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Dementia's Jester: The Phantasmagoria in Metaphor and Aesthetics  
from 1700 – 1900.

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This work is dedicated, with deepest love and gratitude, to my mother and father, Elizabeth and Drummond Small, and to my sister Lynsay. I cannot thank you enough for everything you've done for me.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1792, the last of the winter sun would have left Paris at about 5 o'clock in the afternoon, so that the group of spectators who arrived at the Hôtel de Chartres one evening shortly after Christmas would have done so in the dark. This was by design, because they had come for death.

The year already had a strong claim to be regarded as a particularly cadaverous one. The guillotine had been employed for the first time in April to put an end to the life of the robber Nicholas Jacques Pelletier and shortly thereafter to effect the first of the political executions ordered by the Revolutionary Tribunal. What these men and women had come for, though, was a more complex, flamboyant and technologically advanced spectacle of death; it was the invention of the illusionist Paul Philidor and was called 'the phantasmagoria'. Coined by combining the Greek words 'phantasma' (appearance, vision, ghost) and 'agora' (assembly), Philidor had intended the name to suggest a vast crowd of the undead, a riotous carnival of phantoms. He promised his audience that, using the projections of a magic lantern and other ingenious mechanical devices, he would show them the illusory shapes of ghosts and monsters, reunite lovers separated by death, and call fiends out of hell. Philidor's show was an immediate success. He and other canny entertainers (such as the Belgian, Etienne Gaspard Robertson) spread the format across the continent; Philidor himself brought it to London in 1801. However, this exhibition of spectres was to become something far more than a mere footnote in the history of Romantic popular entertainment. With the phantasmagoria, Philidor had dropped a seed of post-enlightenment paranoia into the already sepulchral soil of The Terror.

Over the following years, the phantasmagoria came to serve as a symbol for a set of new ideas about thought and imagination. The historian Terry Castle describes how, throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a sense of the vulnerability and malleability of the mind had been gradually overtaking the notion of it as a strictly rational, empirical engine. A new and disturbing theory was emerging: that the mind might be at the mercy both of its own imagination and of subtle

influences that could transform the action of the senses.<sup>1</sup> The mind, that is, could produce hallucinations within itself that had the appearance of reality, fantasy might overtake thought, and the mind might undermine its own rationality. The ghastly but insubstantial and hypnotic forms summoned up by Philidor's performances seemed to embody this growing anxiety concerning the mind's own febrile imaginative activity. In the collective imagination of the period, therefore, the phantasmagoria rapidly evolves from being just one of a number of amusements to having a much broader symbolic function.

In the course of this evolution, while some understood the image of the phantasmagoria as representing the imagination fearfully out of control, others saw in it the imagination marvellously freed from restraints. One of the first spectators of Etienne Robertson's phantasmagoria, Sébastien Mercier, rapturously declared that it had 'excavated the dream'<sup>2</sup>. For him the spectacle was a symbol of the unfettered potency of the imaginative faculty; used in this way, the term 'phantasmagorical' was not terrifying but celebratory. This duality is at the heart of the nineteenth-century deployment of the phantasmagoria as metaphor; it could represent both the wonders of dream and the horrors of nightmare. In effect, the phantasmagoria was a suitably delirious symbol for the delirium of creativity itself.

With this in mind, from now on – unless explicitly noted otherwise – whenever I refer to the phantasmagoria or the phantasmagorical, it will be to one or other of its metaphorical or symbolic roles rather than the original magic lantern show pioneered by Philidor.

In addition to this metaphorical function, though, the phantasmagoria also came to act as a new figure for a particular aesthetic. Since the beginning of the eighteenth century, the fashionability of collections of odd, exotic or 'curious' objects had produced a 'culture of curiosity'. As Barbara Benedict and Nigel Leask have shown us, during this period there emerged in novels, newspapers and magazines a debate about the morality and social legitimacy of acquiring curiosities and of living as a curious person.<sup>3</sup> Intimately associated with this culture of curiosity was an aesthetic of spectacle, and in particular of the collection. Both those who supported

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 140-168.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 244.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 1-25.

this fashionable curiosity and those who satirised it did so by depicting collections of things that were exaggeratedly bizarre or unfamiliar. This emphasis on collecting also meant that the culture of curiosity was frequently also a culture of exhibition and display: the collector's identity was effectively defined by the quality of his collection and his ability to show it off. The collection became an externalised version of its owner's selfhood, its exotic and fabulous elements suggesting the exoticism of the owner's own personality. These fantasies of materialism and collecting were intimately connected with eighteenth-century fashionable curiosity.

As the nineteenth century approached, the fashionable appeal of the culture of curiosity and the collections that characterised it began to decline. The phantasmagoria as metaphor or symbol, however, picked up on the residue of the eighteenth-century culture of curiosities and partially reinvented it, combining it with its own imaginative and illusionistic associations. This reinvention can be seen in the works of writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, where phantasmagorical collections of marvellous objects merge with the imaginative and psychological aberrations of their owners. In nineteenth-century literature, the phantasmagorical aesthetic becomes a strange intersection of materialism and imagination: the products of the imagination are given material form as lists and collections of exotic objects, these objects take on suggestively magical properties, and collections of material finery begin to be seen as a kind of fantastic narcotic, allowing access to a phantasmagorical dream world.

The objective of this thesis is to explore the interplay between these different metaphorical, material and aesthetic elements and their roles in the evolution of the idea of the phantasmagorical. Since the phantasmagorical is in part a continuation of the ideas and preoccupations of the culture of curiosity, I will begin by examining that culture and the questions it provoked among its contemporaries about (among other things) the attribution of wonder and amazement to collections of objects, the creation of a 'collected self' through owning such objects, and the morality of spending sometimes vast amounts of capital in order to accumulate such an ersatz selfhood. These questions persist after Philidor's creation of the phantasmagoria proper. The illusionistic nature of the phantasmagoria adds an imaginative dimension to the issues of consumption and identity that had dominated the debate over curiosity. The aesthetic which is derived from the phantasmagoria is, therefore, one which is deeply rooted in material culture. At the same time, it purports to depict something of the romantic, disordered quality of dream. This implied

contradiction between fascination with conspicuous consumption and a desire to escape from conformity and consumerism into a 'higher', more emotionally and imaginatively satisfying dream world, in turn hints at a tension within the phantasmagorical aesthetic: the possible falseness of its ideals and the difficulty of trying to employ an inherently materialist aesthetic to resist consumption and social conformity.

The phantasmagoria's distorted, anarchic quality has another effect throughout the nineteenth century. Because it seems to be predicated upon the confusion of normally concrete certainties – the coherence of consciousness, aesthetic unity and so on – the phantasmagorical becomes an aesthetic that is well adapted to social non-conformity. In effect, it becomes an aesthetic of rebellion. All these different strands reach their greatest prominence in the period that is also the apogee of the phantasmagorical aesthetic itself – the last decades of the nineteenth century. It is in the decadent movements of England and France that the phantasmagorical is at its most widespread and – ironically, given its identification with rebelliousness and social non-conformism – its most mainstream. During this period, the phantasmagoria's associations with the dream, with material acquisition and with a resistance to normative values all mesh with the ideas and ideals of the decadent movements.

From its inception, the phantasmagoria is dominated by a sense of its own ambiguity: simultaneously disconcerting and fabulous, rooted in the dreamscape and the collection, it makes its elusively spectral way through the nineteenth century. Revenant-like, it is in part a revivification of the culture of curiosity and its own creature. From its beginnings with Paul Philidor amid The Terror of revolutionary France, it transmutes itself into a cluster of ideas that comes to dominate the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe and his successors of the fin-de-siècle, and which remains singularly potent even to the present day.

With this in mind, I will chart the evolution, first of the culture of curiosity into the phantasmagorical aesthetic, and then of that aesthetic itself. Chapter One will provide a background analysis and discussion of the phenomenon of curiosity culture in eighteenth-century society, before going on to examine its role in the literature of the period and to trace the first foreshadowing of phantasmagorical ideas in that literature. Chapter Two will describe the gradual disappearance of fashionable curiosity as the eighteenth century drew to a close, a development which provided the



impetus for many of the ideas and problems originally associated with curiosity culture to attach themselves to the emerging metaphor of the phantasmagoria. Chapter Three explores this process of transference in more detail, analysing the metaphor of the phantasmagoria from the time of Paul Philidor's invention to its wholesale permeation of nineteenth-century language and society. The closing section of the chapter will examine the emergence of the phantasmagoria in fiction, and especially the works of Edgar Allan Poe, and the resultant formation of what is effectively an aesthetic of the phantasmagorical. The last chapter will examine the literature of the fin de siècle, where – thanks to the lasting influence of Poe and the decadent movement – the phantasmagorical is at its most prominent and where it is most explicitly concerned with questions of society and material culture. After this, the Conclusion will briefly sketch the development of phantasmagorical forms of literature beyond the end of the nineteenth century and up to the present, demonstrating in the process the continued impact of the phantasmagorical aesthetic in contemporary fiction.

A note on titles: This work makes use of various materials that have been translated into English. Where the translators have anglicised the title, the work is referred to by its English language title with a note in parentheses giving the original title of the work the first time it appears in a chapter: for example, *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*). In the case of works which have been translated into English but retained their original titles, such as *Monsieur de Phocas*, the original title has been used throughout.

## CHAPTER 1

### *Incessant Observation: The Birth of the Culture of Curiosity.*

By the eighteenth century, ‘curiosity’ and the idea of ‘being curious’ had come to occupy a somewhat paradoxical place in the British popular consciousness. For some, it directed the course of fashion in print, travel and collections and provided the model for the fashionable personality. For others, it represented much of what was wrong with modern society: excessive consumption, hypocrisy, the breakdown of social decorum and aesthetic unity. For the eighteenth century, curiosity both defined contemporaneity and the immodesty and excess of the contemporary. In the culture of curiosity, we can see the antecedence of the phantasmagorical. However, the discourse of curiosity that is so prevalent in this period has its origins in a historical debate about the legitimacy of intellectual inquiry that stretches back over hundreds of years. In order to understand the nature of curiosity culture and its links to the phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century, we have to understand some of the context that informed it.

Many of those who were critical of curiosity in the eighteenth century reiterated or adapted arguments that dated back to theologians such as St Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux. In his *Confessions* (the most influential text for all subsequent Christian commentaries on curiosity) Augustine principally equated curiosity with the sins of Lust and Pride. As a subspecies of lust, Augustine described it as the ‘lust of the eye’ and ‘concupiscence ... not delighting in the flesh but of making experiments through the flesh, the seat whereof being in the appetite of knowledge’<sup>1</sup>. 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, whether it was something beautiful like ‘light, the queen of colours’ or something hideous, like a decaying corpse. At the same time the mind of the curious would become obsessed with magic and with religious prodigies and omens, not from a devotion to God but out of the lust for the uncommon and the spectacular, which is ‘masked under the title of knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, ed. Edward Bouverie Pusey (New York: Cosimo, 2006), 197.

and learning'.<sup>2</sup> A side-effect of this concupiscent curiousness was that it disrupted the integrity and unity of the self. Daston and Park observe that 'Like other appetites, curiosity shattered self-mastery and with it the sense of self... Just as lust overwhelmed the body and scattered its energies, so curiosity waylaid the mind.'<sup>3</sup> This was a theme that was taken up and expanded by Augustine's intellectual successors. Bernard of Clairvaux's tenth century work *The Twelve Steps of Humility* identifies it as an appetite which the pious should avoid 'feeding'.<sup>4</sup> So while it was a sin of the intellect, curiosity was also a physical sin originating in bodily appetites. It was a type of intellectual incontinence which caused its sufferers to lose their God-given and seemingly self-control; it was a sin founded upon unrelenting consumption, an instigator of gluttony and lust, a cause of the perversion of the mind and fragmentation of the self. It was to these founding concepts that the discourse of curiosity was continually to return in the eighteenth century.

The reiteration of these Augustinian ideas was in part a reaction against a rehabilitation and popularisation of curiosity that had occurred in the latter part of the seventeenth century.<sup>5</sup> The emergence of the concepts of empirical observation and deduction led to a reassessment of the moral and social position of curiosity. In simple terms, empiricism defined knowledge as the outcome of observation, rather than as the pronouncements of civil or intellectual authorities; this made empiricism 'hospitable to ambitious "new men" who sought social advancement on the basis of merit, not blood.'<sup>6</sup> Previously, curiosity (the *impulse* toward inquiry) had been aligned with impious peeping; but now it was allied to empiricism (the new *method* of inquiry) and, in consequence, came increasingly to be seen as an emblem of modernity and social transformation. Curiosity became a mechanism by which to enfranchise the curious, to authorise the questioning of the established order. 'This popular curiosity invited [its practitioners] to re-examine social "truths" and to consider themselves equal to those who determined them... Curiosity itself, rather than any invention, seemed the instrument for a progress that would launch unorthodox ideas and new people into

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<sup>2</sup> For a summary of Augustine's criticisms of curiosity see Lorraine Daston and Catherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone, 1998), 123-124, and Lorraine Daston, 'Curiosity in Early Modern Science', *Word and Image*, Vol. 11 No. 4, 393-394.

<sup>3</sup> Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 123.

<sup>4</sup> Lorraine Daston, 'Curiosity and Early Modern Science', 393.

