Shadows of Being

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Four Philosophical Essays

By

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To my dear parents Mila and Stanko
who gave me life

Just being alive!
—miraculous to be in
cherry blossom shadows!

Kobayashi Issa

斯う活て
居るも不思議ぞ
花の陰

一茶

Kō ikite
iru mo fushigi zo
hana no kage

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Books are written in solitude. And yet the author's mind hosts many souls from the past and present. "We stand on the shoulders of giants"—so we have to be deeply grateful to them, our elder brothers and sisters in spirit.

Many dear people have helped me in my life and work, from my young days to the present time of writing this book. I am grateful to my teachers who taught me, long ago, to read and write, as well as to all the friends and fellows who have opened my eyes to the beauty and depth of the world. I would like to embrace them all, but that is beyond the compass of my human arms and emotions. So let me only say that memory, enhanced by empathy, is the core of our human lives and minds.

I would nevertheless like to mention some persons who have helped me to create this book. First of all, I am very grateful to Mr Hugh Brown (of the company Amidas), who has translated nearly half of the book (Chapters 2 and 3), demonstrating excellent language skills and his very reliable understanding of my original Slovene. He has also carefully revised the longest essay in the book (Chapter 4), which I wrote anew this spring—in my personal variant of "Euro English". Thanks also to Ms Mateja Petan, who translated the first variant of Chapter 1 and helped me to find bibliographical references. I am grateful to my friend and academic college Prof. Olga Markič, who read the draft of Chapter 4 and suggested some important improvements. Many thanks also to those academic colleagues who reviewed my proposal for this book last year. I am pleased by the courtesy of my friends Mojca Senegačnik, Nena Škerlj and Damjan Švara for allowing me to publish their works in the figures 3-3, 4-10 and 4-12.

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CHAPTER ONE

SHADOWS OF IDEAS

In one of his notes, subsequently collected in the *Trattato della Pittura* ("The Treatise on Painting"), Leonardo da Vinci wrote that "shadow is the diminution of light and of darkness, and it is interposed between darkness and light" (Leonardo 2003, 980). Among his numerous corollaries which follow from this simple and ingenious definition, I will point out the following two: "Shadow is the expression of bodies and of their shapes" (ibid.), and "No opaque body can be visible unless it is clothed with a shaded and illuminated surface" (ibid. 955).[1] Leonardo's conception of shadow entails that in order to define shadow along with its middle position (or transience) between light and darkness, at least two additional concepts are relevant: *diminution* and *surface*.

In the process of exercising their painting skills, painters are predominantly interested in shadows on the surfaces of bodies, i.e. shadows as two-dimensional phenomena, since shading is especially important in conveying the illusion of three-dimensional objects and the depth of space. Nevertheless, this illusion was not sufficient for the master Leonardo, as he had above all to "know how to see" (*saper vedere*)—and therefore, both abilities were equally relevant for him: seeing the depth on a surface and knowing how to see shadow as "diminution of light". In another fragment, Leonardo wrote: "The beginnings and the ends of shadow extend between light and darkness, and they may be infinitely diminished and increased"

[1] In this book, the quotations of Leonardo's notes follow two English referential translations: *A Treatise on Painting*, translated by John Frances Rigaud (see Leonardo 1877 [2014]), and *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, edited by Edward MacCurdy (Leonardo 2003). However, in both translations, the definition of shadow is slightly different from the Italian original in the *Trattato della pittura*. Namely, in the fragment § 533, titled *Che cosa è ombra* ("What is shadow") we read: *L'ombra, nominata per il proprio suo vocabolo, è da esser chiamata alleviatione di lume* [diminution of light] *applicato alla superficie de'corpi* [applied to the surface of bodies], *della quale il principio è nel fine della luce, ed il fine è nelle tenebre* (Leonardo 2006, 379). I guess that these differences are due to the various editions of Leonardo's notes.

(ibid. 980). In short: "Darkness is the absence of light. Shadow is the diminution of light" (ibid. 962).

Leonardo da Vinci's fragments need to be comprehended on two distinct semantic levels: on the first, of course, they are guidance to an apprentice, a young painter (and also to himself), on how to pursue painting to make an image as beautiful and convincing as possible; but on the second, more "internal" level, they yield a *metaphysical* contemplation on the "essence" of shadow and everything visible and invisible. For the middle position between light and darkness is characteristic not only of the visible, physical nature of shadow, but also of its metaphysical essence—"the diminution of strength" of something or someone that has a "stronger existence" (for example an angel, as Rilke puts it beautifully in the first of his *Duino Elegies*). From the human perspective, shadow is a "condition of the possibility" of light, its presence-in-absence, because light can only be seen "in" shadows and/or "through" shadows. If we gazed straight into the Light, we would go blind.

1.1 **Metaphysical essence of shadow, Platonism**

At the beginning of the four essays on shadows, in which I will write on the shadows of ideas, the shadows of bodies, the shadows of worlds, and in the last and the largest essay, on the internet as our contemporary "world wide" web of the shadows of reality, let me first attempt to define the "metaphysical" *essence of shadow*. The metaphysical and also the physical essence of shadow (if we conceive of the latter as a "species" of the former) is a duplication or a replica of some form on another ontological (or existential) level—a replica which is the "diminution of strength", or better still, the diminution of the reality of a more primal form. In short, a *shadow is a less real replica of some form*.[2] What is more real or what has a "stronger existence" depends on what is taken as ontologically primal: if ideas are more real, if they have a "stronger existence" in relation to sensory (or material) things, then *things* are *shadows of ideas*, as is the case of ideas as Forms in Platonism—but if sensory things (i.e. bodies, inanimate and animate) are more real than ideas, we may state the opposite, i.e. that *ideas* are *shadows of things*, in a way as ideas are conceived of in modern empiricism. However, even if ideas are more real and things are only their

[2] The ancient Greek term for shadow, *skía*, also means "trace" or "image". In some of the Platonic texts, two terms *skía* and *eídolon* (image) are used as synonyms, e.g. in Plotinus' treatise *On Beauty*, where beauties of the realm of sense are called "images and shadows" (*eídola kai skíai*) of the intelligible beauty of Forms (Plotinus, *Enn.* I.6.3, 34).

