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The Phantasmagorical Imagination: From Singular Perversion To Curious Celebration

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The subject of this article is the ‘phantasmagorical imagination’. What I have produced is a preliminary study of a particular type of imaginative vision. I have chosen the term ‘phantasmagorical’ to describe this vision because of its definition in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (under ‘Phantasmagoria’) as a ‘rapidly transforming collection of imaginary and fantastic forms, such as may be experienced in a dream or fevered state.’ This encapsulates the effect that the phantasmagorical imagination and the phantasmagorical style of writing seek to produce. It is an imagination that delights in producing not merely fantasies, but fantastic incongruities and inversions, deploying them in an inherently anarchic fashion, and marrying them to strangeness and to spectacle while emphasising quantity and variety – both in collections of strange objects and in the elements of unfamiliar landscapes. The aim of this article is to provide a short account of how this specific creative predilection, or taste, is manifested and regarded by different people in two different periods – the eighteenth century and the fin-de-siècle.

The phantasmagorical type of imagination underlies many elements of eighteenth century culture. In addition to this, the attitudes toward it (both positive and negative) remain remarkably constant throughout the century until it begins to become less fashionable in the 1790’s and early 1800’s. The prevalence of the phantasmagorical style in this century is, in large part, due to the

fashionability of collections of curiosities and oddities. With the scientific advances of this period there developed a sense of the fashionability of personal curiosity and investigation. Possession of collections of exotica and strange and uncommon objects allowed individuals to portray themselves as keenly investigative, engaged and intelligent. An interest in oddities was used to suggest a serious engagement with scientific or historical issues. From this fashionable collecting (most famously seen in men like Hans Sloane) there developed a widespread aesthetic that accentuated singularity, oddity and curiosity. Travel narratives focussed upon depicting what was extraordinary, strange or grotesque about foreign countries, and the depictions of the popular masquerades of the period frequently concentrate upon the exotic and phantasmagorical nature of the experience.

In contrast to this fashionability though, there is in many eighteenth century writings a pervasive sense of the illegitimacy of this aesthetic. The eighteenth century inherited a legacy of theological objections to curiosity that stretched back to St. Augustine. The traditional portrayal of the curious man as prideful and lusting after knowledge evolved into a widespread eighteenth century depiction of the curioso as a self-indulgent buffoon. The taste for singularities is often described as having its roots in self aggrandisement. As Elizabeth Bonhote writes in *The Rambles of Mr Frankly*: ‘everyone who pretends to singularity is actuated by the love of fame: and was there no panegyric, there would be no antiquary’ (Bonhote 1776, p.160). Critics portray the curioso as spending inordinate sums of money in pursuit of singularities so as to compensate for a lack of personal charisma and to give a false impression of their own intellectual superiority. Because of this, despite the prevalence of the phantasmagorical, or curious, aesthetic

in eighteenth century culture, it was also frequently subject to strong condemnation.

There are a number of key differences between the eighteenth-century and the *fin-de-siècle* realisations of this aesthetic. One significant difference is that by the late nineteenth century the phantasmagorical aesthetic and imagination were no longer directly underpinned by contemporary practices of collecting. The prevalent nineteenth century attitude to collections can best be summed up in the views of one curator who described the ideal museum as ‘a collection of labels illustrated by well-selected specimens’ (Leask 2002, p.31). Instead, the phantasmagorical aesthetic appears chiefly in literature. The imagination of writers such as J.K. Huysmans, Oscar Wilde and Lord Dunsany conform to many of the principles familiar from the eighteenth century culture of fashionable curiosity. Within their works there is the same taste for oddities and exotica and also the same taste for rapidly transforming and incredibly varied collections of the fantastic and the grotesque. Another important difference is in the authors’ attitudes to these phantasmagorias. Rather than condemning or excusing them, as eighteenth century commentators do, these writers have a propensity to celebrate their imaginative strangeness and excesses because of their obvious departures from bland normality. The phantasmagorical imagination is often depicted as an imagination that rebels against the common and the everyday and substitutes a more intense and more vital imaginative experience.

