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Conrad's Secret Sharer at the Gate of Hell*

Thomas Dilworth

[204] The immense popular and critical interest in 'The Secret Sharer' has generated since publication in 1910 testifies to the poignancy of its human drama. But its impact is due as much to narrative technique as the centrality of theme. Conrad's narrative method, influenced by the literary impressionism developed in collaboration with Ford Madox Ford, stresses the subjective revelation implicit in the narration of remembered experience. The story's recollected landscape and descriptive detail disclose the narrator's point-of-view to such an extent that his sea yarn becomes a symbolic account of a journey through the narrators own interior space. It is because of the secret or hidden nature of such a journey that the story poses so many problems. The importance of Leggett the significance of other characters, the meaning of the head Leggatt leaves behind, his ghostly aspect, the apparently unnecessary nearness of the ship's approach to the island of Koh-ring: none of these can be understood apart from moral awareness of man recollecting them.

Analysis of the narrator's character and the significance for him of what he recalls have been made by means of mythic analogues and the gleanings of modern psychology. But conclusions reached in this way tend to neglect the narrative's *quidditas* or particularity—for, however helpful myths and psychological theory, may be, they remain, for the most part, outside Conrad's known interests and external to the story's field of reference.

* First published as 'Conrad's Secret Sharer at the Gate of Hell,' *Conradiana* IX (1977), 203-17. Original page numbers are yellowed in square brackets. I have made slight improvements in the writing. My thanks for permission to republish online to *Conradiana's* editor, John Peters, and Joanna Conrad of Brill Publishing, email 9 Aug. 2022.

To determine what happens and why in the narrator's personal inscape, the reader might do well to scan again the story's images for possible allusions, elusive evocations, and suggestions which previously may have gone unnoticed. Such scanning must, in a real sense, be visual, for Conrad's art engages primarily the visual imagination. In this story, moreover, the features and posture of a person, the relative positions of figures in a defined space, and more comprehensive, topological relationships are sometimes described with an exactitude and clarity that gives to them the specific significance of visual puns. Such precisely defined images, taken together, appear almost to pantomime aspects of the invisible, unconscious drama taking place in the young captain's psyche. Furthermore, those allusive images establish for this interior drama a significant background of analogue and typology by reference to Conrad's known interests, notably works by Rodin, Dante, and Baudelaire.

[206] The physical passage of the ship and the interior journey of its captain simultaneously each their most critical moment at the end of the story in the tacking maneuver in the shadow of Koh-ring. This towering black island is identified by the narrator with the entrance to Hades: 'the very gate of Erebus,; 'the gate of ... everlasting night,' 'the very gateway of Erebus.'¹ The image may suggest death, but it is uncertain whether mortal danger threatens anyone on board a ship which, if the helm is not shifted at the right time, will merely continue to drift toward the island at a virtually imperceptible speed in a sea said to be as smooth as glass. The worst the narrator anticipates is the ruin of his career. As he puts it, 'the only future for which I was fit, would perhaps go irretrievably to pieces in any mishap to my first command' (135). But the fearsome name he gives the island must refer to more than the possible loss of a vocation. The suspense and tension of the young captain's interior struggle, evident especially in his relation to the others on deck, appear to be of greater moment—however obscure the nature of his struggle may be.



1 Rodin, *Porte de l'Enfer* (Plaster model, 1880-1917), Musee d'Orsee, Paris

Erebus or Hades, besides suggesting death, signifies hell. In particular, the narrator's

phrase ‘gate of Erebus’ calls to mind the title of Auguste Rodin’s monumental *Porte de l’Enfer*, a ‘Gate of Hell’ that might afford an entrance into the secret experience the captain shares with Leggatt. The *Porte de l’Enfer*, twenty-one feet high and thirteen feet wide, portrays on a large scale the suffering caused by human passion. Its two main panels depict in pulsating rhythms the tension, conflict, anguish, and despair of figures caught in a swirling sea of bronze. Over this painful chaos, in the centre of the door’s tympanum, broods the introspective figure of ‘The Thinker.’ Certain similarities between this presiding figure and Leggatt suggest that Rodin’s sculpture exercised a formative influence on Conrad’s story.²



