



Zinovy Zinik

Anyone at home?

In pursuit of one's own shadow

Novelist and broadcaster Zinovy Zinik left his native Russia in the 1970s and moved first to Israel and then to Britain. Speaking at the Eurozine network conference in Sibiu in September 2007, he traced the history of the shadow as metaphor for exile through Evgeni Shvartz's play *The Shadow* back to earlier fables by Hans Christian Andersen and Adelbert von Chamisso. The sum effect: a web of intermeshed émigré biographies and fictions spanning two centuries of political change.



I was recently invited to a gathering of writers who meet regularly in a London Soho pub. It is generally assumed that writing is a lonely occupation and novelists need company. But writers are not necessarily good talkers and if they are, they mostly tend to keep their mouths shut for fear that their brilliant stories will be stolen by their comrades-in-pen.

Their conversation, therefore, is usually limited to an informative chat about the weather and mortgages. The meeting I attended took place in a spacious room upstairs, hired for private functions. To my surprise, I found there a lively crowd, big enough to occupy different corners of the room. While I was buying myself a drink at the bar, a man introduced himself. "Are you polyamorous?" he asked. I didn't know what the word meant. He explained that it implied loyal amorous involvement with a few people at the same time. I considered the question for a few seconds and then told him that yes, I do care about all the characters in my novels with the same passion, regardless of their sex, gender, age, or profession. "Are you're a writer?" he asked. "Aren't you?" I asked in return. "No!" he said. "I came here for a meeting of the Polyamorous Society". It turned out that the different corners of the pub were occupied by different gatherings, mixing gradually with each other. Borders are getting blurred these days.

The plurality of the writer's loyalty to his characters is notorious (Leo Tolstoy was as much in love with Anna Karenina's husband as with his heroine). Does this creative pluralism now apply to everyday life? We inhabit the world of dual citizenships, of electronic virtual realities and assumed multiple identities. Unlike material objects, we are capable of becoming alien to our own nature. The sense of alienation and exile caused by The Fall from Paradise could be interpreted in Biblical, Freudian, or Marxist terms, but any of these interpretations makes all of us émigrés on this earth.

Well, this is true but not entirely true, as a Georgian émigré in Russia, Comrade Stalin, used to say in similar situations. In fact, people are becoming more and more enclosed in themselves, less tolerant of outsiders, of those who don't belong to their tribal cultures. Their tribal integrity remains remarkably

intact, the singular sense of belonging is undisturbed by the plurality of the world outside. True, many people, faced with that plurality of alternatives, go mad or become mentally paralysed. But most cope with their split personalities quite successfully. The great religions of the world are the best example of the inherited integrity of the human mind. Even established religions are conglomerates of contradictory tenets borrowed from preceding cults and mythologies, incompatible historical or ideological articles of faith. They always contain irresolvable inner contradictions. But this lack of logicity — such as the concept of Holy Trinity — seems to enhance the faith of the believer, his dedication to his gods. Even the Jewish followers of the false Messiah Shabbatai Zvi (the Donme sect that emerged in the Turkey of 1666), who voluntarily converted into Islam while preserving their Judaic culture (wearing the skullcap under the turban, as it were), didn't feel torn apart by irreconcilable spiritual forces. They were at home with their contradictory religiosity (and, eventually, played a major role in building modern Turkey) in the same way as the orthodox Jew of today is spiritually comfortable with the principle of the perpetual non-return: of the constant instability epitomised by his praying every year — "Next year in Jerusalem" — while remaining permanently in exile.

But many simple hearts have perished in the face of similar religious dilemmas. The first to die in Stalin's labour camps were not the intelligentsia but peasants who couldn't adapt to the new circumstances. Unlike ordinary mortals, the writer, with his polyamorous, multifarious mind, is capable of holding the centre in this world of mental confusion and lost identities. He can create an illusion of unity amidst this chaos by turning it into a coherent story. In that, he is not very different from the founder of a new religion. The difference between writing and religion is that the purpose of every religion is to deliver the believer from spiritual despair and bring tranquillity to his soul and peace to his mind. Writing, at its best, disturbs the spiritual smugness of the reader by representing situations where borders, political and moral boundaries, are crossed, where ethical taboos are transgressed. Ambiguity is a precondition of drama.

