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**THE DOUBLE-STAGING OF IMPERATIVES IN  
JOSEPH CONRAD'S "THE SECRET SHARER"**

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of this essay is to explore the interplay between the personal secret-sharing that forms the overt subject of Joseph Conrad's celebrated short-story "The Secret Sharer" and the impersonal sharing that occurs continuously between two distinct "imperatives": the territorial, which controls the overt actions of the protagonists, and the symmetrical, which guides the covert activity of Conrad himself. Its methodology is inspired by Robert Ardrey's classic study of the quest for territory in *The Territorial Imperative* (1966), on the one hand, and, on the other, by Marcel Jousse's study of human beings as a bilaterally symmetrical species in *L'anthropologie du geste* (2008), on the other. The captain's failure to claim uncontested "communion" with the territory represented by his ship will lead to his fulfilling it via the "mysterious communication" that he achieves with Leggatt as a substitute "territory." His determination to **prevent** the discovery of his designated double by the members of his crew is accompanied throughout the story by Conrad's **inviting** his readers to discover the innumerable doubles that contribute to its design. These doubles oscillate between the high visibility of the "two bunches of bananas [that] hung from the beam symmetrically" and the low visibility of Leggatt's "headless corpse" at the beginning of the story and his "homeless head" at the end.*

**Keywords:** territory; symmetry; visibility; scheme; schema

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This paper will eventually be a chapter in a book to be entitled "Balancing All: The Symmetrical Imperative of Writing." Its title recalls a famous line from William Butler Yeats's poem "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" (Yeats, 1986, 55) and its subtitle echoes the thesis of Robert Ardrey's *The Territorial Imperative* (1966) that human beings are essentially a territorial species while also revisiting Mareel Jousse's contention in his *L'anthropologie du geste* (2008) that the bilateral symmetry of the human body is the model to which we instinctively resort when giving form to our experience of the world. The guiding hypothesis of this book-in-progress is that all great literary works – from Homer's *Iliad* to masterpieces of modernist writing – stage the continuous interplay between the territorial imperative in the overt *actions* of their protagonists and the symmetrical imperative in the covert *activity* of their authors.

There is, at first glance, nothing secretive about the relation of the title of Joseph Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" to the story itself. Right from the beginning, we understand that it refers to Leggatt, the chief mate of the *Sephora*, whom the unnamed captain describes as "the secret sharer of my life" (Conrad, 2021,32) and twice as "the secret sharer of my cabin" (Conrad, 2021, 39, 72). In a similar way, he refers to Leggatt more than a dozen times as his "double," beginning with "[he] followed me

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like my double on the poop” (Conrad, 2021, 13) and concluding, a dozen references later, with “I wondered what my double there in the sail locker thought of this commotion” (Conrad, 2021, 69). Barbara Johnson and Marjorie Garber have been led by these frequent allusions to Leggatt as the captain’s double to conclude that “A more overdetermined figure has seldom appeared in literature. The reader is hardly to be congratulated for noticing its presence” (Johnson & Garber, 1987, 628). They then take the further step of maintaining that “Nothing is left to the imagination – no secret is unshared” (Johnson & Garber, 1987, 629). The captain’s explicitness is, however, utterly at odds with Conrad’s warning in a letter to Richard Curle dated 24 April 1922 about the threat that it poses to the success of a work:

Explicitness, my dear fellow, is fatal to the glamour of all artistic work, robbing it of all suggestiveness, destroying all illusion. You seem to believe in literalness and explicitness, in facts and also in expression. Yet nothing is more clear than the utter insignificance of explicit statement and also its power to call attention away from things that matter in the region of art. (Conrad, 1928, 113)

As we shall see, what most matters in “The Secret Sharer” – and which, indeed, leaves a good deal more to the imagination than does the captain’s overdetermined designation of Leggatt as his “double” -- is the under-noticed “double-staging,” on the one hand, of the territorial imperative that compels the captain to *hide* his secret-sharer from his crew and, on the other hand, the symmetrical imperative that inspires Conrad to *plant* countless doubles for his readers.

