

# **Conrad's Shadow**

**Catastrophe, Mimesis, Theory**

**Nidesh Lawtoo**

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CHAPTER 3

The Cooperative Community:  
Surviving Epidemics in  
*The Shadow-Line*

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What there is in place of communication is neither the subject nor communal being, but community and sharing.

—Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*

It seems now to have had a moral character . . . on the ground of that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers of this earth.

—Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*

After the escalating violence of total wars and the threat of perfect storms, Conrad urges us to turn to yet another catastrophe that casts a shadow on the past, the modern, as well as the contemporary imagination: the spread of epidemic contagion. From the fever recorded in “The Congo Diary” to the little fever that renders Marlow scientifically interesting in *Heart of Darkness*, from the plague of tuberculosis that infects James Wait and affects the crew in *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* to the epidemic of malaria that spreads to the community of sailors in *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad’s fictions invite a diagnostic of different types of infectious pathologies.

It is worth noticing at the outset that these epidemics often occur in tales of the homo duplex, suggesting secret continuities between physical and psychic contagion. Conrad would thus have agreed wholeheartedly with René Girard's account of "the plague in literature" as a reflection of the affective dynamic of mimetic contagion central to "social phenomena."<sup>1</sup> As we move from mimetic doubles to escalating violence, emotional contagion to epidemic contagion, Girard's insights continue to find an important confirmation in Conrad's narratives of the homo duplex—if only because, for both authors, behind the shadow of contagious epidemics lurks the phantom of mimetic contagion.

And yet if Girard is particularly attentive to the metaphorical implications of the plague, Conrad also uses the "mirror of the sea" to reflect (on) the literal effects of epidemic diseases. Writing from the position of a still relatively immune nation-state, Girard, in the past, has in fact tended to downplay the medical side of contagion, treating it as a "disguise" of a more profound mimetic truth.<sup>2</sup> This hermeneutical choice is historically determined and can be dated to the post-World War II period, which shaped Girard's theoretical imagination. Equally dated is Girard's diagnostic that we now live in "a world less and less threatened by real bacterial epidemics."<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, history taught us otherwise. From the plague of HIV that spread across the world in the 1980s and 1990s and continues to infect the "wretched of the earth" (Frantz Fanon's term) to the contemporary pandemics that, every year, threaten to contaminate an increasingly globalized, permeable, and precarious world, the shadow of epidemics looms large on the horizon. In his last book, however, Girard recognized this shadow and urged future mimetic theorists to develop a diagnostic of the immanent dynamic of contagion.<sup>4</sup> Hence the need to supplement Girard's hermeneutics in light of what epidemiologists call the threat of "the coming plague."<sup>5</sup> Hence the urgency to turn back to a writer like Conrad who, well before contemporary theorists, puts readers back in touch with the literal effects of pathological contagion.<sup>6</sup> Epidemic infections, in what follows, shall thus be treated *à la lettre*.

Time and again, we have seen that a nonhuman, often unrecognized, yet always menacing shadow lurks in the background of Conrad's fictions of the homo duplex. This shadow in the background constantly changes in its spectral manifestations and requires, each time, a different form of literary investigation; yet, once illuminated, it allows us to theorize mimetic

shadows in the foreground. One of the diagnostic lessons that has emerged so far is that the ethical trajectory of Conrad's nautical fictions transgresses anthropocentric accounts of agency, is attentive to nonhuman forces, and thus cannot be considered in a contextual vacuum. Instead, a mimetic approach requires a specific foregrounding of environmental forces first, in order to subsequently trace the complex interplay of human and nonhuman forces. It is this spiraling interplay that also in-forms Conrad's diagnostic of catastrophic pathologies, a diagnostic that requires careful scrutiny of its clinical variations. As we steer our attention toward one of the best tales of his final period, *The Shadow-Line* (1917), we see that his concern is with a local epidemic of malaria on board ship in the Gulf of Siam. The context is thus familiar, but the patho(-)logy is different. For instance, contrary to the perfect storm depicted in "The Secret Sharer," *The Shadow-Line* dramatizes a menace that does not rock the ship from without but infects its community from within; it does not threaten to swallow up the ship in single moment, as in *Lord Jim*, but progressively contaminates each member of the community over a prolonged period of time. Consequently, the realization that things are "bound to end in some catastrophe" (SL 52) cannot be avoided with deft, immediate, and still somewhat romantic maneuvers that require authoritarian will power. Rather, it demands persistent and continuous endurance grounded on democratic and sympathetic interactions with the crew. As we sail from storm pieces to a calm water piece, we progressively realize that the possibility of survival does not rest on instinctual, individual reactions, but on prolonged communal actions.

If we want to do critical and theoretical justice to what Conrad calls "a fairly complex piece of work" (5) and sound the depth of his ethical thought for contemporary times characterized by a shared vulnerability to infections, a change of perspective is in order: a tale that is often simplistically depicted as a re-presentation of a linear process of personal maturation needs to be reframed against the collective shadow of epidemic contagion Conrad takes the trouble to represent. Furthering an ethico-environmental line of inquiry initiated in "The Secret Sharer" that considers the foundations of subjectivity in shared, relational terms, *The Shadow-Line* focuses on the threat of infective contagion in order to offer a diagnostic account of the shared vulnerability, collective responsibility, intergenerational relations, and ethical care that is not limited to two sovereign individuals but stretches

to include the community as a whole.<sup>7</sup> More precisely, *The Shadow-Line* calls for the coming of a type of solidarity that cuts across distinctions between self and others, high and low ranks, present and past generations, in order to establish an ethos based on shared, intergenerational, and communal cooperation. Once again, the experience of mimetic contagion is as poisonous as it is therapeutic, as dissociative as it is associative, as pathological as patho-logical. It generates, for better and worse, an “inoperative community” (Nancy’s term) that can be turned into a cooperative community.

### Political (Con)Texts

Catastrophes, we are beginning to learn, come in successive waves. In “The Duel” Conrad dealt with the escalation of violence that swept across Europe during the Napoleonic Wars generating the years of “universal carnage” (165). In *Typhoon* and “The Secret Sharer” he faced the psychic and ethical shadows that emerged from the threat of “mountainous seas” (*TLS* 101) caused by a “catastrophic disturbance of the atmosphere” (*TOS* 20). In *The Shadow-Line* he confronts us with a less visible, less spectacular, but no less devastating scenario in which climatic, epidemiological, and sociopsychological factors all contribute to generating an epidemic outbreak on the “small planet” of the ship. This accumulation of multiple factors generates a spiral of affective and infective pathologies that escape unitary diagnostics. Yet Conrad does not give in to apocalyptic despair. Instead, he continues to advocate an ethics of sharing, which is also a politics of shared, relational, intergenerational, and, above all, communal cooperation. My hypothesis is that he does so in order to affirm the possibility of collective survival—out of catastrophic situations.

#### *Grand Miroir*

*The Shadow-Line* reflects psychological preoccupations with the process of personal development we have already seen reflected in “The Secret Sharer.” The mirroring continuities are clear, the echoes loud: both texts deal with a loosely autobiographical nautical experience set in the Gulf of Siam; both texts give an account of the psychic anxieties of young, inexperienced, and highly suggestible captains generated by the responsibility of “first command”

(this being also the first title of the novel); and, above all, both texts represent Conrad's obsessive fascination with mysterious forms of mimetic communication with exemplary alter egos responsible for formative, sometimes transgressive, but always transformative experiences of "initiation."<sup>8</sup> And yet the continuities between these "twin-stories" run deeper than critics previously realized. Both texts are, in fact, haunted by a shadow that is not simply personal and psychological but also collective and environmental. It is thus necessary to focus on a shadow that has so far remained in the background of critical discussions in order to cast new light on the process of psychic, political, and ethical maturation in the foreground.

