

# Interpretation

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Volume 48 Issue 3

- 285 *Jason Blakely* Thomas More's Hermeneutic Politics
- 307 *John Kirby* "A Mysterious Communication": Schopenhauer's Will to Live in Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*
- 323 *Thomas L. Pangle* Hegel's Philosophy of Nature as Foundational for His Political Philosophy
- 347 *Devin Stauffer* **Timothy W. Burns, *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education: An Exchange***  
Remarks on Timothy W. Burns's *Leo Strauss on Democracy, Technology, and Liberal Education*
- 351 *Timothy W. Burns* Reply to Devin Stauffer
- 373 *Shilo Brooks* **Heinrich Meier, *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?: An Exchange***  
Book Review: *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra?* by Heinrich Meier
- 379 *Laurence Lampert* Review Essay: On Heinrich Meier's *What Is Nietzsche's Zarathustra? A Philosophical Confrontation*
- 397 *Heinrich Meier* A Short Response to a Polite Request
- 399 *Laurence Lampert* Reply to Heinrich Meier
- 401 *Jacob Boros* **Book Reviews**  
*Limits: Why Malthus Was Wrong and Why Environmentalists Should Care* by Giorgos Kallis
- 407 *Steven H. Frankel* *Emil Fackenheim's Post-Holocaust Thought and Its Philosophical Sources*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green and Martin D. Yaffe

# Interpretation

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## “A Mysterious Communication”: Schopenhauer’s Will to Live in Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer*\*

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Conrad’s *The Secret Sharer* has enjoyed enormous popularity since it first appeared in 1912 and has inspired an enormous number of interpretations. Commentators have employed theories from different schools of philosophy, psychology, comparative religion, aesthetics, structuralism, gender studies, and the history of British maritime law in attempts to identify the core meaning of the story. In what follows we propose to return to one of the most familiar known influences on Conrad, the thought of Arthur Schopenhauer, and by doing so to develop a new reading of *The Secret Sharer*.

Extended research on the Conrad-Schopenhauer relationship has been largely confined to the major novels and has not focused on the short stories.<sup>1</sup> Interpretations of *The Secret Sharer* have most often been based on concepts

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\* The authors are indebted for helpful comments and suggestions to Zdravko Planinc and Richard Sherlock.

<sup>1</sup> Mark Wollaeger, *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Skepticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); Nic Panagopolous, *The Fiction of Joseph Conrad: The Influence of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, *Anglo-American Studies* 12 (London: Peter Lang, 1998); Norman Stinchcombe, “Understanding Ourselves: Character and Self-Knowledge in Conrad and Schopenhauer” (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2011); and Fred Madden, “The Ethical Dimensions of *Heart of Darkness* and *Lord Jim*: Conrad’s Debt to Schopenhauer,” *Conradiana* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 42–62.

borrowed from Freud, Jung, and Nietzsche.<sup>2</sup> Of the older literature, Bruce Johnson's study from 1971 contains perhaps the most sustained attempt to identify the influence of Schopenhauer on *The Secret Sharer*. He saw elements of Schopenhauer's concept of will throughout the story, but nonetheless judged that Conrad was uncertain about how to represent it in the actions of his central characters.<sup>3</sup> As we will make clear, this judgment grew out of Johnson's constricted view of Schopenhauer's will to live that in turn obscured key imagery and themes in the story. We shall consider Johnson's assessment in detail below. What follows will show that Schopenhauer's view of the will to live is a central and unifying feature of the characters, the action, and the story as a whole.

We know from John Galsworthy that, around the turn of the century, Conrad took an interest in Schopenhauer's work, which "used to give him satisfaction."<sup>4</sup> Translations of Schopenhauer's major works as well as his popular essays were widely available in the 1880s and '90s. There is not complete agreement on the details of Conrad's contact with Schopenhauer's thinking, but, as Owen Knowles has made clear, several paths of direct and indirect exposure were available even if Conrad were disinclined to spend time wrestling with "sometimes the tortuous abstractions" of *The World as Will and Representation*.<sup>5</sup> Commentaries and criticism of Schopenhauer by English

<sup>2</sup> For interpretations based on Nietzsche, Freud, and Jung, see Jeffrey Meyers, "The Secret Sharer: A New Interpretation," *Conradiana* 47, no. 3 (Winter 2015): 247–50; Douglas Kerr, "The Secret Secret Sharer," *The Conradian* 39, no. 2 (Autumn 2014): 19–30; Stanley Renner, "The Secret Sharer, Nietzsche, and Conrad's New Man," *Conradiana* 44, no. 2–3 (Fall–Winter 2012): 145–61; Christie Gramm, "The Dialectic of the Double in *Lord Jim* and *The Secret Sharer*," *The Conradian* 37, no. 2 (Autumn 2012): 80–94; Donald Shaw, "On the Dark Side: Conrad's *The Secret Sharer* and Valenzuela's *La palabra asesino*," *Studies in 20th and 21st Century Literature* 32, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 202–18; Paul Kirschner, "Conrad, James and the 'Other Self,'" *Conradiana* 32, no. 2 (Autumn 2001): 110–26. Jeremy Hawthorn focuses on comparisons to other tales of the Double in "Generic Transformations in *Under Western Eyes* and *The Secret Sharer*: Echoes of E. T. A. Hoffman's *The Sandman* and Dostoevsky's *The Double*," *The Conradian* 36, no. 2 (Autumn 2011): 41–62.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Johnson, *Conrad's Models of Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 130.

