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The Ingenious Art of Mephistopheles: Faust's Forgetting and Peter Schlemihl's Life Without a "Shadow" (Collective Memory)[3]

Abstract

The paper strives to provide a hermeneutical analysis of the motive of oblivion in Goethe's *Faust* and Adelbert von Chamisso's short story*Peter Schlemihl's Miraculous Story*. In both works the Devil appears as an agent of forgetting, which is his ingenious art. Both texts share the age-old bargain with the Devil sealed in blood, whose consequences are tragically far-reaching - loss of one's soul (Faust) and loss of one's shadow (Peter Schlemihl). The pact with the Devil entails a life doomed to eternal oblivion. Mephistopheles forces Faust to move through a series of insane events, from one act of oblivion to the next, resulting in Faust's forgetting himself, even his love for a girl named Margaret, although he swore in good faith: "I can't lose her or forget her." Chamisso's hero Schlemihl offers his shadow to the Grey Man (the archetypal figure of the Devil) in exchange for gold (Fortunatus's fortune-bag). As a result, Schlemihl loses his shadow which will be interpreted as collective memory in the paper.

Keywords: Faust, Schlemihl, oblivion, soul, shadow, collective memory.

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Peter Schlemihl's Strange Story (1814), written by German writer of French descent Adelbert von Chamisso (1781–1838), is interpreted in the light of memory or oblivion that at first glance has some characteristics typical of the scientific approach of the time when Chamisso lived. Chamisso, after having studied medicine and natural sciences, became a scientist, more precisely – a natural scientist. Between 1815-1818 Chamisso participated in a scientific expedition and sailed around the world on a Russian sailboat called *Rurik* and later wrote an expedition report and several scientific articles that captured much attention in the field. One can easily understand what he wrote about himself in this report on his journey around the world: "I shall not vain gloriously invoke the past of our history, in which there was nobility my ancestors belonged to. [...] I am the man of the future. [...] Let us leave the past to go away, just because it has passed. "Chamisso's words should be understood as his deliberate opting for forgetfulness as a driving force of scientific innovation. Chamisso's scientific memory, therefore, is characterized by the fact that a relevant discovery or similar achievement in each individual case initiates a new set of elements to be memorized or forgotten.

In this "fable"(as Chamisso's refers to the narrative) or "a modern myth" (according to Denis de Rougemont's words),[4] the author dramatizes - based on the example of an archetypal character - the problem of memory and oblivion. For, the unfortunate hero of this story is a man who sold his shadow to the devil and after that he must continue to live without his shadow. This protagonist's name is Schlemihl, and he thus bears the name that in the Jewish-Yiddish narrative tradition signifies a kind of person whom, since happiness and maybe God have forsaken him and left him adrift, befall all sorts of trouble and ill-fate, which is conducive to his eventual tribulation and downfall. It should be noted that the name *Schlemihl* and the word *Schlammassel*, denoting misery / distress, are intrinsically semantically related.[5]

The miraculous Chamisso's story opens with Peter Schemihl, beggared except for a letter of recommendation to a gentleman named Mr. Thomas John, arriving in a north German harbour city, perhaps Hamburg. At this point, Peter Schlemihl is indeed a nobody, yet he has not become a *schlemihl*, meaning *ajinx*, yet. Peter Schlemihl is summoned to join the elegant and self-complacent group of people gathered in the park around the rich Mr. Jones and his beloved mistress Fanny. And Schlemihl will, of course, receive an explanation of the kind of

4 For more information read Denis De Rougemont's *The Devil's Share*, Pantheon books, New York, 1944.

5 *schlemiel*: *n. slang.* an awkward and unlucky person for whom things never turn out right. It comes from Yiddish *shlemil*, Hebrew *shəlumī'ēl* Shelumiel, a Biblical figure. *schlamassel*: borrowed from Yiddish שלימזל (*shlemazl*, "bad luck, misfortune"), from שלים (*shlim*, "bad") (compare German *schlimm*).

society he encounters for the first time; uttered in the cynical words of Mr. John, it is worded as follows: "He who is not the master of at least a million, forgive the expression, is a ragamuffin." (Chamisso 2007: 25).