Both personal and collective sides are already mirrored at the opening of the text. Subtitled "A Confession," *The Shadow-Line* opens with an epigraph by Charles Baudelaire, which reads: "*D'autres fois, calme plat, grand miroir / De mon désespoir*" (11). This mirror reflects an existential, romantic despair that casts a shadow on an individual ego. This is a central concern in the tale, yet Conrad also sets up a larger mirror for more general ethico-political shadows cast on the whole of Europe. **Written in 1916**, while the "universal carnage" of the Great War literally reduced a civilization to ruins, the novella opens with a deeply personal dedication that stretches to include an entire generation, thereby suggesting that personal and political despair cannot easily be dissociated: "To Borys and all others who like himself have crossed in early youth the shadow-line of their generation, with love." Conrad's son returned from the front; most of his generation did not. They crossed the "shadow-line" that divides not so much youth from maturity but, rather, the living from the dead. Retrospectively, we can see that this is probably one of the most intimately personal and, in the same breath, widely collective dedications in modern literature—**if not literature tout court. More than 16 million people perished in the Great War. And this tragic number was soon amplified by the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, which, one year after the publication of *The Shadow-Line*, spread around the world, generating a heartrending estimate of 50 to 100 million additional victims.**<sup>9</sup> Conrad was, of course, not in a position to foresee how far his dedication would stretch; and within the text, the phrase "the shadow-line" is clearly taken to delineate a boundary that divides two periods in the life of a single, immature individual, a shady line in-between the youth/adulthood binary the captain-narrator needs to cross for personal maturation

and successful collective navigation to occur. Still, Conrad's opening gesture toward what he also calls, in the "Author's Note," "the supreme trial of a whole generation" (6) testifies to his painful awareness that, during those dark years, a long shadow had been cast on the whole world. As Owen Knowles recently recognized, the dedication "actively invites the reader to attend to the story's wartime origins."<sup>10</sup> And as Martin Bock shows, Conrad was personally concerned with the Spanish flu pandemics, and his fictions gain from considering "germ theory" and its concern with "contagion" that were emerging at the time.<sup>11</sup> Hence *The Shadow-Line* invites us to open up a series of supplementary binaries that, at least in theory, and certainly in fiction, can potentially be crossed, binaries such as self/others, living/dead, fiction/history, sick/healthy, one generation/the next generation.

What, then, does this "*grand miroir*" reflect?

#### Sovereign Head/Contagious Bodies

What is certain is that in light of such contextual historical horrors that press from the outside-in, the political metaphors that inform the text from the inside-out sound strikingly conservative, and in line with the authoritarian bent of "The Secret Share." In fact, the newly appointed captain relies on monarchic images of authority that inform his vision of what command is or should be. As he lands, somewhat unexpectedly, his first command, he confidently says: "In that community I stood, like a king in his country in a class all by myself. I mean a hereditary king, not a mere elected head of state" (54). This ship, we are given to think, is thus not simply a ship; it is representative of a "state." The crew is not simply a crew; it stands for a "community." The captain is not simply a captain; he is the embodiment of a "king"—a "hereditary" king whose power is guaranteed by his alignment with a dynastic, aristocratic tradition to which he claims to belong. The image of the king as head of the state, whose power is conveyed transcendently by the "Grace of God" (54), alludes to the political topos of the two bodies of the king—one mortal, the other divine—a canonical, monarchic distinction the captain-narrator convokes in order to draw a line that divides him not only hierarchically but also affectively from his subjects. Thus he specifies: "My sensations could not be like those of any other man

on board” (23–24). The captain might be in the same boat as the crew, yet his “sensations” should not be confused with communal sensations; the head is attached to the body, but should not be confused with the body. This, at least, is the theory.

And yet in practice boundaries are shadier than they appear to be, for the hierarchical line the human head sets up can easily be transgressed by non-human forces. Notice that already the organic analogy of the human body that informs this image of the body politic cuts both ways, and opens up the possibility of infectious continuities that cut across affective discontinuities. If the head/body dichotomy introduces a distance from communal “sensations,” it also opens up channels for contagious infections that can potentially penetrate, contaminate, and, eventually, undermine the authoritarian power structure on which the body politic of the ship qua “state” rests. This, at least, is what the captain progressively realizes as his “abstract idea” (38) of what command is begins to give way to the empirical “experience” (3) of what command leads one to become. This tension between idea and experience, theory and practice, is central to Conrad’s poetics in general and informs the immanent and transcendent sides of the Janus-faced shadow I am tracking. In the context of *The Shadow-Line* it generates a limit(ing) nautical experience that confronts the captain-narrator’s idea of monarchic power with the reality of environmental forces that constrain the ability of the head to direct the social body.

### Epidemic Patho(-)logies

From the outset of his nautical journey, the captain realizes that the human head that controls the communal body is radically dependent on nonhuman factors beyond the control of his command. **Trapped in a becalmed ship in a river, the captain finds himself unable to “get her out to sea”** (55). If you recall, this is a repetition of a nautical situation that already haunted the beginning of “The Secret Sharer.” But we should equally remember that Conrad never sails in the same river twice.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he echoes a previously explored scenario in order to add new narrative layers that complicate, alter, and ultimately reframe the shadow cast on board ship.

## Poisonous Infections

In *The Shadow-Line*, Conrad stresses that adverse meteorological conditions not only passively impede nautical action; they also actively generate new catastrophic possibilities. Thus, as a consequence of being stuck in what he calls a “pestilential river” (55), an epidemic of malaria breaks out on board ship. We are told that “the first member of the crew . . . [was] taken ashore (with choleric symptoms) and died there at the end of a week” (57). **This is one of the slowest possible starts in the history of narratives of the sea (six weeks are spent in that poisonous river). And as the ship eventually reaches the Gulf of Siam, the epidemic, far from being cured, continues to determine the entire trajectory of the journey, eventually forcing a return to Singapore.** As the captain-narrator retrospectively puts it, **“the infection . . . clung to the ship. It obviously did cling to the ship. Two men. One burning, one shivering” (66).**<sup>13</sup> Confronted with this epidemic infection, the captain’s initial faith in his sovereign, monarchic power to be left unaffected begins to give way to a form of fatalistic, anxious, and rather desperate sensation, as he admits: “I felt a distinct reluctance to go and look at them. What was the good? Poison is poison. Tropical fever is tropical fever” (66). Poison is, indeed, poison. **It affects the head as much as the body, rendering the head not only unable to direct the body but also as vulnerable as all the other members of the body politic.** There is a subtle diagnostic lesson in this clinical realization. Indifferent to all-too-human hierarchical distinctions between (human and divine) bodies, the narrative alerts us that epidemic pathologies are mimetic in the sense that they are contagious and introduce (horizontal) sameness where there once was (vertical) difference, (shared) infection where there once was (divided) affection. Anticipating the possibility of a generalized contagion that poisons the entire body politic, the captain-narrator asks, in an apocalyptic mood: “Who hasn’t heard of ships found floating, haphazard, with their crews all dead?” (74–75).

This is, indeed, the state of “undifferentiation” that Girard would consider “metaphorical” of the mimetic crisis that is hidden behind the mask of real epidemics. But while the shadow of mimetic doubles continues to haunt the tale, no violent crisis ensues. On the contrary, solidarity and sympathy follow. Moreover, Conrad’s diagnostic of undifferentiation remains quite literal, and opens up a holistic, environmental, and nonanthropocentric

perspective that is attentive to the complex ecological interplay between human and nonhuman contagion. As an ex-seaman, Conrad is, in fact, painfully aware that meteorological and epidemiological factors are intimately connected; conversely, as a seaman turned writer his narrative dramatizes the contagious pathologies that infect the bodies and souls of the entire body politic. This patho(-)logy, as we know, does not operate according to a billiard-ball causal logic, but according to a systemic feedback loop we have already encountered. The diagnostic, however, is different now. What Conrad calls the “double fight” of adverse weather and epidemic disease generates a spiral of contagious circulation that does not allow for any form of individual resistance à la Leggatt. The captain-narrator retrospectively diagnoses the logic of this poisonous pathology with incisive clinical precision:

The fact was that disease played with us capriciously very much as the winds did. It would go from one man to another with a lighter or heavier touch, which always left its mark behind, staggering some, knocking others over for a time, leaving this one, returning to another, so that all of them had now an invalidish aspect and a hunted, apprehensive look in their eyes. . . . It was a double fight. The adverse weather held us in front; and the disease pressed on our rear. (70)<sup>14</sup>

This fight is at least double. It confronts both climatic and epidemic factors, which, in turn, retroact to affect and infect both the bodies and souls of the crew, generating a vortex of contagious actions and reactions. The mimetic ecology emerging from this widening spiral of climatic, epidemic, and anthropogenic forces generates what Gregory Bateson calls a “systemic pathology,” making us realize, along with the captain, that “we are not by any means the captains of our soul.”<sup>15</sup> It also opens up a diagnostic of the pathological effects of the immanent vibrations of matter that, as Jane Bennett aptly recognized—from viruses to wind, currents to storms—reframes human agency along lines that “are more emergent than efficient, more fractal than linear.”<sup>16</sup>

The emerging spiraling logic of this vibrant pathology could be schematically diagnosed as follows. First, climatic factors deprive the captain (or head) of the power to effectively direct the ship (or body politic), leaving the entire crew (or community) exposed and vulnerable to additional threats

that escape anthropogenic control. Second, viral, epidemic factors join hands with adverse weather conditions and cause a generalized physical pathology whereby one body infects another body, progressively knocking over subject after subject. And third, epidemic, environmental, and somatic factors affect the psyche of “all” the members of the crew, generating a haunting apprehension that, in yet another feedback loop, renders the bodies even more vulnerable to the circulating return of other waves of infection. Once caught in such a pathological spiral of environmental, epidemic, and anthropogenic infections, linear logic breaks down, preventing the possibility of effective antidotes to be applied.