<sup>4</sup> John Galsworthy, "Reminiscences of Conrad," in *Castles in Spain and Other Screeds* (London: Heinemann, 1927), 91.

<sup>5</sup> Owen Knowles, "Who's Afraid of Arthur Schopenhauer?: A New Context for Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*," in *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 49, no. 1 (June 1994): 75–106. Knowles's very detailed article remains one of the most careful studies of the sources and manner of Schopenhauer's influence on Conrad. He highlights the myths, symbols, and legends associated with Schopenhauer's life and career as Europe's "rogue philosopher" as materials Conrad could have drawn upon while developing the character of Kurtz. Knowles saw arguments for Nietzsche's influence on Conrad as less convincing. In "Who's Afraid" Knowles does not discuss *The Secret Sharer*. See also Owen Knowles and Gene Moore, "The Secret Sharer," in *The Oxford Reader's Companion to Conrad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 337–38 and "Schopenhauer," in *Oxford Companion*, 326–27. Knowles and Moore do not discuss *The Secret Sharer* in the article on Schopenhauer. In "A Note on the Naming of

and French writers were appearing in the 1890s along with William Wallace’s biography, *The Life of Arthur Schopenhauer*. As well there was the work of Frances Hueffer, father of Conrad’s collaborator Ford Madox Ford, who had studied with Schopenhauer and wrote widely popularizing his thought in Britain. Conrad would also have encountered the influence of Schopenhauer in the works of other writers such as Flaubert, de Maupassant, and Max Nordau. In any case, Knowles concluded that the fact “that Schopenhauer’s more popular essays were directly echoed in Conrad’s dark letters of the 1890s... seems indisputable.”<sup>6</sup>

Conrad commentators have focused on various aspects of Schopenhauer’s enormous oeuvre in an effort to identify the themes and images that may have been particularly influential. In our view, they have paid too little attention to one of Schopenhauer’s central concepts, the will to live. The philosopher understood the world as composed of two dimensions: the phenomenal world of appearances, of persons, of things, as well as the interactions between them; and, beyond this realm, the noumenal world of Will, the invisible, eternal reality that operates in all created beings. For Schopenhauer, “will, considered purely in itself, is without knowledge, and is merely a blind incessant impulse” to exist and to strive to continue to exist.<sup>7</sup>

And since what the will wills is always life, just because life is nothing but the representation of that willing...instead of saying “the will,” we say “the will to live.” Will is the thing-in-itself, the inner content, the essence of the world. Life, the visible world, the phenomenon, is only the mirror of the world.<sup>8</sup>

The will to life is constant and restless. It “always strives, for striving is its sole nature, which no attained goal can put an end to.”<sup>9</sup> It “fills everything and strives and strains in all.”<sup>10</sup> The individual in Schopenhauer’s universe may conceive great plans and singular aspirations but in fact remains simply “the

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Archbold in *The Secret Sharer*,” *Conradiana* 9, no. 1 (April 1984): 25–27, Knowles examines only the historical background of the Archbold name and the irony of its use in the story and does not mention Schopenhauer.

<sup>6</sup> Knowles, “Who’s Afraid,” 77.

<sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. R. B. Haldane and J. Kemp, 7th ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1909), 1:355. The Haldane-Kemp translation is likely the one that Conrad and his contemporaries would have read. Notwithstanding the different practices of later translations, we follow Haldane-Kemp in not hyphenating “will to live.”

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

fixed will to live, *i.e.*, asserts life with all its power.”<sup>11</sup> The massive focus on will as “the only metaphysical reality” is not confined to the major works.<sup>12</sup> In his more popular and more accessible essays, Schopenhauer maintained the view of will as “the lord of all worlds” and considered the “most perfect manifestation of the will to live, to be the human organism, with the cunning and complex workings of its machinery.”<sup>13</sup> And if human beings are, for Schopenhauer, fundamentally animated by will, so too is the rest of the natural world. Thus, “the whole of nature is the phenomenon and also the fulfillment of the will to live.”<sup>14</sup> And “man is Nature itself, and indeed Nature at its highest grade of self-consciousness, but Nature is only the objectified will to live.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the “aims of Nature” serve “the will to live...which is its inner being.”<sup>16</sup> Schopenhauer emphasizes the completeness of this identification of will and nature: “We have recognized the inmost nature of the world as will, and its phenomena as only the objectivity of will; and we have followed this objectivity up from the unconscious working of obscure forces of Nature up to the completely conscious actions of man.”<sup>17</sup>

This brief sketch of Schopenhauer’s philosophy of will highlights themes and language that appear in Conrad’s depiction of the characters and the action of *The Secret Sharer*.