The contrast between the condemnation of this phantasmagorical imagination that often appears in the eighteenth century and the celebration of it that features in the works of writers such as Huysmans can be seen clearly if we compare, for example, an

article written by George Coleman in 1775 with a passage from Huysmans' 1884 novel *Against Nature*.

In May of 1775 George Coleman (under the slightly ostentatious pseudonym of 'Mr Town, Critic and Censor-General') wrote a protest against the immorality of masquerades for *The Connoisseur* magazine:

The wit and humour of these meetings [...] greatly consists in exhibiting the most fantastic appearances, that the most whimsical imagination can possibly devise. [...] the more extravagant and out of nature his dress can be contrived, the higher is the joke. (Coleman 1775, p.392-393)

Although this extract does not seem obviously condemnatory, the rest of Coleman's article makes it unmistakably so. Coleman imagines two new iterations, or evolutions, of the principles of the masquerade. One of his satirical inventions is a masquerade where all the participants should appear naked, thus mocking decency and restraint. The other is a masquerade that takes place on Sunday where the revellers only appear as characters from scripture, thus (in Coleman's words) 'show[ing] their taste by ridiculing all the old women's tales contained in that idle book of fables, the Bible' (Coleman 1775, p.395). According to contemporary social mores, by celebrating their own peculiarities and freakishness, the masqueraders (and adherents to the phantasmagorical imagination in general) become immoral. Their desire to aggrandise themselves leads to their becoming grotesque, not only physically but also morally. The 'taste' and the 'joke' that Coleman writes of are identified as not merely against nature, but against decency. These are the same criticisms that are often applied to curiosi.

In contrast to this attitude, Huysmans' novel revels in peculiarity and weird beauty. This passage describes the tastes of *Against Nature's* protagonist, the decadent aesthete, Jean Des Esseintes:

His flowers [...] were some remarkable specimens – some a pinkish colour like the Virginale, which seemed to have been cut out of oilskin or sticking-plaster; some all white like the Albane, which looked as if it had been fashioned out of the pleura of an ox or the diaphanous bladder of a pig. Others, especially the one called Madame Mame, seemed to be simulating zinc, parodying bits of punched metal coloured emperor green [...] Most of them, as if ravaged by syphilis or leprosy, displayed livid patches of flesh mottled with roseola, damasked with darts; others had the bright pink colour of a scar that is healing or the brown tint of a scab that is forming. (Huysmans 2003, p. 82-84)

Des Esseintes' love of the exotic and the monstrous is the same taste that Coleman and many of his contemporaries castigated. Huysmans delights in the variety and peculiarity of the plants that he describes. They are variously compared to metals, fabrics and diseased human flesh. Not only does Huysmans emphasise the fantastic and otherworldly appearance of Des Esseintes's possessions, he emphasises the variety within this otherworldliness (as do many of the eighteenth-century accounts of collections and foreign countries). In Huysmans' novel, these oddities are enthusiastically paraded before the reader. Earlier in this chapter Huysmans explicitly contrasts Des Esseintes' garden with 'the common, everyday varieties that blossom on the Paris market stalls, in wet flower-pots' (Huysmans 2003, p.82). There is a whole hearted rejection of normality and a desire for the exotic and fantastic. This is markedly different from the attitudes of the eighteenth century, where the curious and the phantasmagorical were either excused or condemned.

This phantasmagorical type of imagination underlies both the eighteenth-century culture of curiosity and the vision of fin-de-siècle writers such as Huysmans, Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley in *Venus and Tannhäuser*, as well as writers such as Raymond Roussel and Lord Dunsany, who perpetuated this distinctly fin-de-siècle aesthetic into the first decades of the twentieth century. However, while the imaginative underpinnings are the same, the attitudes toward them are not. The fin-de-siècle writers who use this style enthusiastically embrace the phantasmagorical aesthetic as an act of rebellion against an unexciting normality, while the eighteenth century was keenly aware of its potential moral and social dubiousness. It is this similarity of imagination and contrast in attitudes that is the focus of this article.