“The Secret Sharer” begins with the captain apparently enjoying full mastery of the territory that he calls “my ship” (Conrad, 2021, 2). A moment later, however, he sees something that “did away with the solemnity of perfect solitude” and assures that “the comfort of quiet communion with her was gone for good” (Conrad, 2021, 3). This “something” is another ship whose presence he discovers in the distance. Closer to home, aboard his own ship, he hears “disturbing sounds – voices, footsteps forward” (Conrad, 2021, 3). We soon learn of the even greater disturbance whereby his possession of “my ship” is contested by a crew whose claim may actually be more valid than his: All these people had been together for eighteen months or so, and my position was that of the only stranger on board (Conrad, 2021, 4).

Throughout “The Secret Sharer,” the captain continually employs words that remind us of how tenuous his territorial claim really is. He feels that he was “doing something unusual” when he tells the mate “to let all hands turn in without setting an anchor watch” (Conrad, 2021, 6), and then explains that “my strangeness, which had made me sleepless, had prompted that unconventional arrangement” (Conrad, 2021, 7). Thanks to the miraculous arrival of Leggatt, the loss of his “quiet communion” at the outset becomes “a mysterious *communication*” (Conrad, 2021, 12-13; my emphasis) with “my double” that restores the companionable solitude that he had previously enjoyed with “my ship,” a benefit that he associates with their mutual strangeness: “He had turned about meantime; and we, the two strangers in the ship, faced each other in identical attitudes”. (Conrad, 2021, 27). The irrevocable discovery of his strangeness by his crew is now transferred to Leggatt, whose presence aboard the ship can be successfully forestalled. He declares his resolve to avoid discovery when, in the midst of one of his many whispered conversations with Leggatt, he imagines the chief mate suddenly appearing:

We stood less than a foot from each other. It occurred to me that if old ‘Bless my soul – you don’t say so’ were to put his head up the companion and catch sight of us, he would think he was seeing double, or imagine himself come upon a scene of weird witchcraft; the strange captain having a quiet confabulation by the wheel with his own gray ghost. I became very much concerned to prevent anything of the sort. (Conrad, 2021, 18)

He then arranges several encounters in which he intentionally hides Leggatt in his stateroom, a place where others are likely to “catch sight” of him but in such a way as to avoid this unwanted intrusion into his territory. Among these stagings, we notice his concealing Leggatt while the steward cleans his room:

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, his face looking very sunken in daylight, his eyelids lowered under the stern, dark line of his eyebrows drawn together by a slight frown. (Conrad, 2021, 32)

He then continues this stratagem by calling for the mate: "my object was to give him an opportunity for a good look at my cabin. And then I could at last shut, with a clear conscience, the door of my stateroom and get my double back into the recessed part" (Conrad, 2021, 32-33). "Such was my *scheme*," he tells us, "for keeping my second self invisible" (Conrad, 2021, 33; my emphasis). The implementation of this scheme next finds him inviting Captain Archbold into his cabin, where, by pretending to be hard of hearing, he assures that Leggatt, while remaining out of sight, will overhear what Archbold says. After casually opening and closing the door of his bathroom, he then suggests that Archbold see his stateroom, an invitation that he offers "in a voice as loud as I dared make it, crossing the cabin to the starboard side with purposely heavy steps" (Conrad, 2021, 42). Later, his scheme will be nearly foiled when the steward enters his bathroom without his having been able to give advance warning to Leggatt:

Suddenly I became aware (it could be heard plainly enough) that the fellow for some reason or other was opening the door of the bathroom. It was the end. The place was literally not big enough to swing a cat in. My voice died in my throat and I went stony all over. I expected to hear a yell of surprise and terror, and made a movement, but had not the strength to get on my legs. (Conrad, 2021, 53)

Fortunately, the disastrous "end" that he fears is averted, and his scheme actually concludes with his arranging the invisible (even to himself!) departure of Leggatt from his ship. "The comfort of the quiet communion with her" – which became, following its loss, the captain's "mysterious communication" with Leggatt – returns in the aftermath of Leggatt's departure: "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" (Conrad, 2021, 71-72; my emphasis).

Unlike the captain, who – in response to the territorial imperative -- *prevents* his "side by side" relationship with Leggatt from being discovered by his crew, Conrad – under the influence of the symmetrical imperative as he writes "The Secret Sharer" – arranges any number of equally side-by-side meetings between details of the story that he *invites* his readers to discover. The emblematic example of these authorial secret-sharers is offered by the bananas that hang in the ship's cuddy. After noticing the vase of flowers placed by a provision merchant on the table of the cuddy, he calls our attention to the two bunches of bananas that Conrad (the "provision merchant" of his story, as it were) has placed above the rudder casing: "Two bunches of bananas hung from the beam symmetrically, one on each side of the rudder casing" (Conrad, 2021, 19). Here, recalling Johnson and Garber's remark about the overdetermination of the double, we would expect no credit for having discovered this particular specimen; we may, on the other hand, claim credit for seeing it as a paradigm of Conrad's engagement with the symmetrical imperative.