The tale begins simply enough. A young, inexperienced, unnamed captain prepares to undertake a voyage home to Britain from the East Indies. New to his ship, he wonders about the coming trip and his ability to perform successfully as commander. The young captain, like his ship, is unnamed, as if he were Everyman, the hero of an epic tale from long ago who engaged in a great struggle with mythic forces. At the outset, Conrad sounds a note of gravity as he locates the captain and the ship in an immense universe of nature far from the institutions of society. The story opens with the young captain surveying the “immense stillness” of the sea around him and thinking about his upcoming journey.<sup>18</sup> He senses the vastness and the indifference

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 453.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 512.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, “The Vanity of Existence,” in *Essays and Aphorisms*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1973), 52, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 356.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 512.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 524.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer*, in *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, ed. John G. Peters (New

of the natural world that enfolds him and his journey as he watches a tugboat sail out of view while returning to the nearby island. "The tug...became lost to my sight, hull, funnel and masts, as though the impassive earth had swallowed her up without an effort, without a tremor." Both the captain and the ship "seemed to be measuring our fitness for a long and arduous enterprise." This enterprise is "the appointed task of both our existences to be carried out, far from all human eyes, with only sky and sea for spectators and for judges." Conrad's captain is not a modern, nineteenth-century man ready to measure scientifically and to challenge nature but a more traditional sort ready to be measured by the natural world of which he is a part. The forces that guide nature will measure him. Judgment of the adequacy of the captain and the ship for their tasks will not be determined by human beings or institutions but by "sky and sea," by the order of nature. A particular notion of nature is suggested as the story is told.

As the crew prepared to begin their journey westward, their solitude is interrupted by the discovery of another vessel anchored nearby. While pausing to discuss that ship, the chief mate reports another recent surprise: a week earlier he had found a dead scorpion in his inkwell, an alien life form that had somehow managed to board his ship and find its way to his cabin. The scorpion offered a quiet reminder of the unusual forms that life can take and the dangers that can accompany them. The scorpion was a precursor to the fugitive seaman Leggatt who would arrive shortly thereafter and would have a more dramatic impact on the life of the ship.

During an evening watch he took over himself, the young captain discovers a naked swimmer at the side of his ship. Leggatt, it turns out, has just escaped from his ship the *Sephora* where he served as chief mate and where, during a typhoon, he had gotten into a fight with a mutinous sailor and accidentally, he claims, killed him. Unwilling to face the charge of murder leveled by a captain he considered incompetent, Leggatt escaped by swimming two miles to the young captain's ship where he is given refuge, tells his tale and befriends the young captain who hides him and helps him plan a final escape. As Leggatt's confidant, the young captain comes to see himself in the other, his "double," his "secret self," his "secret sharer" (16, 17, 21–24, 29). He grows closer to Leggatt as they plan a final escape and, by the end of the story, seems a man thoroughly changed by this experience.

A pivotal moment occurs when Leggatt describes the events on the *Sephora* that led him to flee to the young captain's ship. Leggatt paints a clear and dark picture of the fight he had with an insubordinate sailor during a typhoon that resulted in the sailor's death. The sailor was clearly a very hard case.

He was one of those creatures that is just simmering all the time with a silly sort of wickedness. Miserable devils that have not business to live at all. He wouldn't do his duty and wouldn't let anybody else do theirs....  
You know well enough the sort of ill-conditioned snarling cur— (14)

As Leggatt attempted to save and set a reefed foresail, the last remaining sail on the ship, the seaman challenged him and in the ensuing fight, in which Leggatt grabbed the other by the throat amid wild waves crashing onto the deck, the seaman was killed. Leggatt describes it as essentially an accident. The captain and crew felt otherwise and Leggatt was relieved of his command as first mate and confined to his quarters. Leggatt claims, in effect, that the man was killed when he became an obstacle to saving the ship and all its crew, something the captain had not managed to do. As the young captain listened, he judged that "it was all very simple. The same strung-up force which had given twenty-four men a chance, at least, for their lives, had, in a sort of recoil crushed an unworthy, mutinous existence" (30). The fight and the resulting death mark a turning point, and critics cannot agree on what happened there. Was the seaman murdered? Was the officer doing his job in a crisis? How did the crisis arise, and who was responsible? What was the "strung-up force which had given twenty-four men a chance, at least for their lives?" Did this force operate only on Leggatt, or on the young captain and on Archbold, commander of the *Sephora*, as well? When Leggatt was attacked by the insolent sailor he was already engaged in fighting for his life and the lives of the crew against a typhoon that had nearly destroyed the ship. By challenging his officer the sailor had made himself part of the threat. A force for life surged in Leggatt at that moment of extreme danger and he disabled the sailor to save his own life and the lives of those around him. Was it the will to live? No mention of the will to live occurs in this scene.<sup>19</sup> Conrad does

