

A Poetics at the Limit of the Subject: Nancy's Philosophy of Singular Being in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer"

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In concluding the Preface to *La communauté désœuvrée*, Jean-Luc Nancy laments the possibility (or likelihood) that as human beings we will soon be deprived of our finite existence, the experience of the finitude at the essence of our being. The myth of much contemporary discourse, the myth Nancy hopes to interrupt with "literary communism," is the sublation or overcoming of finitude. In articulating a discourse of "singularity" Nancy disrupts the narrative flow of subjectivity. He does not propose a new myth nor does he oppose singularity to subjectivity. Rather, Nancy exposes the limit of subjectivity, defining the subject by its mortality, its limit. Because the subject holds this very limit in common with all other beings, this limit does not restrict the subject. Quite the contrary, the limit opens the subject to a shared experience with others. The relation between subjects is the *Mitsein*, the being-with other beings. The communication necessary for a "true" (or "operative") community depends on this exposure of beings to other beings, "finite existence exposed to finite existence" (IC xl). The final chapter of Nancy's work is titled, suspended in quotes, "*Le communisme littéraire*" ["Literary Communism"].¹ According to Nancy, the call to the common limit, this exposed limit between finite beings, this call comes from "*écriture*" or "*literature*" (IC 71; CD 178). This limit is itself *not* a *place* but rather a *space* or spacing between finite beings exposed to each other. In Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Sharer*, the captain and the fugitive Leggatt share an experience of this limit. They expose themselves to each other, and in this exposure there is a possibility, an offering of community.

I have proposed Conrad's story in the present context, to think Conrad together with Nancy, because this story in particular communicates the exposure between beings that constitutes community as Nancy defines it and the story itself communicates "literary communism." I will argue that this sense of community is what the story is "about": the work effects an exposure and communicates community. The communicability of a literary work is carefully articulated by Nancy. The work does not deliver a message about community. The communication of community is not transitive but presentable, presented or offered at the limit between beings.

That the work must be offered to communication means that it must in effect be *offered*, that is to say, presented, proposed, and abandoned on the common limit where [singularities] share one another. (IC 73, modified)

Que l'oeuvre soit offerte à la communication, cela veut dire qu'elle soit effectivement offerte, c'est-à-dire présentée, proposée et abandonnée sur la limite commune où se partagent les êtres singuliers. (CD 182)

In the essay "Sharing Secrets," J. Hillis Miller presents Conrad's story in strikingly similar terms (without any direct reference to Nancy). "What most immediately strikes the reader of 'The Secret Sharer' is Conrad's extraordinary descriptive power. Conrad excels in what might be called a force not so much of representation as of presentation" (232). According to Nancy's argument, the writer offers his work not as an individual subject (much less as a genius) but as a finite being. The privilege of the writer arises not from his individuality but from his experience as a mortal being and from his ability to make this experience the experience of another. The skill is that of the storyteller.

To the letter, Conrad is a storyteller according to the definition offered by Walter Benjamin: "The storyteller tells what he tells from experience [...] And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale" (87). This is precisely what happens in "The Secret Sharer." As Miller has argued, "The reader becomes the sharer of the narrator's secret feelings, just as the narrator says he was able to put himself inside Leggatt's feelings and thoughts" (232). This is the first

¹ In the English translation, this appears as the middle chapter. The roman numerals refer to a "Preface" written by Nancy but not published in the French edition. In text citations will be given for both the English (IC) and French (CD) editions.

skill of the storyteller according to Benjamin: the ability “to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it” (89). The story can be explained, but it is not the writer who does the explaining, and no explanation is satisfactory. In Benjamin’s formulation, “[the story] does not expend itself” (90). Of course, such stories will be explained *ad nauseam*, as Conrad’s stories have been and continue to be explained. Indeed, Conrad often tempts the reader to find a psychological meaning in his work. However, Benjamin insists that “[t]here is nothing that commends a story to memory more effectively than that chaste compactness which precludes psychological analysis” (91). And, it may be of consequence that “The Secret Sharer” is well known to be the piece Conrad wrote in the shortest period of time, just about a week. As reported by Michael Levenson, “the story fell onto the page with surprising speed — ‘12,000 words in ten days,’ [Conrad] proudly reported to Gallsworthy” (171). His wife recalls Conrad’s denial of a basis in reality for “The Secret Sharer” (Benson 92), but the purity of its fiction does not preclude it from being a story in the profound sense of shared experience. The rapidity with which the story was written perhaps reflects its communicability and it is this communicability that establishes a common sense between writer and reader, not as individuals but as finite beings. The story gathers, but not in the mythic scene of a gathering. That scene is specifically debunked by Nancy who describes the mythic scene of myth.