2 Detail, Rodin, *Porte de l’Enfer* (Plaster model, 1880-1917), Musée d’Orsay, Paris

Leggatt, as the narrator describes him, is pre-eminently a thinker. In the young captain’s cabin he resembles a monk in meditation, ‘sitting rigidly on the low stool, his bare feet close together, his arms folded, his head hanging on his breast’ (115). At other times he reclines ‘on the floor, his legs bent, his head sustained on one elbow (127), resembling the melancholy brooder of Gray’s ‘Elegy’ and numerous romantic etchings whose prototype lolls in Milton’s ‘Il

Penseroso.’ In physical appearance, Leggatt resembles Rodin’s *The Thinker*. He is under twenty-six years of age, well-built, with a dark brow and a square forehead. His expression is that of *The Thinker*, his face ‘sunken ... his eyelids lowered under the stern dark line of his eyebrows drawn together by a slight frown’ (114). At the narrator’s first clear view of him, Leggatt’s nakedness and posture are particularly evocative of Rodin’s naked form: the narrator recounts, ‘I ... 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 [207] hands.’ The description continues, ‘His expression was concentrated, meditative, ... such as a man thinking hard in solitude might wear’ (100). Later, in the cabin, Leggatt sits ‘for hours’ ‘on the camp-stool’ remaining ‘perfectly still’ (115, 127). His stillness is statuesque: ‘to find him sitting so quietly was surprising, like something against nature, inhuman’ (136). His habit of motionlessness was doubtless acquired during his six weeks of solitude aboard the *Sephora* after the storm in which he saved the ship and killed a shipmate; he tells the narrator, ‘I had had time to think all those matters out several times over.’ And his host can readily imagine ‘the manner of this thinking out’ (106).

The probability of Leggatt’s being based at least partly on *The Thinker* is strengthened by Conrad’s having visited Rodin in 1896, when he would have seen for himself the full-scale plaster version of the *Porte de l’Enfer*, which had been virtually complete for ten years.³ Furthermore, Rodin was well-known and his work well-publicized. In a letter dated 31 May 1902, Conrad associates himself with ‘Rodin the Sculptor’ as being among those contemporaries whose work has achieved some degree of popular recognition. By the time ‘The Secret Sharar’ was written in November 1909, the sculptor was the most famous artist alive. In 1903 he had succeeded Whistler as president of the International Society of Painters, Sculptors and Engravers. In 1907 he had received an honorary degree from Oxford and the following year was visited at his studio-home at Meudon by the King of England. The ‘Gate of Hell,’ which had become his life’s work, had by then acquired a widespread reputation as a work-in-progress. Its exhibition at the Paris International Exposition of 1900 was reported by the *News and Courier of 18 June*, which stated that ‘Twenty years of ceaseless toil have completed this apotheosis of suffering.’ Five years later, the November issue of the *Architectural Record* notes that it has not yet been cast in bronze. The portal’s presiding figure, however, had been enlarged and cast, receiving the name *Le Penseur* from foundry workers who noticed its resemblance to *Il Penseroso*, Michelangelo’s statue of Lorenzo de Medici. The workers’ title was adopted by

everyone, including Rodin. On 27 April 1905, *The Thinker* was set up in a conspicuous position before the Panthéon. It seems improbable, in light of Rodin's notoriety and the publicity given his work, that Leggatt-the-thinker, who bears notable resemblance to Rodin's *Thinker*, should have been situated by Conrad in any proximity to a symbolic 'gate of Erebus' without the author giving some thought to the sculptor's 'Gate of Hell' or, as seems more probable, his deliberately alluding to Rodin's great work.

The meaning of the *Porte de l'Enfer*, and its consequent significance for Conrad's story, derives largely from the main literary and artistic models that informed its creation. Rodin's 'Gate' was inspired by the *Inferno* of *The Divine Comedy*. But instead of the moralistic, hierarchical demarcations of Dante's hell, the *Porte* displays the swirling chaos of the infernal [208] poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a work Rodin began to read in 1878 and eventually illustrated. The interior location and personal nature of Baudelaire's hellscape suggests what is perhaps obvious to anyone looking at the *Porte de l'Enfer*, that the passionate suffering depicted on its panels is what absorbs and afflicts the mind of *The Thinker*. Whether or not Conrad was conscious of the influence of Dante and Baudelaire, their works were of course known to him and, as we shall see, have some affinity with aspects of 'The Secret Sharer.'