There is, indeed, a thus far unrecognized monstrous shadow beyond human control haunting this tale, what the captain-narrator also calls “an invisible monster ambushed in the air, in the water, in the mud of the river-bank” (57). It is thus not surprising that even the captain’s mind is infected by poisonous images of catastrophe. Once out of the pestilential river, but still followed by the infection, he says: “The intense loneliness of the sea acted like a poison on my brain. When I turned my eyes to the ship, I had a morbid vision of her as a floating grave” (74). **This poisonous infection is as somatic as it is psychic, as personal as it is collective.** And in an expansive narrative and theoretical gesture we are by now familiar with, Conrad does not limit such a vision to the microcosm of the ship and the community it sustains. Instead, by metonymic association, he extends **the spiral of epidemic contagion to imaginatively infect what he calls “a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence” (62).**

Confronted with this imminent possibility, the narrative posits a diagnostic problem to its captain: **the problem of finding a remedy that would, if not magically cure, at least contain the contagious effects of epidemic infection.** Much has been said about the episode of the missing quinine. Thrown overboard by the previous captain gone mad, this episode leaves the new captain without medical antidotes to counter the pathology on board. And as the phantom of the late captain continues to haunt the ship, this episode opens up the tale to supernatural, interpretative possibilities that have stimulated the critical imagination.<sup>17</sup> Conrad did not seem to be particularly fond of this line of inquiry: he stressed in a materialist mood his “invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature” (5). While a transcendent touch unquestionably informs the tale, my

focus here is less on supernatural ghosts than on natural shadows. There is, in fact, an environmental awareness internal to Conrad's work that still needs to be foregrounded for clinical reasons in line with the double principles of Janus-faced investigation. Thus, if we have seen that Conrad offers a precise diagnostic of the pestiferous spiral of infective contagion, we now turn to see how he provides a possible remedy to counter the equally poisonous dynamic of affective contagion.

### Affective Remedies

Let's face it. Still caught in the windless waters of the poisonous river, this adventure has not taken us physically far. And yet despite the paralysis generated by the becalmed ship, the epidemic infection, and the contagious demoralization that ensues, this experience of first command constitutes a decisive step ahead in the captain's psycho-ethical development. It leads to the realization that there is no second, divine body divided from the human body, no transcendental head of the state apart from the immanent body politic—if only because the head remains, for better and worse, attached to the body. Consequently, **the captain experiences that the head is not only as vulnerable to the danger of infection as the body; it is also radically dependent on the social body for the survival of the "community" as a whole.** To be sure, in a tale of maturation haunted by the shadow of catastrophe, a radical reform of the captain's psychology, politics, and ethics is urgently in order if he wants to navigate out of these poisonous waters. Before sailing ahead, however, it is necessary to cast a retrospective glance and retrace this process of psychic maturation from the very beginning of the tale by paying attention to the microlevel of intersubjective communications that tie the head to other bodies. This circumnavigation brings us back to mimetic currents we are by now familiar with and, I hope, shall give us the sufficient speed to navigate past the epidemic that infects the body politic on more relational, intergenerational, and communal foundations.

The first, incredibly slow chapters of *The Shadow-Line* are often considered to be marginal at best and totally dispensable at worst, but on closer inspection they reveal the push-pull of mimetic and antimimetic undercurrents that orients the tale as a whole. The beginning already makes clear that a mimetic anxiety casts a shadow on the captain-narrator's process of

maturation. The novel starts with the narrator's complaint about the lack of originality provided on board his previous ship, where he served as first mate before giving up his berth. Invoking a romantic dissatisfaction characteristic of what he later diagnoses as "the green sickness of late youth" (12), he says: "one expects an uncommon or personal sensation—a bit of one's own" (11). And later, he echoes: "There was nothing original, nothing new . . . no opportunities to find out something about oneself" (25). Originality (something "one's own"), not imitative behavior (something "shared"), is what this romantic soul in search of adventure seeks as the cure to his youthful, existential despair. Interestingly, such a solipsistic self-sufficiency and narcissistic self-concern renders the newly appointed captain indifferent to catastrophic scenarios: "People might have been falling dead around me, houses crumbling, guns firing, I wouldn't have known" (35), he says. It is thus not surprising that his entire attitude at the Officers' Home in Singapore, as he is waiting demoralized, frustrated, and anxiously insecure, for a ship to take him on a passage home, is characterized by a fierce antimimetic stance toward kindly disposed, paternal figures who actively serve as helpers in his journey of maturation. This psychic anxiety of influence concerning "whiskered" father figures is not unusual in Conrad's nautical fictions, and the type of psychic rivalry it generates has traditionally been read in familial, psychoanalytical terms. This rivalry, and the ambivalences it generates, however, is not so much revealing of the subject's Oedipal complex (Freud)—though an anxiety of influence is at play; nor can it be fully understood within the triangular dynamic of "mimetic desire" (Girard)—though shadows have certainly been cast on his ego. Rather, it sets in motion the "influences" grounded on a mimetic unconscious that generates affective communal pathologies as much as critical pathologies (Conrad).

Take, for instance, the captain-narrator's severe evaluation of Captain Giles, a calm, experienced, and benevolent figure he initially dismisses as a "churchwarden" from whom one could only expect "moral sentiments, with perhaps a platitude or two" (17). Especially revealing of the narrator's mental disposition is not so much what he says, but how he says it. As we tune in, pay particular attention to the captain's tonality of voice and its contrast with Captain Giles's tone. We are told, for instance, that Giles was a "low-voiced man," whereas the narrator "spoke a little louder" (18); if Giles asks questions in a "benevolent" voice, the narrator gets "angry all of a sudden" (19); if Giles

“murmured” (19), the narrator “cried” (20), and so forth.<sup>18</sup> The Conradian subject is, once again, defined by how he sounds more than by what he says. The medium is the underlying message of these communications. For Conrad, in fact, tone is a defining feature of subjectivity in general and of authority in particular. It is a property that is attuned to the affective currents that traverse self and others, establishing both mimetic continuities and antimimetic discontinuities. The narrator’s impulsive outbursts of “childish irritation” (22) take place prior to crossing the shadow-line, in a “twilight” zone (15) that has the power to turn sailors into shadows depriving them of a proper identity, as Giles’s “deeper philosophy” suggests.<sup>19</sup> And what this philosophy reminds us of is that the refusal of imitation generates mirroring inversions that are imitative nonetheless and have the power to trigger affective reactions that are not under the control of consciousness and are, in this sense, unconscious. As it was already the case for the process of maturation in the other fictions of the homo duplex considered so far, it is via a mimetic, unconscious mechanism that the process of maturation takes place. And once again, it is in the other, not in the ego, that lies the mysterious source of one’s originality.

#### The Influence of Prestige

The mimetic unconscious continues to be central to Conrad’s account of ethical maturation insofar as ethics, for him, rests on permeable, intersubjective, and thus relational foundations. Already at the moment of maximum antimimetic opposition to Captain Giles’s paternal guidance, the captain-narrator is, in fact, caught in the hypnotic-suggestive-mimetic spell of the older man, acting in such a way that not his own will, but the will of the other directs his actions. Thus, as he sets out to chase the steward who is concealing the letter with the offer of his “first command,” the narrator says: “To this day I don’t know what made me call after him” (27). Retrospectively, however, he articulates the following hypothesis: “possibly I was yet under the influence of Captain Giles’s mysterious earnestness. Well, it was an impulse of some sort; an effect of that force somewhere within our lives which shapes them this way or that” (23). And he concludes: “my will had nothing to do with that. . . . No. My will had nothing to do with it” (27). The psychic origins of the captain’s personal “will” do not stem from the

ego, but from the “influence” of another, more experienced, or, as he says, “exemplary” (104) figure whose “force” has mysteriously penetrated the ego in order to “shape” it from within. This is, indeed, a mimetic hypothesis. Diagnostically put, a nonverbal, affective, and suggestive communication creates a shared bond of solidarity with a more experienced alter ego, and thanks to an unconscious, mirroring mechanism we are by now familiar with, the thoughts of the other operate within the ego, influencing his own will. Drawing directly from the modernist tradition of the mimetic unconscious, Conrad calls this mysterious psychic will power, “influence,” or, alternatively, “prestige”—qualities decisive for command in general and for navigating through catastrophic situations in particular. Indeed, authority in *The Shadow-Line* continues to have its foundations in the intersubjective, mimetic bonds with singular others central to “The Secret Sharer.” It is on this initial mimetic influence that an alter ego (or *socius*) is anchored, so to speak, in the affective structure of the ego—generating a “feeling that binds a man to a child” (*LJ* 101), as Marlow puts it—and creating a subject that is already plural and thus, as we shall see, open to forms of cooperation with the community as a whole.