We know the scene: there is a gathering, and someone is telling a story [...] They were not assembled like this before the story; the recitation has gathered them together. Before they were dispersed (at least this is what the story tells us at times), shoulder to shoulder, working with and confronting one another without recognizing one another. But one day, one of them stood still [...] He stopped at a particular place [...] and he started the narrative that brought together the others [...]

He speaks, he recites, sometimes he sings, or he mimes. He is his own hero, and they, by turns, are the heroes of the tale and the ones who have the right to hear it and the duty to learn it. In the speech of the narrator, their language for the first time serves no other purpose than that of presenting the narrative and of keeping it going. It is no longer the language of their exchanges, but of their reunion — the sacred language of a foundation and an oath. The teller shares it with them and among them. (43-4)

Nous connaissons la scène: il y a des hommes rassemblés, et quelqu’un qui leur fait un récit [...] Ils n’étaient pas rassemblés avant le récit, c’est la récitation qui les rassemble. Avant, ils étaient dispersés (c’est du moins ce que le récit, parfois, raconte), se côtoyant, coopérant ou s’affrontant sans se reconnaître. Mais l’un d’eux s’est immobilisé, un jour, [...] Il s’est immobilisé en un lieu singulier, [...] et il a entamé le récit qui a rassemblé les autres[...].

Il parle, il récite, il chante parfois, ou il mime. Il est son propre héros, et eux sont tour à tour les héros du récit et ceux qui ont le droit de l’entendre et le devoir de l’apprendre. Pour la première fois, dans cette parole du récitant, leur langue ne sert à rien d’autre qu’à l’agencement et à la présentation du récit. Elle n’est plus la langue de leurs échanges, mais celle de leur réunion — la langue sacrée d’une fondation et d’un serment. Le récitant la leur partage. (109-10)

While Nancy lightly mocks the originary power with which this scene is invested, he acknowledges the gathering force of language and the distinction between the narrative story (which “often seems confused”) and the recitative words (which gather not by meaning but by understanding).

The story makes heads incline towards one another, almost conspiratorially. In contrast, the novel bends one’s head into a book and away from the world, and the novelist writes in similar solitude. According to Levenson, Conrad struggled profoundly with the isolation required of a modern writer. “The writer’s isolation, which in his more confident moods had appeared to allow the opportunity for splendid gestures of individual will, now seemed to him the crippling outcome of cultural neglect” (170). In Conrad’s letters in 1908-9, Levenson found that Conrad was deeply affected by his “near-total solitude” and loss of cultural contact. “To read through the correspondence of this period is to be struck repeatedly with Conrad’s attempt to nurture some form, almost any form, of cultural alliance” (171).

Even in its isolation, however, the novel maintains a common sense of being human. The difference between the story and the novel is a difference of the relationship that human beings have with time. The story is constituted by an essential timelessness. That is why, as Benjamin shows with an example from Herodotus, the story "is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness" (90). The novel reflects a resistance to time. Benjamin quotes Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*: "One can almost say that the whole inner action of a novel is nothing else but a struggle against the power of time" (in Benjamin, 99). In the novel, human beings share a common sense of what Lukács called "transcendental homelessness." Even more isolating than the discourse of the novel, and Benjamin's greatest fear for modernity, is the relay of information that is absolutely explanatory. Information has two distinctive characteristics. First, it must be plausible. Second, it is "shot through with explanation" (89). Today, even more profoundly than in 1936 (the year of Benjamin's essay), "Every morning brings us news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories" (89).

The temptation to psychologize "The Secret Sharer" is strong but ill-founded. Even a specifically classified "psychoanalytic perspective" of the work (Daniel R. Schwarz's "The Secret Sharer' as an Act of Memory") begins by acknowledging that the story draws "from experience that is at once individual [...] and representative of the deepest strains of human experience." Schwarz also admits that the narrative is as concealing as it is revelatory (95). He then proceeds to explain the story as a psychological allegory of the artist. Schwarz connects the captain's literal estrangement from the crew to a personal self-doubt.