My departure from Russia thirty years ago was voluntary. I've enjoyed being a foreigner in distant lands (perhaps I emigrated in order to find out how it felt to be a foreigner). In the 1970s, the Iron Curtain divided my life into two parts, turning my Moscow past into a fiction; one of the first essays written outside Russia after my emigration was called "Emigration as a literary device". The catchy title originates from an essay written in the 1920s by Russian genius Viktor Shklovsky, entitled "Literature as a device". Shklovsky suggested that in order to turn an object or a subject matter into a piece of fiction, one should alienate it, estrange it from its mundane surroundings, take it out of its routine context — in the same way that to see the whole picture, one should distance oneself from it, take a step back. (When I look at photographs of myself thirty years ago I see a total stranger. The process of ageing is perhaps the most effective literary device imaginable.) Following this logic, it is tempting to arrive at the conclusion that every modern man is an émigré in this world and, therefore, that there is no other literature than émigré literature. The proverbial duality, the duplicity of the life of an émigré, separated from his past by an iron curtain of political circumstances, is only one metaphorical example of the plurality of every creative mind. (According to Marina Tsvetayeva, "all poets are Yids".)

Yet I would be reluctant to define, say, Somerset Maugham or Graham Green, who described the mores of British expatriates in Malaysia or Africa, as émigré

authors. A long-term resident abroad, Nikolai Gogol, who wrote *Dead Souls* in Rome, knew where he belonged. Travel writers also know their place in national literature. Mavis Gallant, a Canadian born writer for the *New Yorker*, who for the last fifty years has lived permanently in France, told me that she didn't switch to French in her fiction because she didn't want to feel like an émigré author. That is, she didn't want to have a double existence in her prose. The émigré milieu begins with the author's sense of displacement.

Is the notion of the émigré author a dated phenomenon that has outlived itself in the age of global communications? I don't think so. I think it is still a useful concept to define a specific type of literature. While the native author deals with moral ambiguities by proxy, using his characters, the personality of the émigré writer is part of his fiction's plot — he himself has to decide on which side of the border his mind is. What an ordinary human being lives through, the writer tries to describe. What for an ordinary writer is mental exercise, for the émigré author is lived experience. The émigré writer physically lives this metaphor of life in transit. (Elias Canetti, my neighbour in Hampstead, preferred to write sitting in his car, parked in front of his house.) The dilemma of the émigré author is, therefore, linked with his sense of belonging; and since he is a writer, the question arises for whom he writes and where his audience is located. The citizenship of the émigré writer is not necessarily that of the country of his main readership, and his sense of belonging or his religion might differ from his loyalty as a citizen of the country of his residence. That is, the émigré writer is the one who feels he is displaced — geographically or in language, separated from his readers in one way or another.

Vampires, doomed to exist between two worlds forever, provide the ultimate example of the mental state of exile. But they are émigrés of a very specific kind: they don't cast a shadow. In other words, they have no real identity in this world. The writer's existence in the outside world is measured by the influence that his creation exerts — by the shadows his words cast. Vampires are like émigré writers, understood neither in the country of their dwelling, nor able to reach across the border to their readers in the motherland.

Again and again, like in Plato's fable of the cave, we set our dark foreign self against the wall of the native background, illuminated by our new experience, and learn about ourselves by watching the play of shadows. Sometimes, shadows take on an independent life and we lose them. In what follows, I will try to explore how different authors of the last two centuries treated their shadows as a metaphor for their sense of belonging, for the state of their internal and external exile

Every émigré in a foreign land is in search of his second self, the ideal double — a native who hasn't been corrupted by the duplicity of alien experience, whose roots in his old country are deep, and whose integrity of worldview, whose wholesomeness of daily life, the stranger aspires to. The émigré plays the role of a shadow to this imaginary native ideal. Do such ideal natives, these *idiots savants*, exist in the modern world? We don't know. Knock-knock-knock. Anyone at home? Gradually, we realise that we're knocking at our own door.

In order to understand those with whom we want to identify, we mimic them. But we cannot emulate them completely — our individuality rebels against total assimilation; this creates an instance of split personality, which is, perhaps, rooted in the basic duality of our way of learning human speech. The first human sounds uttered in our mother tongue we hear while sucking at her

breast; it's much later that we turn our heads to listen to the outside world — the world of our fathers. While there is no such expression as "father tongue", the notion of fatherland is very much part of our vocabulary. We imitate the speech of those around us of whom we are fond, but whom we don't entirely understand. It affects not only our personality but also our appearance: the English expression "stiff upper lip" describes just that.