By way of an introduction to the culture of curiosity, it is useful to outline the prevailing views on curiosity from earlier centuries. As well as providing a context for the discussion of curiosity culture, these earlier sources provide the basis for many of the criticisms of curiosity that appear in the eighteenth century. According to Lorrain Daston and Katharine Park the most influential text for all subsequent Christian commentaries on curiosity was Saint Augustine's *Confessions* (Daston & Park 2001, p.123-124; Daston 1995, p.392-396),.

Augustine principally equated curiosity with the sins of Lust and of Pride. Rather than a lust that took pleasure directly from the physicality of the body, the lust of the curious man was a perverse desire to take pleasure from the operation of the senses. Continually desirous of novelty and spectacle (and of prying into the hidden causes of these) the eye of the curious would fix itself indiscriminately and ravenously upon anything uncommon, regardless of whether it was beautiful or disgusting. The final result

of this lust of the eye was to lead the curious into the sin of pride. Having learned so much of the hidden operations of nature and its most remarkable products, they would turn away from a pious admiration of God (whose wonders they had so assiduously been prying into) and toward self-congratulation at their own cleverness.

This equation of curiosity with impiety persisted until the mid-seventeenth century, when it came to be regarded as having the potential to be a virtue, rather than being unequivocally a vice. As a result of the scientific advances of the age and their association with the doctrine of empiricism, the curious personality came to be seen as also being the fashionable and desirable personality (see Benedict 2001, p.25-28).

The most direct way in which one could establish oneself as curious was through the possession and the exhibition of a collection of curiosities. The word 'curiosity' throughout this period (like the word 'wonder') was used to describe both an object and the viewer's emotional response to that object. As such, the terms 'wonder' and 'curiosity' (used to designate objects as well as emotions) were both closely interrelated and to an extent interchangeable. To describe an object as 'curious' usually carried with it the implication of strangeness and wondrousness, whilst also suggesting a kind of associated intellectual activity. Because of this the possession of a collection of wonders/curiosities could prove a useful tool for social self-advancement. At the same time the collector could portray himself as possessed of an enquiring mind and also establish himself as having the power to command wonder through his possession of *wonders*.

The variety of objects that were commonly labelled as curious occasionally seems quite baffling to modern eyes. Items as apparently different as Greco-Roman antiquities, mechanical toys,

stuffed animals and artefacts from America or the Indies were staples of most curious collections. The unifying feature of these curiosities seems to have been their ability to defy easy categorisation and assessment – an obvious defiance of being easily understood. They were objects seemingly remote from the observer, both in time and space and in comprehension. Thus, Roman coins could be curious because they were so far removed from the time of their creation and yet, with their portraits of dead emperors and ancient gods, seemed somehow to provide a tangible representation of, and connection to, that time. Amazonian headdresses and African masks were curious because of their remoteness from the civilisations that created them and those civilisations' own remoteness from European cultural norms. Automata were curiosities because they were lifeless objects that appeared to duplicate the processes of life. The 'curiousness' of objects was, in other words, a property conferred upon them by the observer and generated by their unfamiliarity, rather than an innate quality of the objects themselves (see Kenny 2004, p.175-177; Swann 2001, p.24-25)

The capacity to control and dispense this amazement could, if handled correctly, be effectively converted into political influence and social charisma. The socially ambitious could portray themselves as sitting at the centre of a 'theatre of mastery' (Swann 2001, p.12) which demonstrated not only their modernity but also their authority. By commanding wonders the collector could depict himself as a marvel among marvels – he himself became the chief wonder of his collection. Marjorie Swann (2001, p.26) compares this practice to the courtly art of *sprezzatura*. Just as the objects in a collection were wondrous and somehow beyond context or explanation, so too could the collector appear to be. His identity became a form of *collected self*, defined by his possessions and by the

implications that those possessions had within the culture of curiosity. The ideal expression of this collected self was to appear to be at once marvellous, unconventional and yet also fashionable and intellectually dynamic.