One theme of Conrad's story certainly appears to be alienation. The narrator first identifies himself as a "stranger," not as a captain, and even as a captain, he is strange to both his ship and his crew. He turns away from the fellowship of the crew the first night at sea, telling them all to turn in, and he takes the first watch in solitude. This solitude is interrupted by the appearance of another ship moored in the distance. The "secret sharer" comes from this other ship (the *Sephora*). The story tells of the relationship between the narrator and another being in whom the narrator-captain perceives and creates a double of himself. The captain never describes his own features, but after dressing Leggatt in his extra sleeping suit and calling him "my double" for the second time, the narrator devotes a paragraph to describing the fugitive's features. A few lines later he observes: "It was in the night, as though I had been faced by my own reflection in the depths of a somber and immense mirror" (101). Nonetheless, in a candid moment a few pages later, the narrator admits, "He was not a bit like me, really" (105).

The story provides ample support for the existence of Leggatt and his crimes of murder and escape. Nonetheless, before even getting close enough to imagine his reflection in the face of Leggatt (at the beginning of the story), the narrator admits, "A mysterious communication was established already between us two" (old 26). As Leggatt recounts his crime, the captain muses, "He appealed to me as if our experiences had been as identical as our clothes." And indeed, the captain shares the experiences. Listening to the story, the captain confesses, "I saw it all going on as though I were myself inside that other sleeping suit" (102).

This relationship has often been read in terms of subject and other, or as a subject reflecting on itself as other. I would like to suggest that something very different is portrayed in the inter-experience of the double protagonists. The reading of the "other" (whether objective or subjective) in the text meets with some resistance. There is no attempted or actual appropriation of the "other." In the end, Leggatt departs as fortuitously and quietly as he had arrived. The captain, however, is no longer alone. As the ship rounds, narrowly escaping utter destruction, the captain exalts in "the perfect communion of a seaman with his first command" (143). Communication and communion, cognates of community, frame this tale. It begins with the establishment of a "mysterious communication" between two human beings and ends in a "perfect communion" that exceeds the individual subject. The mystery of communication unfolds and finally exposes itself in its perfection. The work has been offered and released. To echo Nancy, it has been "presented, proposed, and abandoned on the common limit where singularities share one another." This limit is not only inscribed in the text. There is also a common limit shared by the reader and the writer. Like Leggatt, the reader is released to her fate, "a proud swimmer striking out for a new destiny." (143)

I do not pretend that Conrad consciously intended this reader response. Neither authorial intent nor reader response are relevant to the argument I am making. Both intent and response, the figures of both author and reader, are subjective. As subjects, as particular individuals, the author (the Polish writer) and the reader (the Polish-American academic) cannot, in essence, communicate. As Nancy remarks, "the question of community is so markedly absent from the metaphysics of the subject" because the subject is the "figure of immanence: the absolutely detached for-itself, taken as origin and as certainty" [*Il est une autre et symétrique figure de l'immanence: le pour-soi absolument détaché, pris comme origine et comme certitude*] (IC 3-4; CD 16). The "community" between subjects is necessarily an inoperative one. A metaphysics of subjectivity precludes the possibility of a being inclining towards others. "An inconsequential atomism, individualism tends to forget that the atom is a world." The metaphysics of the subject (with its foundation in Hegel) is a metaphysics of the absolute being, the absolved being, that is, "perfectly detached, distinct, and closed, without relation [*sans rapport*]" (IC 4, modified; CD 17). The absolute absolutely precludes community, and in its insistent absolution — to be alone being alone — the absolute contradicts its own logic. The individual needs a relation in which to be "without relation." This relation undoes, or renders inoperative, the absolute. The subject, or the individual being, establishes itself only through the founding myth of "the autarchy of absolute immanence." This myth interrupts itself because the very community upon which it depends to establish its absoluteness "comes perforce to cut into this subject" [*La communauté revient forcément entamer ce sujet*] (IC 4; CD 18). The human being, because it is a finite being, always inclines towards other beings who share in its finitude. Nancy calls this inclination the *clinamen*, and he argues that "there is no theory, ethics, politics or metaphysics of the individual that is capable of envisioning this *clinamen*" (IC 4; CD 17).

Metaphysics and poetics are both forms of information. They explain things through a narrative in which the goal is to leave little in doubt. The subject can be explained in this way; singularity cannot. In a play with the title of this conference, I have suggested the possibility of a poetics at the limit of the subject, but in fact, at this limit there is only an allegory of a poetics. Nancy offers the term "singularity" and describes a community composed of singularities inclining towards one another, thereby undoing, unworking "the autarchy of absolute immanence." Finally Nancy insists that there are not singular beings but singularity. Following Nancy, I argue that there can be no poetics of the subject. There may be, however, a possibility for a poetics at the limit of the subject, a poetics which would give a structure but not an explanation to singularity in its exposure. This poetics would, of necessity, be an allegory.