<sup>5</sup> See Barbara Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 25-70, for a more detailed analysis of this process.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict, *Curiosity*, 27.

power'.<sup>7</sup> This then, goes some way towards explaining why, throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the curious personality was also the fashionable and desirable personality.

On the most basic level the curious personality was founded upon the appeal of inquiry, questioning and investigation. The modern personality was one who was intellectually active, who made a continuous effort to be informed and to seek out information. He (and on the vast majority of occasions, curiosity was seen to be a purely masculine virtue, or rather, it was only seen to be a virtue when it was practised by men)<sup>8</sup> would ideally appear to embody the new spirit of the age: he was a restless agent of revelation and dynamic inquiry. It is worth noting in passing, however, that the extent to which this questioning extended to the criticism of existing authorities and social structures appears to vary between individual 'curiosi'. Whilst Benedict comments that 'the radical philosophy of the New Science opposed state practice' and that 'the royal society remained triumphantly independent of the monarchy',<sup>9</sup> clearly there were others for whom the 'fashionable enquiry' of empiricism and the culture of curiosity were paths to advancement and patronage within the existing social hierarchy. Marjorie Swann identifies Elias Ashmole as perhaps the most well-known example of this type of 'curious' social climbing.<sup>10</sup>

The most direct way in which one could establish oneself as a curious person was through the possession and exhibition of a collection of 'curiosities' – bizarre and remarkable objects. 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; an object was a curiosity or wonder because it could provoke the observer to become curious about it or to marvel at it. Objects that were unfamiliar, exotic or strange provoked questions in the minds of those who saw them; they aroused curiosity so they were 'curiosities'. 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

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict, *Curiosity*, 27-28.

<sup>8</sup> See Neil Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern Germany and France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 386-395, on the various strategies that were deployed to limit and to condemn feminine curiosity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

<sup>9</sup> Benedict, *Curiosity*, 27.

<sup>10</sup> See Marjorie Swann, *Curiosities and Texts: The Culture of Collecting in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001), 40-54 (especially p. 51 on the opening of the Ashmolean Museum by the Duke and Duchess of York and its decoration with the insignia King Charles II).

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 'made sense of'. 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 geographical remoteness from the civilisations that created them, and because of those civilisations' own seeming remoteness from European cultural values; automata were curiosities because they were lifeless objects that counterfeited the processes of life; and taxidermy animals became so because they suggested not only nature rendered static by the power of art, but also the removal of natural things from nature and their insertion into a new system devised by man: the collection. The 'curiousness' of objects was, then, a property conferred upon them by the observer and generated by their unfamiliarity, rather than an innate quality of the objects themselves. Perhaps the most obvious example of this are collected objects such as finely woven fabrics or carved cherry stones. These were designated as curiosities because the methods used in their creation were especially skilful, complex or unclear. In this case to call these things curious was not only to designate them as representing somewhere or some-when different from the familiar time and place of the observer, but an acknowledgement of the observer's confusion and amazement at the mere fact of their existence.<sup>11</sup>

It is this interweaving of confusion and amazement that most directly prefigures the emotions provoked by the phantasmagoria. The collection of curious things was also a collection of wondrous things. The concepts of wonder and curiosity (and, therefore, of curiosities and wonders) were closely connected and could easily shade over into each other; to an extent, they were interchangeable terms. To describe an object as curious usually carries with it an implication of strangeness and wondrousness, while also suggesting a kind of associated intellectual activity. The intellectual questioning provoked by an object's curiousness was paired with a pleasing astonishment occasioned by the mere fact of its existence. Because of this,

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<sup>11</sup> See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern Germany and France*, 175-177, and Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, 24-25.

the possession and exhibition of a collection of curiosities was both a way for the collector to exhibit his intellectual vigorousness – to show that he was possessed of an inquiring mind – and to establish himself as having the power to command wonder. This capacity to control and to dispense wonder could, if handled correctly, be effectively converted into social charisma. The socially ambitious could portray themselves as sitting at the centre of a ‘theatre of mastery’<sup>12</sup> 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 compares this practice to the courtly art of *sprezzatura*.<sup>13</sup> 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 ‘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, beyond convention and yet also fashionable and intellectually dynamic. In a word: curious.

This was at the heart of the fashionable culture of curiosity that the seventeenth century bequeathed to the eighteenth. There were two significant consequences of this that were to reappear in the metaphor of the phantasmagoria as it arose at the end of the eighteenth century. First, the curious collection produced what may be described as a characteristic aesthetic of curiosity culture: a primarily visual delight in unsystematic, even perversely disorderly collections of peculiar and astonishing objects. In this aesthetic, it is possible to see a prototypical version of the multifarious and disordered spectacles of the phantasmagoria. Aiming to convey their individualism and personal distinctiveness, the collector’s idea of being unusual or unique is converted into the idea of possessing lots of unique or unusual things; the discontinuous, disordered wonders of the collection implicitly mirror the wondrous, multiplicitous identity of the collector. As such, the collector’s personality seems to be projected outward, materially embodied in his objects while at the same time, the objects are partly internalised, defining the aspects and boundaries of their owner’s selfhood. In this interweaving of object and personality the collection becomes a physical manifestation of the dreamscape of the collector while he in turn becomes

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<sup>12</sup> Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Swann, *Curiosities and Texts*, 26.

objectified – the crown jewel of his own collection, displayed and admired in the same way that all the other objects are.

This type of disorganised, collected spectacle – and its relationship with the identity of the collector – can also be seen in contemporary curious practices of travel and the acquisition of knowledge. In 1660 Charles Hoole wrote in his *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole* that ‘of all the places I have known in England [London] is best for the full improvement of children in their education because of the variety of objects which daily present themselves to them, or may be easily seen once a year, by walking to Mr John Tradescant’s [famous collection], or the like houses or gardens.’<sup>14</sup> The ‘education’ provided by exposure to curiosities, though, was not an ordered or complete one. Like the collected wonders and oddities themselves, the information that could be derived from them by most visitors was fragmentary and unsystematic. Its use, as far as education went, was commonly understood to be to ‘broaden the mind’ by exposing the viewer to the unfamiliar and bizarre. Curious knowledge was made up of isolated and self-contained facts which were interesting or amusing in themselves but were not linked to wider and more systematic schemes of understanding. A secondary function of their fragmentary nature was that these self-contained ‘items’ of information could be later seeded through the visitor’s conversation; visitors to collections could recycle curious experiences and facts into elegant discourse, making themselves appear as informed, curious and generally noteworthy personalities. Curious information and experiences thus became – like curious objects – things that could be stored and later verbally exhibited for the benefit of their possessor.

The practice of travel was treated in a similar manner.<sup>15</sup> Especially for young men engaged on the Grand Tour, travel was an opportunity for travellers to expose themselves to novelty and curiosity and in so doing allow them the opportunity to collect experiences and observations that could later be transformed into conversation. As Neil Kenny writes: ‘travel was to provide life-long material to dine out on’.<sup>16</sup> Much of the travel writing from the 1650s onwards is also predicated upon this ‘curious’ model of behaviour. Travel narratives ape the attitudes of educated aristocratic travellers in that they fundamentally equate the act of travelling with the

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<sup>14</sup> Charles Hoole, *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole* (Menston: Scholar Press, 1969), 284-285.

<sup>15</sup> See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern Germany and France*, 249-251.

<sup>16</sup> Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern Germany and France*, 251.

act of collecting. Indeed throughout the culture of curiosity these seem to have been regarded as essentially complementary activities. On the most basic level, collectors and their agents travelled in order to obtain items for their collections. However, collectors also travelled extensively for the purpose of visiting each other's collections and the act of travel was characterised by a kind of mental collecting of information and of experiences. Travel, like collecting, was regarded as first and foremost a curious activity and indicative of the curious mind-set. The underlying purpose of the curious travel account was to document singularities and oddities of the locales travelled through. These could be strange customs, dress, manners, peculiar plants and animals or unusual features of geography.

Foreign oddities, grotesqueries and exotica were compiled and collected in these accounts like the items in a cabinet. Rather than a description of the *typicality* or *totality* of a foreign landscape or culture, the curious travel account attempts to depict those elements of it that immediately strike the observer as strange or bizarre.<sup>17</sup> This attitude continues into the eighteenth century. Nigel Leask offers an example of the typically curious travel narrative in John Hawkesworth's *Account of the Voyages* (essentially a compilation and rewriting of the journals kept by the crews of several exploratory expeditions in the south seas between 1768 and 1772, including Cook's *Endeavour* expedition), published in 1773. Hawkesworth spends nine pages discussing the 'giants' native to Patagonia, describing them as being 'both of popular and philosophical curiosity'<sup>18</sup>. Later descriptions of the 'giants' refer to them as '[seeming] to realise the tales of monsters in human shape' and as 'enormous goblins'<sup>19</sup>, emphasising the grotesque strangeness found in foreign lands and peoples. As Leask writes 'His landscape descriptions...are generally more concerned with topographical and botanical singularities than with conveying the typicalities of exotic nature.'<sup>20</sup> When Hawkesworth describes a feature of the landscape, for example, it is usually because it represents 'a very extraordinary natural curiosity', such as the rock wall of a valley on the shore of New Zealand, 'perforated through its whole substance, so as to

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<sup>17</sup> Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

<sup>18</sup> John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, Vol. 1 (London, 1773), p. xvi.

<sup>19</sup> Hawkesworth, *Account of the Voyages*, Vol. 1, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing*, 36-37.



form a rude but stupendous arch or cavern, opening directly to the sea [which...] produced an effect far superior to any of the contrivances of art.'<sup>21</sup>

According to Neil Kenny, an earlier, though perhaps slightly less obvious example of this same attitude can be found in a French edition of *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle* (*Viaggi di Pietro Della Valle il Pellegrino*, in the original Italian or *Les Fameux Voyages* as it was called in French), published between 1665 and 1670. Kenny describes how, in the margin next to Valle's description of the 'curious' style of dress maintained by Christian women in Constantinople, his editor has inserted the phrase 'His Curiosity'. In this way he specifically labels this curious information and offsets it from the flow of Valle's narrative, objectifying it and allowing it to be easily appropriated by the reader. The curious knowledge contained in works such as these is portrayed as being like a collection of rare 'items' that the reader could select, collect, and then reuse himself. In this they were the same as the experiences and sights to be 'collected' by travellers in the Grand Tour.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, as Kenny points out, such books were designed to substitute for actual travel, allowing those without the free time and income it required to lace their conversations with tit bits of curious information, and in so doing to participate in fashionable conversation on curious topics. Travel was not the only subject that was considered inherently curious: historical anecdotes, physics, botany, philosophy, biology and alchemy were all understood to be fields of curious knowledge that could be sifted for useful conversation pieces. The tendency of the culture of curiosities (at least as it appeared in the world of fashion) was to encourage the accumulation of discrete pieces of information and uncommon facts from numerous separate disciplines.

Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, caught much of the popular sense of the curious person in her 1653 book of verse *Poems and Fancies*. Her Poem, 'Nature's Cabinet', gives us perhaps the clearest idea of the nature of the collected self:

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.

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<sup>21</sup> Hawkesworth, *Account of the Voyages*, Vol. 2, 317-318.

<sup>22</sup> See Kenny, *The Uses of Curiosity in Early Modern Germany and France*, 247-248.

*Masques of Imaginations* onely shew  
The *Eyes of Knowledge*, t' other part none know.  
*Fans of Opinion*, which wave 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  
The *Face of Fooles*: this *Cabinet* is shewn.<sup>23</sup>

In this analogy, travel and learning are not so much processes of education and maturation as methods for obtaining raw materials to be used in the creation of the collected self. In the realm of fashionable curiosity the personality becomes an amalgam of objects, both discursive and physical. It is a self engineered for display: the sum total of a mass of rarities and a rarity in itself. Cavendish's poem follows this model by creating a parity between mental attributes and physical actions and objects: knowledge becomes objectified, and the self become a cabinet. Crucially, the items that Cavendish chooses are entirely decorative: ribbons, hats, hair, fans etc. The mind becomes something that is susceptible of artful arrangement. Even ignorance can be pleasingly deployed. Knowledge, the knickknack of the mind, is used to prettify the personality.

Cavendish's poem both celebrates and criticises the idea of a collected identity. However, for those who were more obviously condemnatory of fashionable curiousness, the parallels between this collected self and the traditional condemnations of curiosity were not hard to draw. Augustine's claim that curiosity shattered the unity and continence of the self seemed to be confirmed by the appearance of a self that was *defined* by its eclecticism and disunity. Likewise, the connection between curiosity and pride could be seen in the fact that this collected self was created specifically for public show. The curious man was, therefore, nothing but an empty spectacle of cheap self-aggrandisement, compensating for the lack of decorum and substantial achievements with random oddities and grotesqueries. These criticisms, as we shall presently see, inform a great deal of the eighteenth-century discourse of curiosity. As well – alongside the Augustinian arguments that directly linked curiosity to vanity, indecorous peering, lust and appetite – the new value that the fashion for curiosity had

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<sup>23</sup> Margaret Cavendish, *Poems and Fancies* (London: Printed by T.R, 1653), 126.

conferred on curious objects led to a new consumerist criticism. The lust and gluttony implied by curiosity were no longer purely intellectual but also suggested the lust for material things: the market's ravenous and apparently endless demand for curious commodities. As a consequence, much early modern dialogue about curiosity becomes, either implicitly or explicitly, a dialogue about commodities and consumption.