The *schema* that Conrad creates with the aid of doubles – of which the highly visible bananas hanging symmetrically in the ship's cuddy are a striking (albeit universally overlooked) paradigm -- serves as a counterpoint throughout "The Secret Sharer" to the *scheme* that the captain devises for maintaining the invisibility of Leggatt. While the territorial imperative inevitably generates overt conflicts – in this case, between the captain and the crew (and later between himself and Captain Archbold) -- the symmetrical imperative produces covert "one on each side" balancings. These begin with the opening sentences of Conrad's story: "On my *right* hand there were lines of fishing stakes," the captain tells us and "to the *left* a group of barren islets" (Conrad, 2021, 1; my emphasis). He then pairs the lines of fishing stakes with "the nomad tribe of fishermen" who had built them, and the barren islets with the "ruins of stone walls, towers, and blockhouses" (Conrad, 2021, 1) that they suggest to him. The balancing that we observe in these opening sentences then continues:

- I saw that straight line of the flat shore joined to the stable sea, *edge to edge*, with a perfect and unmarked closeness, in one level floor *half brown, half blue* under the enormous dome of the sky (Conrad, 2021, 2; my emphasis).
- Corresponding in their insignificance to the islets of the sea, two small clumps of trees, one *on each side* of the only fault in the impeccable joint. (Conrad, 2021, 2; my emphasis).
- My eye followed the light cloud of her smoke, *now here, now there*, above the plain, according to the devious curves of the stream.” (Conrad, 2021, 2; my emphasis).

The high visibility of these pairings will eventually be balanced at the end of “The Secret Sharer” with the low visibility of the captain’s second mention both of fishermen (in this case, of fishermen presumed to inhabit Koh-Ring) and the island that he had initially compared to a tower. This alternation between the high visibility of certain symmetries and the low visibility of others recurs throughout “The Secret Sharer.” Highly visible ones appear in the balancings created by the conjunction “as if” (to which Conrad has recourse nearly three dozen times). These include:

- “crazy of aspect as if abandoned” (Conrad, 2021, 1)
- “hand resting lightly [. . .] as if on the shoulder of a trusted friend” (Conrad, 2021, 3)
- Leggatt: “as if he had risen from the bottom of the sea” (Conrad, 2021, 11)
- “Then a crash, as if the sky had fallen on my head” (Conrad, 2021, 16)

A particularly intriguing example of a balancing that is, on the other hand, not immediately obvious occurs in Conrad’s pairing of the words “whisper” and “whiskers.” “Whisper” occurs nearly three dozen times, not surprisingly since this is, after all, the mode of “mysterious communication” to which the captain and Leggatt must resort in order to escape detection:

- “I heard somebody moving about, and went in there at once,” he whispered. (Conrad, 2021, 20)
- He was not a bit like me, really; yet, as we stood leaning over my bed-place, whispering side by side [. . .] the uncanny sight of a double captain busy talking in whispers with his other self. (Conrad, 2021, 20)
- “All’s well so far,” I whispered, “Now you must vanish into the bathroom.” (Conrad, 2021, 32)
- “She will clear the south point as she heads now,” I whispered into his ear.” (Conrad, 2021,61)

While “whisper” is clearly in the service of the captain’s *territorial scheme* to protect the invisibility of his secret sharer, his constant mention of the chief mate’s “whiskers” forms one of the many pairings that contribute to Conrad’s *symmetrical schema*; it is comparable to, but by no means as visible as, the symmetrically hanging bananas. Here are a few examples, chosen from among the dozen or so that Conrad has included in his story:

- Meantime the chief mate with an almost invisible effect of collaboration on the part of his round eyes and frightful whiskers, was trying to evolve a theory of the anchored ship. (Conrad, 2021,5)
- Goodness only knew how the absurdly whiskered mate would “account” for my conduct. (Conrad, 2021, 9)
- The man of whiskers gave a blast on the whistle which he used to wear hanging round his neck, and yelled, “Sephora’s away!” (Conrad, 2021, 43)
- He raised sharply his simple face, overcharged by a terrible growth of whisker, and emitted his usual ejaculations. (Conrad, 2021, 44)
- And now the frightful whiskers made themselves heard giving various orders. (Conrad, 2021, 71)