"copies", sensory things, of course, possess visual, physical or *optical shadows*. For this reason, I say that physical shadows are a "species" of metaphysical shadows, since for the "usual" shadows it is true, very evident, that they are less real replicas of ontologically more primal forms, i.e. of sensory things or bodies in our common "reality"—although this reality is perhaps not the most *real* sphere of being.

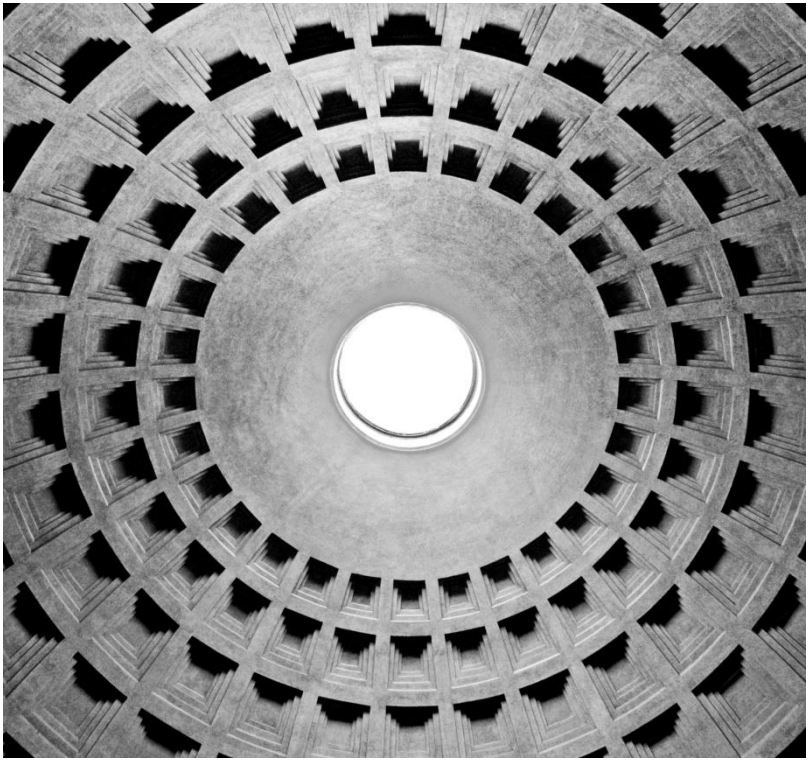

Fig. 1-1: Ceiling of the Pantheon in Rome, 2nd century AD.
Retrieved from Pinterest.com. Public domain.

As far as the "surface character" of shadows is concerned, the analogy between the world of things and the world of ideas is multi-faceted. As a rule, shadows of sensory things or bodies are two-dimensional, although often twisted or broken on the surface on which they glide, whereas three-dimensional shadows have until recently been considered only as "spirits", the phantasmagorical doubles made of some kind of "ectoplasm" or similar

esoteric substances. In the everyday context, *three-dimensional shadows of sensory things or bodies* are only a modern contrivance enabled by the discovery of holographic techniques, which open up inconceivable possibilities of the "simulacra" of the sensory world in the future. But on the other hand, the three-dimensional "shadows of ideas" have always existed, as they are the very sensory things and bodies in our "real" three-dimensional world. Some have speculated that the Platonic "world of ideas" is located in the fourth or even some higher dimension (if time is considered the fourth dimension), but here we shall not venture so far. Instead, let us remain within the limits of what is—either from a sensory or intellectual perspective—at least that much evident that we may state something reliable about it, though still enough compelling.

Therefore, shadows, if defined in the metaphysical sense, are not merely two-dimensional, but may also be three-dimensional. The main and the most general characteristic of shadows is that they have a weaker existence than their primal forms, whatever these may be. Plato, with his famed Allegory of the Cave, wanted to say precisely this: as much as a two-dimensional shadow of a jar exists merely as a "copy" of a three-dimensional material object, i.e. the jar itself, so the jar also exists as merely a "copy" of the idea of a jar, namely by "participating" in the reality of its idea or in other words, *ideas have a "stronger existence" than their shadows, their sensory objects, which are their "copies".* Surely, this thought may seem to us, people of the modern world, quite alien when we first come across it, but once fully comprehended it becomes clear and revelatory. In addition, *nota bene*: here, it is not the case of some evolution of a jar from the idea of jar, since an idea is not the "creator" of a jar, we speak rather of the pure *ontology* of these entities. And if we ask simply: why does an idea have a "stronger existence" than things?—we may answer: a jar may be broken, but the idea of a jar is preserved, i.e. in the (universal) mind, in the transcendent "world of ideas". As we put here aside the complex question of the *evolution* of things from ideas (e.g. from the Platonic Forms), so we also consider that the question of *genesis* (or "entailment") of ideas themselves is a different topic—let us say, a topic of "dialectical logic"—which is not necessarily involved in our ontological consideration of shadows as replicas (or "doubles") of some "stronger" forms and/or beings.

And what can we say about the light and colour of shadows? Although Leonardo wrote that "shadow is diminution of light" which ends in darkness, this of course does not mean that a shadow is necessarily dark, obscure or grey. Bodies, as illuminated by the Sun, for example clouds in a spring sky or blooming trees in an orchard, are *bright shadows*, therefore, we may claim that they are also "shadows of ideas", because with their

sensory beauty they "participate" in the intelligible Beauty, as was taught by Plato and Plotinus. And if a *soul* is a *shadow of the spirit*, the same applies to her, i.e. she is bright, though only when she is good. While the *angels*, *the glittering shadows of God* are even brighter.

