

The Hero and His Shadow

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Abstract (E): This essay traces the literary theme of the ‘disobedient shadow’ from the Romantic archetype to its adaptation nineteenth- and twentieth-century fantastic fiction. Focusing on texts in which the shadow takes up its own identity, becoming an uncanny double of its master, it is argued that the development of this theme is closely linked with the evolution of the human subject through the epistemological and cultural revolutions of the last two centuries.

Abstract (F): Cet article retrace l'évolution du thème littéraire de l' « ombre désobéissante », de l'archétype romantique aux mutations ultérieures dans la fiction fantastique des 19^e et 20^e siècles. Il examine un corpus où l'ombre assume son indépendance, devenant un double de son maître dans un esprit que l'on sait être maintenant celui de l'inquiétante étrangeté. L'article soutient l'idée que le développement du thème à travers les âges a beaucoup à voir avec les transformations du sujet humain tel que l'ont façonné les révolutions culturelles et épistémologiques depuis deux cents ans.

Keywords: Doppelganger, Fantastic, Shadow

There are more enigmas in the shadow of a man who walks in the sun
than in all the religions of the past, present and future

Giorgio de Chirico (1912)

My paper will deal with the uncanny in the framework both of Freudian theories of literature and studies on the fantastic. Against this background, my purpose is to follow the literary history and phenomenology of a specific topic: that of the alterations in the common relationship between the human body and the shadow it projects. It is a topic obviously connected to the more general theme of the double, and it usefully illustrates some of the literary devices and strategies that can produce the effect of the uncanny.

To mistake shadows for real bodies, as Plato teaches us in his famous myth of the cave (*Republic*, Book VII), is a hermeneutic error, derived from a limited and distorted perception. Nevertheless, in the realm of the fantastic, shadows frequently take on physical form and walk away, thus abandoning their masters' bodies.

So learns Peter Schlemihl, the unfortunate hero created by Adelbert von Chamisso, whose Romantic tale introduces the shadow among the most popular phenomena of the fantastic – alongside magical objects, ghosts, living puppets and obscure dreams. The story told in *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte* (1814) is well-known: the young Schlemihl is approached by a mysterious “Man in Grey”, who offers him a bottomless purse full of gold in exchange for his “herrlicher Schatten da zu Ihren Füßen” (Chamisso 1975: 22; “the glorious picture at your feet”, Chamisso 1915: 19). Allured by the prospect of inexhaustible riches, Peter agrees to the offer, but soon realises that he has given more than he has gained, since not even his fabulous wealth, which he shares with great generosity, can compensate for what he lacks.

Precisely what is it that he lacks, and what is represented by the lost shadow? Critics have been discussing the metaphorical meaning of Schlemihl's shadow for nearly two centuries, but if we keep to the letter of the text, we can agree with Thomas Mann, who saw it as the symbol of “der Solidität, der menschlichen Standfestigkeit, des bürgerlichen Schwergewichts” (Mann 1975: 244; “solidity, human regularity, bourgeois stability”, Mann 1968: 256). In other words, we can argue that Schlemihl, by abandoning his shadow, also gives up that peculiar social quality that we could define as his “bourgeois respectability”: in fact his lack of a shadow provokes people's derision and contempt,¹ thus forcing him to hide his deficiency carefully and flee each time he is exposed; children laugh at him; his servants have no scruples about stealing his money and wrecking his house; the police hound him; and finally Mina's father, who had first considered Peter a worthy suitor, denies him his daughter's hand in favour of Rascal, Schlemihl's former servant. Thus every attempt at social integration fails by the same pattern of events: after an initial period of social success, sooner