Many of the contemporary plays that satirise virtuosi and collectors – most famously Thomas Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* (1676) – end with the financial ruination of the curious collector. His fortune having been expended upon stuffed alligators, fossils, microscopes, shattered antiquities and other such traditionally 'curious' items, this represents his final punishment for his self-involvement and inability to properly restrain his appetites. This is explicitly spelled out in the last scene of *The Virtuoso*:

**Steward:** O sir, I bring you the most unfortunate news that e'er you heard.

**Sir Nicholas:** More crosses still!

**Steward:** Several engineers, glassmakers, and other people you have dealt with for experiments have brought executions and extents and seiz'd on all your estate in the country.

**Lady Gimcrack:** 'Tis very well. You were all this while bottling of air and studying spiders and glow worms, stinking fish, and rotten wood.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Sir Nicholas Gimcrack's curiosity leads to his self-indulgence and marks out his profligacy and incompetence in matters of finance. Rather than wisely and properly managing and investing his money as a gentleman should, the curioso fritters it away upon what the more sensible would immediately recognise as rubbish. As well as being incompetent at financial transactions, the curious man was often portrayed as

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Shadwell, *The Virtuoso*, ed. Marjorie Hope Nicolson and David Stuart Rodes (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), 135.

being cut off from emotional transactions as well. Lost in his own obsessions, the curious man loses all connection with humankind. As Shadwell's *The Virtuoso* ends, Gimcrack cries out in anguish:

**Sir Nicholas:** That I should know men no Better! I would I had studied mankind instead of spiders and insects. –Sure, my dear, thou wilt not leave me!...

**Mrs Flirt:** Sir, trust not to that, for women of my profession love man but as far as their money goes.<sup>25</sup>

Not only do curious pursuits leave a man incapable of managing his money, they leave him incapable of managing normal social, emotional and sexual interactions. In Shadwell's satire the curious personality is portrayed as a laughable interweaving of gullibility, self-indulgence, pretentiousness and, in consequence, financial ineptitude and sexual dysfunction.

In this way, the fashion for curious activities and curious things was rendered problematic. It was necessary to evolve strategies to legitimise the act of inquiry, to establish specific attitudes that the curious man should maintain, so as to defend himself against association with the 'vulgar' curiosity depicted in satires like Shadwell's. It is important to acknowledge that, as the eighteenth century approaches, there develops a highly self-conscious strand of 'authentic' curiosity that defines itself in vehement opposition to the merely fashionable pose of curiosity. Daston and Park use Isaac Newton's 1672 description of his reaction to seeing light beamed through a prism to illustrate the development of this narrative of socially acceptable curiousness. In the introduction to his *New Theory of Light and Colours* Newton writes:

It was at first a very pleasing divertissement to view the vivid and intense colours produced [by the prism]; 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

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<sup>25</sup> Shadwell, *The Virtuoso*, 139.

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.<sup>26</sup>

Newton's account represents the typical strategy of elite or 'authentic' curiosity. As Daston and Park describe, this narrative proceeds in three obvious phases: first the investigator's senses were attracted by some pleasing or unusual spectacle; then 'understanding snapped to attention as novelty deepened into philosophical anomaly' and finally 'body and mind mobilised to probe the hidden causes of the apparent marvel'.<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to observe how curiosity is characterised in each of these three phases. There is an emotional restraint and intellectual articulacy that pervades the description as a whole. The initial response to the coloured spectrum is as a 'pleasing divertissement', however its true value is as a stimulant to the intellect; more specifically, the account emphasises that Newton is concerned with cause and effect, not with things or events in isolation. 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 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; its features and peculiarities are observed, analysed and compared. Then, based on the results yielded by this second phase, there might follow another phase of intellectual exertion and dynamism: the singular curiosity, by being abnormal or exceptional, prompts the desire to divine a new rule, to fit its exceptionality or abnormality into a new and more comprehensive system of knowledge. This last phase acts as a utilitarian justification for the first two. Far from being idle self-gratification, the end of this narrative asserts that the right curious object and the right curious observer could interact to push back the borders of knowledge.

The principal means by which authentic curiosity defended itself, therefore, were utility and decorum. The curious had to have some obvious and useful aim in mind and they had to behave with restraint – as far as possible from the lusty

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<sup>26</sup> Isaac Newton, 'New Theory of Light and Colours', *Philosophical Transactions*, Vol. 6 (February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1671) (London: The Royal Society, 1671), 3076.

<sup>27</sup> See Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 303-304.

inquisitiveness of satire. The reason for drawing attention to this attempt to distinguish legitimate scientific curiosity from the fashionable variety is because it is the fashionable type that prefigures the phantasmagorical. The main difference underlying the division of the two types was their different approach to wonder and its role in the culture of curiosity.<sup>28</sup> As Daston and Park write, in the eighteenth century ‘there emerged a new cultural opposition between the enlightened and the vulgar, which turned on contrasting valuations of wonder and wonders. Central to the new, secular meaning of enlightenment as a state of mind and a way of life was the rejection of the marvellous’.<sup>29</sup> The thrill of wonder, of excitement at the spectacle of the strange, was anathema to the calm control that the properly curious man had to wield over his passions. And because fashionable curiosity really existed only to ape authentic curiosity (after all, how many fashionable curiosi would willingly admit to being inauthentic), there exists a strange paradox whereby, although there clearly *was* a fashionable, wonder-loving, ‘vulgar’ variety of curiosity that was distinct from its more elevated brother, none of its practitioners would acknowledge themselves to be part of it. This refusal to assert a distinct and separate identity for itself is the reason why, again as we shall see, paradoxically it is in the eighteenth-century satires of fashionable curiosity that we can see the aesthetics and preoccupations of the phantasmagorical expressed in fiction.

This, then, was the shape of the culture of curiosity that permeated the eighteenth century. It was divided between elite and fashionable interpretations. The following elements can be said to constitute the ‘fashionable’ expression of curiosity culture and to stand in contrast to its ‘authentic’ or ‘serious’ manifestations that were regarded as less morally compromised. First, there was an emphasis on wonder as a response to curious objects and foreign locations. This was often derided as the most superficial of responses, perceiving only the surface of a thing without the proper mental activity and insight. Connected to this was the desire not simply for singular wonders but for accumulations or collections of them; and because the purpose of these collections was to achieve an emotional reaction from the observer – rather than to serve a more scientific purpose – their organisation was not systematic, but inclined instead to emphasise abundance, strangeness and multiplicity. This, in turn, was often linked to a sense of excessive consumption and a prevalence of poor taste. A second

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<sup>28</sup> See Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 303-363.

<sup>29</sup> Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 331.

corollary to the emphasis that was placed on wondrousness was the use of wonder – and wonders, both as physical objects and ‘items of information’ – to create a collected self: the personality and charisma of the collector, comprised of accumulated exotica and oddities. The interplay between the owner and the collection suggests that the collector is the distillation and refinement of all his objects into a single personality and that the collection is itself the externalised manifestation of its owner’s mindscape; the collector is presented as both the incarnation of the collection and its most fascinating component. Finally, the experience of *encountering* the foreign and the wondrous was, in the practices of fashionable curiosity, often as unsystematic as the curious collections, and represented a kind of idle wandering. Curiosity, in this manifestation, is unfocussed and the observer seems to drift between objects of attention, constantly refocusing his scrutiny. This stands in marked contrast to the organised and industrious observation of ‘serious’ curiosity culture.

An examination of eighteenth-century public discourse on the subject of curiosity reveals numerous reiterations of these familiar ideas. That the gluttony of curiosity was seen by some as a symptom of the materialism and consumerism of the age is evident from assorted literature of the period. *The Country Spy* (a book of comic and socially critical anecdotes about a visit to London, published anonymously in 1730) poses the question:

What Man, that is a Man of any tolerable Understanding and common Sense, would not be cunning enough to give thirty or forty Guineas for a fine *Adder, Toad*, or what you will that is more insignificant, if he full well knows, that he had made himself *Cocksure* of having fourscore for it every Day he lived from some ignorant and wealthy Person? This Art is an upstart kind of Deceit that succeeded *Alchymy* when the Jest of that was grown stale and would take no longer.<sup>30</sup>

Here the author condemns the curious for a wealth of interconnected failings. Their lack of taste leads them to prefer things that are pointless and ugly over things that are beautiful and useful. In consequence, they overinflate the values of ‘insignificant’ but

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<sup>30</sup> *The Country Spy, or a ramble thro’ London* (London: R. Walker, 1730), 46-47.

fashionable things and provide an open field for unscrupulous con-men; modern day alchemists who convince the ignorant that dried butterflies and pickled frogs are worth real money. The same condemnation can be seen in the issue of *The Tatler* for August 24<sup>th</sup> 1710, asserting that ‘I have known one of these whimsical Philosophers who has set a greater value upon a Collection of Spiders than upon a flock of sheep, and has sold his coat off his back to purchase a Tarantula’.<sup>31</sup> The article itself is mostly made up of the satirical ‘Will of a Virtuoso’ in which a collector bequeaths the parts of his collection to his relatives. Among these bequests are: ‘*Item*, To my little daughter *Fanny*, Three Crocodile Eggs, And upon the birth of her first child, if she marries with her mother’s consent, The Nest of a Humming Bird’.<sup>32</sup> Instead of real and useful financial support, the virtuoso leaves behind him only trivial rubbish that he values beyond anything else. Not only does he hurt himself, he hurts his dependents by not providing for them, and the rest of society by inverting the normal economic conventions. Just as we shall see with the phantasmagoria, the collection of curiosities was fundamentally tied to questions of taste and consumption.

Another constituent element of curiosity criticism was linked to this. The excessive economic consumption of ‘monsters’ could easily be construed to imply a monstrous appetite. On one level, this could be read as simply exposing the inherent vanity of the curious person – another return to the Augustinian allegation of pride. In 1788, in his *Elements of Criticism*, Henry Home, Lord Kames gives us perhaps the clearest statement of this position:

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.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> *The Tatler* by Isaac Bickerstaff, *Esquire*, Vol. 4 (London, 1794), 99.

<sup>32</sup> *The Tatler* by Isaac Bickerstaff, *Esquire*, 100-101.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism – The Seventh Edition*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh: Printed for John Bell and William Creech, 1788), 269.



In Kames's view, the curious man is interested only in self-aggrandisement. We can see again the idea of the collected self as a false self; a mere show designed to attract attention, rather than a properly integrated and accomplished personality. Additionally, the desire for oddities indicates the oddity of the curious man himself. Kames's conclusions represent an inversion of the relationship between collection and collector; rather than a collection of wonders conveying the wondrousness of their possessor, the collection is a mass of monstrosities implying the inner monstrosity of the man who has assembled them. Kames's words sum up the difference between the authentically curious man and those who ape him. The first is engaged in a serious undertaking directed toward acquiring knowledge and refining himself, the second in the indulgence of deficient taste.

Underlying this there is also the idea that by seeking to portray himself as outstanding or wondrous, the curioso actually reveals himself as something less than this: something malformed and freakish. In effect, Kames suggests that the improperly curious man makes himself into a subject for the 'proper' curiosity of those who know how to restrain themselves appropriately. By trying to be the centre of attention, the curious end by becoming curiosities. As Barbara Benedict writes:

[Critics and] Satirists... represent the curious man as a collector, a spectator, an anatomist of the social world whose scientific skill destroys what it would explain and whose appetite devours what it seeks. A victim of his own inquiry, this new man empties himself into the vast maw of inquiry and vanishes... Contemporary writers, struggling for the cultural authority to claim the curious perspective, vaunt their own curiosity [in order] to turn opponents... into monstrosities.<sup>34</sup>

In effect, satirists assert a 'proper' and socially legitimate curiosity of their own which is justified by being directed at the self-aggrandising eccentricities of those who claim to be curious persons only in order to give themselves a sense of distinctiveness. We can see an obvious example of this attitude in the novel *The Rambles of Mr Frankly* by Elizabeth Bonhôte (1772), when the principle characters encounter an antiquary who

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<sup>34</sup> Benedict, *Curiosity*, 71-72.

is referred to throughout as 'Curio' and is described as being 'as great a curiosity as any in his possession'.<sup>35</sup> Although Curio joins them for coffee the next day and proves himself to be a man 'of solid sense, benevolence and humour',<sup>36</sup> these positive aspects of his personality contrast with his eccentricities to make him even more of a curiosity:

'What a pity it is,' said I, when [Curio] had left us, 'that a gentleman endued with so many apparent good qualities, should be so much led away by one study, as in a manner to seclude himself from the world, and neglect others more useful!' – 'It is too often seen to be the case,' said Sir William; - 'yet I believe, my friends, that every one who pretends to singularity is actuated by the love of fame: and was there no panegyric, there would be no antiquary. However, pity it is, that the curiosity of peeping into our forefathers frying-pans, should lead any of us to disregard the custom and manners of the present times.'<sup>37</sup>

As in Newton's observation of the oblong spectrum, for Sir William and the others, the act of dignified meditation licenses the observer's curiosity. Curio's curiosity is portrayed as illegitimate because it leads him outside the bounds of social norms and acceptable taste: as one of the ladies declares, 'The objects of your [Curio's] passion are different from youth and beauty. Death and old age are your flames, and never did I see twenty-one so well ape four-score'.<sup>38</sup> For the rest of the party to be curious about *him*, though, *is* legitimate, because their curiosity takes the form of incidental observation and a restrained speculation as to the cause of Curio's own oddness.