My first literary exercises consisted of recording on paper conversations with the mentor and the guru of my youth, the Moscow thespian and wandering philosopher Alexander Asarkan (1930–2004). Having spent a few years as a political prisoner during the Stalin era, after his release he did his best to remain apolitical, avoiding both Soviet officialdom and its shadowy reflection, the Soviet intelligentsia's counter-culture of kitchen table dissent. Asarkan and his coterie decided to create their own classless society by patronising a seedy bar known as *Café Artistique* (its interior was an imitation of a Viennese cafe with marble-top tables), across the street from the Moscow Arts Theatre. The clientele was a motley collection of artists and intellectuals on the fringes of society, who resorted to an arcane and eccentric mode of thinking in an attempt to distance themselves from the Soviet way of life. Despite the fact that they had never been abroad, some spoke European languages fluently (Asarkan knew Italian). It was a bizarre version of cafe society, a little Europe in the prison-like Soviet city. Perhaps it was in search of the surrogate Europe of my spiritual mentors that I emigrated from Russia a decade later.

Meanwhile, I imitated and mirrored Asarkan's persona with the dedication and conviction that only a teenager is capable of. I dressed like him, spoke like him, stooped like him, even smoked like him — dropping cigarette ash into an ash tray in a particular quirky way. In short, I became his shadow.

Like every guru, he treated his pupils like a tyrant. I rebelled against this tyranny. We quarrelled. My emigration from Russia was perhaps motivated less by the tyranny of the Soviet regime and more by the desire to get as far away from Asarkan's influence as possible, to get a life in a foreign language that was not dictated by his mannerisms and mode of thinking. It was the decision of a shadow to begin an existence independent of its master.

The notion of the interplay between the shadow and its owner was introduced into our relationship by Asarkan himself. A rebellious youth, he was incarcerated in the Leningrad Psychiatric Prison Hospital. He was lucky. Dissident intellectuals sent there in the early 1950s, thanks to insightful and kind KGB interrogators, were protected from the harshness of the punitive regime in ordinary prisons, let alone labour camps in Siberia. There was even a semblance of cultural activity inside the walls of this corrective institution. Asarkan was encouraged to stage a play in which inmates could take part. He chose *The Shadow* by Evgeni Shvarts.¹ It was an absurdist satire, written in 1940, which had struck Soviet censors as so outrageously anti-Stalinist that they decided to regard it, for their own safety, as an anti-Nazi propaganda.

It is set in a macabre and comic little foreign state somewhere in the south (where everything grows rapidly, even shadows), populated by a collection of sycophantic time-servers: state ministers who communicate by reducing words, for the sake of secrecy, to single syllables; cannibals and orgs who run local banks and pawnshops (reminiscent of the current economic situation in Russia); vain artists and shameless reporters. These absurd characters are busy denouncing and betraying each other for the favours distributed by those in power. The protagonist, the Scholar, a curious foreigner visiting this country,

falls in love with the local Princess and thereby unsettles the precarious political balance. His enemies strike a deal with his disgruntled and ambitious Shadow and together succeed in imprisoning the Scholar. However all ends well.

In an absurdist twist reminiscent of Marquis de Sade's experiments in Charenton, in which reality merges with fiction, some of the inmates of the Leningrad Psychiatric Prison Hospital who took part in Asarkan's production really were convicted cannibals and murderers. Asarkan managed to survive his sojourn in prison, not unlike the hero of the play who escaped, psychologically damaged but free, from the regime established by his Shadow. Ironically, a few years after my departure from Russia, Asarkan followed me, his own former shadow, into exile.

The plot in Shvarts's play evolves around the Shadow's gradual detachment from his owner, his rise to power, and his ideological confrontations with the Scholar. This motif is, of course, borrowed by Shvarts (an interesting name, by the way, for the author of a tale about shadows) from Hans Christian Andersen, who in turn adapted his story of the lost shadow from the original tale written in 1813 by Adelbert von Chamisso. In Chamisso's story, a lonely unassuming man, a voyager in a strange city, is approached by the devil and sells him his soul in exchange for a bottomless purse. As a result of the deal, he loses his bride and, shunned by the rest of humanity, goes into exile, seeking refuge in distant uninhabited lands. Both Andersen and Shvarts were internal exiles, each of his own kind, and their stories of shadows reflect this fact indirectly. Although the initial motive of his protagonist's action is money, it was Chamisso who wrote his story as a straightforward fable about the lost identity of an émigré.