¹ As Peter explains to his reader: “Erspare mir, lieber Freund, die schmerzliche Wiederholung alles dessen, was ich erdulden mußte. Die Frauen bezeugten oft das tiefste Mitleid, das ich ihnen einflößte; Äußerungen die mir die Seele nicht minder durchbohrten, als der Hohn der Jugend und die hochmütige Verachtung der Männer, besonders solcher dicken, wohlbeleibten, die selbst einen breiten Schatten warfen”. (Chamisso 1975: 26. “Spare me, my beloved friend, the painful recital of all that I was doomed to endure. The women often expressed the deepest sympathy for me – a sympathy not less piercing to my soul than the scoffs of the young people, and the proud contempt of the men, particularly of the more corpulent, who threw an ample shadow before them”, Chamisso 1915: 29.)

or later the community discovers Schlemihl's diminished condition to their horror. Consequently, despite starting out as a high-ranking member of society, he is disgraced, and is finally expelled, following the scapegoat mechanism². On the other hand, as is shown by the love and friendship Schlemihl excites in Mina and Bendel respectively, his human dignity has been preserved, but it is not enough to grant him a seat in bourgeois society, which is the heart of Chamisso's Romantic criticism of bourgeois Philistinism.

Nevertheless, the misfortunes of poor Schlemihl eventually resolve themselves: in fact our hero turns down the new proposal by the Man in Grey – who, predictably, offers to restore the shadow in exchange for his soul – and resists temptation by ridding himself of the magic purse. Eventually, Schlemihl comes into possession of the Seven League Boots, and thanks to them, devotes the rest of his life to exploring and studying the natural world. Therefore it is not the lack of his shadow, but instead his sacrifice of diabolic powers that is rewarded with another magical object and a new but "positive" power, and this time he will succeed in using it for good. Moreover, Schlemihl's new-found power gives a fresh meaning to his condition as outcast and Wanderer, since his forced exile is turned into the voluntary solitude of a scholar, while his inability to project a physical image is compensated by the projection of a spiritual one. In fact it is Schlemihl himself who tells his own story, in a manuscript Chamisso pretends to have received by a mysterious wayfarer.

Consequently, Peter Schlemihl is the first western hero who willingly gives up his shadow, thus paving the way for many other characters to follow³. As Victor Stoichita remarks in his *Short History of the Shadow*, shadows can be used as exchange goods only after they have undergone a process of reification. In other words, from optical phenomena they have to rise to the rank of actual entities, dependent on other bodies but still alienable (Stoichita 1997: 170-172). As a result, Schlemihl's shadow must take on physical form or, we could say, must find a body of its own; and this corporeal form manifests itself in the scene of the diabolic exchange:

“Topp! der Handel gilt, für den Beutel haben Sie meinen Schatten.” Er schlug ein, kniete dann ungesäumt vor mir nieder, und mit einer bewundernswürdigen

² In the scapegoat ritual, as it has been described by René Girard (1986), an individual is selected for sacrifice in order to purge social groups of their introspected violence; the scapegoat is usually singled out because of her/his difference from the general norm (race, religion, etc) of the community.

³ For a wide-ranging review of the theme, see Wilpert 1978.

Geschicklichkeit sah ich ihn meinen Schatten, vom Kopf bis zu meinen Füßen, leise von dem Grase lösen, aufheben, zusammenrollen und falten, und zuletzt einstecken". (Chamisso 1975: 23)

("Done," said I; "the bargain is made: my shadow for the purse." "Agreed," he answered; and, immediately kneeling down, I beheld him, with extraordinary dexterity, gently loosen my shadow from the grass, lift it up, fold it together, and, at last put it in his pocket. [Chamisso 1915: 22])

More importantly, this shadowy body comes to life, even if we never have proof that it is self-aware or possesses free will. In fact, when Schlemihl borrows the shadow temporarily from the Man in Grey and tries to escape, the shadow stays behind and waits for its legal master.⁴ Therefore we can argue that the status of Schlemihl's shadow involves the confusion of two of the three basic predicative oppositions generally understood with regard to the fantastic, thus producing that hesitation which gives rise to the uncanny⁵: the opposition *concrete/non-concrete* – since the immaterial shadow gains physical consistency and may be handled – and the opposition *animate/inanimate* – since the shadow appears to come to life, even if its level of awareness is inferior to that of sentient beings.