Margaret Cavendish seemed to sense something of the beginnings of this fashionable identity when she wrote her book of verse *Poems and Fancies* in 1653.

In *Natures Cabinet*, The *Braine*, you'll find
 Many a fine *Knack*, which doth delight the
Mind.
 Severall *coulour'd Ribbons* of *Fancies* new,
 To tye in *Hats*, or *Haire* of *Lovers* true.
 [...] *Fans* of *Opinion*, which wave with the
Wind,
 According as the *Heat* is in the *Mind*.
Gloves of *Remembrance*, which draw off, and on
Black Patches of *Ignorance* to stick on
 (Cavendish 1653, cited in Benedict 2001, p.59)

Cavendish depicts a realm of fashionable curiosity in which the personality becomes an amalgam of objects, both discursive and physical: the sum of a mass of rarities and a rarity in itself. Critically, the objects she chooses are all decorative articles of clothing: ribbons, hats, fans etc. In this there is a demonstration of the parallel between the curious collections and Coleman's masqueraders. The bizarre and imaginative costumes adopted in the masquerade allowed participants to make *themselves* into curiosities and rarities in a way that could only be done implicitly through the possession of a collection.

Beyond this, writers from the period who describe masquerades, either in journalism or in fiction (see Bonhote 1776, p.113-174), have a tendency to do so in a predominantly phantasmagorical style, focussing either on the weirdness and

contrasts seen in the costumed crowd or giving itemised descriptions of the revellers as if they were objects in a cabinet of curiosities. This example is from *The Guardian* in 1712:

I found nature turned topsy-turvy, women changed into men, and men into women, children in leading-strings seven foot high, courtiers transformed into clowns, ladies of the night into saints, people of the first quality into beasts or birds, gods or goddesses. I fancied I had all of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* before me. Among these there were several monsters, to which I did not know how to give a name [...] The next object I saw, was a chimney-sweeper, made up of black crape and velvet, with a huge diamond in his mouth, making love to a butterfly. On a sudden I found myself among a flock of bats, owls and lawyers.

(Addison 1790, p.300-301)

In addition to specifically describing the masqueraders as 'objects', Addison arranges his description so as to accentuate their variety and strangeness. He focuses on the extreme and ironic disparity between the semblance of the costumes and the reality of the wearers, as well as on the contrasts among the different costumes themselves. The description as a whole unites the grotesque with the whimsical and the comical. The light and amusing image of the chimney sweep making love to a butterfly stands in opposition to the revellers whose ages and genders are disturbingly inverted. The anarchic and hallucinatory nature of the description has much in common with later phantasmagorical writers like Huysmans and Dunsany, such as its attention to variety, singularities, oddities and grotesques.

The focus upon the odd and the singular also appears in the period's attitudes toward travel and travel narratives. For young men engaged on the Grand Tour, travel was seen as an opportunity to expose themselves to novelty and the unfamiliar and in so doing allow them to collect itemised experiences and curious observations

that could be elegantly recycled into future conversations. As Neil Kenny writes, ‘travel was to provide lifelong material to dine out on.’ (Kenny 2004, p.251)

Travel narratives of this period behave in a similar fashion. Nigel Leask (2002 p.8) comments that, rather than a description of the ‘typicality’ or ‘totality’ of a foreign landscape or culture, the curious travel account attempts to compile and collect those elements that immediately strike the observer (and are supposed to strike the reader) as strange or bizarre.