The form of Rodin's 'Gate' derives from and alludes to the traditional iconography of the Last Judgment as depicted on various cathedral portals—notably Notre Dame's door of the Judgment—and in the sculptured pilaster of Orvieto Cathedral, in Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel, and in painting by Tintoretto, Rubens, Blake, and others. In all these works, Christ, whose body is usually larger than the figures he judges, occupies an elevated and central position in the composition. In Rodin's work, this place is occupied by 'The Thinker,' who is larger than those he presides over. Not that he is a Christ-figure; rather, Christ-as-Judge is supplanted by self-conscious man who, as man, not only judges but himself comes under judgment, if only his own.

If the theme of judgment informs the 'Gate,' it also permeates Conrad's story, judgment in two senses: as considered opinion and as 'crisis' (the Greek word meaning judgment). There are two judgments in the latter sense: the tempest in which Leggatt's heroic and homicidal acts are committed, and the maneuvering of the narrator's ship in the shadow of Koh-ring. Leggatt implies that the second of these crises will be a sort of judgment when he says he intends to escape 'Not naked like a soul on the Day of Judgment. ... The Last Day is not yet' (132). And he

remarks of the first crisis aboard the storm-tossed *Sephora*, 'I suppose the end of the world will be something like that' (124). It is this 'last day' in the gale that lives in Leggatt's memory as the swirling inferno of Rodin's door preoccupies the mind of its 'Thinker.'

The stormy apocalypse aboard the *Sephora* is for Leggatt an enduring revelation of the irrational power of uncontrolled passion, the same 'strung up force' that set the saving foresail and, 'in a sot of recoil,' killed the rebellious crewman (125). Homicidal rage so displaced Leggatt's rational consciousness that he retains no memory of intent: 'It's clear that I meant business,' he says, 'because I wa holding him by the throat still when they picked us up' (pl 102). In his account of the misadventure, the sea reflects the force of irrational passion in a manner that recalls Baudelaire's image o the sea as mirror of the human spirit in '*L'Homme et la Mer.*' In 'a sea gone mad' (124), all the men of the *Sephora* lost their reason. 'Just as an awful sea made for the hip,' Leggatt closes with the crewman 'half-crazed with funk (102). For over [209] ten minutes the two of them were swirled together by the torrent swamping the deck—like figures caught in the liquid chaos of Rodin's *Porte*. When the water cleared, the pair, still linked by Leggatt's grip on the dead man's throat, were carried aft by the crew 'screaming "Murder!" like a lot of lunatics' to the captain who joined in the 'raving,' having been driven 'out of his mind' by the gale (102-3). Previously the captain's fear and despair had so overwhelmed his rational faculties that he had not only failed to order the foresail set but, in his conversation later with the narrator, does not recall having failed to give the order—just as the hero of *Lord Jim* cannot recall his actually having jumped from the crippled *Panta*. Of the *Sephora*'s captain, Leggatt comments, 'Devil only knows what the skipper wasn't afraid of (all his nerve went to pieces altogether *in that hellish* spell of bad weather ...) (107, my italics).

All the *Sephora*'s men broke under tha strain of crisis, each according to his temperament and circumstances: Leggatt fell into blind rage, the captain into fearful despair and, with his men, into irresponsible mob hysteria. But the unanimity of weakness evident in their common failure goes unacknowledged in ensuing conscious judgments. Only Leggatt is blamed—for murder, of which he is rightly acquitted by himself and the narrator. Leggat's homicidal act was not intended in full consciousness and, *per se*, entails little if any moral guilt. It seems doubtful, moreover, that a court of law would have convicted him of manslaughter, as one reluctantly did his prototype in real life who, in less extenuating circumstances, killed a crewman aboard the *Cutty Sark*. Not that Leggatt is innocent; his culpability is simply not the sort to be discerned by

a court of law. As he says to the narrator, ‘you don’t see me coming back to explain such things to an old fellow in a wig and twelve respectable tradesmen, do you? What can they know whether I am guilty, or not—or of what I am guilty either’ (131-2)? Leggatt’s act of homicide is symptomatic of what Marlow, in *Lord Jim*, calls an ‘infernal alloy’ in a person’s metal and what Melville in *Billy Budd* calls the ‘flaw in the universe.’ Leggatt’s act is an epiphany of this universal flaw. It shatters the comfortable illusions men entertain about themselves and reveals a measure of the darkness of heart Kurtz declares at the end of his life to be ‘the horror.’ It is precisely the radical nature and universality of the darkness that compels the crewmen of both ships and the *Sephora*’s captain to condemn Leggatt so harshly. In order to avoid self-awareness that would diminish self-esteem, they dissociate themselves from the living medium of revelation.