Nowadays, the bright shadows are not only *there*, in the transcendent spheres of being, but also *here*, in our everyday life: on television screens, we see bright shadows of people that we sometimes encounter in the street. In the streets, particularly in large cities, bright shadows of more or less human figures are projected on digital screens to convey some message or convince us into doing something (usually buying a not indispensable item). And on the film screens of thousands of contemporary Platonic "caves", there live bright shadows that we share joy and sorrow with, we laugh or cry over their destiny, which is at the same time our own.

All these *virtual* shadows are not only black and white, since *coloured shadows* have populated our world for a number of years and show themselves in all possible hues and shades, almost in the same way as sensory things. Even the shadows in our dreams are often colourful. We may say that *dreams* are the *shadows of wakefulness*, although it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between dreams and wakefulness. When the ancient Chinese master Zhuang Zhou awoke from a dream in which he dreamt of being a butterfly, he asked himself whether the butterfly was dreaming of being him instead. And Marcel Proust in his *In Search of Lost Time* wrote that he was alarmed "by the thought that [his] dream had had the clarity of consciousness", for he also asked himself: "By the same token, might consciousness have the unreality of a dream?" (Proust 2001, III, 359)—Sometimes, we truly feel that events of the day are shadows of the night, although we usually think that dreams of the night are shadows of the day. Most likely, dreams are a "diminution of reality", the reality of something more primal (perhaps not of day), and so dreams are also shadows *sui generis*.

If I believed in abstract philosophical speculation more than I actually do, I might claim that the difference between shadow as a "replica" and its "primal form" (more accurately, their "difference-in-sameness") is the origin of all ontological distinctions, particularly of the metaphysical distinction between *here* and *there*, between immanence and transcendence. In some of my writings (e.g. in Uršič 2004 and 2006), I have written on transcendence as being not necessarily "real" in the sense of something that is *actually* beyond, i.e. in the traditional Christian-Platonic sense of the "higher world", which was supposed, especially in the Middle Ages, to exist somewhere "above" all things and beings of this world, somewhere up in the place above the sky (in the *topos hyper-ouranios* from Plato's *Phaedrus*

247c).[3] It would be indeed difficult, nowadays perhaps even impossible to believe in such an "actual" transcendence, if imagined in this manner. However, that does not mean that transcendence as the *beyond-in-all* does not exist. On the contrary, transcendence is "absently present" in each and every reality, even in the tiniest or the least relevant entity.[4]

In my philosophical novel *Pilgrimage to Anima* (see Uršič 1988), I wrote that "transcendence consists of splinters, discarded by the world", however, these splinters, the "sparks of light" were not really discarded, they are rather time and again lost, time and again sought after, and sometimes also found. In all things there is the same and always differently real transcendence, in each little shadow there is Light which illuminates all beings from "inside out": it is the Light which is named Good or One in Neoplatonism. Nevertheless, since we are not *there* yet, on the "highest summit"—even if we are already *there* while being still on our way, i.e. if *here* is in the same time *there*—therefore, I am not saying yet that all *shadows are diminutions of the reality of the highest Light* (although I would indeed like to claim precisely this), but I shall rather say that *shadows are symbolic forms*—using a metaphysically more modest notion, which was introduced to modern philosophy by Ernst Cassirer. In the following essays, I shall therefore approach the idea of shadows mostly in terms of symbolic forms which open up and maintain the *metaphysical distinction* between lower and upper levels or links of the "Great Chain of Being"—and thus maintain the *transcendent tension*.

1.2 **The Sun and shadows in Ancient Egypt**

Plato admired the Ancient Egyptians (who were also ancient for him!), as may be assumed from those parts of *Timaeus* and *Laws* where he mentions them. Timaeus, the Pythagorean sage, recounts an anecdote about the meeting of Solon of Athens, the lawmaker, with a priest in Sais, the sacred city in the Nile Delta. After the Egyptian priest gives Solon a lecture on the right laws, he adds (in *Timaeus* 22b): "O Solon, Solon, you Hellenes are never anything but children, and there is not an old man among you. […] in

[3] Concerning the Platonic *topos hyper-ouranios* see also my article in *Hermathena* (Uršič 1998): "The Allegory of the Cave: Transcendence in Platonism and Christianity" (translated by Andrew Louth).

[4] In this meaning of the world "transcendence", I may also refer to the term "transcendence-in-immanence", originally coined by Edmund Husserl for his phenomenological analysis concerning the relation between the transcendental subject and its world—however, the original sense of this syntagma is quite modified here.

mind you are all young" (Plato 1985, 1157). In fact, this is true also from today's perspective if we compare two of the most spiritually elevated cultures of the Ancient World. Nevertheless, it is also true that the Ancient Greeks, Plato in particular, admired the "timeless" *lawfulness* of Pharaonic Egypt, as well as the depth and mystery of the ancient culture flourishing along the great river.

In the second book of *Laws* (655c–657a), Plato speaks through the mouth of an Athenian about the right and wrong choric performances and dances, and says "that poses and melodies must be good, if they are to be habitually practiced by the youthful generation of citizens" (ibid. 1253), and that they should follow the example of Egypt, where "[p]ainters and practitioners of other arts of design were forbidden to innovate on these models or entertain any but the traditional standards" (ibid. 1254). Of course, today's artists would be appalled by such conservative and censorious views, since the main characteristic of contemporary art is the creation of something new, but Plato continues:

> If you inspect their paintings and reliefs on the spot, you will find that the work of ten thousand years ago—I mean the expression not loosely but in all precision—is neither better nor worse than that of today; both exhibit an identical artistry. (Ibid.)