<sup>19</sup> The phrase "will to live" does not occur in *The Secret Sharer*. Yet the strength of will and its weakness are basic features of the three central characters. Suggestive language does appear elsewhere in Conrad's work at that time. The crew of the *Narcissus*, after righting the ship which had been swamped in a storm, had not a word of conversation as they recovered. They were consumed with "the mental occupation of **wishing to live**. And **the desire of life** kept them alive." Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* in *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories*, 195 (emphasis added). The language of the will is even more explicit and varied in *Under Western Eyes*, which Conrad was finishing when he took a break to write *The Secret Sharer*. Early in the novel, Razumov worries about his relationship with Haldin and he is possessed at once by "the blind rage of self-preservation." Joseph Conrad, *Under Western Eyes* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979), 32. Pondering the political future of Russia, Razumov

not use the language of the will to tell the story but he does make constant allusion to a reality, a force that stands behind and around the central characters, invisible but for its effects. That force, the will to live, we argue, draws the young captain to Leggatt who becomes his double, his secret self.

The absence of any direct mention of will seems intended to drive readers to search for another dimension, a new context, one that will more fully explain the meaning of the tale. It is at this point that Bruce Johnson's probing analysis seems to wander away from the text and causes him to judge that Conrad had "by no means decided how the idea of will is involved in such actions as Leggatt's."<sup>20</sup> This happened, in our view, because Johnson had an understanding of Leggatt influenced too heavily by Freud.<sup>21</sup> Leggatt's actions were "primitively instinctive," they derived from "raw impulse," they were part of "man's irrational nature...man's animal nature," they displayed "primitive spontaneity" and "primitive levels of human nature" (129, 132, 136, 137). The accent in this picture of Leggatt tilts more to the primitive forces of the Freudian unconscious than to Schopenhauer's view of the will to live which, we have seen, he considered "the inmost nature of the world" which he had traced "from the unconscious workings of obscure forces of nature up to the completely conscious actions of man." Indeed, it is in human

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considers that "what it needed was not the conflicting aspirations of a people, but a will strong and one" (35). Dealing with the local revolutionaries he worries that his future could be imperiled by "the will of violent enthusiasts" (58). At the same time, he wonders how to change any great mass of people and he judges that "nothing could. Nothing but a single will" (37). He considers a political mob "a miserable encumbrance of space, holding no power, possessing no will" (36). To ready himself for a meeting with General T—, Razumov "had prepared his will and his intelligence" (78). In language recalling Leggatt on the deck of the *Sephora*, he needs to control "his strung-up individuality." In private, he judges that "the true Razumov had his being in the willed and determined future" (71). To Natalia Haldin, Razumov speaks of "a people's will to achieve anything" (116). Pointedly, she replies that "the will must be awakened, inspired, concentrated." Later Razumov suggests that "an iron will is an integral part of such a (leader's) temperament" (195). In discussion with the revolutionaries, Razumov considers that "the only condition of success and safety was indomitable will power" (208). In a moment of confusion Razumov experiences self-doubt. "It was weakness; it was this disease of perversity overcoming his will" (212). A tense conversation with Sophia Antonovna becomes "a plain struggle for self-preservation" (214). Razumov asks the student Kostia if he believes the revolutionaries' talk "of the new future and the sacred will of the people" (260). While speaking with Natalia Haldin, Razumov starts losing his self-control and recovers it by "a miracle of will" (289). At the exact time that he was writing *The Secret Sharer*, Conrad was finishing *Under Western Eyes*, a work permeated by the language of struggling, surviving, and willing as understood by Schopenhauer.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson appreciated the centrality of the will to live to Schopenhauer's general view of human nature as he indicated in several places (*Conrad's Models*, 42, 44, 134). He saw in *The Secret Sharer* "men who discover within themselves great natural impulse, energy and determination...flowing from primitive essential wellsprings" (134). But he did not identify this as the will to live in Leggatt or the drama of *The Secret Sharer* as a whole. Regarding another story, he did speak of the "will to live" in *Falk* (134). There he emphasized the primitive in "the crude Schopenhauerian will."