A symmetry that is easily overlooked because its elements are separated by twenty pages of text – but which is completely obvious once they have been placed “side by side” -- appears in the contrasting descriptions of Leggatt’s and Captain Archbold’s physiognomies:

Leggatt:	Captain Archbold:
The voice was calm and resolute (Conrad, 2021, 12)	he persisted in his mumbling (Conrad, 2021, 36)

The self-possession of that man (Conrad, 2021, 12)	the manner of a criminal (Conrad, 2021, 35)
light eyes (Conrad, 2021, 13)	smearly blue, unintelligent eyes (Conrad, 2021, 36)
no growth on his cheeks (Conrad, 2021, 14)	a thin red whisker (Conrad, 2021, 35)
a strong soul (Conrad, 2021, 14)	a spiritless tenacity (Conrad, 2021, 35)
a well-knit young fellow (Conrad, 2021, 14)	one leg slightly more bandy (Conrad, 2021, 35)

A similar kind of distinction creates a neatly balanced, as well as immediately visible, symmetry between the mate whom Leggatt has killed, of whom the captain says, “And I knew well enough the pestiferous danger of such a character where there are no means of legal repression” and of Leggatt himself, with respect to whom he adds, “And I knew well enough also that my double was no homicidal ruffian” (Conrad, 2021, 15).

More subtle – and, for this reason, possibly less visible – distinctions contribute to Conrad’s symmetrizing the two ships:

- One has completed its journey down river and the other is about to begin its journey up river.
- One (The Sephora) is named and the other is unnamed.
- The captain of The Sephora is named (Archbold) and the captain of the unnamed ship is not.
- The chief mate of The Sephora is named (Leggatt) and the chief mate of the unnamed ship is not.
- Leggatt kills the mate of The Sephora while setting a sail and departs the captain’s ship via its sail locker.
- The brig of the Sephora is a prison for Leggatt and the stateroom of the captain’s ship is a refuge for him.

Another less visible symmetry involves Conrad’s balancing the arrivals and departures of Legatt and Captain Archbold in such a way as to create an ABBA pattern:

- A. The captain sees Leggatt when he arrives.
- B. He does not see Captain Archbold when he arrives.
- B. He sees Captain Archbold when he leaves the ship.
- A. He does not see Leggatt when he leaves it.

Conrad’s readers may also not notice immediately the widely separated yet clearly symmetrized accounts of the burial at sea of the Sephora’s mate and of Leggatt’s departure from the captain’s ship:

- One occurs only after sunrise and the other under the cover of darkness.
- One is a public ceremony and the other a private event.
- The mate is clothed and Leggatt is naked.
- Captain Archbold covers the mate’s face with “a bit of bunting” (Conrad, 2021,38) and the captain gives Leggatt “my floppy hat” (Conrad, 2021, 65) to cover his head.
- The sea is “mountainous” (Conrad, 2021, 38) during the mate’s burial and “silent” (Conrad, 2021, 58) during Leggatt’s departure.
- The crew aboard The Sephora is, at the beginning, “terrified” (Conrad, 2021, 38) by the sea and, at the end, the helmsman responds to the captain’s order to approach Koh-Ring “in a frightened, thin, childlike voice” (Conrad, 2021, 69).

Yet another kind of balancing – one that remains invisible to the captain’s chief mate but is likely quite visible to Conrad’s readers -- involves the scorpion that the mate had found in his cabin the previous week:

The why and the wherefore of that scorpion – how it got on board and came to select his room rather than the pantry (which was a dark place and more what a scorpion would be partial to), and how on earth it managed *to drown itself* in the ink-well of his writing desk – had exercised him infinitely. (Conrad, 2021, 5; my emphasis)

We may suspect that the scorpion chose the chief mate's cabin (with Conrad's approval, to be sure) because of the symmetry that this creates with the captain's choosing (again with Conrad's blessing) to offer Leggatt an appropriately "dark place" to hide in his stateroom. We may further suspect that this scorpion proceeded to drown himself in the chief mate's inkwell as a reminder of the parallel *risk* of drowning to which Leggatt alludes when he recalls his swimming away from The Sephora: "Let them think what they liked, but I didn't mean *to drown myself*" (Conrad, 2021, 24; my emphasis).