Adelbert von Chamisso was the son of French émigrés who escaped the horrors of the French Revolution and settled in Germany at the end of the eighteenth century. A series of unfortunate events, including the untimely death of his parents and the declaration of war between France and Prussia, made Chamisso's situation all the more precarious. His difficulties were compounded by a decree issued by Napoleon in 1806, whereby any Frenchman found in foreign military service was to be executed within twenty-four hours of his capture. Chamisso was torn between two cultures:

I am a Frenchman in Germany and a German in France; a Catholic among the Protestants, Protestant among the Catholics; a philosopher among the religious, a mundane among the savants, and a pedant to the mundane; a Jacobin among the aristocrats, and to the democrats a nobleman, a man of the Ancien Regime [...] Nowhere am I at home!²

Peter Wortsman, one of the modern translators of Chamisso into English, coined the term "lingoverts" for bilingual writers "who have undergone the internal psychic and emotional transformations that accompany linguistic conversion". As an outsider and the victim of considerable xenophobic sentiment, Chamisso gravitated naturally to the orbit of other déclassé pariahs — the Jews. Chamisso's tale "Peter Schlemiel" ("schlemiel" is a Yiddish word for an awkward clumsy person who doesn't belong anywhere, a man of no consequence) was written in 1813 in German, not in his native French, and corrected and polished by his new circle of friends in the famous Berlin salon held in the attic of the house of Rahel Levin (who would later marry one of Chamisso's good friends, Karl August Varnhagen).

Rahel Levin was a Berliner who throughout her life fought to acquire a sense of reality different from the only reality that was tangible for her — her Jewishness. She deeply resented this Jewish reality, felt haunted by it, and renounced it, though managed to regain it for herself towards the end of her life in a final gesture of defiance. She became the subject of a biography written by Hannah Arendt before the Second World War, in which Arendt developed her concept of pariah and parvenu — of the outcast and the social climber. It was Karl August Varnhagen, a social climber, who provided Rahel, throughout their marriage, with a new identity and a minor aristocratic title. In his own words, he felt in her presence "like a beggar on the side of the road"; he shadowed her every gesture, repeated every word she uttered, collected every letter she wrote. Remarkably, Arendt's first creative work, written during her love affair with her professor Martin Heidegger (before he revealed his pro-Nazi proclivities), was called "Shadows"; in it, she tried to shake off the solipsistic duality of a young girl's existence. She became an exile herself when she settled in New York in the early 1940s and opened her own salon in Manhattan.

Rahel Levin's salon flourished, Arendt pointed out,³ during a period of great social ferment, marked by the collapse of the previous order of class distinctions and aristocratic privileges. Intellectuals and financiers, actors who felt like aristocrats and aristocrats who felt like actors, oddballs from all quarters, assembled in the living room of the ultimate outcast, a Jew, where they couldn't care less about their class and origin. It's worth noting that all those who later adapted Chamisso's tale to their own times and purposes were acquainted with those types of transitory space and states of mind in which one can lose his fixed or imposed identity, get rid of the burden of his past and birth legacy — be it in a salon, a seedy bar, a long distance train, a revolution, or a dubious sexuality.

As symptomatic as the émigré Chamisso's bilingual nature was the non-traveller Hans Christian Andersen's bisexuality, albeit unfulfilled (because there is no evidence that he had had any sexual relationship with either of sexes). All his life he dreamed about unattainable, unrequited love. No wonder that in his version of the tale, the Scholar makes love to the object of his adoration by proxy. He sends his shadow instead of himself. The Shadow becomes a messenger, a doppelgänger who procures love for his master but then gains control over his master's life. While the shadow becomes rich and famous, his former master is doomed to poverty and oblivion.