In addition to this, and more significant, is Sir William's comment that 'everyone who pretends to singularity is actuated by the love of fame: and was there no panegyric, there would be no antiquary'. This is the standard eighteenth-century criticism of the curious personality and is essentially identical to the conclusion drawn by Kames. The knight's reasoning also subverts the apparent authority of the curious person. The ideal curious personality combines the authority of observing – and

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Bonhôte, *The Rambles of Mr Frankly* (London: T. Becket, 1776), 153.

<sup>36</sup> Bonhôte, *The Rambles of Mr Frankly*, 159.

<sup>37</sup> Bonhôte, *The Rambles of Mr Frankly*, 159-160.

<sup>38</sup> Bonhôte, *The Rambles of Mr Frankly*, 158.

therefore determining what is worthy of being observed – with the authority of being observed – being an object of fascination and amazement; critics of curiosity undermine this idealised portrayal by claiming a superior curiosity of their own. The curious person becomes an oddity to be observed, rather than a cultural arbiter. The authority of observing is refigured as an insatiable desire for voyeuristic ‘peeping’; and the gaze of others does not empower the curious but makes them vulnerable. The desire to observe and the desire to be observed are both portrayed as dangerous and unnatural. The continual, ‘curious’ desire for novelty marks them as insatiably and greedily acquisitive, so that they do not *command* the attention of others but hunger for it and render themselves freakish in order to get it. By trying to be *curious* they become *curiosities*, like conjoined twins, giants, dwarfs and bearded women. These issues can be clearly seen in those eighteenth-century works of literature that take curiosity as a theme. At this point, it is worth examining some of these in detail, particularly those works that either satirise or warn their readers against a too-enthusiastic personal curiousness. As they see it, these authors perform a public duty in regulating curiosity, alerting their readers to the dangers it may present if taken too far. Given this, it is ironic that – as I will attempt to show in my analysis – some of these satirical works form an important part of the contribution that curiosity culture makes to later phantasmagorical literature.

The novelist Eliza Haywood, for example, shared Bonhôte’s view that the curious made themselves vulnerable by their eagerness both to scrutinise others and invite others to scrutinise them. Haywood’s novel *The Masqueraders Or Fatal Curiosity* (1724), tells the story of a love triangle that develops between its three principal characters: a man, Doriménus, and two women, Dalinda and Philecta, and takes the different strains of ‘curiousness’ that these three characters engage in as its principal subject. The book begins with a meeting between Doriménus and Dalinda at a masquerade. After Dalinda faints from the heat the company has to remove her mask and loosen her costume, exposing her incredible beauty. Doriménus decides to pursue her, and the two begin a relationship.

Dalinda’s friend Philecta becomes intrigued by Dalinda’s reports of the handsome and intelligent Doriménus. Throughout the narrative, Philecta maintains that she is only curious about the details of her friend’s relationship, using curiosity to conceal her envy of her Dalinda and her personal attraction to Doriménus. To satisfy her ‘curiosity’, Philecta develops a plan to go to a masquerade wearing the same

costume that Dalinda intends to wear: an Indian Slave. After he uncovers her true identity, the two subsequently begin an affair. They spend several weeks together before Dalinda accidentally discovers the affair and avenges herself by making it public. Philecta's reputation is destroyed, she discovers she is pregnant and Dorimeneus leaves her after he receives a profitable offer of marriage.

From the perspective of a student of eighteenth-century curiosity culture, what is intriguing in this plot is the peculiar role played in it by the conventions of the masquerade. Despite the fact that 'masquerade' appears in the novel's title and the significance that the two visits to the masquerades have in forwarding the plot, there is virtually no description of the masquerades in the narrative at all. Indeed the only descriptions of costumes are those worn by the protagonists (a Spaniard for Dorimeneus and Indian Slaves for Philecta and Dalinda). In fact, to all practical purposes the masquerade only figures in the story as a mechanism for enabling curiosity. The costumed anonymity it produces turns everyone present into a mystery and encourages people to be curious about each other. By the same token, donning a costume transforms people into strange objects; the masqueraders parade both the spectacle and the mystery of themselves for their own amusement. We can see this illustrated in the way that the three core characters behave; the 'Fatal Curiosity' of the title applies to all of them equally.

The most obviously curious is Philecta. The most prominent aspect of Philecta's curiosity is that, while she is constantly curious about Dorimeneus and his relationship with Dalinda, she never interrogates herself or her own motives. Throughout *The Masqueraders* there is a constant repetition of Philecta's own lack of self-knowledge and self-examination:

Not all her good sense, not all her former experience of the passion she was now again possessed of, had yet once reminded her, that she took all this pains for any thing more, than to triumph over the tenaciousness of Dalinda, and to have the pleasure of raillyng her a little for her imaginary security – or at the most, that it proceeded for a bare liking of his conversation, and a humour of amusing herself.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Eliza Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity* (London: Printed for J. Roberts, 1724), 19..

Philecta is consistently shown to be lying to herself about the nature of her alleged 'curiosity'. Effectively, it provides a smokescreen for her true feelings. Her fascination with looking outward and penetrating into the lives of other people blinds her to her own nature. This is a common point in curiosity criticism. From the eccentric but kind-hearted Curio in Bonhôte's *The Rambles of Mr Frankly* to Gillray's grotesque cartoon of William Hamilton, showing him withered, hunchbacked, gazing lasciviously at a damaged bust of the courtesan Lais of Corinth, the depiction of the curioso is of a person so fixated on looking 'outward' – whether at people, insects, antiques or sculptures – that they become unable to look at themselves and so moderate their desires. As such, curiosity is inherently transgressive because it enables unregulated desire and unrestrained behaviour. Here, Haywood creates an equivalence between the masquerade and her 'fatal' version of curiosity. The masquerade is dangerous and seductive because it seemingly allows people to experience a universal concealment of identity. Masqueraders are simultaneously entranced by the anonymity of their fellows and comforted by their own. The masquerader can seemingly regard others without the fear of being regarded herself. Likewise, the curious live in the fantasy that they occupy a superior position above other people, from which vantage point they observe them with the impunity of a naturalist looking through a microscope. These illusions of superiority and anonymity encourage transgressive desire and an abandonment of restraint. This, in turn, leads participants to become monsters or social outcasts.

Philecta's curiosity, therefore, makes her vulnerable to her own desires. Paradoxically, it hides the true nature of her desires from her own eyes yet exposes them to others. This in turn is what allows Dorimeneus to exploit her. Conforming to the pattern whereby the curious person ends by becoming an object of public curiosity, Haywood concludes that "'tis impossible for anything to be more exposed than the affair between them',<sup>40</sup> ending with the public 'exposure' of Philecta's private lack of restraint. Philecta's pregnancy is depicted in the same way: after prying into the lives of other people, she is now powerless to prevent people from seeing into her own private affairs. Her life, and her body, become public property.

Dalinda is the least obviously curious of the three, but it is her initial visit to the masquerade – her desire to make a spectacle of herself and engage the curiosity

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<sup>40</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 47.

of others – that sparks off the whole chain of events. We are told that her ‘Bon Mien had attracted the eyes and addresses of a great number of the Assembly’.<sup>41</sup> Dalinda’s act of self-display invites the eyes of others. But, in seeking their attention, the curious person runs the risk of losing control of this relationship, and of shifting from being an object of fascination to one of consumption. The danger that *The Masqueraders* articulates is that the curious person may encounter a superior and more voracious curiosity. For Haywood, this risk is embodied in Dorimenus.

In the context of Dorimenus’s relationship with the two women, it is interesting to observe that Dorimenus’s initial attraction to Dalinda is presented as an act of revelation. The removal of her mask and the loosening of her costume allows for a gradual exposure of Dalinda’s hidden beauty to Dorimenus:

All the Graces seem’d assembled in her Countenance, - a thousand dimpled Charms play’d round her lovely Mouth, - a thousand little Loves laugh’d in her shining Eyes, - the Delicacy of her complexion exceeded all comparison, - her Neck, her Breasts, her fine-proportion’d Hands and Arms, - there was no part of her expos’d to view, that did not discover a Beauty peculiar to itself.<sup>42</sup>

Dorimenus does not simply ‘see’ Dalinda’s beauty, he ‘exposes’ and ‘discovers’ it. His attraction is implicitly compared to a kind of exploration and investigation. Indeed, it is also implied that he is attracted to her *because* she represents something to be explored and investigated. In part this is a reaction to Dalinda making herself into an object of mystery and scrutiny. As he discovers more of her, though, Dorimenus also seemingly fragments her. His investigation dissects her into separate components: mouth, eyes, neck, breasts, hands and so on. In this way, Dorimenus’s curious regard objectifies what it sees, removing Dalinda’s identity as a person and turning her into a collection of attributes: he consumes her with his eyes.

Dorimenus’s sense of vision and his corporeal eyes themselves occupy a prominent place in *The Masqueraders*. Throughout the novel, Dorimenus’s powers of seduction are closely tied to his powers of perception: he has ‘a perfect understanding

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<sup>41</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 3.

[of] the language of the Eyes'.<sup>43</sup> With both women, Dorimenes is described as being able to overcome their initial resistance to him because of this ability to read their hidden emotions in their eyes. In his first encounter with Dalinda we are told that, though she 'entreated and struggled to get loose, he easily read in her Eyes, those infallible Betrayers of the Heart, that he did not disoblige her in refusing her request'.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, in his later meeting with the unfortunate Philecta he perceives 'an unusual Languishment in her Eyes, they had nothing of their wonted Austerity remaining, and seem'd rather to invite than forbid the adventurous Gazer'.<sup>45</sup> The description of Dorimenes as 'the adventurous Gazer' is doubtless intended to convey the invasive, domineering quality of his observations: his gaze transgresses boundaries and establishes his control over those whom he transgresses against. Indeed, as a character, Dorimenes is fundamentally optically oriented. Not only does he have an extraordinary ability to read 'the language of the eyes' of others, but his own eyes themselves are powerfully affecting:

All eyes become not Love... But his [Dorimenes's], whatever  
Air they wore, were always charming! – whether the gay  
Delights of Hope revell'd in their Glances, or trembling Doubt  
aw'd their contracted Fires in down-cast Languishment! –  
whether they seem'd to triumph or beseech, they were  
enchanted still! – every kind of Look transporting!  
Vast was their Power, and numberless the Conquests they had  
gain'd!<sup>46</sup>

Dorimenes has the ability not only to see into other people, but also to command how he is seen by them. In addition to this mastery of his own image, Dorimenes's sexuality is shown to be primarily visual in nature; his desire is constructed around sight and the act of seeing. The most direct example of this appears in his final seduction of Philecta. Not long after Haywood refers to him as the 'adventurous gazer', she tells us that '[Philecta] could not hinder him kissing and embracing her –

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<sup>43</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 39.

<sup>44</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 4.

<sup>45</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 41-42.

<sup>46</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 6.

from feasting his impatient Eyes with every naked charm about her'.<sup>47</sup> There is a clear parity between this encounter and Dorimenes's first sight of Dalinda at the novel's opening masquerade. On both occasions, Dorimenes's curious desire disintegrates, exploits and objectifies what it sees.

The prominence of the eye as a symbol of Dorimenes's character is also tied to Haywood's portrayal of the link between curiosity and the masquerade in general. As we have seen, Dorimenes's skills as a seducer are based on his understanding and mastery of eyes – both his own and other people's. In addition to symbolising the restless, visually avaricious appetite of the curious man it also fundamentally ties him into the nature of the masquerade: behind the costume and the mask, the eyes are the only part of the masquerader's true identity to show through. Dorimenes's power over eyes therefore gives him a unique power within this setting. Again, he is able to observe with impunity and govern the manner in which he himself is observed, giving him a specifically 'curious' mastery over others.

In Haywood's depiction, curiosity (especially that of Dorimenes) is inextricably linked to desire and to control. For Dorimenes, investigation and seduction are one and the same. His power is dramatised by the fact that, at the second of the novel's two masquerades, Dorimenes appears costumed as a Spaniard while the two women are both dressed as Indian Slaves. Here, social power is transformed into colonial power. It becomes even more significant in light of the language of exploration and investigation that is used to describe Dorimenes's relationships with both Dalinda and Philecta. He explores and conquers them in the same way that the aggressive Spanish Empire explores and conquers the New World. Finally, by costuming them as slaves, Haywood demonstrates the ultimate consequences, both of their own curiousness and that of Dorimenes. Like slaves, they have become people who are reduced to the level of objects, owned by another.

This in turn relates back to the notion that the collected self is inherently false. Just as curiousness could lead to a person becoming an object, so could the creation of an identity from objects lead a person to lose their humanity. In this sense, the discourse of curiosity is often underpinned by a feeling of unease about material culture: the fear of people transforming themselves into objects or of seeking to impose this transformation on other people. Much of Jonathan Swift's writing about

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<sup>47</sup> Haywood, *The Masqueraders or Fatal Curiosity*, 42.



curiosity clearly articulates the perceived moral dubiousness of these activities. This is the subject of Swift's poem 'The Progress of Beauty', for example. The poem describes the daily procedures by which the prostitute Celia beautifies herself with cosmetics and conceals her bodily (venereal) corruption:

But Celia can with ease reduce,  
By help of pencil, paint, and brush,  
Each colour to its place and use,  
And teach her cheeks again to blush.