<sup>21</sup> Johnson referenced Freud repeatedly. See *Conrad's Models*, 30, 103–4, 124, 128, 130, 205–8.

action, including rational action, that Schopenhauer judged one finds the “most perfect manifestation of the will to live, the human organism, with the cunning and complex working of its machinery.” The will to live is more than the instinctive impulse in which it originates. It is this encompassing vision of the entire natural world that seemed to fascinate Conrad and to animate *The Secret Sharer*. Such a vision exceeds the explanatory powers of Freudian theory. Conrad borrowed from many sources but there is little clear evidence that Freud was one of them. Lenormand, the French playwright and disciple of Freud, told a story of once having lent Conrad two volumes of Freud’s essays, which the novelist considered contemptuously and returned two days later unopened.<sup>22</sup> Distracted by Freud, Johnson never identified the will to live as the driving force of *The Secret Sharer*.

In explaining his actions, Leggatt introduces the conflict that drives so much of the story: whether his actions had been justified or not, whether he was a criminal or an honorable man. The story compels readers to consider two views of justice: the simple, strict application of maritime law by Captain Archbold of the *Sephora*, and a more nuanced understanding by the young captain of Leggatt’s character and the circumstances surrounding the event. The tension between these views constitutes, said Knowles and Moore in 2000, “one of the major cruxes in interpretation of the story, which largely depends on how one understands the captain’s motives, the question of whether or not Leggatt’s homicide is justifiable, and the nature of the intense bond that unites the two men.”<sup>23</sup> We propose to answer these three questions by considering how Schopenhauer’s notion of the will to live is reflected in the character and the actions of Leggatt, the young captain, and Archbold. Recent commentary on the story is remarkable for two reasons: it displays an enormous variety of opinions on what the story means, and this variety includes virtually no mention of Schopenhauer.

The question whether Leggatt’s homicide is justifiable is perhaps the most fundamental of the three cruxes that Knowles and Moore pose as it raises a series of moral and legal issues in what follows. Many critics simply judge Leggatt a “murderer.” Others, looking at the extraordinary circumstances, think otherwise. In his depiction of the fugitive, Conrad turns the question of “What did Leggatt do?” into the question of “Who or What is Leggatt?” One

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<sup>22</sup> Giles Foden, “The Moral Agent,” *Guardian*, December 1, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/dec/01/classics.josephconrad>; Morton Zabel, *The Essential Conrad* (New York: Penguin Books, 1947), 13.

<sup>23</sup> Knowles and Moore, “The Secret Sharer,” 337.

is struck by the strange and varied ways Leggatt is described. At one point he appears to be the epitome of health, strength, and vitality and at other times as ghostly and dead. He appears as a sea creature, as a magician, as a mirror to the young captain, as a corpse, and as a naked soul awaiting judgment. Exactly how is he alive? How is he dead? Something sets him far apart from other men. By analyzing the imagery with which Conrad describes Leggatt, we will identify a thread that links them all, namely, Leggatt's remarkable attunement to the will to live and the effect this has on the young captain.

What is known from the outset of his story is that Leggatt killed a man. Judged a murderer by a captain he believed had abandoned him and confined to his room, he felt compelled to escape a legal regime that lacked justice and the entire world that had produced it. Leggatt fled with no intention ever to return to society and its institutions. He has died to that world, and had become invisible to the familiar world of ships, sailors, and the commercial enterprises they served. He declared simply, "I am off the face of the earth now" (35). Who Leggatt was and what he had become, Conrad indicates with a series of dramatic and colorful images.

Leggatt at the outset is "a mysterious arrival" from the sea (17). He has just swum two miles in the open ocean. Floating near the ship he appears only as "something elongated and pale" like an eel or a sea serpent. Emerging from the water he looks "fish-like" and is "as mute as a fish too." It seemed as if "he had risen from the bottom of the sea" (12). The preternatural creature is also vigorous and strong. Later, when speaking of his weeks of arrest and confinement, "there was nothing sickly in his eyes or his expression" (17). Leggatt spoke of his nighttime swim with the voice of "a strong soul," a man full of "self-possession" (13). The man from the bottom of the sea was a force of nature—a strange force of nature. He was a man full of the will to live.

He was a strange apparition. Naked in the water he appeared "cadaverous," even for a moment like a "headless corpse" (12). And later he appeared as the young captain's "own grey ghost" (16) reflecting the "ghostly grey" sleeping suit (14). When told to "vanish into the bath-room" he moved "as noiselessly as a ghost" (23). He had become "invisible" and was "not visible to other eyes" than those of the young captain (24, 34). At times, he "haunted" the young captain (34). Leggatt declares that "it would never do for me to come to life again. It was something that a ghost might have said." He was speaking to the young captain saying "things not fit for the world to hear" (35). Leggatt the ghost was now partly in this world and partly in another. He had become, like the will to live, a force that was real but was itself not visible.