The judgment that effects this insulating estrangement emerges from a superficial consciousness typified by the narrator’s chief mate, who is Leggatt’s counterpart both in rank and as thinker (but not in temperament: in that respect he is like the *Sephora*’s captain). ‘His dominant trait [is] to take all things into earnest consideration.’ ‘Of a pain-taking [210] turn of mind,’ he likes, in his own words, “‘to account to himself” for practically everything’ (94). Occasionally his expression takes on ‘a thoughtful cast’ (122). His manner becomes ‘grave, preoccupied ... as though he were in possession of some perplexing intelligence’ (125). Unlike Leggatt, however, he is no meditator; in the mate, ‘a dreamy, contemplative appearance’ is nothing more than ‘a mark of perplexity’ (134). His manner of thinking is exclusively pragmatic and devoid of insight into human motivation. He correctly deduces the nature and situation of a strange ship but is unable to ‘account for’ the ‘whims’ of the self-embittered second mate. He is bewildered by the *modus operandi* of a scorpion that boarded the ship, crawled into his room, and ‘managed to drown itself’ in his inkwell (probably mistaking it for a hole to hide in). Significantly his reconstruction of the scorpion’s activity parallels his account of an argument about Leggatt. Members of a visiting party from the *Sephora* insinuate that the fugitive is being hidden aboard the ship. The chief mate recounts his indignant shipmates’ response: “‘As if we would harbour a thing like that. ... Wouldn’t you like to look for him in our coal-hole?’” and the chief mate concludes, ‘I suppose he did drown himself’ (123). In effect, the mate and the crewmen absolve themselves by reducing Leggatt’s nature to that of ‘a thing,’ as though evil were somehow subhuman and therefore beneath them. Leggatt, in short, becomes their

scapegoat. For this reason also, the *Sephora*'s captain Archbold is 'under the pitiless obligation' not only to surrender Legatt to the law but to treat him as a willful murderer. Only in this way can he prolong what he considers 'seven-and-thirty years at sea, of which over twenty [were] of immaculate command' (118). And like the narrator's chief mate, Archbold is willing to believe in Legatt's suicide—assuming perhaps that such a monster might well be driven by guilt to execute himself.

In their refusal to acknowledge in themselves any innate inclination to moral weakness in the face of passion, the chief mate, Archbold, and the crewmen idealize human nature. This paradoxically minimizes humanity; man is made over implicitly at least in the image of an animal or mechanism which if incapable of great evil is also incapable of love. The assumption that the criminal Legatt is less than human is, in Baudelaire's words, 'only the consequence of the great modern heresy of the artificial doctrine substituted for the natural doctrine—I mean the suppression of the idea of Original Sin.'⁴ The artificial doctrine is that of Rousseau, which might be termed the idea of Original Virtue.

Legatt himself may have accepted unquestioningly the post-romantic minimization of man's immoral (and moral) potential. His crime, at any rate, indicates that he had not effectively come to terms with his passions. Only [211] after he has killed does he acquire in meditation a conscious awareness of the essential amorality of human passion and an effective determination to control it—much as T.S. Eliot's Sweeney, by killing a girl, gains in guilt a knowledge that terminates for himself what Eliot calls the 'cheery automatism of the modern world.'

Legatt's references to himself as a Cain-figure are admissions of guilt. They also suggest the dark ambiguity within every human, which conditions personal relationships. In a letter opposing Cunninghame Graham's liberal sentiment that human fraternity is synonymous with love, Conrad writes on 8 February 1898, 'Fraternity means nothing unless this Cain-Abel business.' Legatt's homicide is a perverse assertion of human brotherhood. As he himself puts it, he played Cain to the rebellious crewman's 'unworthy Abel'—his uncontrolled anger mirroring the latter's irrational spite. Like elicited like until, identical in their active fraternity, killer and victim resembled Siamese twins as they were carried together the length of the deck, linked physically by Legatt's unbreakable strangle-hold. Distracted from the evil within by the enemy without, Legatt became a killer. But he discovered in the process that if his victim was an 'ill-conditioned snarling cur,' neither is he himself 'an angel from heaven' (101).