Quite (un)expectedly, that is the moment when the Devil steps in the form of a mysterious-looking, inconspicuous shadowy man wearing a grey coat and offers Schlemihl a bargain; in exchange for Schlemihl's invaluable shadow the grey man will give him,

> As a proof of my gratitude for the gentleman, I leave him the choice of all the jewels which my pocket affords; the genuine divining rods, mandrake roots, change pennies, money extractors, the napkins of Rolando's Squire, and divers other miracle-workers,—a choice assortment; but all this is not fit for you—better that you should have Fortunatus's wishing-cap, restored spick and span new; and also a fortune-bag which belonged to him. (Chamisso 2007: 32).

Great as has been Schlemihl's terror, all his senses are now enraptured by the merry sound of the words "Fortunatus's fortune-bag."[6] Schlemihl becomes dizzy,—and nothing but double ducats seem sparkling before his eyes. As a result, Peter Schlemihl signs away his soul and thus becomes the Devil's unofficial collaborator for a time.

Before we account for what this *shadow* and its loss mean for Peter Schlemihl, we must first have a closer look at the Devil with whom this bargain is made. The Devil himself is, as all the descriptions of him show, a truly unsightly, unprepossessing and obscure figure, devoid of personality traits, and the author provides very few descriptions that might help us identify him – "a silent, meagre, pale, tall, elderly man" dressed in an "old-fashioned, grey taffetan coat" with "unassuming, even humble demeanor" (Chamisso 2007: 26), which could be interpreted as only signs of his lack of qualities. Nevertheless, what is particularly striking about the grey man -especially if we compare him with the great, named Devils in the world history and literary history: Lucifer, Beelzebub, Leviathan, Asmodeus, Mephistopheles – is the fact that he is nameless. He is referred to only as "the grey one", and even this identification can be read as a mere symbol of his namelessness. A nameless Devil, then, an anonymous officer in Hell's secret services, takes control of Peter Schlemihl's shadow, but in the process he retains an infallible memory, in which no inscription of guilt is forgotten. It is in

6 *Fortunatus* is a German chapbook involving a legendary hero popular in 15th and 16th century Europe. Namely, after the goddess of Fortune in a forest Fortunatus was given by her a magic purse which was continually replenished as often as he drew from it. Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "Fortunatus". *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

this way that the memory potential of this name first develops even in his debtor, so that the man named Peter Schlemihl becomes a *schlemihl*, in the true sense of the word.

Under these circumstances, Schlemihl's lost shadow, using one relatively non-specific and anachronistic expression at the same time, can be interpreted as his *collective memory*. This term, as we know, was coined by Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) in the twenties of the twentieth century, and it has become the main focus of interest of modern memory research in recent years. Its purport is made evident by the fact that individual memory in all its aspects does not in any case depend only on a particular individual, but it has been formed by a myriad of social memories, in accordance with the habits of a particular family, environment, profession, class, religion and other social groups. At its core, collective memory also signifies what Chamisso himself, referring to Schlemihl's shadow, called "the substantial" in Schlemihl. In any case, we do not learn almost anything specific about the prehistory of Peter Schlemihl; as if it had been cloaked in a shroud of oblivion and secrecy. Still, all the characters in the story immediately notice that this gentleman, who, being fabulously wealthy, cannot remain unnoticed, does not have a shadow, and that stigma spontaneously repels them, in particular young and beautiful Mina and her thorough bred family, for whom it is unimaginable and scandalous that a son-in-law, no matter how rich he is, has no shadow. It is patently true that Schlemihl cannot count on collective forgetfulness.