Leask offers an example of the typically curious travel narrative in John Hawkesworth’s *Account of the Voyages* published in 1773. This work was essentially a compilation and rewriting of the journals kept by several members of Cook’s *Endeavour* expedition between 1768 and 1772. Hawkesworth spends nine pages discussing the ‘giants’ native to Patagonia, describing them as being a suitable focus ‘both of popular and philosophical curiosity.’ As Leask writes: ‘His landscape descriptions...are generally more concerned with topographical and botanical singularities than with conveying the typicalities of exotic nature. When a landscape feature is detailed, it is often because it represents “a very extraordinary natural curiosity”, like the rock on the coast of New Zealand which “perforated through its whole substance, so as to form a rude but stupendous arch or cavern... produced an effect far superior to any of the contrivances of art.” (Leask 2002, p.36-37)

It is easy to observe the similarities between the characteristics of the fashionable culture of curiosity and the phantasmagorical literature of later centuries. Leask’s observations on Hawkesworth’s *Account of the Voyages* could equally well be applied to Dunsany’s *Idle Days on the Yann*.

I entered Perdóndaris and found all the people dancing, clad in brilliant silks, and playing on the tambang as they danced [...] And from the market-place I came to a silver temple and then to a palace of onyx, and there were many wonders in Perdóndaris, and I would have stayed and seen them all, but as I came to the outer wall of the city I suddenly saw in it a huge ivory gate. For a while I paused and admired it, then I came nearer and perceived the dreadful truth. The gate was carved out of one solid piece! I fled at once through the gateway and down to the ship, and even as I ran I thought I heard far off on the hills behind me the tramp of the fearful beast by whom that mass of ivory was shed. (Dunsany 2003, p.274-275)

Dunsany's narrative is framed as a collection of experiences. Perdóndaris (like the other cities through which the narrator passes) appears to the reader as an aggregate of outstanding and bizarre singularities – its carvings, silver temples, palaces and ivory gates – in the same way that the foreign locales in curious travel narratives do. Just as these narratives ignore the 'typicalities of exotic nature' so too does the phantasmagorical imagination stand in contrast to the totalising or 'world-building' kind of imagination typified by writers like Tolkien.

There are other similarities to the culture of curiosity in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Grey*:

He longed to see the curious table-napkins wrought for the Priest of the Sun, on which were displayed all the dainties and viands that could be wanted for a feast; the mortuary cloth of King Chilperic, with its three hundred golden bees; the fantastic robes that excited the indignation of the Bishop of Pontus, and were figured with 'lions, panthers, bears, dogs, forests, rocks, hunters – all, in fact, that a painter can copy from nature'; and the coat that Charles of Orleans once wore, on the sleeves of which were embroidered the verses of a song beginning '*Madame je suis tout joyeux*' [...] And so, for a whole year he sought to accumulate the most exquisite specimens that he could find of textile and embroidered work,

getting the dainty Delhi muslins, finely wrought with gold-thread palmates, and stitched over with iridescent beetles' wings; the Dacca gauzes, that from their transparency are known in the East as 'woven air', and 'running water', and 'evening dew'; strange figured cloths from Java; elaborate yellow Chinese hangings; books bound in tawny satins or fair blue silks, and wrought with fleurs de lys, birds, and images; veils of *lacis* worked in Hungary point; Sicilian brocades, and stiff Spanish velvets; Georgian work with its gilt coins, and Japanese *Foukousas* with their green-toned golds and their marvellously-plumaged birds. (Wilde 2000, p.132-134)

Beyond the information contained in this passage, Wilde also gives us descriptions of Dorian's collections of perfumes, exotic musical instruments, jewels and accounts of notorious historical madmen (see Wilde 2000, p.129-140). Dorian's obsessions are projected outward into the accumulation of his possessions and in turn these acquisitions give rise to further obsessions. Dorian represents the collected self. He, as the owner of the collection, becomes both the incarnation of the collection and consequently its most fascinating component. In this context it is perhaps not insignificant that Dorian's identity is literally objectified through his portrait. His personality, as well as his physical appearance, are defined by objects that he possesses. Like the fashionable collectors of the eighteenth century, Dorian's charisma and even his selfhood are assembled from the objects that he owns.