She knows her early self no more,  
But fill'd with admiration stands;  
As other painters oft adore  
The workmanship of their own hands.

[...]

But art no longer can prevail,  
When the materials all are gone;  
The best mechanic hand must fail,  
Where nothing's left to work upon.

Matter, as wise logicians say,  
Cannot without a form subsist;  
And form, say I, as well as they,  
Must fail if matter brings no grist.

[...]

When Mercury her tresses mows,  
To think of oil and soot is vain:  
No painting can restore a nose,  
Nor will her teeth return again.

Two balls of glass may serve for eyes,  
White lead can plaister up a cleft;  
But these, alas, are poor supplies  
If neither cheeks nor lips be left.<sup>48</sup>

Swift's Celia here is as much a 'self-created' or 'self-assembled' entity as any *curioso*. Her body (and its appeal for onlookers) is manufactured out of soot, rouge and white lead in the same way that the collector manufactures his identity out of butterflies, fossils and bits of curious knowledge. Like the virtuosos though, without an authentic selfhood she is ultimately revealed as a grotesque monstrosity. The poem therefore adopts the 'curious' perspective of the anatomist, or the visitor to a freak show, the perspective that violates others' bodies and transforms them into mere objects of observation. In Celia's case, however, this is justified. The 'gaze' of the poem can legitimately 'invade' Celia's body because that body is not real. Made up from bits and pieces, it gradually disintegrates under the enquiring eye of the poem (and, by proxy, the reader) until its monstrous nothingness is revealed. Celia is finally, literally, presented to us as what she is – fleshless, eyeless, faceless, a hideous non-person.

Alongside this, the poem more than once links Celia's white lead face-powder to imported china: 'Venus, indulgent to her kind, / Gave women all their hearts could wish, / When she first taught them where to find / White lead, and Lusitanian dish [...] White lead was sent us to repair / Two brightest, brittlest, earthly things, / A Lady's face, and China-ware'.<sup>49</sup> And the poem's final request ('Ye pow'rs who over love preside! / Since mortal beauties drop so soon, / If you would have us well supplied, / Send us *new* nymphs with each *new* moon')<sup>50</sup> establishes Celia as being part of a system of material consumption. Her body is a commodity, a novelty, manufactured for sale.

Swift adopts the viewpoint of the curious and turns it against the person who is the product of a modern and manufactured concept of identity. In creating a false self to attract the attention of others – like the 'transported fops' who exclaim 'g-d d-n me, Jack, she's wondrous fair!'<sup>51</sup> at Celia as she walks past – the curious

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<sup>48</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Major Works*, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 393-395.

<sup>49</sup> Swift, *Major Works*, 393.

<sup>50</sup> Swift, *Major Works*, 395.

<sup>51</sup> Swift, *Major Works*, 394.

individual also opens itself up to more critical attention. In ‘The Progress’ only the foolish participate in the illusion by giving it attention and praise.

Swift presents a similar view about the artificiality and incoherence of the collected self in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Barbara Benedict writes that, during his travels, Gulliver aims to connect himself to, and elevate himself within, every society he encounters. However he does so by embracing his own oddness and the fact of his being an outsider:

He apes the cultural values [of every society he joins] and in the process parodies them: urinating in the Lilliputian palace, offering the Brobdingnagian king gunpowder, projecting in Laputa, whinnying in Houyhnhnmland [...] Unencumbered by the past, he mirrors his present context, yet his identity ripples on the margins of whatever culture he inhabits. For Swift, such mutability exemplifies the monster [...] Gulliver’s efforts ironically exclude him from the society he would join. A giant in Lilliput, a dwarf in Brobdingnag, a rube in Laputa, a yahoo in Houyhnhnmland and a horse in England, throughout, he is the spectator and the spectacle, the exhibitor and the exhibit.<sup>52</sup>

Gulliver is at once a spectacle for the reader and for the inhabitants of the lands he visits. His identity is so universally fluid that he is no single thing, instead becoming a chimerical assembly of everything he has encountered and every idea that he has absorbed on his travels. The more Gulliver tries to exploit his remoteness from the cultures he visits, the more remote he becomes from his own culture.

Pope was to adopt this aspect of Swift’s characterisation and make it even more prominent in his poem ‘Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver’. Published as part of Pope’s ‘Verses on Gulliver’s Travels’ in 1727, the poem takes on the point of view of Gulliver’s wife, lamenting the change that has taken place in her husband since his return. The early parts of the poem conform to the habitual association of ‘curiousness’ with sexual perversion. Mary Gulliver is made to exclaim

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<sup>52</sup> Benedict, *Curiosity*, 115.

more than once that Lemuel will ‘Not touch me’, and Lemuel’s lack of sexual interest in his wife is suggested to be a consequence of his confused and curious identity:

Not touch me! Never Neighbour call’d me Slut!  
Was *Flimnap*’s Dame more sweet in *Lilliput*?  
I’ve no red Hair to breathe an odious Fume;  
At least thy Consort’s cleaner than thy *Groom*.  
Why then that dirty Stable-boy thy Care?  
What mean those Visits to the *Sorrel Mare*?<sup>53</sup>

The loss of a clear sexual orientation is shown to be the most apparent sign of the loss of a clear identity. Gulliver has made himself too much of a spectacle, too much of a curiosity for too many people and cultures: as Benedict says, he has been a rare miniature among giants, a monster to the Lilliputians and an educated animal for the Houyhnhnm. He represents the final, dysfunctional end of the self created out of bits and pieces for the sole purpose of being displayed.

Like Shadwell’s Gimcrack and the ‘ignorant and wealthy persons’ from *The Country Spy*, Gulliver has lost not only his sexual potency but his ability to judge the monetary values of things. Mary complains that ‘Others bring goods and treasure to their Houses, / Something to deck their pretty Babes and Spouses; / My *only* Token was a Cup like Horn, / That’s made of nothing but a Lady’s *Corn*’.<sup>54</sup> Gulliver is shown to have failed completely in the fundamental marital duties; he can no longer provide for his wife financially or sexually. The extent of his disintegration is made clear in the last stanza:

O teach me, Dear, new Words to speak my Flame;  
Teach me to woo thee by thy best-lov’d Name!  
Whether the Style of *Grildrig* please thee most,  
So call’d on *Brobdingnag*’s stupendous Coast,  
When on the Monarch’s ample Hand you sate,  
And hollow’d in his Ear Intrigues of State:

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<sup>53</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen & Co, 1963), 486.

<sup>54</sup> Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 487.

Or *Quinbus Flestrin* more Endearment brings,  
 When like a Mountain you look'd down on Kings:  
 If Ducal *Nardac*, *Lilliputian* Peer,  
 Or *Glumglum*'s humbler Title sooth thy Ear:  
 Nay, wou'd kind *Jove* my Organs so dispose,  
 To hymn harmonious *Houyhnhnm* thro' the Nose,  
 I'd call thee *Houyhnhnm*, that high sounding Name,  
 Thy Children's Noses all should twang the same.  
 So might I find my loving Spouse of course  
 Endu'd with all the *Virtues* of a *Horse*.<sup>55</sup>

The final presentation of Pope's Gulliver is as a random mass of attributes. He has no complete language with which to communicate and no meaningful name to call himself by.

In 'Mary Gulliver to Captain Lemuel Gulliver', Pope obviously criticises the curious collected self. Despite this condemnation, however, it is hard not to detect, in works like *The Rape of the Lock*, a certain enthusiasm for 'the moving Toyshop of [the] Heart'<sup>56</sup> that characterizes the world of fashionable curiosity. There is an obvious vitality and admiration in the descriptions of the 'curious toil' with which Belinda puts on her cosmetics that can be easily contrasted with, for example, Swift's attitude in 'The Progress of Beauty'. *The Rape of the Lock* acknowledges the appeal of the artificial and the illusory, whereas Swift's gaze aggressively dissects in an ironic application of empirical method. In *The Rape of the Lock* the gaze admires as it regards, entranced by the very falsehood it identifies. The preparation of Belinda's toilet is very different from Celia's:

The various offerings of the world appear;  
 From each she [the maid] nicely culls with curious Toil,  
 And decks the Goddess [Belinda] with the glitt'ring Spoil.  
 This Casket *India*'s glowing gems unlocks,  
 And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.

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<sup>55</sup> Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, 488.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, ed. Cynthia Wall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 56.

The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,  
Transform'd to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.  
Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,  
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.  
Now awful beauty puts on all her Charms,  
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,  
And calls forth all the wonders of her Face;  
Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,  
And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike Celia, who appears as a mass of dead objects given animation (and who therefore later takes on the horrible semblance of a moving corpse, like Frankenstein's monster) Belinda is presented to us almost as a kind of intricate, jewelled mechanism. The body and identity that Belinda assembles are not a cosmetic attempt to disguise the nothingness behind them and they do not decay back into nothingness and corruption as Celia's do. Instead, what Pope offers us is very close to the ideal of fashionable curiosity: a kind of beautiful, glittering artificiality that, while Pope acknowledges and even emphasises its artifice, he cannot help but concede to be more than humanly attractive. While Pope maintains an ironic and mocking disapproval of the extravagance and naked materialism on display – just as he disapproves of Gulliver's amalgamated curious selfhood – in *The Rape of the Lock*, there is still a subtle blurring of the definition between condemnation and fascination. Even the bodily monstrosities in the cave of Spleen become attractive in the inventiveness of their grotesquery.

Pope purposefully erodes the distinctions between people and objects – objects becoming vitalised while people become oddly sterile and mechanical. The purpose here is to critique the false materialism and materialistic version of identity promoted by the fashionable culture of curiosity. Personalities composed of objects (such as Belinda and Sir Plume, 'of Amber Snuff-box justly vain, / And the nice Conduct of a clouded Cane')<sup>58</sup> give rise to objects made of fragmented bits of personalities. In the cave of Spleen the goddess *Affectation* prepares a bag

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<sup>57</sup> Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 57.

<sup>58</sup> Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 77.

Like that where once *Ulysses* held the Winds;  
There she collects the Force of Female Lungs,  
Sights, Sobs, and Passions, and the War of Tongues.  
A Vial next she fills with fainting Fears,  
Soft Sorrows, melting Grievs, and flowing Tears.<sup>59</sup>

Later, the moon is identified as the realm of all things lost to Earth:

There Heroes' Wits are kept in ponderous Vases,  
And Beaus' in *Snuff-boxes* and *Tweezer-Cases*.  
There broken Vows, and Death-bed Alms are found,  
And Lovers' Hearts with Ends of Riband bound;  
The Courtier's Promises, and Sick Man's Pray'rs,  
The Smiles of Harlots, and the Tears of Heirs,  
Cages of Gnats, and Chains to Yoak a Flea;  
Dry'd Butterflies, and Tomes of Casuistry.<sup>60</sup>

Though deploring the cataloguing and collecting of useless exotica, the poem itself becomes a catalogue of such exotics: the sylphs, the cave of Spleen, the Moon and the Ship of Fools. It is for this reason, that we can perhaps see in some of these satires of curiosity the first signs of a phantasmagorical form of literature.

Curiosity, as it is depicted in satire, differs from its real world manifestation in one important respect: in satire, the curious collection is transformed into fiction; here alone, an *imaginative* element is introduced into it. Real collections of curious objects were assembled and maintained as part of a pose of scientific endeavour, executed in a properly refined and socially decorous manner. We have seen how problematic it was for the 'real world' curiosi to admit to the love of wonder and the love of strangeness purely for their own sakes. For the 'authentically' curious, these were lower passions, the first steps on the road to making one's curiosity serve some productive end. Satires, however, emphasised these superficial qualities of wonder and grotesqueness because their authors wanted both to deny the possibility of a productive use for curiosity and to profit by (and delight in) creating a sense of

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<sup>59</sup> Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 76.

<sup>60</sup> Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, 85.

wonder or grotesquery themselves. Satire seeks to burlesque the curious and also trade off the discredited passion of wonder that had once been associated with it; it takes the culture of curiosity and the curious collection and introduces a subversive wondrousness into them.

Eighteenth-century satires of curiosity are often shot through with a simultaneous sense of its attractiveness and its impropriety. The fashionable form of curiosity culture is based on abundance, strangeness and multiplicity, both in the curious collection and in the collected self. The great transformation that occurs in satire is the conversion of these ideas from being predominantly connected to an act of inquiry and being informed about the world, to being an act of imagination on the part of an author. The phantasmagorical literature of the nineteenth century takes the elements of curiosity culture – the exotic collection, the collected self, its reflection of consumerist society – and transfigures them into a form which articulates their vision of the nature of the imagination; for the decadents, the curious collection became a kind of fantasia. It is in the satires of curiosity penned by Swift, Pope and others, that the first version of this change takes place. Nineteenth-century writers look back to them but rather than seeing only the castigation of curiosity, they see something worth emulating: the strangeness, materialism and economic indifference of the *curioso* provide a model for the decadent collector.