The fact Schlemihl's shadow must have something to do with remembering and forgetting results from the history of the creation of this literary motif. Chamisso narrates in an anecdotal tone that once on a trip he lost a hat, haversack, handkerchiefs, gloves and all his movable property. When his friend and poet Friedrich Heinrich Karl de la Motte, Baron Fouqué, born into a family of French Huguenot origin, learned about this, he asked, in a teasing manner, whether Chamisso had lost his shadow as well. In the story they both laugh and imagine what it would have been like if such a thing had happened. This strange occurrence served as a seed from which Chamisso's story was germinated.

This undoubtedly entertaining anecdote can even be understood as a true story, which will not deprive it of its humor if we decide to see it as something more than a mere ridiculous expression of momentary forgetfulness. Namely, this anecdote accords well with a dream or a nightmare, which a few years later, when Peter Schlemihl was already written, persecuted and apparently tormented Chamisso. One event from his dream causes the author to return to the time of his service in the Prussian army. In the dream, Chamisso is a young officer who

is supposed to take part in a military parade; to his horror and chagrin, he notices that he has forgotten his sword. At that time, it used to be a much worse forgetfulness compared to the forgetfulness mentioned in the anecdote, which is venial as it concerns only the property owned by a "civilian". But, to forget a sword, for officers such as Chamisso, used to be an unforgivable forgetfulness that concerns the very honor, and which weighs on oblivion with a feeling of dreadful guilt.

When translated into the civic context, this is exactly the way things are concerning Peter Schlemihl, who did not simply "lose" his shadow. Earlier, he gave his soul into the grey man's hands in exchange for money, and people surrounding Schlemihl immediately see it as a stigma, which means - as a visible sign of ostracization or exclusion. In any case, what we want to emphasize is that losing the shadow does not mean losing the soul. Unlike Faust's pact with the Devil, Schlemihl sold the grey man "only" his shadow, but not his immortal soul, and it is a matter of his honor that he does not redeem his guilt by means of another, more terrible guilt. Therefore he, however, remains Schlemihl, the jinx, but he does not become one of the grey people, as opposed to Mr. Jones, about whom in the further course of the story we learn that before Peter Schlemihl had become a victim of the grey man to whom - obviously, through making over to him his shadow first- he delivered his soul in the end. Now the rich Mr. Jones pays for the price of his ugly trade in transcendence, and at the end of the story, we hear his lamentation as a distant echo of *the lex talionis* from Dante's *Inferno*: "*Justo judicio Dei judicatus sum*; *justo judicio Dei condemnatus sum*."

This path does not lead Peter Schlemihl to hell. No matter how hard he tries, Peter Schlemihl does not manage to cancel the "half" trade with the grey man. He must, by the end of his life, come to terms with living without a shadow, and he has to ensure that his shadowlessness remains inconspicuous as much as possible. It is extraordinarily interesting to observe how this transpires, or, speaking in the language of narration technique, how the author under these circumstances tells his story to the end. Chamisso invents such an ending that no ingenious reader could foresee. The author transforms Peter Schlemihl, finally deprived of his shadow, into what he himself is: a natural scientist, a botanist.

As a "a retired philosopher," as Schlemihl calls himself, he begins a "new mode of life". This transformation in the story is, in any case, permeated with a few miraculous and fairy elements, especially through the accidentally found the seven-leagued boots, with which Schlemihl now traverses the world so quickly that it is breathtaking:

Shut out from human society by my early guilt, nature, which I had ever loved, was given me for my enjoyment, spread out like a rich garden before me, an object of study for the guide and strength of my life, of which science was to be the end. It was no decision of my own. What then appeared bright and perfect in my inner thoughts I have since endeavoured to describe with calm, earnest, unremitting diligence, and my happiness has depended on the intensity of my recollections.