Contrary to contagious epidemics that are outside human control, Conrad’s narrative suggests that contagious affects can be consciously transformed—by mimetic means. As the narrative gives an account of the “revolution in [the captain’s] moral nature” (*SL* 35) that puts the head back in charge of the social body, we see a therapeutic transformation that turns the captain’s impulsive (anti)mimetic behavior toward a more sympathetic stance that reproduces the qualities of restrained tonality initially located in the experienced other. Thus, as the narrator belatedly realizes Captain Giles’s role in securing his first command, he addresses the older man by “assuming a detached tone” (36), a tone he manages to keep throughout the tale. To be sure, imitation often escapes conscious control and can generate violent, unconscious reactions. Yet Conrad is also aware that mimetic pathos can be consciously channeled by logical and detached reflections. Mimesis, as always, cuts both ways: it can lead to aggressive escalations that contribute to the spreading of pathologies but also to an increase of affective distance that can be put to patho-*logical* use.

If we now leap ahead so as to return on board the infected ship stuck in the poisonous river with the patho(-)logical lessons drawn from these

seemingly dispensable chapters, we notice that they introduce secret steps for countering the epidemic that infects individual bodies as well as the body politic. In fact, by the time the captain-narrator confronts the choleric infection, he has not only learned to master his youthful desire for originality (his romantic “sickness”) but also to control the infective provocation of others (his mimetic sickness). Take the captain’s relation to the chief mate, Mr. Burns, for instance. If this relation initially generates the anxiety of influence he experienced with Captain Giles, it does so with a significant difference. Confronted with Burns’s “red moustache” (47) attached to a “face” “several years . . . older than [him]self” (48), the captain displays the usual symptoms of intimidation (that is, fear of “inexperience,” “becoming self-conscious,” and so forth [48]). This mimetic anxiety is understandable. Burns is, after all, openly antagonistic to the young captain, considers himself entitled to take up the position of command, and initially occupies the role of what Girard would call “mimetic rival.” Thus Burns initially blurts out to the captain, in a “tone of forced restraint”: “If I hadn’t a wife and a child at home, you may be sure, sir, I would have asked you to let me go the very minute you came on board” (55). This is, of course, a contagious affective provocation that could easily escalate. But the captain has learned his antimimetic lesson from Giles, and no reciprocal violence ensues. Instead, he deftly avoids this mirroring contamination by “answer[ing] him with a matter-of-course calmness as though some remote third person were in question” (55). And later, he consistently responds to Burn’s bitter accusations with what he calls a “systematic kindness” (56) or “invariable kindness” (59).

How can mimetic rivalry be avoided? This is a question that has not received sufficient attention in mimetic theory, but it is one Conrad helps us address. There is, in fact, a subtle psycho-ethical lesson at work in these seemingly marginal exchanges that is indicative of the captain’s process of development and has larger therapeutic implications for the formation of communities—both imaginary and real. Mimesis, it should be noted, is central to both the message and the medium of Conrad’s diagnostic. The message is that having assimilated, via the medium of mimesis, Giles’s anti-mimetic qualities and refusing to automatically respond to a provocation with yet another provocation, the captain avoids generating contagious escalations on top of a contagious epidemic. Attention to the medium, on the other hand, tells us, exactly, how he avoids being caught in the spiral of

mimetic reciprocity: by treating a first-person narrative speech (or *mimesis*) as if it was uttered in a “third-person” narrative speech (or *diegesis*). You want to avoid the contagion of an insulting provocation? Speak as if not you but a third person has been offended, and an antimimetic reply will naturally ensue. Such a shift of perspective indicates that a formal narrative distance is the necessary precondition not to be affected by the infective contagion of mimetic pathos; *diegesis* might be the antidote to *mimesis*; sympathetic distance functions as the best antidote to the pathos of poisonous feelings.

#### The Ethos of Profession

I have traced this process of personal, psychic maturation in some detail because it signals an ethical reform in the captain’s relation to the body politic as a whole. The case of Mr. Burns continues to be therapeutically instructive to diagnose the captain’s shift from egocentric to we-centric concerns. One of the first victims of the contagious epidemic, Burns is taken to a hospital. Interestingly, as the captain regularly visits him, his cold distance characteristic of sovereign detachment that initially made him impermeable to the “sensations” of others gives way to affective proximity that makes him permeable to the pathos of the other, generating bonds of sympathy that cut across hierarchical barriers. Resting his case on their shared professional ethos in order to be taken back on board ship, Mr. Burns cries out with pathos, addressing the captain in mimetic speech: “You and I are sailors” (59). And confronted with this irresistible you-I ethical interpellation, the captain is forced to acknowledge that “he had happened to hit on the right words” (60). The words are right, but so is the medium: it is in fact the use of mimetic speech that introduces a flux of affects that blurs the line between you and me in the first place. Thus, echoing Mr. Burns, he repeats from a diegetic distance: “He and I were sailors. That was a claim, for I had no other family” (60). The linguistic repetition (*diegesis*) reflects the emergence of an affective “you-I” bond (*mimesis*). And as both pathos and distance are joined, Conrad opens up the possibility that sovereign forms of subjectivity are not self-contained but rest on shared bonds of sympathetic solidarity that begin to tie the head back to the social body to which he belongs.

As we move from “The Secret Sharer” to *The Shadow-Line*, the same shared feelings generated by a common training and profession continue to

inform ethical relations with others. The mimetic foundations of the Conradian subject remain essentially the same. But now these foundations are no longer limited to two aristocratic individuals considered as “secret sharers.” Instead, the you-I bond stretches from singular I to plural you to include the entire community of sailors considered as “family.” Thus the captain immediately generalizes this familial feeling to the crew as a whole, making clear that a common sensation ties, for better and worse, the head back to the social body. As he puts it: “I could imagine no claim that would be stronger and more absorbing than the claim of that ship, of these men snared in the river . . . as if in some poisonous trap” (60). This passage marks an ethical turn that redirects the ship along communal lines I shall presently discuss. Yet it is important to recognize that its diagnostic lesson remains anchored in familiar structures. What these initial chapters suggest, in fact, is that the “poisonous trap” has a paradoxical double effect we have encountered before: it is not only responsible for a contagious pathology that infects the social structure of the ship from without; it also generates a psychic, intersubjective, and communal stimulus that can potentially serve as a cure from within. It is, in fact, because the ship is caught in a poisonous trap that generates a shared infection that the captain develops a shared bond of solidarity with the crew along communal lines that take Conrad’s ethics of sharing a step beyond “The Secret Sharer.” Put differently, the shared, contagious epidemic that infects the body politic is not only the problem but also contains, at least in embryo, a diagnostic solution; it contributes to generating an ethics of sharing that has the power to reanimate the entire social organism. The poisonous infection is new, but the diagnostic remains fundamentally the same: it reminds us that where the poison is, there also lies the remedy; where the danger of infection is, there also lies the cure.

We are indeed back to the Janus-faced diagnostic principle that orients this book. But as always Conrad gives a new spin to this ancient patho(-)logy that keeps our investigation on the move. Adding a new layer of complexity to the problematic of subject formation, Conrad suggests that this (horizontal) sympathetic bond with the community is itself dependent on a prior (vertical) identification with a leader figure that has the experience necessary for command. In this sense, *The Shadow-Line* relies on the same conception of the shared subject at work in “The Secret Sharer”; yet it also suggests that the range of identifications needs to be expanded in order to

assimilate a plurality of “exemplary” figures that belong to both present and past generations. Thus, in this tale, Conrad multiplies models who contribute to *in-forming* the captain’s still malleable character: from Captain Giles to Mr. Burns, from Captain Ellis to Ransom, the captain-narrator aligns himself with a chain of sovereign figures that belong to a fundamentally shared, maritime tradition. This also means that in *The Shadow-Line* sharing is no longer part of dyadic, private, and secret ethics, but a multiple, communal, and plural ethos; it not only concerns one generation but also links a multiplicity of generations; the shared soul, for Conrad, turns out to be not simply a split, or divided, soul, but a plural, or “composite,” soul—homo duplex, in short, turns into homo multiplex.

### The Composite Soul

Confronting the shadow of catastrophe that haunts the community on board “the small planet” of the infected ship continues to require a Janus-faced approach, but Janus, as we know, leads to protean transformations. If Conrad repeatedly encouraged us to look back to the romantic trope of the doppelgänger to diagnose split souls, in *The Shadow-Line* he uses mirroring devices to look ahead to the formation of a protean or, as he says, “composite soul.” Given the symbolic centrality of this transformative scene in the circumnavigation that will help bring the infected community back to where it started, it is necessary to look into this mirror in some detail—for we are only halfway home.