This integration of an imaginative element into the curious collection forms the main conceit of a poem called ‘The Virtuoso’ published in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in April 1737.<sup>61</sup> It describes the character and habits of a *curioso*, and its final lines run:

Fast by the window did a table stand,  
Where hodiern and antique rarities,  
From *Egypt, Greece, and Rome*, from sea and land,  
Were thick-besprent of every sort and size:  
Here a Bahaman-spider’s carcass lies,  
There a dire serpent’s golden skin doth shine:  
Here *Indian* feathers, fruits, and glittering flies;  
There gums and amber found beneath the line,

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<sup>61</sup> Although the original publication was anonymous, it is widely attributed to Mark Akenside.



The beak of *Ibis* here, and there an *Antonine*.

Close at his back, or whispering in his ear,  
There stood a spright ycleped *Phantasy*;  
Which, wheresoe'er he went, was always near:  
Her look was wild, and roving was her eye;  
Her hair was clad with flowers of every dye;  
Her glistening robes were of more various hue,  
Than the fair bow that paints the clouded sky,  
Or all the spangled drops of morning dew;  
Their colour changing still at every different view.

Yet in this shape all tydes she did not stay,  
Various as the chameleon that she bore:  
Now a grand monarch with a crown of hay,  
Now mendicant in silks and golden ore:  
A statesman now, equipp'd to chase the boar,  
Or cowed monk, lean, feeble, and unfed;  
A clown-like lord, or swain of courtly lore;  
Now scribbling dunce in sacred laurel clad,  
Or papal father now, in homely weeds array'd.

The wight whose brain this *phantom*'s power doth fill,  
On whom she doth with constant care attend,  
Will for a dreadful giant take a mill,  
Or a grand palace in a hogsty find:  
(From her dire influence me may Heaven defend!)

All things with vitiated sight he spies:  
Neglects his family, forgets his friend,  
Seeks painted trifles and fantastic toys,  
And eagerly pursues imaginary joys.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> 'The Virtuoso', *Gentleman's Magazine* (London, 1737), vol. 7, 244-245.

In this poem, we can clearly see those elements of curiosity culture which will one day evolve into the phantasmagorical. 'The Virtuoso' contains the first faint trances of phantasmagorical preoccupations: the immodest and unrestrained imagination, the vagaries of human perception and consciousness and the enjoyment of collections of wonderful objects. The 'spright ycleped *Phantasy*' that dominates the collector's mind, for example, is an inherently phantasmagorical idea: she implies something spectral and ungovernable in the nature of thought itself while she is also aligned with processes of optical refraction and the changing colours of the chameleon. In her multifarious nature, she hints at the amazing but also potentially monstrous or deranged character of the imagination. Similarly, she is compared to a crowd of different people, suggesting the changeable, pluralistic nature of the mind of the man she 'haunts'. As the Phantasy stands behind the collector whispering in his ear, the reader is put in mind of a kind of supernatural possession or influence which recalls the stories of Edgar Allan Poe, whose characters were similarly subject to 'possession' by their own passions and ideas. In 'The Virtuoso', this possession speaks to foolishness and collecting mania – the Don Quixote parallel in the final lines establishes the collector as a type of holy fool.

However, the relationship between the sprite and the collector also points to an odd (and, as we shall see, in subsequent chapters, characteristically phantasmagorical) relationship between the collector and his objects. In part, they stand in the conventionally curious relationship, wherein the collection reflects the mind of the collector. But, through their relationship with the Phantasy, they also take on a partly fabulous dimension. The fantastical creatures, substances and glittering shapes of the collection appear to come to life in the form of the Phantasy herself; the objects are simultaneously physical and evocative of dreams. There is the distinct suggestion that this group of objects has the power to provoke a kind of delirium; a suggestion that anticipates the aesthetic I will be describing as 'phantasmagorical'.

In 'The Virtuoso', we see eighteenth-century satire arrive at the ideas which Poe and the fin de siècle decadents were to embrace so enthusiastically: the collector's intimate relationship with his objects, the disorder of the collector's imagination and the link between collected objects and dream – perhaps also madness. After the appearance of Philidor's phantasmagoria, these aspects of the culture of curiosity were reiterated and combined with ideas suggested by the spectral phantasmagoria itself. Before that, however, the culture of curiosity was to pass out of

fashion and disappear from the forefront of fashionable aesthetics and discourse. This fall from prominence is instrumental to its eventual transformation.

## CHAPTER 2

### *A Sublime Transgression: The Romantic Reinvention of the Curious.*

A relatively minor incident takes place in the third volume of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Faced with the perennial 'problem' encountered by the novel's characters – what, on any social occasion, is to be done with Emma's decrepit father Mr Woodhouse – the ever-resourceful Mr Knightley contrives a solution:

Mr Knightley had done all in his power for Mr Woodhouse's entertainment. Books of engravings, drawers of medals, cameos, corals, shells, and every other family collection within his cabinets, had been prepared for his old friend, to while away the morning; and the kindness had perfectly answered. Mr Woodhouse had been exceedingly well amused. Mrs Weston had been showing them all to him, and now he would show them all to Emma; fortunate in having no other resemblance to a child, than in a total want of taste for what he saw, for he was slow, constant and methodical. Before this second looking over was begun, however, Emma walked into the hall for the sake of a few moments' free observation of the entrance and ground-plot of the house.<sup>1</sup>

This diversion from the novel's main plot, while brief, nevertheless presents us with an interesting insight into the early nineteenth century's view of the curiosity culture that had so powerfully affected the mind-set of previous generations. And it is this, the fact of its being, like Mr. Woodhouse himself, an enfeebled preservation of an earlier epoch, the pastime of a previous generation, which seems to come across most obviously in Austen's portrayal. Knightley's cabinets and collections are described as belonging to his family, rather than to him personally. They are part of the accessories of Knightley's home, Donwell Abbey, and its estates; he owns them, it is suggested, because, as a gentleman, he would be expected to have inherited such things.

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Austen, *Emma*, ed. Fiona Stafford (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), 339.

However, he takes no personal interest in them; the only person who *does* exhibit any enthusiasm for the corals, medals etc. is the aged Mr. Woodhouse. The collection of curiosities is clearly sign-posted to us as being something, by this point in time, old-fashioned and out of step with modern tastes. It is perhaps not insignificant in this context that, while Mr. Woodhouse is set up inside, surrounded by the bric-a-brac of defunct fashions, the rest of the party are outside, roaming through the picturesque grounds of Donwell Abbey. New aesthetics and new activities have emerged to occupy the fashionably minded. And when faced with the imminent threat of her father exhibiting Mr Knightley's collection to her, Emma escapes quickly to fortify herself by looking over the house's 'entrance and ground-plot'. In this incident Mr. Woodhouse not only demonstrates his attachment to the outmoded accoutrements of curiosity culture but also reiterates its practices. He attempts to display the collection to his daughter in the style of the virtuoso or curioso, but meets only with politely concealed boredom and an indulgent lack of interest.

The presence of Mr. Knightley's collection in the text is even more intriguing when we consider that *Emma* contains several other elements that would, a few decades earlier, have been immediately branded 'curious'. Emma herself, with her constant desire to inquire into the private emotions of her neighbours (and her equally constant ability to draw the wrong conclusions from her observations of them) could, at one time, have very easily passed for an incurably curious personality. Mr. Woodhouse too – old, comical, paranoid, worried by everything and etiolated mentally and physically – would, even apart from his interest in the oddities of Knightley's collection, have seemed to follow the pattern set out for the typical mock-virtuoso. However, Emma's social meddling is never ascribed to curiosity; and Mr. Woodhouse does not, like his eighteenth-century precursors, appear to enjoy the collection out of a love of oddity, but instead from a quest for the reassuringly familiar, an obsessive-compulsive certainty, against all the evidence, that things should not and do not change. The 'comic curioso' allowed his passion for curiosities to twist him into a curiosity himself, but this is not what we see in Austen's portrayal of Emma's father. He is old and boring, so he delights in things that are old and boring. While they might have been risible, the once-upon-a-time devotees of fashionable curiosity were also inherently transgressive. It is hard to imagine a less transgressive figure than Mr. Woodhouse.

From this shift in the representation of both curiosities and personal curiousness it is clear that by the nineteenth century there has been a diminution of what was once the conventional discourse of curiosity. The association of curiosity with specifically defined fashions, cultural (or sub-cultural) activities and aesthetics has faded. There are a number of explanations for this process. One is that the increasingly obvious professionalism of scientific endeavour effectively robbed the public discussion of curiosity of much of its fuel. The constant question as to the ‘utility’ of curious investigations became easier to answer and, simultaneously, ‘the cultural differences between kinds of curiosity became more easily classifiable as either professional or prurient’.<sup>2</sup> It is also plausible to suggest that the late eighteenth century’s increasing taste for sentimentality, subjectivity and ‘pleasing melancholy’<sup>3</sup> began to undermine the established idea of the curious personality as the ideal fashionable personality. I shall explore some of these ideas in more detail later in this chapter, but for the moment it is the aesthetic aspect of this dissociation that is most relevant to the mutation of the curious into the phantasmagorical. I have already described how the culture of curiosity gives rise to a particular ‘curious aesthetic’; one based on the collecting of oddities and the love of singularities and exotica. However, towards the end of the eighteenth century and through the first decades of the nineteenth a disconnection develops between the *discourse* of curiosity and the *aesthetic* of curiosity. The prominence of the bizarre collection and of the collected self is reduced; these ideas are no longer an intimate part of the nation of curiosity and what it is for a person to be curious. Disconnected from their original context, these orphaned constituents of the vanished culture of curiosity attach themselves to, and find new expression in, the emerging metaphor of the phantasmagoria. This process of disconnection is best seen in two significant works from the period that take curiosity as their theme: William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786) and what is perhaps *the* classic depiction of ‘dangerous’ curiosity, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818).

Of all contemporary works on curiosity, none seems to handle its subject with the same levels of wilful ambiguity and impish contrariness as *Vathek*. Beckford so obviously revels in the curiosity of his protagonist (as well as the highly various,

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<sup>2</sup> See Barbara Benedict, *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Modern Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 245-54 for an expanded examination of post-eighteenth-century depictions of curiosity.

<sup>3</sup> Malcolm Andrews, *The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape, Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain, 1760-1800* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1989), 41.

creative and often outright psychotic misdeeds he perpetrates in pursuit of it) that, in the end, the work sometimes comes across as a burlesque celebration of curiosity hiding behind a completely spurious moral about being satisfied with simple pleasures. The final paragraphs of the book, somewhat censoriously, run:

All [Vathek, his lover and their companions] severally plunged themselves into the accursed multitude, there to wander in an eternity of un-abating anguish.

Such was, and should be, the punishment of unrestrained passions and atrocious deeds! Such shall be the chastisements of that blind curiosity, which would transgress those bounds the wisdom of the Creator has prescribed to human knowledge; and such the dreadful disappointment of that restless ambition, which, aiming at discoveries reserved for beings of a supernatural order, perceives not, through its infatuated pride, that the condition of man upon earth is to be humble and ignorant.

Thus the Caliph Vathek, who, for the sake of empty pomp and forbidden power, had sullied himself with a thousand crimes, became a prey to grief without end, and remorse without mitigation: whilst the humble, the despised Gulchenrouz passed whole ages in undisturbed tranquillity, and in the pure happiness of childhood.<sup>4</sup>

The slightly hypocritical nature of this sentiment is hard to ignore in the context of the novel as a whole. And even the most cursory examination of its author's biography suggests that he would have been fundamentally disinclined to listen to his own advice in this regard – in life as well as in art. However, it is worth looking more generally at *Vathek*'s presentation of curiosity before returning to examine the 'moral' of its final scenes in greater detail.

*Vathek* was the more or less direct result of a Christmas party that the young Beckford (he had turned 21 in September of that same year) threw at Fonthill

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<sup>4</sup> William Beckford, *Vathek*, ed. Roger Lonsdale (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 119-20.