The motif of mirror reflections that informs the narrator's early descriptions of his relationship with Leggatt suggests that the young captain too (in addition to Leggatt's victim) is, in some respect, Leggatt's twin. No doubt physical similarity, common background, and the sympathy these generate serve to motivate the young captain to undertake the interior journey that the other seamen refuse to risk. The direction of this inner journey is, however, determined by the one thing lacking in his resemblance to Leggatt: moral self-awareness, which the latter has acquired as a result of his violent act and his six weeks of meditation.

The extent to which the captain lacks this awareness is suggested by his first look at Leggatt, which, when considered as one of the story's mirror reflections, discloses more about the captain than the swimmer. To the former, putting his 'head over the rail,' Leggatt seems at first 'a headless corpse' (97). Headlessness suggests unconsciousness, but not, in retrospect at least, of Leggatt, who by this time has become a thinker. Instead, the captain, looking down into the water as Narcissus did, sees a symbolic reflection of himself. At the same time, Leggatt sees above him 'a man's head looking over' (110). The combined effect from the two points of view is, paradoxically, of bodily unconsciousness and disembodied consciousness—in other words, of a mind existing in almost Cartesian disjunction from the physical passionate half of its humanity. As the narrator himself later realizes, 'I was somewhat of a stranger to myself' (93).

[212] That the young captain lacks self-knowledge is suggested initially by his wondering whether he will 'turn out faithful to that ideal conception of one's own personality every man sets up for himself secretly' (93). Entertaining this ideal self-concept, he rejoices naively 'in the great security of the sea,' in his 'choice of that untempted life presenting no disquieting problems' (96). Idealism that precedes or precludes self-awareness is inevitably imaginary and self-deceptive: as is the literary heroism of Jim's fantasies, the romantic-heroic self-image of Nostromo, Razumov's concept of himself as an autonomous, rational man, and the ethical idealism of the young Kurtz and his Intended.

The alternative to false idealism is not a more realistic ideal but the steadfastness of an integrated personality. The young captain initially seeks an 'untempted life.' Marlow, in *Lord Jim* (London: Dent, 1947), proposes instead a courageous

Ability to look temptations straight in the face—a readiness unintellectual enough, goodness knows, but without pose—a power of resistance, ... ungracious if you like, but priceless—an unthinking and blessed stiffness before the outward and inward terrors, before the might of nature, and the seductive corruption of men—backed by a

faith invulnerable to the strength of facts, to the contagion of example, to the solicitation of ideas. Hang ideas!
(111)

This controlled strength of will Leggatt manifests during the time he is hidden by the young captain. Leggatt, 'haggard as he appeared' to his host, 'looked always perfectly self-controlled, more than calm—almost invulnerable' (127). When he is nearly discovered by the steward, Leggatt causes the rattled captain to marvel 'at that something unyielding in his character which was carrying him through so finely' (131). Leggatt's will derives its strength not from an ideal conception of his own personality but from his having experienced, and his wanting henceforth to avoid, the hell of passion. Accordingly, for the narrator, Leggatt is not the embodiment of a mental paradigm, someone simply to imitate. If he becomes the captain's model, he is also in a truer sense his guide.

Like athletic Hermes in ancient rites of initiation, Leggatt escorts the captain through an underworld to *gnosis*. But this Hades Leggatt bears within himself. It is made present to the captain in the course of the long whispered conversations through which he experiences empathetically Leggatt's struggle during the gale and profits from the meditation that filled his prolonged solitude.