The ghostliness of Leggatt is related to a certain atmosphere of death that is highlighted in different ways in the story. When the crew of the *Sephora* went in search of the escapee “the anchorage became as still as death” (19). Later, as the ship approached Leggatt’s jumping-off point for his escape to the nearby island, it moved noiselessly on its path “shadowy and silent like a phantom sea” (35). Sailing closer to the island, the presence of death seemed to intensify. “The black southern hill of Koh-ring seemed to hang right over the ship like a towering fragment of the everlasting night” (40). The young captain at that point gave a new order to the sailor “who stood at my elbow as still as death” (40). The ship continued silently to skirt the shore. “Such a hush had fallen on the ship that she might have been a bark of the dead floating in slowly under the very gate of Erebus.” In Homer, the bark carrying the dead passed Erebus, the realm of darkness, as it approached Hades in the underworld where their past lives would be judged and their eternal fate determined. Leggatt had already suggested that he was “naked like a soul on the Day of Judgement” (35). In Plato’s *Gorgias* (523–524a), the souls of the dead appear naked on the day of judgment, as do their judges, so that no one is distracted or impeded by clothing that can disguise and distort appearances. Conrad repeats the Homeric reference a page later, when the young captain tries to assess his progress but can detect no movement on the surface of “the shadowy water” (41). Without any palpable wind, the ship is at risk of drifting and grounding on the rocky shoreline “and her very fate hangs in the balance, with the black mass of Koh-ring, like the gate of everlasting night towering over her.” Yet further on, the young captain spies his white hat floating nearby “on the very edge of a darkness thrown by a towering black mass like the very gateway of Erebus” (42). The ship’s movement into darkness and the world of the dead suggests the captain’s movement into the unknown, a new realm, a different plane of reality not visible to other men.

Leggatt, the invisible force, appears to have strange powers. His first, late-night conversation with the young captain resembled “a scene of weird witchcraft.” Leggatt was exercising a mysterious power over the young captain (16). Talking with him, the young captain felt as if he “had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a sombre and immense mirror” (14). The mirror was not only “sombre” as befitted the discussion but was “immense,” because something in Leggatt was putting the young captain’s life, his view of himself, in a dramatically new and larger context. Schopenhauer frequently described life or the world as the “mirror of the will.”<sup>24</sup> The world of

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<sup>24</sup> Schopenhauer, *World as Will*, 354, 355, 360, 387, 450, 467, 523.

phenomena and the interaction of these phenomena were for Schopenhauer only the reflections, the representations of the true reality, will. In Leggatt, a man attuned to the will to live, the young captain saw life, saw the world reflected back to him in a new way. In the captain's experience of Leggatt, as in Schopenhauer's vision of the world, "life is the mirror of the will."

Leggatt, the mysterious arrival, immediately commenced "a mysterious communication" with the captain (13). He had at that point told the young captain nothing but his name. Yet a "mysterious communication was established *already* between us" (13, emphasis added). "The self-possession of that man had somehow induced a corresponding state in myself." Leggatt had begun to change the young captain simply by being who he was. Leggatt told his story without pause or interruption. "There was something that made comment impossible in his narrative, or *perhaps in himself*; a sort of feeling, a quality which I can't find a name for" (20, emphasis added). Later, reflecting on the challenges that confronted Leggatt's final escape, the young captain marveled "at that something unyielding in his character which was carrying him through so finely" (34). From the moment they met the young captain was drawn to Leggatt. A "mysterious communication" occurred which did not involve the delivery of any information. *OED* recognizes several meanings for "to communicate" including "to give to another as a partaker" and "to share in; to use or enjoy in common" or "to participate."<sup>25</sup> Leggatt had shared something, had made the young captain a partaker in something, starting at their first meeting, something that had begun to change him. And it was something the young captain could not name. The captain did not know how to name the life force emanating from Leggatt but he knew that he felt it. The weak will to live in the young captain was attracted by the stronger will in Leggatt. The strong will of Leggatt evoked an incipient strength in the captain. When the captain saw himself reflected by the mirror of Leggatt he saw himself *as* Leggatt, as what he might be if the force which animated the other were more powerfully to animate him. Leggatt was the captain's double, his doppelganger. He did not, however, like famous doubles from fiction, biography, and mythology, carry a message from the past or the future. Leggatt's words and action spoke of a dimension of life the captain did not know; they spoke of the will to live. Leggatt communicated, he shared his experience of the will with the captain. The attraction of the life force in Leggatt for the captain was powerful, disorienting, creating a tension in the

<sup>25</sup> *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944), s.v. "communication."

young captain's sense of himself. "The dual working of my mind distracted me almost to the point of insanity" (23). The captain's intense awareness of Leggatt as "my secret self" was almost crippling. "It was very much like being mad." The captain felt he was going out of his mind because he was. The "mysterious communication" with Leggatt was *pulling* him "out of his mind" to somewhere new. It was forcing him to understand the world and himself in ways that he had not previously imagined.<sup>26</sup>

For Schopenhauer the will to live is not simply a feature of life; it is the "inner being" of Nature, including human nature. And one clear indication of the strength of will is the health and vitality of strong persons. In the story, Conrad portrays health, like other basic features of life, by drawing contrasts. As the captain studied Leggatt on the night of his arrival, it was clear that "there was nothing sickly in his eyes or in his expression. He was not a bit like me, really" (17). Listening to Leggatt describe his escape from the *Sephora*, the captain feels he "could imagine perfectly the manner of this thinking out—a stubborn if not a steadfast operation; something of which I should have been perfectly incapable" (17). Conrad highlights the health and the vigor of Leggatt by comparing them to the sickliness and diffidence of the young captain.