House in 1781. Over fifty years later Beckford was to identify the significance of the occasion, not only with regard to the composition of *Vathek*, but also to his own emotional development. The account takes the form of an 1838 note attached to the transcript of a letter from Beckford to Louisa Beckford (née: Pitt); the letter itself was written in 1782. Given the numerous points of comparison between *Vathek* and the events it describes, it is worth reproducing the relevant passage at length:

Immured we were ‘au pied de la lettre’ for three days following – doors and windows so strictly closed that neither common day light nor commonplace visitors could get in or even peep in – care worn visages were ordered to keep aloof – no sunk-in mouths or furrowed foreheads were permitted to meet our eye. Our société was extremely youthful and lovely to look upon – for not only Louisa in all her gracefulness, but her intimate friend – the Sophia often mentioned in some of these letters – and perhaps the most beautiful woman in England, threw over it a fascinating charm. Throughout the arched Halls and vast apartments we ranged in, prevailed a soft and tempered radiance distributed with much skill under the direction of Louthembourg<sup>5</sup> himself a mystagogue. The great mansion at Fonthill which I demolished to rear up a still more extraordinary edifice was admirably calculated for the celebration of the mysteries. The solid Egyptian Hall looked as if hewn out of a living rock – the line of apartments and apparently endless passages extending from it on either side were all vaulted – an interminable stair case, which when you looked down it – appeared as deep as the well in the pyramid – and when you looked up – was lost in vapour, led to suites of stately apartments gleaming with marble pavements – as polished as glass – and gaudy ceilings – painted by Casali with all the profligacy of pencil – for which in that evil day for the

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<sup>5</sup> Here, Beckford is referring to Philippe-Jacques de Louthembourg, a German-English painter and theatre designer famous for producing elaborate optical and pictographic effects. His skill as an illusionist explains Beckford’s description of him as a ‘mystagogue’.



arts he was so admired. From these princely rooms – a broad flight of richly carpeted comfortable steps led to another world of decorated chambers and a gallery designed by Soane, – still above which – approached by winding stairs – you entered another gallery, – filled with curious works of art and precious cabinets. Through all these suites – through all these galleries – did we roam and wander – too often hand in hand – strains of music swelling forth at intervals – sometimes the organ – sometimes concerted pieces – in which three of the greatest singers then in Europe – Pacchierotti, Tenducci, and Rauzzini – for a wonder of wonders – most amicably joined. Sometimes a chaunt was heard – issuing, no one could divine from whence – innocent affecting sounds – that stole into the heart with a bewitching languor and melted the most beloved the most susceptible of my fair companions into tears. Delightful indeed were these romantic wanderings – delightful the straying about this little interior world of exclusive happiness surrounded by lovely beings, in all the freshness of their early bloom, so fitted to enjoy it. Here, nothing was dull or vapid – here, nothing resembled in the least the common forms and usages, the 'train-train' and routine of fashionable existence – all was essence – the slightest approach to sameness was here intolerated – monotony of every kind was banished. Even the uniform splendour of gilded roofs – was partially obscured by the vapour of wood aloes ascending in wreaths from cassolettes placed low on the silken carpets in porcelain salvers of the richest japan. The delirium of delight into which our young and fervid bosoms were cast by such a combination of seductive influences may be conceived but too easily. Even at this long, sad distance from these days and nights of exquisite refinements, chilled by age, still more by the coarse unpoetic tenor of the present disenchanting period – I still feel warmed and irradiated by the recollections of that strange, necromantic light which Louthembourg had thrown over what absolutely

appeared a realm of Fairy, or rather, perhaps, a Demon Temple deep beneath the earth set apart for tremendous mysteries – and yet how soft, how genial was this quiet light. Whilst the wretched world without lay dark, and bleak, and howling, whilst the storm was raging against our massive walls and the snow drifting in clouds, the very air of summer seemed playing around us – the choir of low-toned melodious voices continued to sooth our ear, and that every sense might in turn receive its blandishment tables covered with delicious viands and fragrant flowers – glided forth, by the aid of mechanism at stated intervals, from the richly draped, and amply curtained recesses of the enchanted precincts. The glowing haze investing every object, the mystic look, the vastness, the intricacy of this vaulted labyrinth occasioned so bewildering an effect that it became impossible for anyone to define – at the moment – where he stood, where he had been, or to whither he was wandering such was the confusion – the perplexity so many illuminated storeys of infinitely varied apartments gave rise to. It was, in short, the realization of romance in its most extravagant intensity. No wonder such scenery inspired the description of the Halls of Eblis. I composed *Vathek* immediately upon my return to town thoroughly imbued with all that passed at Font-hill during this voluptuous festival.<sup>6</sup>

Even if we make allowances for the exaggerations of memory, the spectacle described here was clearly impressive. Beckford's reminiscences about his party (and, therefore, also about the imaginative conception and foundations of *Vathek* itself) demonstrate a pronounced 'undercurrent' of curiosity running through the event. Aside from the 'tempered radiance' of Louthembourg's lighting and the gallery filled with 'curious works of art and precious cabinets,' Beckford's account of the Christmas party clearly evokes various aspects of the culture of curiosity. He refers to his own and the other guests' 'romantic wanderings' through the Fonthill fantasia, and

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<sup>6</sup> J. W. Oliver, *The Life of William Beckford* (Norwood: Norwood Editions, 1977), 89-91.

writes that ‘Through all these suites through all these galleries – did we roam [...] too often hand in hand – strains of music swelling forth at intervals [...] that stole into the heart with a bewitching languor and melted the most beloved the most susceptible of my fair companions into tears’. The experiences that Beckford records represent the same kind of aimless, random and continuous spectatorship that is the hallmark of the fashionably curious activities. The inmates of Fonthill participate in the same directionless meandering among objects of interest that appears in accounts of curious journeyings and visits to collections. This can be seen again in Beckford’s emphasis upon the defamiliarising effects of the decorations and illuminations: ‘Here, nothing was dull or vapid – here, nothing resembled in the least the common forms and usages, the “train-train” and routine of fashionable existence – all was essence – the slightest approach to sameness was here intolerated – monotony of every kind was banished’.<sup>7</sup> While this unfamiliarity and oddity is not specifically contained in objects (as in a collection) it shares the same underlying essence; the Fonthill party celebrates the inverted and the uncommon, it is shown to be not only an escape from normality but a positive rejection of it. At least, this is what Beckford would seem to have intended and how the event seems to have lived in his memory for decades afterward.

This, then, is the emotional and aesthetic inspiration for *Vathek*. Indeed, *Vathek* is obviously and self-consciously a curious novel; many of its characters are clearly intended to be seen as ‘curious’ and the plot largely revolves around their quest for forbidden (in fact, demonic) knowledge.

The novel tells the story of the fall of the young Caliph Vathek, who, despite his great natural ability, is consumed by his curious desire for forbidden knowledge and material finery. Vathek constructs palaces full of exotic delights and rarities and a tower from which to conduct astrological observations. The Caliph one day encounters the demon Giaour, who initially appears to him as a merchant offering ‘extraordinary merchandise [...] curiosities which were not less admirable for their workmanship than splendour [such as...] slippers, which, by spontaneous springs, enabled the feet to walk; knives, that cut without motion of the hand; sabres, that dealt the blow at the person they were wished to strike; and the whole enriched with gems, that were hitherto unknown.’<sup>8</sup> After tempting him with these curious objects, the Giaour promises him that, if he will worship the powers of evil, the Giaour will ‘bring

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<sup>7</sup> Oliver, *The Life of William Beckford*, 90.

<sup>8</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 5-6

thee to the palace of subterranean fire. There shalt thou behold, in immense depositories, the treasures which the stars hath promised thee'.<sup>9</sup> Beckford tells us, 'The unhappy Caliph, instigated by insatiable curiosity, lavished his promises in the utmost profusion'.<sup>10</sup> The Giaour demands the sacrifice of fifty children and Vathek complies, tricking the children of many of his courtiers into accompanying him back to the valley, where he murders them by throwing them off a cliff.

Vathek and his mother Carathis (herself already a worshipper of dark powers) conduct several other creative and darkly cartoonish sacrifices in the Giaour's honour before Vathek departs, under instructions from the demon, to journey to a distant land wherein may be found the gates of Hell and Vathek's reward. This quest for the forbidden knowledge promised him by the demon takes on an obsessive quality, as Vathek refuses to be deterred, either by misfortunes or by the imprecations of those who wish him to return to the path of virtue.

On his journey, Vathek is briefly a guest of a virtuous and aged Emir, whose daughter, Nouronihar, Vathek seduces and convinces to accompany him. Carathis attempts to murder Nouronihar's fiancé, the virtuous but weak and effeminate Gulchenrouz, but he is saved by a good genii.

At length, Vathek and Nouronihar reach their destination and descend into hell. There they meet its ruler, the demon-prince Eblis, who offers them the delights of the underworld. However, they discover that these delights will only last a few days before they are condemned to eternal damnation. These few days are passed in despair and regret until, 'Their hearts immediately took fire, and they, at once, lost the most precious gift of heaven- HOPE'.<sup>11</sup> Vathek and Nouronihar, feeling only hatred toward each other, wander away into hell and are lost among the multitudes of the damned.

Throughout the story, Vathek's constant motivation is an unquenchable curiosity; a fierce desire to possess both exquisite curious objects and the hidden knowledge promised by the demonic pact. Despite this, and its final message condemning the 'blind curiosity' of its protagonist, *Vathek* is rarely unequivocal in either its support or its condemnation of curiousness. While it is its protagonist's insatiable curiosity which leads him to his eventual damnation, Beckford not only

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<sup>9</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 119.

obviously enjoys describing the various curious spectacles that *Vathek* seeks out, he also lends him a dynamism and charisma which are out of step with the apparently straight-forward denunciation of his conduct that concludes the novel. More importantly for our examination of the interplay between the culture of curiosity and the emergence of the phantasmagoria, there are relatively few instances in the book of an explicitly ‘curious’ aesthetic. One of these instances – which also demonstrates something of the contrariness with which *Vathek* approaches the morality of curiosity – appears near the novel’s beginning. In the description of *Vathek*’s five palaces, each devoted to the exaltation of one of the five senses, there appears the account of ‘the palace named *The Delight of the Eyes, or The Support of Memory*’:

[This Palace] was one entire enchantment. Rarities, collected from every corner of the earth were there found in such profusion as to dazzle and confound, but for the order in which they were arranged. One gallery exhibited the pictures of the celebrated Mani, and statues, that seemed to be alive. Here a well-managed perspective attracted the sight; there the magic of optics agreeably deceived it: whilst the naturalist on his part, exhibited in their several classes the various gifts that Heaven had bestowed on our globe. In a word, *Vathek* omitted nothing in this place, that might gratify the curiosity of those who resorted to it, although he was not able to satisfy his own; for, of all men, he was the most curious.<sup>12</sup>

The celebration of vision, which is identified by the palace’s title as its organizing theme, is entirely identified with curiosities and the curiosity of its guests. The apparently living statues, the pictures that shift and distort perspective and the preserved specimens of nature are the familiar appurtenances of any *curioso*’s collection. The intention is obviously to position *Vathek* within the context of curiosity culture and the discourse surrounding it.

Beckford was not the first to suggest that the best enjoyment of sight might be found in the observation of curiosities; Brueghel and Rubens’ painting *The*

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<sup>12</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 2.

*Sense of Sight*, for instance, executed in 1617 as part of *The Five Senses Series*, takes a similar approach.<sup>13</sup> Beckford is, in fact, writing here in a long-established tradition of portraying curiosity as the principal ‘appetite’ of the eye. But it is worth noting the subtle distinctions Beckford draws between the ‘gratification’ and the ‘satisfaction’ of curiosity. We are directly told that Vathek is unable to *satisfy* his own curiosity because ‘of all men, he was the most curious.’ However, beyond this direct statement of Vathek’s insatiability, there is a more general and more subtle implication: the curiosity of the other guests also goes unsatisfied, it can only be indulged or excited, only ‘*gratified*’ (my emphasis). This is a contrast that Beckford makes even more explicit at the end of the narrative. When Vathek and his lover Nouronihar descend into hell and encounter Eblis (*Vathek*’s Miltonic version of Satan, to whose halls the Fonthill party was compared) the fallen angel tells them:

Creatures of clay, I receive you into mine empire: ye are numbered amongst my adorers: enjoy whatever this palace affords: the treasures of the pre-adamite sultans; their fulminating sabres; and those talismans, that compel the dives to open the subterranean expanses of the mountain of Kaf, which communicate with these. There, insatiable as your curiosity may be, shall you find sufficient objects to gratify it.<sup>14</sup>

Here we are again presented with the subtle difference between the *satisfaction* of curiosity and the *gratification* of it. The list that Eblis gives of the spectacles and forbidden knowledge of the infernal realm serves to feed the characters’ appetites but not diminish them; to gratify but not to sate. By drawing this distinction, Beckford recapitulates the conventional depiction of curiosity as an appetite that by its nature *cannot* be satisfied; an appetite that intensifies the more it is fed.

Another subtle critique of curiosity (and specifically of the collection of curiosities) can be seen in the alternative title that Beckford offers us for the palace of ‘Sight’. The palace is referred to as *The Delight of the Eyes* or *The Support of Memory*. This subtitle may not at first appear to be especially significant, but it is worth

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<sup>13</sup> See Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 111.

observing that in each of the other four ‘palaces of the senses’ an alternative name offers an ironic or supplementary comment on the nature of that particular sense. The house of Scent, for example, is known as ‘*The Palace of Perfumes* or *The Incentive to Pleasure*’; the house of Taste is called ‘*The Eternal* or *Unsatiating Banquet*’; Sound rejoices in the title of ‘*The Temple of Melody* or *The Nectar of the Soul*’; while the final palace (filled with beautiful young women) is given what seems to be the most obvious moral resonance by being denominated ‘*The Retreat of Mirth* or *The Dangerous*’.<sup>15</sup> Clearly we are meant in each case to extract some meaning from these names. What then are we to make of *The Support of Memory*?

The first question which needs to be answered is whether the name of the palace refers to sight in general or more specifically to the ‘curious gaze’; the acquisitive, invasive vision of the curious man. Given that the sense of sight would seem to be most fully celebrated by way of the curious collection, it seems most likely that the title implies something about the nature of that collection. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that in this phrase there is the intimation that the external world of rarities is a ‘support’ for an inner mental world – a memory palace<sup>16</sup>. In effect, the form of memory or of the mind is mirrored in the form of the collection. This, in turn, recalls the fashionable collected self and, for example, Margaret Cavendish’s description of the brain as ‘Nature’s Cabinet’; memory (and the self) may be made up of many separate components assembled like a collection.