The level of awareness of Schlemihl's shadow, however basic, is, in contrast with Peter Pan's shadow, more predictable, although their physical qualities are basically the same. In

⁴ "Er ließ lächelnd meinen Schatten zur Erde gleiten, der alsbald seine Stelle auf des Pferdes Schatten einnahm und lustig neben mir hertrabte. Mir war sehr seltsam zu Mut. (...) Er zu Fuß, ich zu Pferd, ein Schwindel ergriff mich, die Versuchung war zu groß, ich wandte plötzlich die Zügel, drückte beide Sporen an, und so in voller Carriere einen Seitenweg eingeschlagen; aber ich entführte den Schatten nicht, der bei der Wendung vom Pferde glitt und seinen gesetzmäßigen Eigentümer auf der Landstraße erwartete. Ich mußte beschämt umlenken; der Mann im grauen Rocke, als er ungestört sein Liedchen zu Ende gebracht, lachte mich aus, setzte mir den Schatten wieder zurecht, und belehrte mich, er würde erst an mir festhängen und bei mir bleiben wollen, wenn ich ihn wiederum als rechtmäßiges Eigentum besitzen würde". (Chamisso 1975: 54. "With a smile, he immediately let my shadow glide down to the ground; and I beheld it take its place by that of my horse, and gaily trot along with me. My feelings were anything but pleasant. [...] He being on foot, and I on horseback, the temptation to hazard a silly project occurred to me; so, suddenly turning my bridle, I set spurs to my horse, and at full gallop struck into a by-path; but my shadow, on the sudden movement of my horse, glided away, and stood on the road quietly awaiting the approach of its legal owner. I was obliged to return abashed towards the grey man; but he very coolly finished his song, and with a laugh set my shadow to rights again, reminding me that it was at my option to have it irrevocably fixed to me, by purchasing it on just and equitable terms", Chamisso 1915: 111.)

⁵ The process has been described by Tzvetan Todorov: "The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (Todorov 1973: 25).

the novel (*Peter and Wendy*, 1911) by James Matthew Barrie, Peter's shadow, which is hardly described, is caught in the window, then rolled up and stored in a drawer. When Peter recovers his shadow, he clumsily tries to stick it back with soap, but it does not work properly until Wendy sews it back onto his feet herself. Yet we must point out an important difference between the prose and the stage versions of the story. The stage directions of the play (*Peter Pan, or The Boy Who Wouldn't Grow Up*, staged in 1904, but first published in 1928) describe both the aspect and the behaviour of the shadow in detail, and in clearly fantastic terms. For instance, when the shadow is reattached to Peter, the narrator of the novel simply remarks that "soon his shadow was behaving properly, though still a little creased" (*Peter and Wendy*: 49). On the other hand, in the play, the shadow "awakes and is glad to be back with him as he to have it. He and his shadow dance together" (*Peter Pan*: 99). Thus the shadow has shifted from the inanimate to the animate realm – and strangely so, since Barrie's directions do not explain *how* this animation could be rendered on stage.⁶

All the features of Schlemihl's shadow will also reappear in *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (*The Woman without a Shadow*, 1913) by Hugo von Hofmannsthal. Like Chamisso and Barrie, Hofmannsthal chooses a fantasy paradigm and sets his story in a world where natural laws are blended with the marvellous, but he addresses an adult audience, contaminating the archetypes of northern European fairy tales with the obscurities of symbolism.⁷ The heroine without a shadow is a fairy who is married to a human emperor, and to save her husband from a dreadful curse she must find a shadow, which is the mark of the human ability to procreate. The Fairy tries to buy a shadow from a mortal woman, promising her eternal beauty in exchange; but at the last minute the Fairy feels compassion for the victim and her husband, and spills the "goldene Wasser" (Hofmannsthal 1975: 191; "Golden Water", Hofmannsthal 1993: 90) that the shadow is offering her. It is by this sacrifice that the heroine is granted humanity, and when she wakes up by her husband's side, she perceives a new shadow on the ground and realises that she is pregnant. Likewise in *Schlemihl*, and despite all the differences in genre and meaning between these texts, the shadow is the symbol of an essential quality to live among men, and its removal leads to exclusion from society. However, something in the

⁶ I must thank Orsetta Innocenti for drawing my attention to this point.