In a similar fashion, the strength and resoluteness of Leggatt are contrasted with the weakness and sickliness of Archbold. The captain of the *Sephora* "always seemed very sick" when he spoke with Leggatt about the killing (18). The night Archbold refused to leave Leggatt's door unlocked he was "looking more sick than ever." Archbold inadvertently raised the question of health during his conversation with the young captain by musing about the source of Leggatt's behavior. "What was the cause of it—some disease?" (25). The captain surprises him with a too ready agreement, "yes, disease," which shocks Archbold at the same time that it calls into question the meaning of health and sickness when applied to himself, to Leggatt, and to the crew of the *Sephora*.

Beyond that, Archbold also struggled to command.<sup>27</sup> He clearly had not disciplined the sailor who challenged Leggatt. After the homicide he

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson argued that the reader "may wonder at the rapidity with which (the captain) comes to feel nearly 'insane'" (*Conrad's Models*, 131). This is because he missed the power of the will to life in Leggatt reshaping the mind of the captain.

<sup>27</sup> Harry White and Irving Finston, "Conrad's Incompetent Secret Sharer," *Conradiana* 44, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 51–70, make a compelling case for Archbold's failure to command his ship properly and his need to cover up his actions. They argue that *The Secret Sharer*, like *Lord Jim* and *The Shadow-line*

was found in the cuddy, not on deck giving orders (15). “He was afraid of the men, and also of that old second mate of his...[an] old humbug” who was a “sort of loafer” and a seaman who served seventeen years as a second mate without ever making first mate.<sup>28</sup> It was a testament to the corruption of Archbold’s command that “no chief mate had ever made more than one voyage on the *Sephora*” (18). Leggatt judged that the loafer second mate and the equally old steward actually “ran the ship.” Indeed, Leggatt thought that “the devil only knows what the skipper wasn’t afraid of.” The most conspicuous aspect of Archbold’s command appeared to be his weakness of resolve, his weakness of will. When he visited the young captain and reported on the events on the *Sephora*, Archbold “mumbled...as if he were ashamed of what he was saying” (24). He told his story “in the manner of a criminal making a reluctant and doleful confession.” There was a “spiritless tenacity” to his account of Leggatt’s guilt and the need for the judgment of a court. He seemed convinced of his judgment of Leggatt, but he lacked conviction about himself. Something inside him seemed broken or sick. His attempt to find the fugitive on the islands near his ship was a “painful duty” (25). “He seemed completely muddled” in his recollection of the events from two months earlier. He “persisted in his mumbling” throughout the conversation. He was intensely anxious about his reputation but was vague about details of events on his ship. He had an “obscure tenacity” about getting Leggatt judged legally *by others* (26). He insisted on repeating the details of his exemplary career. “I’ve had the *Sephora* for these fifteen years. I am a well-known shipmaster” (25). His sanctimonious account of “seven-and-thirty virtuous years at sea of which over twenty of immaculate command” betrayed by its tone his lack of genuine conviction. Archbold was clear and strong about his years on the sea, weak and uncertain about recent events on the *Sephora*.

He claimed to recall struggling to get the last sail rigged properly during the typhoon. He declared “that I hardly dared give the order” and never actually said that he had. Archbold believed that the *Sephora* had survived “by a special mercy” (26). And he could see “God’s own hand in it.” Divine

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depicts “the incompetence and corruption” that afflicted many British merchant ships in the late nineteenth century. By reporting Leggatt a “suicide” rather than an “escapee” or a “mutineer” Archbold assured that no further investigation into his command of the *Sephora* would be conducted that might jeopardize his reputation. The White/Finston recounting of the *Sephora* incident is based on an extensive review of British merchant navy practice and law and is the most detailed and most convincing study available of the events on the *Sephora* leading up to the homicide and the aftermath.

<sup>28</sup> White and Finston point out that it was remarkable at that time for anyone with a measure of talent to serve so many years as second mate and never advance to first mate. “Incompetent Secret Sharer,” 56.

intervention, of course, is a power that Conrad himself tended never to invoke.<sup>29</sup> In Leggatt's account Archbold played a very different role. "I assure you he never gave the order. He may think he did, but he never gave it. He stood there with me on the break of the poop after the main-topsail blew away, and whimpered about our last hope—positively whimpered about it and nothing else" (30).

