbold is having none of that: "Good God! . . . The sea! No man killed by the sea ever looked like that." And to demonstrate, "he advanced his head close to mine and thrust his tongue out at me so suddenly that I couldn't help starting back" (124). Though the captain starts back here, he never reaches the place where he assesses Leggatt's conduct for himself or the reader.

Instead, he assumes that the narratee will share his acceptance of it, his willingness to think that Leggatt's ending another man's life is less important than Leggatt's current plight and less important than Leggatt's bonding with him. Since the narratee is unspecified and since Conrad does not clearly depict Leggatt as murderer, we are also likely to feel—as both flesh-and-blood and authorial readers—the pull of the captain's assumptions. To be the secret sharer of this narrative is to adopt these assumptions, at least for the moments when we project ourselves into the narratee's position; to be the secret sharer of the narrative is also to endorse the captain's plan to protect Leggatt. It is, I find, a rather uncomfortable ethical position.

It is uncomfortable because even while we feel the pull of the captain's assumptions as we read from the narratee's position, we remain aware of other complex considerations in the authorial audience position. On the one hand, the captain's assumptions are defensible: Leggatt's plight is serious and the mutual understanding he and the captain share is impressive. On the other hand, the assumptions are
questionable: Leggatt may be a murderer, and the captain’s efforts to keep him hidden clearly interfere with the captain’s performance of his primary responsibilities. In this way, hiding Leggatt’s existence becomes the captain’s guilty secret, a guilt made all the more complicated by the captain’s unspoken homosexual attraction. Indeed, Conrad is presenting us with a situation in which the two main internal threats to a “proper” company of sailors—homosexuality and murder—become located, albeit not clearly realized, in the captain’s second self. Once we recognize this dimension of the situation, the captain’s identification with Leggatt puts the captain in an even greater conflict with his responsibility to the crew. Although the captain seems in one way to have no trouble with the ethics of his behavior, he and we also know that the captain could not successfully defend himself to his crew on ethical grounds. As readers, we become the sharers of the captain’s guilty secret, with the added burden of not being sure we can justify it to ourselves. Moreover, once Conrad makes us such secret sharers, once we are in this position of reading guilty secrets, we are at least temporarily in the uncomfortable position of living with them, carrying guilty secrets in our consciousnesses.

The increasing intensity of the narrative, then, depends not just on Conrad’s skillful complication and then convergence of the instabilities, not just on our increasing recognition of the subtextual secret, but also on the complication of the reader’s feelings of sharing and living with guilty secrets. Conrad’s handling of the visit from Archbold and the crew of the Sephora nicely illustrates the point. The key instability in the scene is whether the captain can successfully protect Leggatt, and the captain’s narration is primarily concerned with that. At the same time, details such as the exchange between the captain and the first mate emphasize that Leggatt is, indeed, a secret to feel guilty about. The mate comments that the story he has heard about Leggatt “beats all these tales we hear about murders in Yankee ships” (128). He also reports the crew’s reaction to the idea that Leggatt might be hiding on the ship: “Our chaps took offense. ‘As if we would harbor a thing like that,’ they said. ‘Wouldn’t you like to look for him in our coal hole?’ Quite a tiff” (128). At this point, the tension is running high between our efforts to read from the narratee position, where we remain sympathetic to the captain, and from the authorial audience
position, where we recognize the responsibility to the crew. If the suggestion that Leggatt is on the ship provokes this reaction among “our chaps,” we can only imagine what actually discovering him would provoke. Even as we recognize that the crew’s position is problematic in its assumption of Leggatt’s guilt, the mate’s comments also function to underline the captain’s need for secrecy and to deepen the guilt associated with the secret.

By the time the captain is bringing the boat to the shore of Koh-ring, we are being pulled in different directions: toward compassion for Leggatt and hope for the captain, toward complicitous guilt that the captain is recklessly endangering the ship, putting his own concerns above those of the crew and the ship. These feelings are mingled with the fear that he will end up grounding the ship. Fear, hope, guilt all come together in the moment where the captain violently speaks to and shakes the first mate—a moment that, as many critics note (see especially Leiter), puts the captain in essentially the position occupied by Leggatt during the crisis on the Sephora. As the captain shouts at the mate, our feelings may move us to be shouting to ourselves: Shake some sense into the mate; no, don’t touch him at all; bring the ship all the way in; how can you value the secret over the ship; listen to the mate; forget the mate.

In this context, Conrad’s successful resolution of the instabilities brings a welcome release from the conflict of our feelings. The release seems all the more satisfying when we reflect that the captain now never has to reveal his secret; the torment that made him feel as if he “had come creeping quietly as near insanity as any man who has not actually gone over the border” (134) is permanently over. But further reflection brings back some uneasiness. For some reason, the captain has decided to reveal the secret—and to some extent relive the torment—by telling the story. Our release is not thereby ruined, but the fragility of the captain’s release is underlined. So, too, is the captain’s great good fortune in having events work out this way: the ending could so easily have been different. But after such a reading experience, after such discomfort and such welcome release, that is a conclusion we may want, at least for a while, to keep secret.\textsuperscript{12}