It was in Shvarts's play that the metaphysics of lost identity and the dialectics of love betrayed, as they were depicted in the fables of Chamisso and Andersen, became a political story of betrayal — of the loss of friendship and freedom. Hannah Arendt lived and wrote in a world caught in the monstrous fight between the totalitarian forces of Communism and Nazism. Shvarts had to deal with the banal duplicity of daily life inspired by the communist utopia, initiated by ruthless bureaucrats of revolution, and transmogrified into a macabre nightmare by Stalin's henchmen. Shvarts and his small circle of friends — such as Daniil Kharmis — evolved a philosophy and literature of the absurd as a psychological self-defence against the Stalinist optimism of the masses. Shvarts develops the confrontation between the master and his shadow into a full-blown affair of love and hate, of homoerotic jealousy and political treachery. His Shadow not only steals the Scholar's love, but manipulates those close to the Scholar politically, turning them into enemies and spies. It is a thoroughly modern political parable, in which the Shadow, posing as a friend, plays on the Scholar's pity and then emotionally blackmails him into signing a

document which later is used as the confession of his crimes. The Shadow takes over the control of the State and is ready to behead his master, forgetting that he is nothing but a shadow; but the moment the Scholar's head falls, the Shadow will be beheaded too. The Scholar has meanwhile grown a new shadow (everything grows rapidly in the south). He leaves the old shadow and treacherous princess behind like a horrible nightmare of the past and returns abroad.

"Man", Rahel Levin declared, "is himself only abroad; at home he must represent his past, and in the present that becomes a mask, heavy to carry and obscuring the face".

At the beginning of Chamisso's story, his hero's predicament is explained to a naive listener in the following fashion: "In Russia, the cold was so bitter that one day his shadow froze to the ground and he was no longer able to pry it loose". At the later stage, the hero assumes the identity of a Jew (whose German grammar Rahel Levin had helped to correct). In the end, Peter Schlemiel becomes a traveller and ethnographer, transporting himself across distant lands in magic seven-league boots — rather as if in a private jet.

It was a prophetic insight by the hero of the book into the author's fate, or a self-fulfilling prophecy by the author. Chamisso, a few years after the book's publication, became a traveller himself, joining a team of scientists aboard the Russian ship *Ryurik* on a round-the-world trip. He made a number of remarkable anthropological and biological discoveries and published his scientific travelogue.

It was Joseph Conrad, an émigré writer and a long-distance traveller, who drew attention in his novel *The Secret Agent* to the link that exists between politics and shadows. In that novel, foggy London is a *shadowless* city. (The plot evolves around the Russian government's attempt to set up a terrorist outrage in London in order to push the British government to arrest or expel Russian political dissidents from England. *Plus ça change*.) Conrad describes a particular weather in London in which certain people don't cast shadows — such as his main character, Verloc, a swindler of a dubious origin who has escaped to England from continental Europe.

When we talk about foreigners and their shadows, we shouldn't forget the dependence of the shadows on the source and quality of light. In Chamisso's story, the devil simply picks up the shadow off the ground, rolls it up and puts it into his pocket in a businesslike manner, whereupon the man loses his place in the world. It was Andersen who invented a fairytale-like trick in which the shadow becomes detached from its owner imperceptibly and begins life of its own. But such magic moments are physically possible. Artists and actors know about it. You can see such a picture when the source of light is set right at the feet of a person — like in the limelight of a theatre stage: the shadow cast on the background behind the actor looks as if it is separated from its owner. The higher and brighter the light, the stronger the shadow is glued to its master. In Shvarts' play, in which the master and his shadow cannot initially exist without each other, the Scholar finds a different source of light to cast a new shadow. A different shadow. He doesn't need the old one when he moves back home.

During my first years in Britain, I noticed only those aspects of the new reality that were lit up and reflected by my Russian past. Now, in reverse, my attention is drawn mainly to those aspects of Russian reality that could be seen as a reflection of my British experience. The source of light and its direction

have changed. Talking about the attachment between the person and his shadow, about its metaphorical potential for literature in exile, we've forgotten that the source of light is not necessarily singular. There might be more than one lamp post in the vicinity. A human being can cast many shadows in different directions at one and the same time — depending on where he stands and how he positions himself. Conversely, different people might cast the same shadow. The face of the person might change, sometimes beyond recognition, and yet his shadow looks the same. In other words, the personality of the author and the character of his creation might be drastically different: a bizarre configuration of fingers can cast a shadow in the shape of a rabbit.

Then the light is switched off and the rabbit jumps off the wall.
We are left again with our empty hands.
That's where a good story begins.

¹ Evgeni Shvarts, *The Shadow* (trans. Alan Myers), in *Comparative Criticism* 16, 195–243. Cambridge University Press.

² *Peter Schlemiel* by Adelbert von Chamisso. Translated from German with an Introduction by Peter Wortsman. Fromm International Publishing Corporation, New York, 1993.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

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