I rose up hastily, in order that by a rapid survey I might take possession of the field in which I wished to make my harvest. I stood upon the mountains of Tibet, and the sun, which had risen a few hours before, was now sinking in the evening sky. I journeyed from the east towards the west of Asia, overtaking the sun in his progress, and passed the boundaries of Africa. I looked round with great curiosity, and crossed it in all directions. As I glanced over the old pyramids and temples of Egypt, I observed in the deserts near the hundred-gated Thebes, the caverns once occupied by Christian anchorites: instantly it occurred impressively and distinctly to me—there is thy abode. I chose for my future dwelling, one of the most secret chambers, which was at the same time roomy, convenient, and inaccessible to the jackals, and moved forward with my staff.

I passed into Europe by the Pillars of Hercules, and, after I had taken a rapid survey of its southern and northern provinces, I hastened to North Asia, and thence over the polar glaciers to Greenland and America. I rambled through both parts of that continent, and the winter which had begun to reign in the south now drove me quickly back northwards from Cape Horn.

I lingered till the day dawned in eastern Asia, and after a short repose again entered on my wanderings. I followed the chains of mountains, through the two Americas, some of the highest elevations known in our globe. I trod slowly and prudently from height to height, now over flaming volcanos, and now over snowy cupolas. I was often almost breathless with weariness, but I reached the Elias mountain and sprung to Asia across Behring's Straits. I pursued the western coast along its numerous windings, and endeavoured to ascertain by special observation which of the islands in the neighbourhood were accessible to me. From the Malacca peninsula my boots took me to Sumatra, Java, Balli, and Lamboc. I endeavoured, often with peril, and always in vain, to find a north-west passage over the inlets and the rocks with which the ocean is studded, to Borneo and the other islands of the Eastern Archipelago—but I was obliged to abandon the hope. I sat down at last on the farthest verge of Lamboc, and turning my eyes to the south and east, I wept as if within the grates of a prison, that I could proceed no farther. New Holland, that extraordinary country, so essentially necessary to understanding the philosophy of the earth, and its sun-embroidered dress, the vegetable and the animal world; and the South Sea with its Zoophyte islands, were interdicted to me; and thus everything on which I would have gathered together and erected my hopes was

> condemned to be left a mere fragment, even in its very origin. O, my Adalbert! such is the reward for all the labours of man! (Chamisso 2007: 111-112)

Traversing and measuring the world is also done by means of the so-called "stop-shoes" which enable Schlemihl to shorten his pace in order to move conveniently, if necessary. It is a very simple yet fabulously efficient temporal-spatial device that anticipates the uchronies, temporal utopias of the 19th and 20th centuries. Both these devices are used by Schlemihl with a supremely rational aim, which in our time has become a common thing: connecting tireless field research on all continents in quick succession with work at a desk in a quiet and secluded place. In short, as a researcher he behaves quite purposefully and rationally, as required by modern science.

As for this twist in the story, it is a truly surprising circumstance that no one notices any longer the element discriminating against the natural scientist Schlemihl so often – namely, that he does not have a shadow. This fact has simply become inconsequential and the society simply forgot about it. *Peter Schlemil's Strange Story* may, therefore, end with a factual and sober report that the retired scholar Petar Schlemihl submits to his author, the retired scholar Chamisso. He writes on the last page of it:

> My boots have not lost their virtues, as the very learned tome of Tieckius, *De rebus gestis Pollicilli*, gave me reason to apprehend. Their power is unbroken: but my strength is failing, though I have confidence I have applied them to their end, and not fruitlessly. I have learned more profoundly than any man before me, everything respecting the earth: its figure, heights, temperature; its atmosphere in all its changes; the appearance of its magnetic strength; its productions, especially of the vegetable world; all in every part whither my boots would carry me. I have published the facts, clearly arranged, with all possible accuracy, in different works, with my ideas and conclusions set down in various treatises. I have established the geography of interior Africa and of the North Pole,—of central Asia and its eastern coasts. My *Historia Stirpium Plantarum utriusque Orbis* has appeared, being but a large fragment of my *Flora universalis Terræ*, and a companion to my *Systema Naturæ*. In that I believe I have not only increased the number of known species more than a third (moderately speaking), but have thrown some light on the general system of nature, and the geography of plants. I am now busily engaged with my Fauna. I will take care before my death that my MSS. be disposed in the Berlin university. (Chamisso 2007: 122)

The merry, peaceful science by virtue of which a person can, without a shadow or with it, thinking of what has happened or has been forgotten, exist and walk

around the world, undisturbed and carefree. One ought not to fear even the grey man if this fairy-tale ever becomes a reality.