The relationship between Leggatt and the narrator as guide and follower, master and initiate, has an analogue, at times strikingly close, in the relationship between Virgil and Dante in the first sixty-one cantos of *The Divine Comedy*. In his role as thinker, Leggatt resembles Virgil, the prototype of reason who provides for Dante a vicarious experience of hell in order to broaden his understanding and strengthen his will toward good. In each work, the minds of guide and initiate seem to merge in a process whose completion is marked by the abrupt disappearance of the guide—as though his wisdom has been fully assimilated by his disciple. Leggatt parts from Conrad's narrator at the mountainous island of Koh-ring, which is reminiscent of the island-mountain of Purgatory, where Virgil leaves the narrator of the *Commedia*. And if Leggatt goes 'to take his punishment' (149), so does Virgil, who is consigned to hell's first circle because he was 'a rebel against [God's] law' (*Inferno* I, 125). Furthermore, Virgil's being a shade from Hades may account for Leggatt's being referred to as a 'grey ghost (103), 'as noiseless as a ghost (114), raising 'irresistible doubt of his bodily existence (130). Leggatt's remark, 'It would never do for me to come to life again'—which 'was something that a ghost might have said' (131)—is evocative of Virgil's remark about his being 'Not man, once I was man' (*Inferno* I, 66). Leggatt

the ghost, like Virgil, is a shade whose proper habitation is Hades, albeit a Hades located in the mind as memory and as future possibility. Conrad may well have intended these parallels with *The Divine Comedy*. After all, the *Inferno* had been the original inspiration for Rodin's *Porte de l'Enfer*, which, in its final form, retains representations of several figures from Dante's *Inferno*. That Conrad often called the *Commedia* to mind is indicated by imagery he employs in a letter to Cunninghame Graham (6 Dec. 1897), by quoting in Italian the phrase inscribed on hell's door, *lasciate ogni speranza*, in a letter to A.H.D. Davray (22 août 1903), and by explicit allusions to Dante's hell in *Romance* (Part Four, Ch. 10) and *Heart of Darkness*.

Near the conclusion of 'The Secret Sharer,' the captain's acquisition of Leggatt's knowledge is completed in his total empathy with Leggatt—when, anticipating the fugitive's plight, the young captain pictures himself wandering bareheaded under the sun and spontaneously transfers his hat to Leggatt's head. This empathy is, for the captain, self-integrating. It is sealed, as it were, by the dangerous tacking maneuver in the shadow of Koh-ring. The captain's interior condition issues in this act because what he now knows cannot be circumscribed exclusively by the mind but must engage the whole man—mind and emotion, head and body. The nautical maneuver, a matter of 'conscience' which, he says, compels him to go 'thus close—no less' (141) cannot be reduced to merely practical motivation. It can only be, simply, for Leggatt's sake—a gratuitous act prompted by love and gratitude, since the knowledge he has acquired is not merely information but exists in their relationship.

The captain's daring act marks the final dissolution of the self-alienating image of an ideal self that had kept him from complete engagement with the realities of life. As Conrad writes to Edward Garnett (March 1896), [214]

When once the truth is grasped that one's own personality is only a ridiculous and aimless masquerade of something hopelessly unknown, the attainment of serenity is not very far off. Then there remains nothing but surrender to one's impulses, the fidelity to passing emotions which is perhaps a near approach to truth than any other philosophy of life. And why not? If we are 'ever becoming—never being' then I would be a fool if I tried to become this thing rather than that: for I know well that I never will be anything.

The risk involved in letting go, in surrendering to impulse, is very great—as Leggatt's experience demonstrates. If, however, such surrender is judicious, it need not counteract what Marlow praises as an innate power of resistance in the face of temptation. Moreover, a leap of faith lies at the bottom of any free, personal decision or involvement. And the narrator's relationship with Leggatt culminates, as it began, in spontaneity.

Stein in *Lord Jim* discusses ‘how to live’ in imagery that sanctions such surrender and reinforces the role of Leggatt, the expert swimmer, as model for the young captain. Stein speaks of life as a sea into which man is born

If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavor to do, he drowns .. No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up.... In the destructive element immerse. (214)

In the shadow of Koh-ring, the young captain takes the plunge.