Well, at that time no exact historiography was available, but let us raise another question with a pinch of irony: Why should there always be a need for something new when the old is more beautiful? Moreover, it seems that the Modernism which defined the contemporary Western art for well over one hundred years, and of course produced many works of genius, fell into deep crisis precisely at the time we live in (along with the rise of so-called Post-Modernism), and this crisis does not seem to be coming to an end, since we can no longer simply return to any "traditional standards" of classical forms.

What exactly was that "pose" or posture of the Egyptian images, so highly admired by Plato's Athenian in *Laws* that was supposed to last "ten thousand years"? The paintings in tombs and temples are indeed wonderful, for they are not only long-lasting, but in a deep sense also *everlasting*, since the Egyptian soul yearned for eternity (and in this context, she is also an "elder sister" to us, not only to the Ancient Greeks). But let us ask *how* those ancient masters of painting "depicted" eternity in the postures and motion of figures, in those beautifully coloured shadows that accompanied the

dying on their way through the dark valley of Tuat[5] towards light? Most often, it is the static nature of Egyptian figures that is highlighted; however, this does not imply only their static character, but also *timelessness in motion* (of course, this is a paradox). A typical figure in Ancient Egyptian paintings is depicted in profile, but her or his *eyes*—in fact, there is usually visible only one eye, left or right—do not gaze onwards, in the direction of the figure's "motion", they are rather anatomically "twisted", so that they *gaze on me*, the late spectator who is merely an intruder in those sacred caves, after the mummies of those whom the beautiful figures and wide-open eyes gazing from those timeless paintings were truly intended for had been robbed or taken to museums. (The Egyptian eyes turned against a spectator remind us of one of Picasso's portraits of Dora Maar, in which this beautiful lady gazes at herself, she "reflects" herself, in terms of a modern subject.)

In a typical Egyptian profile figure not only are the eyes twisted, but also the shoulders and the whole chest where the heart dwells, i.e. the physical and spiritual core of a person at the time of life as well as after death, facing judgement from the Great Scales. A human figure, especially the eyes and the heart, has to be as "distinct" as possible, though not in the modern concept of "being available to be seen", but rather as distinct as the best image of the idea of an eternal body, as an immortal shadow of the deceased (in Egyptian *khaibit*). Yet the time component is also highlighted in these figures, their "timeless motion", enabled by the very profile perspective, since it is not only the figure's head that is painted in profile, but also the legs (and arms, although this depends on the role and activity represented by the figure). Moreover, the painted shadows of the deceased are depicted in profile due to their mutual communication, as they are inhabitants of the same world, *here* and *there*, in which they are often heading somewhere, to a common ritual or worship—their highest aim being that final "coming forth by day" (*pert em hru*), which, again paradoxically, repeats and renews with every morning, with every new and concurrently the same rise of the Boat of the Sun-god Rā.

Ernst Cassirer, in *Mythical Thought*, Volume II of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, mentions Ancient Egypt several times, especially the "geometric", "architectonic *form* of things" in Egyptian art and, among other things, he writes:

[5] In this book, we follow Wallis Budge's transcription of the Egyptian hieroglyphs (see Budge 1978). However, in most of recent writings about Ancient Egypt the transcription *Duat* is used.

> In its clarity, concreteness, and eternity this form triumphs over all mere succession, over the ceaseless flux and transience of all temporal configurations. The Egyptian pyramid is the visible sign of this triumph, hence the symbol of the fundamental aesthetic and religious intuition of Egyptian culture. (Cassirer 1955, 128)

The pyramid, we may add, is *a shadow of a "perfect form"* and at the same time with its prominent perpendicular, the expression of human yearning for the transcendence. For as Cassirer continues elsewhere in the same book:

> Thus for myth death is never an annihilation of existence but only a passage into another form of existence. […] the deceased still "is", and this being can be seen and described only in physical terms. Even if, unlike the living, he appears as a powerless shadow, this shadow itself still has full reality, it resembles him not only in form and feature but also in its sensory and physical needs. (Ibid. 160)

Namely, a human *ka*, "double", survives the deceased at his physical death, and as Cassirer points out, "a shadow has a kind of physical reality and physical form" (ibid.).

In the Ancient Egyptian religion, the "shadows of eternity" or symbolic forms of the living being which survive physical death are very different—according to the Ancient Greeks, we might say they are timeless "hypostases" of man. Cassirer sums this up according to Wallis Budge, who states in his translation of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* the following nine hypostases:

1. *khat*, the physical body or mummy;
2. *ka*, a human "double" (in Greek: *eídolon*, "image"), a spiritually physical being which "possessed the form and attributes of the man to whom it belonged, and, though its normal dwelling place was in the tomb with the body, it could wander about at will" (Budge 2008, XCVII); nevertheless, *ka*'s co-habitation with a mummy is not meant in terms of space, but rather in terms of the mimetic link;
3. *ba*, a human soul, more accurately "heart-soul", depicted as a bird, mostly as a human-headed hawk, which likes to fly up from the tomb, but never leaves her *khat*, since she keeps coming back;
4. *ab* (or *ib*), a heart which "was held to be the source both of the animal life and of good and evil in man" (ibid. XCVIII), and is weighed on the Great Scales after death;
5. *khaibit* (or *sheut*), a shadow which "was closely associated with *ba*" (ibid. XCIX), and may also have an existence detached from body;

6. *khu*, "spiritual soul" or spirit which is a more ethereal being than the heart-soul, and "under no circumstances could die" (ibid. C);
7. *sekhem* or "power", "incorporeal personification of the vital force of a man" (ibid.);
8. *ren* or man's name which must be preserved according to the Egyptian religion, in order that the deceased would not cease to exist; and finally
9. *sahu* or the incorruptible "spiritual body, which formed the habitation of the soul" (ibid. CII).

