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The Shadow Self

Just as our bodies cast shadows on the ground, our conscious minds cast shadows over certain elements of our persona—the parts of ourselves that we choose to keep in the dark.

“Life is born only of the spark of opposites,” wrote Carl Jung, the Swiss analytic psychologist. The two opposing forces that he referred to were the conscious mind and what he called “the shadow”—a collection of all-too-often repressed traits, the existence of which most of us deny. Its hazy and indistinct contours contain “all those unpleasant qualities we like to hide,” from arrogance to greed, recklessness and illicit urges. And despite any efforts to the contrary, Jung proposed that this inner Caliban—one’s Puckish side—cannot be silenced or bottled up. It will make itself known to each of us in myriad ways, whether as strange figures appearing in dreams or, most commonly, through projections of those denied traits and qualities onto others.

“Projections change the world into the replica of one’s own unknown face,” Jung wrote in his 1951 text, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*. He went on to describe a solipsistic world consumed by self-made illusions. The more a person tries to hide or subvert the shadow self, the more power those impulses have over their consciousness—with painful consequences.

Sadegh Hedayat illustrates this dilemma in his hallucinogenic 1936 novel, *The Blind Owl*. “I am afraid to look out of the window

of my room or to look at myself in the mirror for everywhere I see my own shadow multiplied indefinitely,” states the narrator, immersed in a feverish dream. Filled with haunting images of a crime he may or may not have committed, the dream repeats itself in various iterations ad infinitum. The kaleidoscopic effect this cycle creates is dizzying. As Hedayat’s prose demonstrates, when one’s world closes in upon itself, all distinctions become meaningless: Guilt and innocence, fact and fiction, reason and madness all blur.

Perhaps most tragic is that denying the shadow severs our ability to form bonds with others, making empathy impossible. Poet Forough Farrokhzad entreats us to resist this isolationism in her sole film, *The House is Black* (1963). At the opening of this lyrical short documentary about life in a leper colony, a voice intones, “There is no shortage of ugliness in the world. If man closed his eyes to it, there would be even more.” The leper colony—a community cast out by most societies—is an ideal metaphor for the shadow. Farrokhzad both makes us look and has our gaze returned. Yet she does not sentimentalize her subjects—neither their appearance nor their pain—making it indiscernible who, among those in the film or those watching, is healthy

and who is scarred, and thus where this blackness begins and ends.

Coming to terms with one’s shadow self is just the beginning of a lifelong undertaking that Jung called *individuation*, or the process in which the conscious part of one’s personality begins acknowledging, and even listening to, the unconscious. This movement toward integration is reflected in the abstract sculptures of Anish Kapoor. Approached head-on, *Monochrome (Grey)* appears as a deep gray hole opening forever into an abyss. Moving just slightly left or right, however, reveals a white bowl that juts out over a foot from the wall—with only the interior painted. In Kapoor’s words, “‘Something’ that dwells in the presence of the work... allows it or forces it not to be what it states it is in the first stance.” As with his reflective stainless steel sculptures that often distort and even conceal the spectator’s image, this piece elicits an anxious, provocative sensation upon revealing its true form. In an instant, surfaces turn corrupt; the safe, comfortable and knowable become untrustworthy.

Jung understood that seeing what lies hidden within us—like staring into Kapoor’s void—causes confusion, even pain. But as writer Jun’ichiro Tanizaki reminds us, “Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty.”

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