#### Specular Identification

The theoretical foundations of Conrad’s account of the “composite soul” are framed by a mimetic scene that seems to mirror narcissistic forms of specular identification. Having set foot on the deck of his “high-class vessel” for the first time (no epidemic in sight yet) and felt “the fine nerves of her rigging as though she had shuddered at the weight” with a “deep physical satisfaction” (48), the newborn captain descends into his cabin and is immediately confronted with a specular scene. Bodily satisfaction gives way to visual satisfaction as he looks around and sees “the sideboard, surmounted by a

wide looking-glass in an ormoulu frame” (46). And as he looks again, in the direction of the looking glass, he finds himself face-to-face with a classical imaginary scene, which he retrospectively describes as follows: “Deep within the tarnished ormoulu frame, in the hot half light sifted through the awning I saw my own face propped between my hands. And I stared back at myself with the perfect detachment of distance, rather with curiosity than with any other feeling” (47). The scene is as specular as it is speculative and tickles our mimetic curiosity. Within this visual scenario, the narrator recognizes himself in his new role as captain from a visual “distance” that has the effect of splitting his ego in two, prompting the following mimetic reflection: “It struck me that this quietly staring man whom I was watching *both as if he were myself and somebody else*, was not exactly a lonely figure” (47; my emphasis). This is, indeed, a decisive affective and theoretical turning point in a narrative of psychic maturation; it also brings to light the shadow I have been tracing so far. This mimetic shadow confirms that, for Conrad, the ego is not a “lonely figure” that can be considered in isolation, no matter how introverted and isolated this subject feels—if only because “somebody else” is already at the heart of what the ego would like to become.

The specular scene of identification is, of course, a familiar one, for we have already faced it in “The Secret Sharer,” but this time it fits more neatly speculative accounts of subject formation. If we put on our theoretical lenses—for this is, after all, what *theoria* means: seeing carefully, which is not very far from Conrad’s view of what mimesis should do in praxis, that is, to “make you *see*”—the passage could be reframed as follows: in this specular scene of (mis)recognition, the subject realizes that this “figure” in the mirror is not simply constituted by his reflection but is itself constitutive of an ego that is not one, for it is already double. Faced with its own image (or imago) the newborn captain, who up to that stage has been animated by turbulent affective movements that render the ego formless, identifies with that ideal form (or Ideal-I), assumes that alienating shadow into its own ego. And, the story goes, this process of identification forms the ego, turning it into a shadow or phantom that “situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a fictional direction [*ligne de fiction*].”<sup>20</sup> This, you will have recognized it, is Jacques Lacan’s speculative hypothesis.

The similarities between both literary and theoretical accounts of subject formation are, indeed, uncanny. They are, in fact, at least double

and blur the line that divides fictional and theoretical speculations. On the one hand, Conrad's account of an imaginary (visual) identification with a figure in a "looking-glass" who is "myself and somebody else" has speculative implications concerning the role of mimesis in the formation of the subject. On the other hand, Lacan's imaginary (identificatory) account of the "mirage of maturation" via the medium of visual imago, or "phantom," is not far removed from imaginary (illusory), fictional, and romantic representations of the homo duplex Conrad equally relies on.<sup>21</sup> There is thus an interesting game of fictional/theoretical refractions and reflections at play in this mirroring scene of (mis)recognition that critics have not failed to recognize and analyze. And yet a long tradition that goes all the way back to Plato's *Republic* and is fully at play in modernist accounts of the unconscious has taught us to be suspicious of mirror tricks. The shadows they reflect, in fact, also invert the fundamental presuppositions they appear to simply reproduce. Hence the closer to reality the mirror-image appears, the farthest from the truth it may actually be. If we do not simply apply a theory to fiction but read fiction theoretically, this is the specular hypothesis that emerges from this scene.

In addition to the obvious fact that the newborn captain, while childish in his insecurity, is no longer at the *infans* stage, Conrad's narrative makes us see that this scene does not depict a solipsistic, narcissistic, and purely specular account of ego formation with an ideal imago considered from the angle of visual "representation."<sup>22</sup> We should in fact remember that this specular identification does not come "before" but after the ego's "social determination." For Conrad, in fact, the subject's social determination is mediated by oral communications whose affective, embodied, hypnotic, and suggestive "influences" orient his mimetic conception of the unconscious. It is thus not surprising that no matter how specular the scene appears at first sight, the subject is not really formed by what Lacan calls, rather hermetically, "the assumption of the armor of an alienating identity which will mark with its rigid structure [*structure rigide*] the subject's entire mental development."<sup>23</sup> Instead, this subject remains *in-formed* by the mimetic hypothesis of a "shared" soul that is open to the affect, or sensation, of the other. This is perhaps the underlying theoretical reason why, in my view, the novelist manages to go a step further than the psychoanalyst by leading the subject "to that point where the real journey [*veritable voyage*] begins."<sup>24</sup>

## From Homo Duplex to Homo Multiplex

To begin this journey—and beginnings, you will have noticed, are what this narrative is all about—it is important to recognize that already during the mirror stage, the Conradian subject does not linger too long on the surface of this specular “image” (or imago). Instead, he finds himself immediately in an affective communication based on a shared feeling of “sympathy” (*sym-pathos*) that ties what is “not exactly a lonely figure” to other imaginary, symbolic, and perhaps even real, all-too-real figures. After emphasizing the visual distance that divides him from this specular representation, the captain-narrator goes through the looking glass, as it were, and gets in touch with a mimetic feeling that is of the order of a lived, affective experience. Let me restate this theoretically dense passage in its entirety:

Deep within the tarnished ormolu frame, in the hot half-light sifted through the awning I saw my own face propped between my hands. And I stared back at myself with the perfect detachment of distance, rather with curiosity than with any other feeling *except of some sympathy* for this latest representative of what for all intents and purposes was a dynasty continuous not in blood indeed but in its experience, in its training, in its conception of duty and in the blessed simplicity of its traditional point of view on life. It struck me that that quietly staring man whom I was watching both as if he were myself and somebody else was not exactly a lonely figure. He had his place in a line of men whom he did not know, of whom he had never heard but who were *fashioned by the same influences*, whose souls in relation to their humble life’s work had no secrets for him. (47; my emphasis)

The scene is more symbolic than it appeared to be; yet this symbolism goes beyond linguistic or narcissistic principles, for it is based on an affective, mimetic hypothesis that Lacan, as Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has forcefully shown, foreclosed<sup>25</sup>—but Conrad, along with other modernists, explored. This hypothesis is affective rather than speculative, for it posits the primacy of sympathetic influences (or pathos) as the necessary condition for a visual recognition (or distance). Having opened up the door to an imaginary, specular identification with an ideal and static imago frozen in a mirror, the movement of Conrad’s narrative immediately plunges into the turbulent

zone of bodily affects and touches on an alternative, experiential source to ego formation along genealogical lines that are not deprived of mimetic yet embodied identifications. Conrad's diagnostic operation cuts deep: the captain recognizes, or better experiences, or better feels, from the depth of an experience that is as interior as it is exterior that a shared pathos ("sympathy") ties him, legates him, to an aristocratic genealogical tradition (or "dynasty"). Continuity, in this tradition, is no longer guaranteed by a transcendental or essentialist inheritance (or "blood"), but rather by an immanent training ("experience"). And it is the mimetic effect ("influence") of this experience that has the power to impress, form, or better in-*form*, an ego that is not one, nor simply double, but "composite" instead.

Now, it is on the basis of an inner experience based on a shared praxis and in line with a genealogy of leader figures that the captain's newborn ego begins to take hold of his symbolic position within the outer social structure of the ship. Significantly, already before catching a glimpse of his specular image in the looking glass, while he still lingers on the side of the bodily referent, the narrator had already testified to a truly felt, sympathetic bond with a series of dynastic figures. You have to picture the scene. The captain, we are told, sits down in "the armchair at the head of the table, the captain's chair with a small tell-tale compass swung above it, a mute reminder of unremitted vigilance" (46). And having adopted this position of vigilant orientation, a feeling of communal belonging creeps up to him from below, penetrating his self in ways that are not at all specular, but are speculative nonetheless: "A succession of men had sat in that chair" (47), he says. And in a moment of antinarcissistic jubilation, he adds: "I became aware of that thought suddenly, vividly as though each had left a little of himself between the four walls of these ornate bulkheads; as if a sort of *composite soul, the soul of command*, had whispered suddenly to mine of long days at sea and of anxious moments" (47; my emphasis).