The objects and information Dorian collects are imagined versions of things that would have been familiar to the eighteenth century *curioso*. Despite its fashionability however, the eighteenth century taste for the monstrous and the exotic suffered from the widespread perception of its moral dubiousness. In his *Elements of Criticism* (1762) Lord Kames writes:

The love of novelty [...] prevails in children, in idlers, and in men of shallow understanding [...] No man is

ashamed of curiosity when it is indulged in order to acquire knowledge. But to prefer any thing merely because it is new, shows a mean taste, which one ought to be ashamed of: vanity is commonly at the bottom, which leads those who are deficient in taste to prefer things odd, rare or singular, in order to distinguish themselves from others. And, in fact, that appetite [...] reigns chiefly among persons of mean taste, who are ignorant of elegant and refined pleasures. (Kames 1762; cited in Leask 2002, p.27-28)

It is not difficult to see the parallels between Kames' remarks and Coleman's observations about the masqueraders. This seems to have been the standard criticism of curious behaviour and the curious, or phantasmagorical, aesthetic that recurs throughout this period. The taste for exotica and singularities is identified as being in reality a form of empty self-aggrandisement. The accumulation of curious objects is portrayed as an attempt to compensate for a deficiency of character and of more substantial achievements. To be seen as curious was, therefore, to attempt to assume a delicate balance between charisma and condemnation. In buying curious objects and books of curious information (be they accounts of travels, peculiar events or historical anecdotes) the curious man ran the risk of appearing, in his ignorance and naïveté, to have been sold what he thought he had invented - his own identity.

The suggestion that the collected self was, in reality, nothing more than a bought self led to the idea that the curious personality was emblematic of unrestrained modern consumerism. This seemed to be a new version of the lustful curiosity described by Augustine, in this case, leading to financial as well as spiritual ruin. The most well known satire of the culture of curiosity, Thomas Shadwell's *The Virtuoso*, ends with the bankruptcy of its title character, the curious Sir Nicholas Gimcrack (Shadwell 1966, p.135). It is interesting to note how many satires of curious behaviour have an explicitly

economic dimension. In 1710 *The Tattler* published an article that (taking its inspiration from *The Virtuoso*) pretends to be Gimcrack's last will and testament. Instead of financial bequests the will distributes crocodile eggs, boxes of butterflies and mosses among Sir Nicholas' relatives (anon 1716 p.119-121). More overtly in 1730 the anonymous *The Country Spy* complains of the ease with which a man might buy an 'Adder' or 'Toad' for forty guineas and have 'fourscore for it every day he lived from some ignorant and wealthy person.' (anon 1730, p. 47)

Given its potential associations with unrestrained consumption and pretentiousness, the curious aesthetic seemed as much a failure of taste as a failure of self restraint. It was not merely vanity but a desperate and ignorant scramble for something, anything, to be vain *about* – the triumph of quantity over quality. To quote Kames again, anything 'to distinguish themselves from others.' This criticism was applied not just to the curious collector but to the entire curious, or phantasmagorical, imagination and aesthetic. Many sources take the view that pure spectacle is an illegitimate or improper form of entertainment. They commonly adopt the position that spectacle offers only visceral gratification of the senses and the passions, rather than dignified and intelligent amusement. The author of one anonymous tract in 1725 offered his opinion that 'Taste is as sure a distinction of a gentleman, as his behaviour, and a much happier one than his quality: [...] It scorns the low entertainments of narrow minds, who are delighted with anything that glitters.' (anon 1725, p.10-11)

Similarly, the satirical *The Dancing Devils* proclaims,

But now, the Stage revolts from these
Dramatick Rules, that us'd to please,
And does, in scorn of Wit, impose