The ship’s approach to the island is, in words Conrad uses in *A personal Record* (London:Dent, 1947) of an experience of his own, the final act of an ‘initiation (through an ordeal which requires some resolution to face) into the life of passion’ (ix). At first the narrator’s ordeal seems to duplicate that of Leggatt, who had to perform a difficult nautical maneuver and deal with an insolent crewman—a ‘snarling cur’ ‘simmering all the time with a silly sort of wickedness’ (101). The counterpart to the man Leggatt killed is the narrator’s recalcitrant second mate, given to ‘sneering’ and jeering remarks. As the ship draws into the island, he questions the narrator’s orders. But before the crisis, he is replaced at the narrator’s elbow by the whiskered chief mate, and the young captain is faced not with the insubordination and rage that overcame Leggatt and for which he may be prepared, but with the enervating despair that debilitated Leggatt’s captain. Again the nature of the crisis is reflected by the sea in a manner described by Baudelaire, in the sestet of ‘La Musique,’ the last two lines of which provide the epigraph of *The Shadow-Line*:

*Je sens vibrer en moi toutes les passions
D’un vaisseau qui souffre,
Le bon vent, le tempête et sens convulsion
Sur l’immense gouffre
Me bercent. D’autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir
De mon désespoir!*

[215] The sea is absolutely still, and the chief mate, seeing the looming island, moans, makes a ‘shadowy gesture of his despair,’ cries out, ‘Lost!’ and rants at his captain:

She will never get out. You have done it, sir. I knew it’d end in something like this. She will never weather, and you are too close now to stay. She’ll drift ashore before she’s round. O my God! ... She’s ashore already. (140-1)

The narrator controls his chief mate by gripping his arm and rigorously shaking it, a gesture at once evocative of and significantly different from Leggatt’s throttling grip on his victim’s throat.

But the fear controlled by the narrator's subdued violence is not solely that of his chief mate; he himself acts, as he recalls, not daring to 'look towards the land lest my heart should fail me' (141). By controlling the mate's despair and his own, he exercises courageous resistance before the outward and inward terrors, reversing the arch-cowardice of the captain remembered ironically as Archbold.

The source of the narrator's courage is his compassion. His fearful mate, by contrast, replied earlier to his complaint about feeling ill 'without showing any great concern (129). Timorous Archbold likewise responds 'without the least sympathy' (116) when told by the narrator that he was nearly deaf. And Archbold was 'pitiless' in his determination to deliver Leggatt to the law. The narrator, on the contrary, is bound to Leggatt, involved in his suffering, by 'pity,' as he calls it—the same *pieta* experienced by Dante in the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio* which keeps him from being merely a tourist. Compassion indicates an intuition of the fundamental communion between people, which, for Conrad, is the basis of art. In the preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (London: Dent, 1923), he writes that the artist

Speaks ... to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation—and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity ... which binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity. (viii)

The captain's compassion for Leggatt increases his understanding of humanity and involves him in a 'fellowship with all creation' that contrasts with the narrow communion he felt and lost at the opening of the story when, as he recounts,

I as alone on her decks. There was not a sound in her—and around us nothing moved, nothing lived ... with tropical suddenness a swarm of stars came out above the shadowy earth, while I lingered yet, my head resting lightly on my ship's rail as if on the shoulder of a trusted friend. But, with all that multitude of celestial bodies staring down at one, the comfort of quiet communion with her was gone for good. And there were also disturbing sounds by this time—voices, footsteps forward. (92-3)

His initial communion with the inanimate ship was disrupted by starlight and the sounds of men. It was a relationship contingent on estrangement [216] from humanity and, as the stars suggest, from the universe and (with all its metaphysical implications) the heavens. The images of starlight and the sounds of men that destroyed this impossibly narrow, inhumane communion recur, significantly, during the final episode under the 'enormous mass of blackness' that the narrator calls the 'gate of Ereus.' The island-mountain blocks out the stars in the sky and seems to impose silence; 'there was not a gleam to be seen, not a sound to be heard' under 'the great

shadow gliding closer ... without light, without sound' (139, 140). Now as before, the sensory void is filled suddenly by starlight and sound. As the ship turns and the mountainous gate of hell falls away, the stars re-emerge, seeming to glide 'from right to left' while the foreyards run 'round with a great noise, amidst cheery cries' of crewmen (143). The captain resembles Dante emerging from hell 'to see again the stars' and 'to course over better waters.'⁵In a reversal of his previous reaction to starlight and clamour, he now feels 'the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command' (143), a broadly based communion now including his crew and men at large.