This is, indeed, a sovereign experience. Secretly whispered, rather than visually impressed, it opens up the subject to the mimetic realization that the soul of command is neither singular nor double, but protean instead. If we trace the temporal movement of this specular scene, we realize that it is only after this sense of belonging to a wider tradition of "shared influences" has been intimately experienced that a visual image of his heterogeneous soul is represented. Conrad's theoretical insight is clear: a feeling of mimetic

sympathy is the condition for a visual identification to be formed; the current of formless, transgenerational affects constitute the multiplicity of the “composite soul” (from Latin, *compositus*, placed together). What is theoretically at stake in this sensorial, bodily awareness that precedes the visual, mental identification is the realization that the soul of command is not the precipitate of a monadic, narcissistic, and idealized figure represented in a mirror—though this figure is physically isolated. Nor is it simply the product of a secretly shared mimetic communication with an ideal other—though secret identifications contribute to the captain’s shared psychic foundations. Rather, this hypothesis opens up the possibility that the soul of command is a shared soul that is receptive to a multiplicity of voices, not images, but voices, nothing but voices that ring an echo within a composite soul, generating the affect necessary for command in catastrophic scenarios.

#### The Affect of Command

We are now in a position to see, and perhaps also feel, that if this scene has both imaginary and symbolic connotations, we are no longer confined within the “ontological structure” of the mirror stage that frames the ego in an ideal form. Rather, Conrad’s reflections on the composite soul invite us to go through the looking glass, as it were, and ground the soul in a more immanent, more social, yet no less mimetic hypothesis. Conrad is not alone in developing this hypothesis. He shares it with other modernists, most notably Nietzsche.<sup>26</sup> In a passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*, which, as we have already seen, has tremendous resonance with Conrad’s nautical and stormy preoccupations, Nietzsche speaks of “the affect of command”<sup>27</sup> along lines that echo Conrad’s diagnostic of the soul. Nietzsche, in fact, develops a “soul hypothesis” that opens the road to what he calls “soul as a multiplicity of the subject” [*Seele als Subjekts-Vielheit*] and ‘soul as social structure of the drives and emotions’ [*Gesellschaftsbau der Triebe und Affekte*]” (*BGE* 12:43–44). For Nietzsche, as for Conrad after him, command is not understood as a solipsistic sovereign affair. Rather, it is predicated on a conception of the sovereign subject that is already plural, always social, for it is traversed by a community of mimetic affects that compose the soul of command. Composite soul, soul as multiplicity: indeed, these two literary/philosophical figures show two faces of the same captain.

Now, the politics of the soul structures this vision of command along lines that are relevant for the communal body as a whole. Conrad and Nietzsche, in fact, independently of each other but within a similar maritime concern with ethics, develop an immanent, psycho-sociological soul hypothesis that challenges an egocentric, narcissistic hypothesis that posits an ideal image as the ontological foundation of what the subject is, or should be. And what they reveal is that the soul of command is not simply a social soul because of its power to govern exterior subjects. Rather, it is social because it is already structured as a multiplicity subjected to the larger social body. The subject of command is thus a subject in the double sense of being a sovereign subject in command and being a sovereign subjected to the burden of command. Implicitly following up on the hypothesis opened up by Nietzsche, Conrad reveals, on a situational narrative basis, this process of subjection. He does so by articulating the multiplicity of heterogeneous “drives and emotions” that, far from being simply personal, or individualistic, are themselves already the product of “social structures” that orient the microcosm of the ship. The social—or to use a more specific concept, the *socius* (that is, privileged social others such as parents and models)—is thus already internal to the ego, constituting its body, generating a subject understood as a multiplicity of singular-composite souls. From homo duplex to homo multiplex, egocentric to we-centric experiences: this is the trajectory the captain’s theoretical compass is pointing to.

But Conrad goes further. For him, the question of influence is not restricted to the living but cuts across generations in a process of mimetic formation that inscribes a living soul in a multiplicity of dead souls. And if the influence of noble figures in the maritime tradition is there to sustain the captain (good mimesis), the negative influence of figures who have departed from this tradition is there to prevent progress (bad mimesis). This is especially true of the captain-narrator insofar as his immediate predecessor, whose symbolic chair he is now occupying, marked a departure from the maritime principles of duties that are passed down from one generation to the next. Described by Mr. Burns as an “artist” and “lover,” “ill in some mysterious manner” (52), the previous captain’s behavior is symptomatic of a form of romantic individualism that is at odds with the communal structure of the ship and contributes to the creation of potentially catastrophic situations. Thus we are told that this captain initially kept the ship “for three

weeks in a pestilential hot harbor without air" (51) and then pushed the crew to confront "a fierce monsoon" in an "insane project" that "was bound to end in some catastrophe" (52). Epidemics and monsoons are environmental catastrophes. But Conrad suggests that insofar as these nonhuman phenomena are entangled with human choices generating what William E. Connolly calls "a cosmos composed of multiple, interacting force fields moving at different speeds,"<sup>28</sup> they are ultimately anthropogenic in nature. If the captain is to cross the shadow-line that divides youth from maturity, then, it is not sufficient to cross the latitude line where the late captain has been buried. Rather, he must cross the shadow-line that divides a singular, individualistic soul from the composite soul necessary to face catastrophic situations. This entails shifting from personal, individualist concerns with originality that still haunt the young captain's romantic imagination, to embrace a mimetic, nonrivalrous, and composite social spirit vital to confronting situations of shared catastrophe on a communal basis.

The captain-narrator is fundamentally aware that the qualities of command based on a genealogical notion of the composite soul can only be tested on the basis of the individual, unique, and, in this sense, always new experience of navigation. If the "compass" reminded the captain-narrator of the importance of "vigilance," it is time for him to put his hands on the helm, which he takes as "a symbol of mankind's claim to the direction of its own fate" (63). And it is in the confrontation with a catastrophic situation that affects and infects the social structure of the ship, and the "planet" it symbolizes, that the captain's composite soul and the social structures that compose it come together as a cooperative community in which head and body are finally joined to jointly steer—and affirm the possibility of survival.

### **The Survival of Community**

The affect of command that is formed by this speculative scene of mimetic identification should not be read in terms of a solipsistic process of psychic maturation confined to the inner space of the cabin. Rather, this inner experience gives birth to a "composite soul" that opens up the sympathetic channels of the sovereign experience of "command" to the wider, collective and exterior question of what Conrad calls "community" (54). Critics have

noticed this concern before,<sup>29</sup> but the theoretical implications of Conrad's emphasis on community to sail past catastrophic situations still need to be articulated. In this concluding section, as "the feverish, enfeebled crew, in an additional turn of the racking screw" (91) is forced to face a storm that overshadows the "last gleam of light in the universe" (92), we turn to see that Conrad contributes to outlining the ethos of community by rendering it operative on the basis of affective forms of cooperation. This also entails supplementing past monocephalic or acephalic accounts of community that first emerged in a period haunted by the specter of Communism and the shadow of fascism (Georges Bataille) and were more recently reframed by continental philosophers who, on the shoulders of Bataille, rethought the question of the "in-common" on the basis of a relational ontology of the subject (Jean-Luc Nancy).<sup>30</sup> Building on this tradition, my aim is to propose some steps toward sovereign yet nontotalitarian forms of command based on sympathetic cooperation between the head and the social body, the composite soul and its social structure we have been tracing so far. For Conrad, in fact, it is only on an immanent, communal ground based on fundamentally shared infective and affective foundations that we can affirm the possibility of survival.

The slow beginning of the first part of the tale has the function of generating underlying currents that, in the second part, are instrumental to bringing the narrative to a speedy end. After spending seemingly useless yet fundamentally instructive time in the Officers' Home in Singapore and enduring an epidemic contamination that infects nearly all members of the crew stuck in windless waters, the ship, as well as the narrative, begins to pick up speed. And in a final nautical turn that faces, head on, the shadow of catastrophe, Conrad anchors the captain's composite soul (or head) in the social structure of the ship (or body) in order to fight for the survival of community via an experience of sovereign communication that is as interior as it is exterior, as individual as it is collective. Following a type of "training become instinct" through the formative influences of exemplary figures, the captain knows, or better feels, that "the difficulties, the dangers, the problems of a ship at sea must be met on deck" (73)—that is, from a position in which the "composite soul" of command can both animate and be animated by communal social bodies, on a sympathetic, we-centric, and nonviolent basis. And indeed, as the narrative unfolds, and the captain's mind is progressively

haunted by “visions of a ship drifting in calms and swinging in light airs, with all her crew dying slowly about her decks” (82), he is led to abandon his solipsistic, aristocratic stance that initially characterized him in order to invest his soul—and thus his body—in the social structure, or “nerves,” of the ship, so as to innervate—and thus reanimate—a feverish and moribund social body on “the common ground” of the deck.<sup>31</sup> A confrontation with a shared catastrophe leads the captain to open up the sympathetic channels that transect his already “composite soul.” And on this affective basis emerges an ethics of communal cooperation that eventually allows the planet of the ship to sail past the Scylla of totalitarian command and the Charybdis of refusal of command, so as to return to a harbor with a community of infected yet still living subjects.