The failure, the inability to act, was complete and it frightened Leggatt. "It worked me up into a sort of desperation. I just took it into my hands and went away from him." That is, Leggatt left Archbold on the poop at the rear of the ship and moved forward toward the foresail where something effective might still be done. By failing to act, Archbold effectively deserted his command and left Leggatt to attempt the rescue of the ship on his own.<sup>30</sup> To cover up his failure, Archbold lied about the incident on the *Sephora*, reported Leggatt as a suicide, discouraged any investigation, and added corruption to the incompetence he had already displayed. The corruption of his command was another emblem of his weakness of will. The unlikeliness of Archbold's discourse continued to grow as he spoke. When he finally concluded his visit, Archbold "drew a long, spiritless sigh and mumbled dismally that he must really be going back to his ship" (28).

Another clear identification of the young captain with Leggatt occurs in the final scene, which has attracted relatively little attention. As the young captain's ship approached the island near the jumping off spot for Leggatt, the helmsman began to worry about sailing too close to shore. He began to throw a fit, waving his arms wildly, shouting and ignoring the captain's commands. The captain responded immediately,

I caught his arm as he was raising it to batter his poor devoted head, and shook it violently....I hadn't let go the mate's arm and went on shaking it. "Ready about, do you hear? You go forward"—shake—"and stop there"—shake—"and hold your noise"—shake—"and see these head sheets properly overhauled"—shake, shake—shake. And all the time I dared not look toward the land lest my heart should fail me. I released my grip at last and he ran forward as if fleeing for dear life. (41)

The captain had reenacted Leggatt's actions on the *Sephora*. He had grabbed the helmsman who was losing self-control during a critical moment.

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<sup>29</sup> On Conrad's lifelong skepticism regarding the supernatural, see Keith Carabine, "Conrad, Apollo Korzeniowski, and Dostoyevsky," *Conradiana* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 3–25, and John Lester, *Conrad and Religion* (New York: St. Martin's, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> On the chain of command see White and Finston, "Incompetent Secret Sharer," 58–60.

He shook him repeatedly, reiterating his orders until losing his grip and letting the frightened man run away fearing for his life. The young captain’s ship, like the *Sephora*, survived the crisis. In the reprise, the frightened sailor feared for his life but did not actually lose it. The will to live that Leggatt had evoked in the young captain gave him the resolve, the strength to exert command effectively and guide his ship through a dangerous maneuver. The young captain’s repetition of Leggatt’s actions suggested a common source: a force that had impelled the two very different men to respond similarly to crises of command as each sought to save his ship. At the conclusion, Leggatt again reentered the sea that had sustained him before, an outcast from the human community, this time “to take his punishment: a free man, a proud swimmer, striking out for a new destiny” (42).

It has not previously been appreciated how fully the patterns of opposed images are clarified if one considers Leggatt an embodiment of the will to life, the life force that animates the universe and all who live in it, and the young captain as a response to it. Dead to the world he had grown up in but alive to the will to live, Leggatt existed at the border of two realms both of which he inhabited partly. His robust will communicated itself to the captain whom it transformed during their encounter. It is this peculiar tension that Conrad captures in his portrait of Leggatt and his relationship to the captain. This tension arises from the different strength of will in the two men. To address the cruxes of Knowles and Moore: the captain is motivated by his attraction to the strength of will in Leggatt which he himself lacks; the will to live, the reckless insubordination of the insolent sailor and the need to save lives in a crisis render Leggatt’s homicide justifiable; the bond between the two men is formed by a sharing, a communication of will by Leggatt to the captain, who needed it desperately to succeed in his role as a commander.

With this reading, we have sought to show how Conrad’s art in *The Secret Sharer* was informed by his encounter with a vast, encompassing philosophical vision of the universe and human nature. Reading *The Secret Sharer* in the light of Schopenhauer’s will to live clarifies the pattern of opposed images that recur throughout the story. It connects the language of strength and weakness, death and life, health and sickness, the resolute and the muddled, the earthly and the ghostly, the animal and the human, the visible and the invisible. The relationships between Leggatt, the young captain, and Archbold are clarified. The identity of the decisive “strung-up force” that burst forth on the deck of the *Sephora* is established, the substance of the “mysterious

communication” is identified, and the dynamic at the heart of the doubling relationship is revealed.

The young captain had begun his journey as a “stranger” to the ship, to the crew and to himself (9, 10, 41). As Leggatt made his escape, the captain completed his ship’s dangerous maneuver and sailed triumphantly away from the “towering black mass” of Koh-ring. He was a changed man for his encounter with Leggatt and he declared the early estrangements overcome. “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” (42).