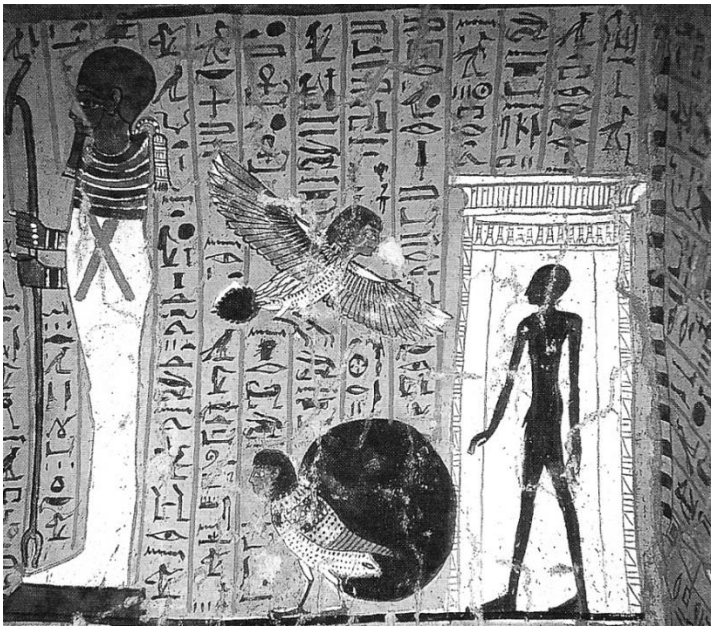

Fig. 1-2: The body (*khat*) of the deceased as Osiris, a bird as his "heart-soul" (*ba*), and his shadow (*khaibit* or *sheut*). Wall painting. Irynefer's tomb at Deir el-Medina (TT 290), 19th Dynasty, 12th century BC. From *Egypt: The World of the Pharaohs* (Schulz & Seidel 2004, 262).

The relations among these shadows of eternity are very complicated, but it is interesting that some of them were also attributed to deities, e.g. in Heliopolis, the immortal bird Bennu was named "the *ba* of Rā", i.e. the soul of the Sun-god, in Memphis the sacred bull Apis was worshipped as "the *ba* of Ptah", and also Osiris (Asar), the ruler of the underworld, was sometimes named "the *ba* of Rā". And if we follow the Ancient Greeks once again,

these epiphanies of the Egyptian deities with their "souls" might be called *divine shadows*, especially in the relation to the supreme Sun-god.[6]

In *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (although it would be more accurate to speak of *books* here, in plural) there are several passages in which—within an otherwise polytheistic religious frame—either Amun-Rā ("god of day") or Osiris ("god of night") are worshipped as the *same* major deity, as the supreme God.[7] In the period of the New Kingdom, he is spoken of as being a God whose forms (sc. "epiphanies") are *multiple*, for example in the *Papyrus of Hunefer*, in a hymn of praise to Rā when he rises in the eastern part of heaven:

> "O One, mighty, of myriad forms and aspects, king of the world, Prince of Annu (Heliopolis), lord of eternity and ruler of everlastingness, the company of the gods rejoice when thou risest and when thou sailest across the sky, O thou who art exalted in the *Sektet* boat." (Budge 2008, 14)

This multiplicity of divine "forms" is also present in "a hymn and litany to Osiris" from the *Papyrus of Ani* (here, cited in its entirety, as chapter XV of *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* in Budge's translation):

> "Praise be onto thee, O Osiris, lord of eternity, Un-nefer, Heru-Khuti (Harmachis), whose forms are manifold, and whose attributes are majestic, Ptah-Seker-Tem in Annu (Heliopolis), the lord of the hidden place, and the creator of Het-ka-Ptah (the House of the *ka* of Ptah, i.e. a name of Memphis) and of the gods [therein], the guide of the underworld, whom [the gods] glorify when thou settest in Nut. Isis embraceth thee in peace and she driveth away the fiends from the mouth of thy paths. Thou turneth thy face upon Amentet, and thou makest the earth to shine as with refined copper. Those who have lain down (i.e. the dead) rise up to see thee, they breathe the air

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[6] Jean-Christophe Bailly writes well on this topic in his book *L'apostrophe muette*: "For the Egyptians, the images of gods were not their true forms (*formes véritables*); only the deceased could know these forms and had access to them, but purely by breaching into their orbit and thus becoming themselves god-like. In the Egyptian notion of gods, which was 'fluid, unfinished, flexible' (according to Erik Hornung), all representations of gods were possible, because the true form of gods was placed in the *beyond* of representation (*dans un au-delà de la répresentation*), which was by itself only its simulacrum." (Bailly 2012, 66)

[7] For example, in the *Papyrus of Nu* we read: "I have not been shipwrecked, I have not been turned back in the horizon, for I am Rā-Osiris …" (Budge 2008, 393). Similarly, we read in the *Papyrus of Quenna*: "Homage to thee, O governor of Amentet, Un-nefer, lord of Ta-tchesert, O thou who art diademed like Rā, verily I come to see thee and to rejoice at thy beauties. His disk is thy disk; his rays of light are thy rays of light …" (ibid. 615–616).