#### Secret Sharers (Nietzsche to Nancy)

Plagued by a contagious “epidemic,” afflicted by “windless” waters, driven by “mysterious currents” and, eventually, “beset by hurricanes,” the narrative generates wave after wave of calamitous factors that “bewitched” (69) the ship, and require a type of strenuous, breathtaking, and continuous endurance to keep affirming the possibility of survival to the end. As Conrad had made clear from the beginning, it is via the systemic interplay of human interactions between the captain and the crew, the head and the body, which literally compose the composite soul of command, that this possibility can ultimately be affirmed. In particular, the concluding part of the journey, which takes the ship from the island of Koh-ring back to Singapore, suggests that the captain-narrator’s ethico-political commitment to the body politic the ship represents stems from the juncture of two seemingly incompatible ethical traditions the narrative has been delineating all along—that is, a vertical, aristocratic tradition that inscribes the captain’s soul in a “dynasty” of commanders (from Giles to Ellis, extending to the whole chain of past captain figures) whose “influences” are constitutive of his “composite soul,” on the one hand, and a horizontal, social experience of “sympathy” (from Burns to Ransom, extending to the entire crew) that anchors this soul within a social “community” represented by the microcosm of the contaminated ship, on the other. I suggest that it is from this paradoxical conjunction of vertical, aristocratic bonds that tie the captain to an aristocratic past tradition and of

the horizontal, democratic bonds that tie him to the present social relations that Conrad's communal ethics of survival emerges.

The bonds of shared solidarity that tie the captain to his fellow sailors are not opposed to the aristocratic soul of command. They rather, provide the living affects that transect the channels of what is already a composite soul. We could, in fact, say that "the composite soul of command" the captain inherits, in theory, from a past "dynastic" tradition of shared "influences," "training," and, above all, "conception of duty" is, in praxis, already organically connected to the horizontal bonds that tie this head, or, if you prefer, this soul, to the social duties that structure the "fine nerves" of the ship. For Conrad, in fact, it is because the soul of command is already informed by what Nietzsche calls, in a psycho-physiological mood, the "social structure of the drives and emotions" that the social duties that structure the ship can exercise such an absorbing affective "claim" on his composite soul, generating a bond so intense that he "could imagine no claim that would be stronger and more absorbing than the claim of that ship." The strength of this claim, in other words, stems from it being not simply an external claim addressed to a singular head. Rather, it is a claim coming from the entire social body on board, a communal body that is—via the ramified "nerves" of the ship—already neurologically connected to the head, part of an inner experience of a soul that is not singular but composite instead. Alternatively, the lived experience of command opens those sympathetic channels that already innervate, but do not yet irrigate, the composite structure of the soul. In his account of the soul as multiplicity, Nietzsche had already stressed that command is an affective affair, as he says: "will is not only a complex of feeling and thinking, but above all an *affect*: and in fact the affect of command" (*BGE* 19:48). Conrad furthers this affective view by putting the composite soul of command in touch with the nerves that tie the ship as social structure. That the head is back in touch with the social body is clear. The captain-narrator realizes, for instance, that "an order has a steadying influence upon him who has to give it" (*SL* 96). The notion of "influence" is thus used again to account for a process of nonverbal communication. Yet this time it does not designate a personal, psychological experience; nor does it have its origin in a totalitarian figure. Rather, it designates a collective, psychic-social dynamic whereby an order on the social body retroacts on the sovereign head, influencing him in return.

This mimetic circulation of reciprocal influences harmonizes the interior structure of the soul of command and the community on deck in a way that balances the microcosm of the social structure of the ship. We are in fact given to think that without these living, experiential bonds that tie the head to the social body and are constitutive of what the narrator calls “the strong magic” (30) of command, the latter is bound to remain what the captain calls “an abstract idea” (38)—a dead concept deprived of the living affects that reanimate this magical experience. In short, for Conrad, the hypothesis of a composite (mimetic) soul innervated by a shared (contagious) experience is necessary to bring a social organism (community) into being.

Conrad’s rethinking of the problematic of command grounded on shared, communal foundations looks back to a past maritime tradition; but looking back allows him to anticipate recent developments in ethical theory that think of community in terms of a shared exposition to the limit experience of death. We have already seen that the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy develops an ethics of catastrophe based on a conception of intersubjectivity that resonates with Conrad’s account of sharing. For both Conrad and Nancy, in fact, the ontological foundations of the self are shared, or, better, *partagés* (both shared and divided) with an other who is neither truly external nor fully internal to the self, but is in a relation of affective communication with the self. Conrad speaks of a “secret sharer” that generates a “mysterious communication” between two connected and disconnected bodies; Nancy speaks of the “sharing that divides and that puts in communication bodies.”<sup>32</sup> For both novelist and philosopher, the subject is not a self-enclosed, self-sufficient monad but is born out of the intimate experience of sharing. What we must add now is that Conrad and Nancy also have in common an investment in rethinking the foundations of community on the basis of a shared exposure to finitude that threatens to render this community inoperative.

#### From the Inoperative to the Cooperative Community

In *The Inoperative Community* Nancy engages with Georges Bataille’s concept of “sovereign communication” to answer the question, “who comes after the subject?” His answer is not “no one,” but, rather, everyone who is part of a community of subjects that are not singular because they are already

plural, or better singular-plural. Nancy's conception of community, like Bataille's conception of communication, offers a challenge to the metaphysics of the subject; it is not simply understood as an assemblage of separate egos but is already constitutive of singularities whose being rests on shared communicative foundations. Nancy writes, for instance, that community "presupposes that we are brought into the world, each and every one of us, according to a dimension of 'in common' that is in no way 'added onto' the dimension of 'being itself,' but that is rather co-originary and coextensive with it" (*IC* xxxvii). For Nancy, as for Bataille, but also for Nietzsche and Conrad before him, community is predicated on a conception of subjectivity that is not based on unitary, monadic egos. Rather, community is predicated on a relational conception of the subject that is open to the outside and rests on shared foundations.

This experience of sharing (or *partage*), in which the subject is both connected and divided (*partagé*) with others, for Nancy, emerges from the common confrontation with the limit-experience of death. And this "exposure" to death is, for Nancy, "the essence of community" (29). This is a philosophical point in line with a number of figures who—from Socrates to Heidegger—think of death as the ontological horizon of subjectivity. But it is not only that. In an echo of Lacoue-Labarthe, in fact, Nancy gestures toward what he calls "literature" as an "inscription of the communitarian exposition" inscribed in what he calls "the instant of communication, in the sharing" (39) that philosophy cannot fully articulate via a rational logos. My sense is that he would have found in Conrad's fictions traces of a mimetic supplement to his account of shared community. For Conrad, too, in fact, sharing is the essential constituent of a subject that is not one, because she or he is already double, or better multiple, so intertwined with the other that the ontological distinction between you and me, singular soul and plural soul, no longer holds, giving way to a "shared" or "composite" soul. Similarly, for Conrad, this singular composite soul is part of a community that is not based on a fusion or confusion of identities, but on a shared exposition to the threat of finitude that allows the captain to compear as a singular-composite soul. Nancy's and Conrad's account of community could not be more intimately shared. And given the number of mimetic instances in which the soul, for Conrad, turns out to be double and composite, we are now in a position to say that Conrad, in his writings, goes furthest in his account of what we

have seen Nancy call “you shares me” (*IC* 29). His tales of the homo duplex in particular reveal the immanent experience responsible for sovereign forms of communication that give birth to a community anchored on shared infective and affective foundations.

And yet as both Nancy and Conrad teach us, the experience of shared communication is as much based on conjunctions as on disjunctions, arrivals, and departures. Nancy puts it in Conradian terms as he speaks of “sharing [*partage*] that divides and puts in communication bodies, voices, and writings in general” (*IC* 6). If the shared foundations between Conrad and Nancy remain profound, it is in what divides them perhaps more than in what unites them that lies Conrad’s originality. Notice, in fact, that Nancy’s philosophical model of “community” is grounded on an ontological exposition of *ipse* restricted to the inner experience of death. Consequently, he does not explicitly address a community exposed to the general equivalence of catastrophe that will preoccupy him later in his career. This is perhaps why he claims that “I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable” (33). Yet in Conrad’s tales the experience of a shared catastrophe seems to force precisely such a mimetic recognition, perhaps based on the lived affective experience that “you and I are sailors,” as Burns puts it while he is exposed to the possibility of his death (*SL* 59). It is thus not surprising that important theoretical shifts of emphasis in their conception of a shared community need to be signaled. Conrad is, in fact, less preoccupied with the impossible confrontation with the limit-experience of finitude and more with the possibility of surviving the limit-experience of catastrophe, less with an ontology of the inoperative community and more with the psychophysiology necessary to render the community operative. There is, indeed, a Nietzschean, life-affirming side in Conrad’s writings that supplements contemporary philosophical accounts of death as community by affirming the survival of catastrophe.