⁷ The story of a woman giving up her shadow and the ability to procreate to preserve her beauty comes from a Swedish saga, which had already inspired the ballad *Anna* (1838) by Nikolaus Lenau.

Romantic model has been changed, and we must point out an inversion in the hierarchy between what is human and what is not, as the lack of a shadow (in this instance) is no longer the mark of shame which denies the hero his human dignity, on the contrary: it is the sign of election that raises him to a superhuman level, among the immortals and other powerful beings.

Moreover, we find the same hierarchical inversion in *The Fisherman and His Soul* by Oscar Wilde, another fairy tale (collected in *A House of Pomegranates*, 1891), which tells the story of a young fisherman who is in love with a mermaid and must give up his soul to join her in the realm under the sea. The Fisherman finds out that the soul is the shadow itself, which is defined as “the body of the soul” (Wilde: 82), and so he frees himself precisely by cutting the shadow away with a knife, thus condemning it to wander alone through the world. However, the neglected shadow-soul is without a heart, and throughout its experience of the world learns only pleasures and cruelties. Later on, the shadow comes back to tempt its old master, and pushes him to commit many crimes. Eventually the Fisherman repents and goes back to the sea, and when he discovers that the mermaid is dead, the regret kills him; but at the moment of death, he rejoins the rejected shadow-soul:

And as through the fulness of his love his heart did break, the Soul found an entrance and entered in, and was one with him even as before. (Wilde: 124)

The pattern remains the same: Hofmannsthal tells of a superhuman being who needs a shadow in order to marry a mortal man, while Wilde tells of a man who must rid himself of his shadow in order to be with a supernatural creature. Nevertheless, in *The Fisherman and His Soul*, we find a new fictional element which is of primary importance from my perspective, and which I would define as “the shadow’s plot”. In fact, the shadow takes the form of a real character, which plays the role of antagonist to the hero: if the Fisherman’s erotic desire sets the plot in motion, bringing him to abandon his shadow and enter the realm under the sea, then the alienated shadow weaves an opposite plot, moved by a contrary desire to return the Fisherman back among humans. In other words, the shadow, which so far has been *objectified*, is now a *subject*: from being a material possession, and thus alienable, it becomes an alien individual, a *double*. Therefore, in addition to the first two predicative

oppositions of the fantastic implied by Schlemihl's shadow (concrete/non-concrete and animate/inanimate), we have the third and decisive opposition: *human/non-human*.

This personification of the shadow is not Wilde's creation. On the contrary, the motif of the shadow as an uncanny double shares similar origins with that of the reified shadow. The bridge between these two aspects of our theme could probably be attributed to *Die Abenteuer der Sylvesternacht* (*The Adventures of A New Year's Night*, 1814-15) by Hoffmann, which almost brings us back to where we started, since it is both a tribute to, and a reworking of, Chamisso's story. Poor Schlemihl makes a short and passing appearance in the text as a secondary character, acting as a point of comparison for the much more miserable Erasmus Spikher, who lost not his shadow but his reflection, which was left in Florence with the beautiful Giulietta. The similar outcomes of the two tales are clear: like Schlemihl, Erasmus realises too late that the loss of his own reflection leads to the loss of his bourgeois respectability – people laugh at him, the police chase him away, his son becomes disrespectful, and his wife reluctantly leaves him, since he no longer has the authority required of a good father. Besides, as with Chamisso, Erasmus can only recover his reflection at the cost of his own soul. In fact the Devil, here in the shape of doctor Dappertutto, offers him both his reflection and Giulietta if he is willing to kill his wife and son. However, there is an important difference between Schlemihl's shadow and Spikher's reflection, a difference that can be described as ontological. Indeed the shadow, even if reified, keeps its nature and function (it remains dependent on the body of its master), while the reflection acquires the capacity for free movement and, one might even say, free will. Such autonomy is clearly shown after the reflection's separation from its master's body:

Erasmus sah, wie sein Bild unabhängig von seinen Bewegungen hervortrat, wie es in
Giuliettas Arme glitt, wie es mit ihr im seltsamen Duft verschwand. (Hoffmann 1963:
399)

(Erasmus saw his reflection, independent of his own movements, step out of the mirror,
slide into Giulietta's arms and disappear with her in a curious odour. [Hoffmann 1966:
96])

We saw that Schlemihl's shadow, like that of Peter Pan, had to be manually removed, carried and reattached, whereas Spikher's reflection moves and acts with the same erotic drive
Image & Narrative, Vol 11, No 3 (2010)

that pushes its master towards Giulietta. In other words, the reflection behaves like a materialization of the hero's desire for the diabolic woman, and maintains the love relationship that is forbidden to its master.

In Hoffmann, this shift of status from object to subject is merely outlined, and moreover it concerns the reflection instead of the shadow,⁸ but this theme is developed more fully by Hans Christian Andersen in *Skyggen* (*The Shadow*, 1847). This tragicomic parable tells of a young northern scholar who, while on holiday in a hot country of the South, is struck by the vision of a beautiful woman on the balcony in front of his window; obeying his desire, the scholar's shadow leaves him and enters her apartment. Thus our young scholar loses his shadow like Schlemihl,⁹ but the manner of this loss mirrors the split between Erasmus and his reflection. The analogy of the separation brings about an analogy in the plot: the scholar, like Erasmus, does not receive anything in return for what he gives and therefore has no means of redeeming himself. Moreover, this time the shadow takes up the role of antagonist: many years later, it visits the scholar, who, having followed his dreams of truth and wisdom, is now penniless, whereas the shadow has grown fat, rich and powerful thanks to the crimes it has committed by its being invisible and almost immaterial. The only thing the shadow still lacks is in fact a shadow of its own, and so it offers to employ its former master as a part-time shadow: "The shadow was the master, and the master was then a shadow", Andersen remarks (Andersen 1982: 29). The scholar then travels the world with his shadow, increasing its prestige with his own wisdom; but when he eventually refuses to lie at the shadow's feet and threatens to reveal the truth, the shadow has him killed.

The moral of Andersen's parable is self-evident: we are dealing once again with the criticism of bourgeois Philistinism, which celebrates hypocrite shadows as long as they are

⁸ However, there are many connections between shadow and reflection, as is shown by the myth of Narcissus: see Stoichita, ch. I: "The Shadow Stage" (11-41); also Otto Rank, in *Der Doppelgänger* (*The Double*, 1914) deals with shadows and reflections as manifestations of the same phenomenon: "This comparison demonstrates the equivalence of the mirror and shadow as images, both of which appear to the ego as its likeness" (Rank 1979: 10). On the phenomenology of the double, see also Hildenbrock 1986.

⁹ The reference is clearly intended, since Andersen uses Schlemihl as an ironic term of comparison: "And it annoyed him, but not so much because his shadow was gone, but because he knew that there was another story about a man without a shadow. Why, all the people who lived in the cold countries knew it, and if the learned man now went there and told his, they would surely say that he was just imitating and that his doing so certainly wasn't necessary. He decided therefore not to talk about it at all, and that was a sensible idea" (Andersen 1982: 23).

provided with wealth and power, while also disregarding wisdom and truth. The uncanny, however, slips in through the obscure genetic connection between the scholar and his shadow, by that split whereby the shadow functions as the embodiment of worldly desire, which the scholar rejects but is unable to suppress. The shadow-subject thus becomes the projection of an Other bearing the rejected component of the Ego, a double in which we can still recognise the physical or moral features of the positive hero.¹⁰ Therefore we must acknowledge that in this second group of texts the change is not only in the status of the shadow, but also in that of the character who has lost it: the diminished hero or heroine, who has been deprived of *something*, whatever it may be (the outcast Schlemihl, the immature Peter Pan, Hoffmann's sterile Empress), is then replaced by the split, conflicted hero, who has lost control over his most obscure drives. As a consequence, in the stories regarding the shadow-double we also find a much stronger effect of the uncanny, especially at the moment in which the hero splits from his shadow.¹¹