> and they look upon thy face when the disk riseth on its horizon; their hearts are at peace inasmuch as they behold thee, O thou who art Eternity and Everlastingness!" (Ibid. 67)

Jan Assmann, a renowned Egyptologist, claims that the Egyptian *henotheism* did not emerge only *after* Akhenaten's "revolutionary" and short-lived monotheism (Akhenaten was a new name of the pharaoh Amenophis IV, who ruled in Amarna between the years 1351–1334 BC), but that the basic feature of the Egyptian religion itself is precisely henotheism (in Greek, *tò hén* means 'One'), as early as *before* Akhenaten, and even more so, *after* this turbulent period, i.e. in "the golden age" of Ramesses II the Great (13th century BC) and his successors—namely, this henotheistic feature of the Egyptian religion manifests itself by *including many gods into one*, the supreme god, whereas it does not require the monotheistic exclusion of other gods, a strict rejection of polytheism, the worshipping of *the one and only God*. Assmann asserts that post-Akhenaten religious beliefs, preserved predominantly in Ramesses' hymns to the Sun, did not develop in direction of a radical monotheism—like the religious beliefs in Judaism—but rather in terms of henotheism:

> The distinction is defined as follows: monotheism radically excludes the existence of other gods, whereas "henotheism" is understood as a monotheism of feelings and moods in which the worship of one god above all others does not imply the denial of the polytheistic world, i.e. of other gods. (Assmann 1993, 9) [8]

[8] In religious studies, the term 'henotheism' was not coined by Assmann, but by Max Müller, one of the pioneers of Indology in the late 19th century, as the most convenient term for the religion and spirituality in the Upanishads' or Vedic tradition. Wallis Budge is of the opinion that the Egyptian belief in the highest god Rā-Osiris-(Horus) is in fact not an entirely developed monotheism, but instead a form of henotheism. In his seminal book, *The Gods of the Egyptians* (1904), he quotes the polemics among earlier Egyptologists regarding this question, and establishes that in the period of more developed polytheism "[t]he priests and theologians saw nothing incompatible in believing that God was One, and that he existed under innumerable forms" (Budge 1969, I, 137). Furthermore, Assmann distinguishes between henotheism and cosmotheism (the latter is more known as a designation for some of the Greek Pre-Socratic and Stoic philosophies), and defines Akhenaton's monotheism as cosmotheism, for which it is characteristic that—in contrast to biblical monotheism—it is "founded on the worshipping of some *cosmic* power, which manifests itself as the Sun, i.e. in light and time, radiation and motion [*sc*. rotation]" (Assmann 1993, 26), while their common feature is the exclusive rejection of polytheism; in this they differ from henotheism.

According to Assmann, Akhenaten's tragic error lies precisely in his radical exclusion of polytheism: inspired by the brilliant Sun Disk, he did not only persist in the basic monotheistic "feeling and mood", in his belief in the highest One, the supreme God, but wanted the One to be the *only* One, and therefore he ordered the destruction of all images and sculptures of other gods. Assmann asserts that this error never came about (at least not in such a drastic way) in the Indian religious history in which henotheism climaxed with the Upanishads and in the Vedanta philosophy. Henotheism, of course, is also characteristic of the polytheistic pantheon of Greece, even more than of Egypt, since in Greek philosophy "the highest" One and/or the divine *Logos* is placed even "above" Zeus, the King of the Olympian gods, or it is at least equated with him. The famous Heraclitean formula "One and All" (*hén kaì pân*) has to be grasped in both senses: "One is All" and "All is One"—since *tò hén* in the Greek mind does not exclude many, as sameness of the One in henotheism does not exclude otherness, difference, plurality of *symbolic forms* which express and reveal it.

Of all the great ancient religions and cultures, it was only Judaism that followed the path of exclusive monotheism, worshipping not merely *one* God, but also *the only* God, i.e. the supreme LORD of all. "Uniqueness (*Einzigkeit*) denies Manifold (*Vielheit*), whereas All-Oneness (*All-Einheit*) dialectically assumes it" (Assmann 1993, 45). And the biblical belief in the only One *versus* many gods has proved to be fatal for the development of all three great monotheisms in the world, for their inter-relations, in all history up to the present.[9] Let us raise a question whether it is possible to truly "open up" a *specific* form of religious worship towards the *universal* belief in the transcendent divine All-Oneness, as it has been stated for Vedic (Upanishadic) religion by Max Müller—but unfortunately this cannot be said for Indian political practice—and which might, *mutatis mutandis*, also be stated of the religious beliefs of the Ancient Egyptians:

> Each god is to the mind of the suppliant as good as all the gods. He is felt at the time as a real divinity, as supreme and absolute, in spite of the necessary limitations which, to our mind, a plurality of gods must entail on every single god. (Müller, in Budge 1969, I, 135)

[9] Henry Corbin, in his treatise *Le Paradoxe du Monothéisme* (*The Paradox of Monotheism*) develops similar thoughts as Jan Assmann, but with reference to Islam, particularly the Sufi mysticism of Suhrawardi (12th century) and Ibn'Arabi (12th–13th century), which are his favourite sages. He meditates about "the One in the Many", "the multiplicity of theophanies in the Unity (*l'Unitude*) that 'theophanises' itself" (Corbin 1981, 23)—and this "second differentiation", succeeding "the first integration", "at last instates metaphysical *pluralism* in its truth" (ibid.); Corbin calls it "theomonism".

To my mind, it is perfectly possible to have such a "universal" and in the same time "specific" religious belief, which does not take anything away from its believers nor from those who believe otherwise. Assmann, in an interesting passage of his extensive book *The Mind of Egypt*, ponders how our (Western, nowadays global) civilisation with all its different religions would have developed, had there prevailed—instead of Moses' "political" monotheism—Akhenaten's *cosmotheism*, which is claimed by Assmann to be the oldest "established religion". His view on this possibility is rather sceptical: "I myself do not believe that Akhenaten's religion of light could have revolutionised the world in this way [as Moses' religion]" (Assmann 2002, 218). However, the question which is essential for true religious tolerance, beginning with the rejection of Akhenaten's violence towards other gods, is still the same: Could a kind of universal human "faith in Light", tuned to our time—i.e. in no way exclusive, neither in the fundamental monotheistic sense nor atheistically "explained" as a mere "delusion", but inclusive for all tolerant beliefs, rites and religious practises—help in brighter development of our future and maybe even save our world? Why a pristine spiritual *sameness-in-difference*, a dream of many wise minds, would not be finally possible?