The communal ethics that emerges from Conrad’s tale, then, suggests that in catastrophic situations haunted by the real possibility of catastrophe, the composition rather than dissolution of community should be at the center of literary and philosophical thought, a community that, with its social body innervated by the head (and vice versa), has all the characteristics of what Conrad also calls a “living organism” (*TOS* 69). To be sure, models of social cohesion based on an organicist view of society in which the head

governs, by “influence,” the body politic have not been popular in the second half of the twentieth century, unsurprisingly given the poisonous effects of popular *Gemeinschaften* predicated on fascist forms of will to power. Nancy is thus right to be “suspicious” of what he calls an “organic communion . . . constituted . . . by a fair distribution of tasks and goods, or by a happy equilibrium of forces and authorities” (*IC* 10, 9), for this community can easily turn into an organism in which a totalitarian head generates fusions or confusions that, in the past, led to unspeakable political horrors (I will return to this). Still, the horrors of the past should not prevent us from looking ahead to the horrors of the future. While the dangers of authoritarian will to power should always be kept in mind for political reasons, and self-contained notions of organic unity have become suspicious for aesthetic reasons, the ancient metaphor of the organism is currently regaining traction for ethical and ecological reasons, especially concerning contemporary preoccupations with epidemic infections and contagious pathologies.<sup>33</sup> Conrad contributes to these debates by adding a diagnostic that shows how a social organism is vulnerable to forms of infection that have the potential to affect equally—and in this sense “democratically”—the head and the body. He also dramatizes nonauthoritarian, democratic solutions in which the head cooperates with the entire social organism in order to fight off pathologies and jointly affirm the possibility of collective survival. As he succinctly puts it in *Lord Jim*: “We exist only insofar as we hang together” (170).

Time and again, what emerges from Conrad’s communal ethos is that the pathology that infects the social body also generates the possible remedy to cure it. A catastrophic situation that infects the social organism and confronts the community with the specter of death has, paradoxically, the power to generate the collective efforts necessary to keep the organism living. There is an immanent, life-affirming tendency at work in Conrad’s communal ethos that cannot afford to think of sharing only as an individual exposure to death. Instead it uses the shadow of death to affirm communal life. This is, indeed, what happens in the end. The ship is hit by a storm, which is not terrific in itself yet, given the pathological state of the crew, has catastrophic implications nonetheless. Enfeebled by the epidemic, crew and captain have to join forces to hoist a sail necessary to keep the ship floating. Here is how Conrad pictures the scene:

The shadows swayed away from me without a word. Those men were the

ghosts of themselves and their weight on a rope could be no more than the weight of a bunch of ghosts. Indeed, if ever a sail was hauled up by sheer spiritual strength it must have been that sail for, properly speaking, there was no muscle enough for the task in the whole ship, let alone the miserable lot of us on deck. (88)

These subjects are reduced to mere “shadows” or “ghosts”; yet these living ghosts cooperate in order to affirm life. They are animated by a “spiritual strength” that is not singular (the head), nor plural (the body), but is generated by the communal work of a composite crew in which the head works in organic communion with the social body. Spiritual strength, just as communal work, can be perceived as oxymoronic concepts. Nancy, for instance, drawing on Bataille’s ontological distinction between work and play, slavery and sovereignty, claims that “community cannot arise from the domain of *work*” since “one does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude” (*IC* 31). The secret continuities between Conrad and Bataille, especially when it comes to the experience of the sacred, are profound, and I shall return to them later. And yet in *The Shadow-Line* Conrad transgresses this venerable Bataillean distinction between work and play, slavery and sovereignty, the sacred and the profane. He makes us see that in a catastrophic scenario, work has the power to generate the flow of affect that keeps the infected organism together. For Conrad, in fact, this type of communal work cannot be reduced to a materialistic and servile conception of life, if only because the “strength” involved is not simply physical but “spiritual,” an indication that the type of work required to affirm survival in a catastrophic scenario does not belong to the sphere of the profane but of the sacred, not to servile but to sovereign experiences. In short, catastrophe, for Conrad, renders work a sacred, sovereign, and spiritual experience.

It is perhaps no accident that at the final turning point in the narrative, of all affects, Conrad privileges a social, contagious, and, as Bataille would say, sovereign effusion such as “laughter” in order to strengthen the communal bonds of solidarity that ties self to others, while at the same time exorcising supernatural fears. “Well, then—laugh! Laugh—I tell you” (95), Mr. Burns shouts insanely and somewhat comically. And in an attempt to spread this laughter by mimetic contagion to the whole crew, he adds: “Now then—all together. One, two, three—laugh!” (95). This insane laughter is only slightly

comic and does not make the crew burst out in communal laughter, yet the narrative suggests that it is not deprived of magical efficacy. In fact, it marks the end of the storm and the crossing of a “barrier” the captain had been trying to cross all along, a shadow-line that could not be crossed individually but required communal affective cooperation. We are thus given to think that laughter is not only cathartic; it also opens up those sympathetic channels that tie self to others via sacred forms of communication based on joyful, mimetic effusions that generate what I have called elsewhere “the laughter of community.”<sup>34</sup> The mimetic experience of sovereign communication gives birth to the communal desire of survival, and out of this desire the possibility of cooperative communities to come is at last affirmed. Thus the captain-narrator makes clear to his crew that “the best chance for the ship and the men was in the efforts all of us, sick and well, must make to get her along out of this” (78). The shift from a diegetic perspective that speaks of “the men” from a position of temporal distance, to an immanent, mimetic perspective that includes the pathos of the narrator (“all of us”) is indicative of the affective investment, sharing, and cooperation between the head and the social body necessary to overcome a catastrophic conclusion.

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We were wondering: What is the possible antidote that allows the crew to affirm survival once it has reached the shadow-line that divides the living and the dead? Which principle animates these half-living shadows of disease and starvation? What *The Shadow-Line* suggests, between the lines, is that the strength necessary to affirm survival as individual bodies are infected by a shared pathology stems from a sovereign communication of souls who are not singular (the head) nor solely plural (the body). They are, rather, composite souls in the sense that each soul is mimetically entangled with another, composing an affective chain of solidarity that holds subjects together forming a social and cooperative organism (the community). Thus understood, the Conradian emphasis on the notion of “composite soul” and the “spiritual” strength it generates stems from the immanent realization that the soul is a living breath that animates a collective organism. Hence the individual, far from being indivisible, is fundamentally interconnected in a web of other souls in such a fundamental way that one soul feels, responds to and supplements the failings of another soul in a shared feeling of solidarity that, at the

microlevel of the ship, is constitutive of a community. Thus understood, the ship becomes “a symbol of mankind’s claim to the direction of its own fate” (63). This, at least, is what emerges during moments of maximum vulnerability in which precarious lives take hold of the realization that their soul is a composite soul, their destiny is a shared destiny, their community a shared community. The ship as a microcosm of a social world threatened by the possibility of catastrophe becomes a privileged space to explore what Conrad calls in *A Personal Record* “that mysterious fellowship which unites in a community of hopes and fears all the dwellers on this earth” (23–24).

The image of the ship as a metaphor of the body politic goes back to the origins of ethical theory and is currently being recuperated by theorists concerned with the precariousness of life. It is equally central to Conrad’s ethical imagination. As we are sailing our planet into the age of the Anthropocene, the picture of the ship effectively reflects our exposure to the changes of climate, our vulnerability to the turbulence of currents, our openness to epidemic contagion, and, more generally, the fragility of our all too human foundations. Meanwhile, Conrad already suggested that as we continue to navigate—compass and helm at hand—the rapid changes that are currently reorienting “a planet flying vertiginously on its appointed path in a space of infinite silence” (*SL* 62), we should start developing those shared bonds of “solidarity” vital to sailing through turbulent waters that both sustain and threaten to dissolve the small planet we ultimately share. As the future of our children looks increasingly uncertain, turning back to Conrad’s nautical experiences also reminds us that what is needed to affirm the survival of community is a type of “solidarity” that, as he so presciently put it, “binds men to each other, which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living,” but above all—“the living to the unborn” (*NN* xii).