Subjectivity belongs to the realm of myth. It is a story, the story of identity. Identity begins with one's identification with an origin. The subject has its origin in the self, in its self, in the identity principle, "I am I." Nancy points out that the being who pronounces itself a subject is a phantasm, a myth.

Death irremediably exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject. The phantasm of this metaphysics, the phantasm that Descartes (almost) did not dare have but that was already proposed in Christian theology, is the phantasm of a dead man who says [...] "I am dead." [...] If the *I* cannot say that it is dead, if the *I* disappears in effect in *its* death, in that death that is precisely what is most proper to it and most inalienably its own, it is because the *I* is something other than a subject. (IC 14)

La mort excède sans recours les ressources d'une métaphysique du sujet. Le fantasme de cette métaphysique, le fantasme que Descartes n'osa (presque) pas avoir, mais que la théologie chrétienne proposait déjà, est le fantasme d'un mort qui dit, [...] 'je suis mort' [...] Si je ne peut pas dire qu'il est mort, si je disparaît effectivement dans sa mort, dans cette mort qui est précisément ce qui lui est le plus propre, le plus inaliénable, c'est que je est autre chose qu'un sujet. (CD 40)

The something other that the *I* is (that *I* am), according to Nancy, is a singularity that "has nothing to do with the subject's structure as *self*" [*la structure de soi du sujet*] (IC 19; CD 52). And that has everything to do with the human being's structure as finite.

Finitude appears in the singular being and the singular being is this appearance of finitude. Singularity appears not as something differentiated (individuated) but as the interrelation, as that which happens between beings. Singularity is not an abyss but it is also not itself a ground. It is not an act of will or becoming, but an action of sharing, the moment of "contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, [...] [another finite being] always *other*, always shared, always exposed" (IC 28; CD 70). Nancy calls this peculiar appearance a "compearance" (*com-paraitre*) (IC 28; CD 72). It is an appearance which, I will add, can only appear allegorically in that it appears always in something other than itself because it cannot in itself appear. Nancy writes, "It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such" [*Elle consiste dans la parution de l'entre comme tel*]. Nancy offers the complicated articulation:

you (are/and/is) (entirely other than) I
toi (e(s)t) (tout autre que) moi

This is to be read "in all its possible combinations." Or, more simply, Nancy suggests, "you shares me" (*toi partage moi*)" (IC 29; CD 74). If Conrad were to write this, he might say, "you are the secret sharer of my existence." In fact, I believe Conrad does say this, that Nancy's being appears/compears in Conrad's novella, not in the figure of Leggatt nor of the captain but in the sharing between an I and a you, between you and I.

Through the story of singularity, Nancy disputes the myths of community, arguing that a community of subjects, of individuals, is always an inoperative community — a myth. This myth is interrupted by literature. The myth of myth (what Bataille called the absence of myth) is the origin, originally because myth is the conversion of fiction into foundation (IC 53; CD 133-4).

In sum, fictioning [fiction-making] is the subject of being. *Mimesis* is the *poiesis* of the world as true world of gods, of men, and of nature. The myth of myths is in no way an ontological fiction; it is nothing other than an ontology of fiction or representation: it is therefore a particularly fulfilled and fulfilling form of the ontology of subjectivity in general. (IC 55)

Le fictionnement est en somme le sujet de l'être. La mimesis est la poiesis du monde en tant que monde vrai des dieux, des hommes et de la nature. Le mythe du mythe n'est pas du tout une fiction ontologique, c'est bel et bien une ontologie de la fiction, ou de la représentation: c'est donc une forme particulièrement accomplie et accomplissante de l'ontologie de la subjectivité en général. (CD 139)

Literature speaks myth without itself being mythic. As such, it gives voice to the myth of community, not as a myth but through the structure of its appearance. In literature, which interrupts myth, community communicates itself. Nancy questions the myth of his own argument, asking "What does this mean? Does it mean anything?" [*Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire? Cela veut-il dire quelque chose?*] (IC 64; CD 160). Nancy goes on to explain, of course, but I would like to let this literary text respond. Does the being-*in*-common that *is* literary appear or compear in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer"? Yes, I believe it does. The community of "The Secret Sharer" is not a mythic community. It cannot be explained as communal or in terms of community. Benson remarks that in "The Secret Sharer" (especially as compared to "The Shadow Line") the captain develops a sense of self-worth but "is little nearer to a realization of his communal duties than he was at the outset" (85). I would say that the captain has perfected them. "The Secret Sharer" *is* community; it is about an *operative* community without explaining community; it presents community without mythologizing it. This story is not a being-for; it is a story of being-with that exposes the finitude of the limit we, as finite beings, share.

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