One of the least noticed symmetries, in "The Secret Sharer" (comparable to the highly visible yet entirely overlooked bananas) appears when, in the closing scene of the story, the captain, observing that the hat he gave to Leggatt had fallen off his head, exclaims that "It had been meant to save his *homeless head* from the dangers the sun" (Conrad, 2021, 71; my emphasis). This remark will call to the minds of Conrad's most assiduous readers the captain's first sighting of Leggatt: "He was complete except for the head. A *headless corpse*" (Conrad, 2021, 10; my emphasis). This doubling is paralleled, in turn, by the "faint flash of *phosphorescent light*" (Conrad, 2021, 10; my emphasis) that is the first sign of Leggatt's arrival and the "*evanescent glimpse of my white hat*" (Conrad, 2021, 72; my emphasis) that signals his departure.

A reasonably visible contribution to Conrad's *schema* on the level of actual episodes emerges when we notice the way in which the author mirrors the crisis aboard The Sephora, which was provoked by a storm at *sea*, with a crisis aboard the captain's ship, which is provoked by his sailing dangerously close to *land*. Here is the storm at sea along with Leggatt's account of how he dealt with the "half-crazed" mate:

I believe the fellow himself was half-crazed with funk. It was no time for gentlemanly reproof, so I turned round and felled him like an ox. He up and at me. We closed just as an awful sea made for the ship. All hands saw it coming and took to the rigging [. . .] They say that for over ten minutes hardly anything was to be seen of the ship – just the three masts and a bit of the fore-castle head and the poop all awash driving along in a smother of foam. (Conrad, 2021, 16)

And now the mirror image that Conrad devises for his readers, in which the violent storm at sea that had threatened The Sephora with shipwreck is paired with the risk of running aground on the island of Koh-Ring:

The wind fanned my cheek, the sails slept, the world was silent. The strain of watching the dark loom of the land grow bigger and denser was too much for me. I had shut my eyes – because the ship must go closer. She must! The stillness was intolerable. Were we standing still? [. . .] The black southern hill of Koh-ring seemed to hang right over the ship like a towering fragment of everlasting night. On that enormous mass of blackness there was not a gleam to be seen, not a sound to be heard. [. . .] Already she was, I won't say in the shadow of the land, but in the very blackness of it already swallowed up as it were. (Conrad, 2021, 67)

Conrad likewise creates for the captain an unusual command at the beginning of the story – one that strictly speaking, could be dispensed with -- which he then symmetrizes with an indispensable unusual order at the end. The first of these orders is motivated by *concern* for the overworked members of his crew:

I detained him as he was making a move. For the last two days the crew had had plenty of hard work, and the night before they had very little sleep. I felt painfully that I – a stranger – was doing something unusual when I directed him to let all hands turn in without setting an anchor watch. I proposed to keep on deck myself till one o'clock or thereabouts. I would get the second mate to relieve me at that hour. (Conrad, 2021, 6)

The second is accompanied, conversely, by his *indifference* to them:

I walked over to leeward and my heart flew into my mouth at the nearness of the land on the bow. Under any other circumstances I would not have held on a minute longer. The second mate had followed me anxiously. I looked on till I felt I could command my voice.  
 "She will weather," I said in a quiet tone.  
 "Are you going to try that, sir?" he stammered out incredulously.

I took no notice of him and raised my tone just enough to be heard by the helmsman. (Conrad, 2021, 66)

I'll conclude by calling attention to the curious way in which “mysterious communication” – the phrase that the captain uses to describe his special affinity with Leggatt – is doubled, as it were, by the relationship between Conrad and his readers. Conrad wrote “The Secret Sharer” – a story that explicitly stages the territorial imperative -- under the influence of the implicitly staged symmetrical imperative, which led him to create, at every opportunity, balanced pairs that ranged from the most explicit (having the captain refer to Leggatt repeatedly as “my double”) to the least explicit (creating the “whisper/whisker” rhyme). We, in turn, as we read his story, find ourselves responding not only to the whispered conversation between the captain and Leggatt, but also to the *silent* conversation between Conrad and ourselves. The territorial imperative served by Leggatt as the captain’s personal double is thus contained within a story in which we continuously experience the subliminal presence of its symmetrical counterpart.

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