According to Assmann, the essential distinction between believing in *one and only* God, which is exclusive monotheism, and believing in *one* God, which is inclusive monotheism (i.e. henotheism), lies in the human attitude towards the *mystery*: "In the first case the One is revealed, in the second it is concealed" (Assmann 1993, 47). Although this distinction may not be so linear, since the exclusive monotheisms might also include a "concealed" God, yet the supreme mystery of human faith, the "One in many" that is common to all spiritually high-developed religions, is indeed essential, also for our time, since it offers the possibility to transcend the oppositions among many different beliefs in the world. This mysterious "One in many" as well as "many in One" was wonderfully expressed by Plotinus in his tractate *On the Intelligible Beauty* with the following metaphor (*Enn.* V.8.4, 11): "The sun there is all the stars (*hélios ekei pánta ástra*), and each star is the sun and all the others" (Plotinus 1984, 249). And now, at the end of this section, let me get back to Egypt for a moment (presumably, that was also Plotinus' homeland), and wonder: If "*ba* denotes [in addition to the human soul] also the visible manifestation of an invisible power" (Assmann, 1993, 37), could the term "god" *truly* denote the multiplicity of various epiphanies of the One, the all-transcending God? In this sense, all historical deities would be just shadows, however, *divine shadows*—or holy "symbolic forms", according to Cassirer—of the highest, all-encompassing, inconceivable and mysterious *Supreme Being* that

transcends all intellectual knowledge and religious beliefs, that is always "present-in-absence", in the mystical contemplation of the One.

1.3 **From Homeric to Orphic shadows**

In the development of the Greek spirit from Homer through the Orphics to Plato, we may trace the metamorphosis of shadows following our definition in terms of replicas and/or diminutions of more primal realities. Similar to other ancient civilizations, reality with the Greeks was first conceived of as a predominantly sensory, lived experience; however, afterwards, especially with Platonism, they saw and discovered "the world of ideas". Therefore, the *primal* reality gradually became more and more intellectual and "transcendent" with regard to everyday life, although for the Ancient Greeks—all the way until Christianity—even *there* (i.e. the place or the kingdom of gods) actually remained *here*, in the unique world, since for them, the boundary between the earth and the sky was passable (at least in mind and imagination) already during one's lifetime, and not only with death. In the classical Greek spirit, *as well as* in Platonism as its central "transcendent thought", such an eschatology of the afterlife as was subsequently introduced by Christianity had been not known yet; and even afterwards, in Late Antiquity, when the Greek spirit became increasingly confronted with the Christian belief in life after death, the idea of an *actual* "life after death" remained alien—it was considered by pagans more as poetically metaphorical than ontologically real. Therefore, for those souls who turned to Christianity, baptism was not only a passage towards something new and different, but also a completely radical emotional and mental shift (let us remind of Tertullian's *Credo quia absurdum est*). We shall, however, discuss Christianity in the second essay; for now, let us remain with Homer.

The Olympian gods, presided over by Zeus, that are so vividly brought forward by Homer in *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, were not the primordial, archaic gods of the Ancient Greece, but rather the second (or more accurately third) generation of gods, as we are instructed by Hesiod's *Theogony*. Zeus, the new ruler of the sky and earth, gained the throne of Olympus after having defeated his father Cronus (i.e. after he defeated Time!)[10] and other ancient gods, the Titans, who in the bright Hellenic light become the gods of

[10] The mythology of the ancient god Cronus is fairly complex as well as ambivalent, since for example in the well-known Plato's philosophical myth on Cronus, Time is put forward as the ruler of "the golden age" into which the humanity had returned with rejuvenation, i.e. in the revolving chronological course (see Plato, *Statesman*, 269c–273e).

darkness, irrationality, chaos etc. In a rather simplified way, we could say that in Greek theogony light defeats darkness and the spirit prevails over nature with the establishment of Zeus' rule and his Olympian family of gods. Of course, this simplification is arguable as soon as we consider the amount of irrationality, moodiness and all sorts of emotions and passions seen in the Homeric Olympians (and this might be the reason why they are still so close to our feelings).

Walter F. Otto, in his renowned book *The Homeric Gods* (*Die Götter Griechenlands*, 1929), subtitled "The Spiritual Significance of Greek Religion" (*Das Bild des Göttlichen im Spiegel des griechischen Geistes*), enthusiastically and inspiringly writes about how the young Greek gods under Zeus' leadership (especially Athena, Apollo and Artemis, Aphrodite and Hermes) defeated the ancient world: "The gloom and melancholy of this ancient world is now confronted by the Olympian deities" (Otto 1954, 69). Zeus won in the clash against the demonic Titans: "Zeus, so it is related, overthrew his father Cronus and the Titans and shut them up in the darkness of Tartarus" (ibid. 132). Among the bright gods a remarkably prominent position is held by Apollo, the most Greek of all gods (not even Roman mythology possesses a direct double of Apollo, as is the case with the other Greek gods). Along with giving Apollo's generally known attributes (the god of light and prophecy, the leader of the Muses and so on), Otto emphasises that Apollo is a god of "distance", especially in the archetypical opposition to Dionysus:

> Dionysiac nature desiderates intoxication, and hence proximity; Apollonian desiderates clarity and form, and hence distance. […] Apollo rejects whatever is too near—entanglement in things, the melting gaze, and, equally, soulful merging, mystical inebriation and its ecstatic vision. He desires not soul but spirit. (Ibid. 78).[11]