Leggatt is the means by which the narrator achieves this new communion. The name Leggatt, if it is a pun like 'Archbold,' may indicate that the fugitive is a legate or envoy promoting unity. The name may also derive from an Italian word of a different Latin root, *legare*, to bind or restrain—the past participle of which is *legato*. The word is used throughout the *Inferno* as a metaphor for the condition of the fallen soul. The sinner is said to have failed because of 'some vital obstruction that binds,' the shades have 'their hands tied' (*legato*), their 'limbs bound' (*legato*), the soul itself is bound, its neck is bound. In the *Paradiso*, Dante is warned against allowing emotions to bind the intellect. Leggatt's reason had been bound in this way, and his unbreakable grip on his victim's throat signified the ambivalent fraternal bond that is common human nature. As a prisoner, Leggatt was physically restrained. He became self-restrained once he understood his passionate nature. The captain, in empathetically becoming Leggatt, likewise becomes *legato*, exercising courageous self-constraint at the gate of Erebus. As Conrad writes in *The Mirror of the Sea* (New York: Doubleday, 1932), 'faithfulness is the great restraint, the strongest bond laid upon the self-will of men and ships on this globe of land and sea' (110).

Paradoxically, the fugitive who I, in several senses of the word, *legato*, when he leaves 'to take his punishment,' is said by the narrator to be 'a free man, a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny' (143). The statement is no sentimental assertion that Leggatt will live happily ever after. The swimmer possesses profound self-awareness in which exile is not at odds with freedom but freely undertaken—like the suffering in the *Purgatorio*'s mountain, where Dante and human souls go eagerly 'to seek liberty' (I, 71).

The final symbolic restoration to the captain of his hat, left by Leggatt in the water, has its Dantesque parallel not in the *Inferno* but, appropriately, in the *Purgatorio*. Virgil's last words to Dante before disappearing are:

No longer expect word or sign from me: free, right and whole us
your will, and it would be a fault not to act according to its
judgement; therefore I crown and mitre you. (XXVII 139-42)

The learning process of secret sharing has issued in a ritual commencement. In place of an imperial crown or episcopal mitre, the narrator receives not a captain's hat, which would be a comparable symbol of authority, but an ordinary 'floppy hat' that any man might wear—the symbol of his compassion, by which he has come to understand something of what it is to be a human being.

University of Windsor 1977, 2022

Note on author: This was the first published of over 130 articles and chapters on Romantic and Modern literature and the relation between visual art and literature by Thomas Dilworth, who became a Distinguished Professor at the University of Windsor, Ontario, a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a Killam Fellow, an H.D. Fellow (Yale), a senior fellow of the David Jones Society, a winner of the British Council Prize in the Humanities, and the editor or author of a dozen books, most recently (the author of) *David Jones, Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet*.

NOTES

¹ Joseph Conrad, *Twixt Land and Sea* (London:Dent, 1947), pp. 140, 142, 143. Page reference to this text appear hereafter in parenthesis. Erebus, the ante-chamber of Hades, is regularly used as a synonym for Hades: vid *Odyssey* X, 528, XI, 564; XII, 81; *Aeneid* 1V, 26; VI, 247, 404; VII, 140.

² The *Porte de l'Enfer* was commissioned by the Beaux Arts committee in a letter dated 17 July 1880, requesting Rodin to execute a door decorated with 'bas-reliefs drawn from the cantos of Dante' (vid. Rodin's letters in the Beaux Arts file of the national Archives, Paris). The full scale plaster model was virtually complete and in its present form by 1886, according to a description by Felicien Champsaurin *Le Figaro Supplément*, 16 Jan 1886. For a

thorough account of the sculpture's conception and genesis, see Albert E. Elson's *Rodin's Gate of Hell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960).

³Jessie Conrad mentions accompanying her husband to 'a reception by M. Rodin' in what she says were 'the early days of our marriage' (*Joseph Conrad and his Circle* [London: Dutton, 1935], p. 240). That would almost certainly have been sometime between their arrival in France in March of 1896, soon after their wedding, and their departure six months later. The author and his wife undoubtedly saw the *Porte* at Rodin's studio, where he regularly received his visitors on Saturdays (vid. Charles Bartlett, 'A Visit with Rodin,' *American Architecture and Building News*, 25 May 1899, 240).

⁴Baudelaire quoted by Robert Benoit Chéris, *Commentaire des Fleurs du Mal* (Genova, 1949), p. 12.

⁵These images mark a major turning in the *Commedia*, deriving as they do from the last line of the *Inferno* and the first line of the *Purgatoria*.