Upon the Town, *Dumb Raree Shows*,
 Compos'd of Vizards and Grimaces,
 Fine Scenes, Machines, and Antick Dresses
 (Ward 1724, p.9)

The poem describes a harlequin who, desperate to reacquire the attention of the theatre-going public, stages a performance of *Faust* packed with special effects such as flying chariots, a clown who continues to dance after his head and arms have been cut off and a massive dragon that appears in the finale to carry Harlequin/Faustus to Hell. The implicit suggestion in the poem is that, in the writer's view, the exchange of good taste for mass appeal is a type of Faustian bargain.

One final explanation as to why these shows, masquerades and collections were often regarded as socially dubious was because they openly and deliberately emphasised wonder as the desired emotional reaction of their observers. For these reasons, being seen to be a curious person required something of a delicate balancing act in order to avoid social condemnation. So, how then was one to portray oneself as 'properly' curious? Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park provide the answer using an extract from the opening of Isaac Newton's *New Theory of Light and Colours* (1672).

On seeing a beam of light shone through a prism Newton writes:

It was at first a pleasing divertissement to view the vivid and intense colours produced thereby; but after a while applying myself to consider them more circumspectly, I became surprised to see them in an oblong form; which, according to the received laws of refraction, I expected should have been circular.... Comparing the length of this coloured spectrum with its breadth, I found it about five times greater, a disproportion so extravagant that it excited me to a more than ordinary curiosity of

examining from whence it might proceed. (Newton, 1672; cited in Daston & Park 2001, p.303)

It is worth noting how curiosity is characterised in this passage. There is an emotional restraint and intellectual articulacy that pervades the description as a whole. The initial response to the spectrum is that it is a 'pleasing divertissement,' but its true value is as a stimulant to the intellect. Oddities, novelties and curiosities represent departures from normality and, as such, puzzles to be solved. The first examination of the curiosity is an aesthetic one, true, but it is dignified, genteel and refined. There follows a dismissal of this most superficial response as the mind is brought to play upon the object and its features and peculiarities are observed, analysed and compared. It was this dismissal of wonder that legitimised the observer's curiosity. Wonder was appropriate only in so far as it first attracted the attention, guiding the intellect to new objects of investigation. This allowed for a distinction to be made between authentically curious activities and what was characterised as merely vulgar staring. The former claimed to consist of dignity and rigorous intellectual analysis while the latter seemed to consist only of sensationalism. By emphasising wonder, the phantasmagorical aesthetic seemed to be merely emphasising superficiality. For these reasons, it looked like an imaginative perversion to serious-minded observers in the eighteenth century. This is in marked contrast to the attitudes espoused in later phantasmagorical literature.

The ideology (if the word can be truly applied here) of the phantasmagorical style appears most clearly in the writings of Lord Dunsany. In *The Avenger of Perdónaris* he writes:

If I could get thirty heathen men out of fantastic lands,
with their long black hair and little elfin eyes and
instruments of music even unknown to Nebuchadnezzar

the King; and if I could make them play those tunes that I heard in the ivory palace on some lawn, gentle reader, at evening near your house [...] you would be gentle no more but the thoughts that run like leopards over the far free lands would come leaping into your head even were it London, yes, even in London: you would rise up then and beat your hands on the wall with its pretty pattern of flowers, in the hope that the bricks might break and reveal the way to that palace of ivory by the amethyst gulf where the golden dragons are. For there have been men who have burned prisons down that the prisoners might escape, and even such incendiaries those dark musicians are who dangerously burn down custom that the pining thoughts may go free. (Dunsany 1920, p.131-132)