In other words, of all the Greek gods Apollo is the brightest symbolic *form*, the one that radiates with the brightest light, but is nevertheless still visible in the religious spectacle as a *shadow* of the supreme Light that transcends any form. Of course, even Apollo's splendour conceals a demonism, albeit no longer the demonism of the defeated "titanic" darkness, but rather of a too powerful light, therefore the worshipping of Apollo needs other, darker, though still bright shadows, so that the human soul would not

[11] Also interesting and striking is Otto's observation that can be read in between the following lines: "Apollo's ideal of distance not only puts him in opposition to Dionysiac exuberance: for us it is even more significant that it involves a flat contradiction of values which Christianity later rated high." (Ibid. 78)

burn in the glare of a spirit too bright: these divine shadows dwell on the high Olympus, one of them being Apollo's sister Artemis, the light-dark goddess. Otto calls her "uncanny goddess" (*die Unheimliche*) (ibid. 86), the patroness of the unrestrained, solitary virgin nature and a merciless huntress who transforms the over-curious hunter Actaeon into a stag, so that he is ripped apart by his own dogs.

Among the best pages in the book *The Homeric Gods*, inspired with genuine Greek spirit, are those in which Otto writes about the *shadows of the deceased*, especially in the chapter on Hermes Psychopompus (guide of souls) and in the central chapter of the work titled "The Nature of Gods: Spirit and Form"—and these passages also demonstrate a "dialectical" opposition between the dark world of the deceased and the overtly emphasised light of the world of the young Homeric gods. With regard to Hermes, "the lord of roads", Otto claims that he is the "friendliest of the gods to men" (ibid. 104), since he leads men in lands *here* and *there* (the disobedient can be lead astray), hence:

> The mystery of night seen by day, this magic darkness in the bright sunlight, is the realm of Hermes. […] Nightness vanishes, and with it distance; everything is equally far and near, close by us and yet mysteriously remote. (Ibid. 118)

By referring to the distant vicinity of the world of the deceased, Otto in the chapter "Spirit and Form" develops an idea which is partly in contradiction to what is stated above, though perhaps only at first sight. Namely, after the victory of young gods—in comparison to the realm of the ancient gods in which, "indeed, life is a sibling to death" (ibid. 136), since the cults of the dead (not only in the archaic period of Greece, but in all "prehistorical" cultures) were the everyday part of life—the "cult of the dead is incompatible with worship of the Olympian" and "the dead had no importance whatsoever for the world of the living", since they are "to be considered only as strengthless shadows removed to a distance beyond reach" (ibid. 137). The dead are by no means excluded "from the new outlook, they have merely received a different place" (ibid.), they are separated from the world of being, they became the images of "has been" (*das Gewesen*) for in the Homeric age "the primal thought that the dead were impotent and dreamy shadows became central to the entire belief in the dead" (ibid. 143)—in the dead everything is past, and "yet there they stand, solemnly and turned inward upon themselves, an eternal image" (ibid. 143–44). And precisely there, notes Otto, lies "the truly Greek victory over death, for it is at the same time the fullest recognition of death" (ibid. 145).

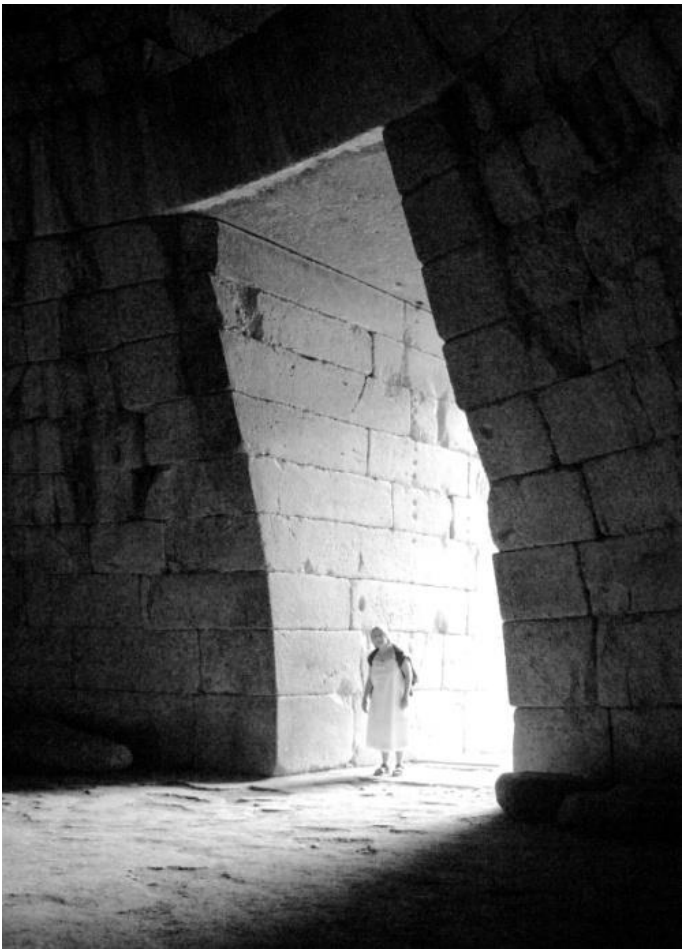

Fig. 1-3: The "bright shadow" of L.U. at the entrance of the Tomb of Agamemnon, Mycenae, 13th century BC. Photo by M.U., 2007.

However, if we join Otto in his contemplation of Odysseus' descent into the underworld as poetised by Homer in Book XI of *Odyssey*, we find it difficult to preserve the Apollonian light of the Olympian spirit, since such light is not present in Hades, there are only the dead "empty shades"—and yet, as Otto adds, "there is in them a mobility, which is given compelling expression in Homer's description of the nether-world" (ibid. 145). But this description is terrifying, as well as grotesquely morbid. For the liveliness of