Of course, in this respect, the shadow functions very much like other subspecies of the fantastic double: reflections, dream projections, portraits, photos and so on. However, in the case of the shadow, the device that brings the double to life is particularly clear: the shadow is literally the physical manifestation of the dark element projected by a man, that part which his diurnal life casts behind and which should remain subdued, at his feet. The splitting thus always takes on the appearance of an unveiling and a liberation; the materialised shadow is

¹⁰ It is well known that psychoanalytic theory explains the double as a result of the narcissistic drive, created to preserve the Ego from the threat of adult object-libido (in fact the shadow-antagonist always interferes in the relationship between the hero and the beloved woman) and of death (the shadow is often identified with the soul, the immortal projection of the Ego). According to Freud, its uncanny quality is connected to the mechanism of the return of the repressed: "When all is said and done, the quality of uncanniness can only come from the fact of the 'double' being a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted — a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. The 'double' has become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons" (Freud: 236). In this paper I decided to focus on the narrative phenomenology and behaviour of the shadow, thus leaving aside its psychoanalytic meaning, since it has already been studied at length. Besides, I suspect it cannot explain all the rich implications of the theme, such as the difference between shadow-object and shadow-subject, or the fundamental changes in the hero-shadow relationship in 20th century fiction.

¹¹ For instance, in *The Fisherman and his Soul*: "Get thee gone, for I have no need of thee," cried the young Fisherman, and he took the little knife with its handle of green viper's skin, and cut away his shadow from around his feet, and it rose up and stood before him, and looked at him, and it was even as himself. / He crept back, and thrust the knife into his belt, and a feeling of awe came over him. 'Get thee gone,' he murmured, 'and let me see thy face no more.' / 'Nay, but we must meet again,' said the Soul. Its voice was low and flute-like, and its lips hardly moved while it spake" (Wilde: 85).

the rebelling slave, the suppressed desire or memory breaking the silence and speaking out loud. Furthermore, as we have seen, the voice is in fact the most remarkable manifestation of the shadow-double; while its physical appearance is never described, its "discourse" is exactly what characterises the shadow-subject as Other, contradicting the hero's discourse and showing its mystifications, contradictions and weak points.¹²

The message this voice delivers to us may change from one text to another, and especially over time; in Andersen and Wilde it was the typical bourgeois greed for money and power, while 20th century writers charged their characters' unconscious with more existential or metaphysical content. Therefore the split between hero and shadow also takes on a less Manichean shape, and the assignment of good and evil, and of right and wrong, is more ambiguous. For instance, and to conclude our short journey by hinting at some other occurrences of our theme during last century, we could mention the protagonist of *Il fu Mattia Pascal* (*The Late Mattia Pascal*, 1904) by Luigi Pirandello, who shams death to rid himself of an inconvenient past, but then realises that his new self is just the shadow cast by the corpse of his old self, and finally decides to kill that shadow and recover his first identity. We find a similar but inverse relationship between past and new life in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) by Murakami Haruki, where the shadow calls the protagonist, who is imprisoned in his own mental utopia, back to his old life and memories in the defective real world, thus reminding us in some respects of Oscar Wilde's story. Finally, in *Il mistero del Bosco Vecchio* (*The Mystery of the Old Wood*, 1935) by Dino Buzzati, a wicked colonel is forced by his shadow to find the goodness and compassion hidden in his heart: a clear case of role-reversal between hero and shadow, showing us that what is dark is not always worse than what stands in the light, and that sometimes we had better listen to what shadows have to say.

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¹² Recent scholars of the fantastic (for instance Rosemary Jackson) have stressed the transgressive element of fantasy literature, which is connected to its representation of the different and the inexplicable. For further discussion specifically concerning the double, see Fusillo 1998 and Webber 1996.

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