Dunsany celebrates the transgressiveness of the phantasmagorical imagination in a manner that would have seemed completely alien to the sensibilities of the eighteenth century. Conventionality, restraint and appropriateness are here identified explicitly as the enemies of a truer, higher and more vibrant imaginative existence. In Dunsany's writing the phantasmagorical imagination is part of an almost spiritual transcendence of everyday life. The wanderer-Dunsany who acts as the narrator in both *Idle Days on the Yann* and *The Avenger of Perdóndaris* has something of the pilgrim about him, though his pilgrimage is phantasmagorical rather than theological. By 'accumulating' exceptional curiosities and grotesques of imagination Dunsany attempts to place his work as far as possible outside of normality and daily occurrences. There is the desire to enter into a more rarefied, chaotic, and vibrant kind of experience. For writers such as Dunsany, the phantasmagorical imagination is an aesthetic of resistance and subversion.

However, what is resisted is usually very general. Rather than addressing a particular cause, writers of phantasmagorical literature seem to demonstrate an unspecific dissatisfaction with 'normality' as a

whole. Everyday experience tends to figure in these narratives as a kind of bland homogeneity from which the protagonist (and, indeed, the narrative itself) is trying to escape. Though Huysmans often mocks Des Esseintes' pretentiousness and his desire for abnormality (aesthetic, sexual and dietary) he allows him a tragic dignity at the end of *Against Nature*, when he laments being forced out of his seclusion by ailing health and back into a life within ordinary society.

Well, it is all over now. Like a tide-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge [...] Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe! (Huysmans 2003, p.204)

At this point Des Esseintes seems to be a more flawed and imperfect version of the narrator of *Idle Days on the Yann*. Fundamentally, the same impulse motivates both of them. It is also not difficult to find examples of an identical attitude in, for example, *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, such as the painter Basil Hallward's comment that 'The ugly and the stupid have the best of it in this world. They can sit at their ease and gape at the play' (Wilde 2000, p.7). Even characters like the inventor Martial Canterel in Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914) seem to suggest a kind of unfocused (though also non-violent) iconoclasm. Canterel is a prolific genius who fills the public gardens of his house with bizarre machines, art and performers. While he is rich, socially accomplished and intelligent, Canterel is also a subtly subversive figure. The machines he designs serve no practical purpose. They create mosaics out of human teeth or allow the performance of underwater ballet but they have no use beyond entertainment. Canterel's machines defy traditional assessments of the value and utility of science. The system of values that Roussel creates in *Locus Solus* places novelty, amusement and

singularity above functionality. As Michel Foucault wrote of him, ‘In Roussel [...] invention opens no future; it is completely introverted.’ (Foucault 2004, p.80)

In this sense, the phantasmagorical imagination as it was manifested by these writers is not so different from how it was seen by the Romantics. Kames’ remark that the curious ‘prefer things odd, rare or singular, in order to distinguish themselves from others’ (Kames 1762; cited in Leask 2002, p. 28) could equally well be applied to Dunsany’s Narrator, Canterel or Des Esseintes. Huysmans’ Des Esseintes is created along a similar pattern to Shadwell’s Nicholas Gimcrack.

However, the essential distinction between the phantasmagorical creations like Canterel and Dorian and characters like Gimcrack is the degree of sympathy between the writers and their characters. Even with somewhat risible figures like Des Esseintes there is the sense that their obsessions and activities are worthy of approval (or at least interest) rather than condemnation. The phantasmagoria becomes a form of writing that celebrates the point of view of the outsider. The nature of the aesthetic seems to embody abnormality and the unnatural. Indeed, it is defined by its love of abnormality and by its rejection of typicalities.

The writers of the nineteenth century, who inherited the notion of the curioso as a comic freak of human nature, inverted it to make the outsider appealing rather than disgusting. The belief in the superficiality of wonder, which characterised the eighteenth century responses, alters to invest it with an aura of spirituality, or spiritual longing. The phantasmagorical becomes a means of transcending the normal and attaining the other-worldly. It seems to speak to something in these writers that admired the curious and the bizarre more than the truthful and the natural.

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