Now we are going to the study room of scientist Heinrich Faust, Goethe's Faust. A highly respected professor is at the height of his career, he is a "great husband". Nevertheless, he is increasingly dissatisfied both with himself and his own thoughts and philosophical efforts. His science seems to be "vain knowledge", his cognitive efforts - verbal subtleties ("And rummage in empty words no more!"), his laboratory "this drear, accursed, masonry":

And Nature shuts on me her gate.
The thread of Thought at last is broken,
And knowledge brings disgust unspoken. (Goethe 2005: 60)

This is, obviously, a grave crisis of faith in the sense of his own spiritual efforts and a creative crisis that one encounters in the biographies of certain scientists, but which, in Faust at least, penetrates the deepest layers of its existence.

Easter bells and chorus of angels prevent Faust from committing a suicide. Or, more precisely - since he harbours no religious feelings for this Easter atmosphere–it is the memory of the carefree years of childhood and youth that rescue him, which these chants rekindled in him:

These chants, to youth and all its sports appealing,
Proclaimed the Spring's rejoicing holiday;
And Memory holds me now, with childish feeling,
Back from the last, the solemn way.
Sound on, ye hymns of Heaven, so sweet and mild!
My tears gush forth: the Earth takes back her child! (Goethe 2005: 31)

It is worth noting here that from all the spiritual gifts that are abundant and available to the scientist, obviously, only memory can help him sustain his life.

It is when Mephistopheles steps in. Faust makes the notorious pact, sealed in blood. In the words of Mephistopheles, it means the following: "Consider well, - my memory good is rated." (Goethe 2005: 58). The Devil apparently has an extraordinary memory. What does Faust benefit from the pact? Ahead of him lies an unprecedented, immense field of research, called life,which he will now, assisted by the devil, explore in terms of its length and width, height and depth, and learn about it, "striving incessantly". And what kind of gain does Mefistopheles hope for? The devil has always wanted only thing only: the soul. According to his calculations, this goal is best achieved when he, being the one who never forgets, forces Faust to go through a vortex of a series of insane events, from one act of oblivion to the next, resulting in Faust's forgetting himself. We

can see that at least the devil places his trust in the art of oblivion and has the ability to, for the sake of his goals, make the most of it.

The first setting of Mephistopheles' art of forgetting is Auerbach's cellar. For the scientist, grown pale with working long hours in the study room, this is an extraordinarily fitting place for forgetfulness–considers Mephistopheles. The Devil then changes the strategy and concocts another kind of amusement for his professor. The basis for this is provided by the Witches' Kitchen: the sixty-year-old is rejuvenated, by "full thirty years," that is, by the whole generation, as the narrative informs us. The generational shift always results in a memory crisis and provides a fertile ground for forgetting. Faustian rejuvenation also involves the change of social class: having been a scholar, he now becomes a man of the world, a nobleman. Thanks to these two changes, Faust's forgetfulness will, according to Mephistopheles' plan, will come in leaps and bounds: along with the erased years of life, previous living conditions will fade into oblivion as well.

With the exception of Faust, everyone in his world remarkably remembers everything that has happened. Famulus Wagner, who inherits Faust after his uncanny disappearance and continues his research, does not make any changes to Faust's study room out of his profound piety for his predecessor, and thus saves it as a memorial place; and Faust's former disciple, who has risen to the rank of baccalaureus and has become even more unbearable than ever, distinctly and vividly remembers the circumstances under which he was taught by the famous professor Faust (he thinks it was him, but in fact it was Mephistopheles). Everyone, therefore, remembers, and of course Mephistopheles himself who is in charge of all the proceedings, because otherwise he would not even have chosen the setting. And something urges him to convince himself of his exceptional memory:

I look upwards, here, around me,
All's unaltered, and undamaged:
Stained glass, there, shows darkly,
Spiders have added to their webs:
The ink is dry: the paper's yellow,
But everything's still in its place:
Even the quill-pen's here, on show,
With which Faust and the Devil embraced.
Yes! Deeper in the nib there's still
A drop of blood, I tempted him to spill. (Goethe 2005: 171)

The perpetrator, therefore, is compelled by something to return to the crime scene. Faust, on the contrary, does not notice any of this. Together with other senses of the "sleeper", what is blotted out in this scene is his memory.

Mephistopheles' art of forgetting, tested on Faust, reaches its peak in Margaret's scene, where it twice shows its special potency: at the beginning, when Faust, for the sake of his love for Margaret, forgets everything else, and once again, when Faust forgets even his love for Margaret, although he swore in good faith: "I can't lose her or forget her." This is quite different from the case of Margaret herself; she has an innately good memory, embedded in the collective memory of her world. She therefore knows full well that "the eternal love" promised to her by her beloved one, does not hold water, for the age-old adage has it "out of sight, out of mind". Proverbs, being concise in form, express what is preserved in the collective memory as social knowledge.

Faust quickly forgot Margaret. The grand Walpurgis-night takes place "the day after tomorrow." Departure, refocusing attention onto other things, new forms of entertainment: these are all fool proof *remediaamoris*, which are conducive to oblivion. The crucial word here is "new". For, forgetting paves the way for the new. In Mephistopheles' art of forgetting, the seductive call of the new keeps resounding:

Have you not led this life quite long enough?
How can a further test delight you?
'Tis very well, that once one tries the stuff,
But something new must then requite you. (Goethe 2005: 128)

Continuous novelties, in the language of the contemporary era - innovations, in the devil's eyes, seem to be the most effective bait for forgetting with respect to Dr. Faust. It seems that Faust himself feels this danger, given his response brimmed with worry to the quoted lines: "Let me not lose myself in all this pother!" (literally: Let me not not forget myself). (Goethe 2005: 161). But this is precisely what is about to happen and thus forgetting remains the inevitable downside of his strivings for the rest of his life, when the aged scientist, within the project of conquering a new land, is yet again dazzled with fascination for the new. The Devil is keenly aware of what kind of benefit he will reap from it.

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Мефистофелесовска уметност: Фаустов заборав и Шлемилов живот без „сенке“/ колективног памћења

Резиме

Циљ рада је херменеутичка анализа мотива заборава у Гетеовом *Фаусту* и Шамисоовој приповеци *Чудноватa повест Петра Шлемила*. Ђаво се у оба дела појављује као агент заборава, што је његова ингениозна уметност. Оба текста повезује чувена погодба са ђаволом запечаћена крвљу, чије су последице несагледиве – губитак душе (Фауст) и губитак „сенке“ (Шлемил). Пакт са ђаволом повлачи за собом и живот осуђен на вечити заборав. Мефистофелес гони Фауста кроз луди вртлог догађаја, од једног заборава ка следећем, док Фауст на крају не заборави сам себе, чак и љубав према девојци Маргарети, иако се у најбољој вери заклео: „Заборавити никад је не могу, изгубити не могу.“ Шамисоов јунак Шлемил потписује уговор са „сивим човеком“ (архетипски лик ђавола) коме продаје своју сенку за злато

(Фортунатова чаробна кеса). Шлемилову изгубљену сенку тумачићемо као његово колективно памћење.

Кључне речи: Фауст, Шлемил, заборав, душа, сенка, колективно памћење.