Importantly though, these interpretations are necessarily speculative. It is difficult to determine the precise meaning of the phrase’s comment on the nature of Vathek’s rarities, and what social or moral implications (if any) Beckford intends them to have. For the other palaces, it is relatively easy to understand the connotations of their titles. For example, ‘*The Eternal* or *Unsatiating Banquet*’ sounds a note of caution: while the feast is never-ending it is also ‘unsatiating’, never appeasing the eater’s hunger and invoking the sin of gluttony. Similarly, ‘*The Nectar of the Soul*’ seemingly refers to the emotional nourishment or potency that music is supposed to possess, though the reference to ‘nectar’, the celestial nourishment of the pagan gods, may also suggest an excessive, epicurean appetite for the aural arts. The meaning of ‘*The Support of Memory*’, however, is more difficult to unpick. This is all the more

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<sup>15</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 2-3.

<sup>16</sup> See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Pimlico, 1992), for a fuller exploration of the concept of the ‘Memory Palace’.

surprising because curiosity is Vathek's driving passion. The novel claims to be completely categorical in its condemnation of curiosity, but it is more ambiguous than it initially appears to be: we can see this in the fact that the palace most obviously associated with curiosity does not make a clear statement *about* curiosity, a particularly strange omission on Beckford's part. If the description of it as 'The Support of Memory' does in fact refer to a link between the mind of the collector and the nature of the collection, then all this description does is to identify the link, not judge it. Traditionally, to connect the mind or personality of a collector with his collection was to suggest the inauthenticity and incoherence of that personality, but there is no suggestion of this in *Vathek*. The vagueness and neutrality of this description is emblematic of Beckford's treatment of curiosity throughout the novel.

In its earlier parts, *Vathek* often appears to recapitulate the various traditional observations about the curious personality. However, the detached and comic voice of the narration, combined with Beckford's tendency to suddenly vary the tone of his novel and undercut its supposed morals, makes it difficult to develop a consistent interpretation. For instance, when Vathek begins construction of a colossal tower from which to make observations of the stars, the Prophet Mohammed watches him from Heaven and comments to his assembled Genii that the tower is for 'the insolent penetrating of the secrets of Heaven' and that Vathek 'will not divine the fate that awaits him.'<sup>17</sup> Sure enough, when the building is completed and Vathek ascends to the top he beholds:

men not larger than pismires [ants]; mountains, than shells; and cities than bee-hives. The idea, which such an elevation inspired of his own grandeur completely bewildered him: he was almost ready to adore himself; till, lifting his eyes upward, he saw the stars as high above him as they appeared when he stood on the surface of the earth. He consoled himself, however, for this intruding and unwelcome perception of his littleness with the thought of being great in the eyes of others; and flattered himself that the light of his mind would extend

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<sup>17</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 4.



beyond the reach of his sight, and extort from the stars the decrees of his destiny.<sup>18</sup>

Vathek's endeavour in building the tower conforms neatly to the classic pattern of hubristic curiosity that attempts to uncover the secrets of the divine – Mohammed explicitly compares Vathek to Nimrod, builder of the tower of Babel. As well as this, what Vathek sees from the tower, 'men not larger than pismires; mountains, than shells' etc., imitates the 'curious perspective' that 'miniaturises' what it sees. The insects and shells to which the mountains, cities and people are compared are typical curious objects, and Vathek's false assumption of superiority over them is paralleled to the false superiority that the curious man assumes over other people. Likewise, Carathis (Vathek's mother and principal instructor in evil) remarks that 'There is nothing so pleasing [to me] as retiring to caverns: my taste for dead bodies, and everything like mummy is decided: and, I am confident, thou [Vathek] wilt see the most exquisite examples of their kind'<sup>19</sup>. It is hard not to see Carathis's excited enthusiasm for sepulchres and corpses as a comical take on the nature of the 'curious' taste for the morbid and disgusting – reminiscent of Gimcrack's experiments with 'stinking fish and rotten wood'<sup>20</sup>.

However, *Vathek* does not confine itself to simply repeating the established comic discourse of curiosity. While it is predominantly humorous in tone it does not seem to be consistently sneering at Vathek and the other curious characters in the same way that, for example, Shadwell invites us to sneer at Gimcrack. Similarly, Beckford goes to some trouble to sabotage his own 'moral' for the novel.

The character of Gulchenrouz is offered to us in the novel's final lines as a virtuous contrast to the sinful damnation eventually suffered by Vathek, Nouronihar, and the rest. He is first introduced to us as Nouronihar's teenaged fiancé, from whom Vathek steals her:

The women all doted upon him; and, though he had passed his thirteenth year, they still detained him in the harem. His dancing was light as the gossamer waved by the zephyrs of

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<sup>18</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Shadwell, *The Virtuoso*, ed. Marjorie Hope Nicolson and David Stuart Rodes (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), 135

spring; but his arms, which twined so grace-fully with those of the young girls in the dance, could neither dart the lance in the chase nor curb the steeds that pastured in his uncle's domains. The bow, however, he drew with a certain aim, and would have excelled his competitors in the race, could he have broken the ties that bound him to Nouronihar.<sup>21</sup>

From this description it seems clear that Beckford intended Gulchenrouz to be so cringingly virtuous that it would be impossible to take him, or the ostensible message of *Vathek*, completely seriously. An unquestioning acceptance of the novel's final injunction to imitate Gulchenrouz becomes even harder when we examine what Beckford tells us about the boy's eventual fate. When Carathis decides to sacrifice him to the infernal powers (for, as she says 'There is nothing so delicious [to them] as the heart of a delicate boy palpitating with the first tumults of love'),<sup>22</sup> he is carried away by a good spirit of the air:

At last, exhausted with fatigue, he [Gulchenrouz] fell senseless into the arms of a good old genius, whose fondness for the company of children, had made it his sole occupation to protect them [...] These the genius brought up in nests still higher than the clouds, and himself fixed his abode, in a nest more capacious than the rest, from which he had expelled the Rocs that had built it [...]

These inviolable asylums were defended against the dives and the afrits, by waving streamers; on which were inscribed in characters of gold, that flashed like lightning, the names of Alia and the Prophet. It was there that Gulchenrouz, who, as yet remained undeceived with respect to his pretended death, thought himself in the mansions of eternal peace. He admitted without fear the congratulations of his little friends, who were all assembled in the nest of the venerable genius, and vied with each other in kissing his serene forehead and beautiful eye-

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<sup>21</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 65.

<sup>22</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 95.

lids.—Remote from the inquietudes of the world; the impertinence of harems, the brutality of eunuchs, and the inconstancy of women; there he found a place truly congenial to the delights of his soul. In this peaceable society his days, months, and years glided on; nor was he less happy than the rest of his companions: for the genius, instead of burthening his pupils with perishable riches and vain sciences, conferred upon them the boon of perpetual childhood.<sup>23</sup>

Even as an alternative to hell, this existence seems less than wholly desirable. Gulchenrouz is depicted as living a life of perpetual innocence, yes, but also one of perpetual inactivity and indolence. Preserved in a continual childhood he and the other children never grow up and, quite literally given their living arrangements, never leave the nest. Beyond this there is the oddly disquieting image of his companions ‘vie[ing] with each other in kissing his serene forehead and beautiful eye-lids.’ This excess of childish affection is obviously meant to recall Gulchenrouz’s treatment at the hands of the women of the harem and his dotingly a-sexual relationship with Nouronihar. Gulchenrouz is constantly displayed to us as a childishly ineffective and flaccid character; a kind of perpetual pet. His continuous passivity becomes ever more risible as, toward the end of the novel, Vathek himself appears to become ever more imposing as a character and develops a certain tragic grandeur and authority.

Before Vathek and Nouronihar enter the halls of Eblis, Vathek’s ‘Guardian Angel’ makes one last attempt to persuade him to return to righteousness. The good genius assumes the shape of a pious shepherd and, as Vathek’s caravan passes, begins to play,

from his flute, such airs of pathetic melody, as subdued the very soul; and, wakening remorse drove far from it, every frivolous fancy [...] Vathek and Nouronihar turned pale in their litter; and regarding each other with haggard looks, preached themselves – the one with a thousand of the blackest crimes; a thousand projects of impious ambition – the other, with the desolation of her family; and the Perdition of the

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<sup>23</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 97-8.

amiable Gulchenrouz. Nouronihar persuaded herself that she heard, in the fatal music, the groans of her dying father- and Vathek, the sobs of the fifty children he had sacrificed to the Giaour.<sup>24</sup>

As this guilt washes over Vathek, the genius addresses the Caliph, saying:

'Deluded prince! to whom Providence hath confided the care of innumerable subjects; is it thus that thou fulfillest thy mission? Thy crimes are already completed; and, art thou now hastening towards thy punishment? Thou knowest that, beyond these mountains, Eblis and his accursed dives hold their infernal empire; and seduced by a malignant phantom, thou art proceeding to surrender thyself to them! This moment is the last of grace allowed thee: abandon thy atrocious purpose: return: give back Nouronihar to her father, who still retains a few sparks of life: destroy thy tower, with all its abominations: drive Carathis from thy councils: be just to thy subjects: respect the ministers of the Prophet; compensate for thy impieties, by an exemplary life: and, instead of squandering thy days in voluptuous indulgence, lament thy crimes on the sepulchres of thy ancestors. Thou beholdest the clouds that obscure the sun: at the instant he recovers his splendour, if thy heart be not changed, the time of mercy assigned thee will be past for ever.'

Vathek, depressed with fear, was on the point of prostrating himself at the feet of the shepherd; whom he perceived to be of a nature superior to man: but, his pride prevailing, he audaciously lifted his head, and, glancing at him one of his terrible looks said: 'Whoever thou art, withhold thy useless admonitions: thou wouldst either delude me, or art thyself deceived. If what I have done be so criminal, as thou

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<sup>24</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 104.

pretendest, there remains not for me a moment of grace. I have traversed a sea of blood, to acquire a power, which will make thy equals tremble: deem not that I shall retire, when in view of the port; or, that I will relinquish her, who is dearer to me than either my life, or thy mercy. Let the sun appear! let him illumine my career! it matters not where it may end.' On uttering these words, which made even the Genius shudder, Vathek threw himself into the arms of Nouronihar; and commanded that his horses should be forced back to the road.<sup>25</sup>

This exchange marks the point where *Vathek* changes from extravagant comedy into something far more serious. The bawdy and farcical elements so common in the earlier parts of the tale drop away as it approaches the point of Vathek's entry into hell. The genius' speech and Vathek's rebuttal of it have an epic and explicitly Faustian aspect to them. From here on, Beckford no longer shows us Vathek in his original guise as the self-involved perpetrator of exotic, elaborate and sometimes slightly enviable villainies. Instead, he becomes ever more tragic and affecting. He is destroyed by the extravagant depths of his own passions; his desire for knowledge, for power and his ungovernable love of Nouronihar are set against both personal duty and the will of heaven. The extremity of his misdeeds is suddenly deprived of its wrapping of comedy as Vathek declares before heaven that his life is 'a sea of blood'.

The dark and sublime tone of this scene continues to dominate *Vathek* until its end. As its conclusion draws near, *Vathek* becomes increasingly focused on showing us a succession of the immense and terrifying landscapes of hell. All that we and the characters perceive is huge, ancient and terrible. After leaving the genius, the remaining members of the party enter a dark and blasted expanse of deserted villages, vast ruins 'of an architecture unknown in the records of the earth'<sup>26</sup> and ragged mountains of black marble. After their descent into the underworld, the two lovers witness the colossal subterranean caverns of the inferno decorated in ebony and gold and filled with the multitudes of the damned:

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<sup>25</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 104-5.

<sup>26</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 107.

In the midst of this immense hall, a vast multitude was incessantly passing; who severally kept their right hands on their hearts; without once regarding anything around them. They had all the livid paleness of death. Their eyes, deep sunk in their sockets, resembled those phosphoric meteors that glimmer by night in places of interment. Some stalked slowly on; absorbed in profound reverie: some, shrieking with agony, ran furiously about like tigers wounded with poisoned arrows; whilst others, grinding their teeth in rage, foamed along, more frantic than the wildest maniac. They all avoided each other; and, though surrounded by a multitude that no one could number, each wandered at random, unheedful of the rest, as if alone on a desert which no foot had trodden.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, this is also the fate of Vathek and Nouronihar: the damned clutch their chests because their hearts are wrapped in fire. (We are literally shown this through the chest, ‘transparent as crystal’, of one of the unfortunates.)

Almost at the same instant, the same voice announced to the Caliph, Nouronihar, the four princes, and the princess,<sup>28</sup> the awful, and irrevocable decree. Their hearts immediately took fire, and they, at once, lost the most precious gift of heaven:—HOPE. These unhappy beings recoiled, with looks of the most furious distraction. Vathek beheld in the eyes of Nouronihar nothing but rage and vengeance; nor could she discern aught in his, but aversion and despair. The two princes who were friends, and, till that moment, had preserved their attachment, shrunk back, gnashing their teeth with mutual and unchangeable hatred. Kalilah and his sister made reciprocal gestures of imprecation; all testified their horror for each other

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<sup>27</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 109-10.

<sup>28</sup> Other soon-to-be-damned souls that Vathek and Nouronihar encounter in hell.

by the most ghastly convulsions, and screams that could not be smothered.<sup>29</sup>

Stripped of the urbane detachment that marks the majority of *Vathek*'s narration, *Vathek* and Nouronihar's doom becomes unexpectedly powerful. The scenery of hell and the characters' fates explicitly enter the realm of the sublime. Certainly, this would seem to be the impression that the book left on the minds of its early reviewers. Henry Maty's *A New Review* claimed that the book possessed 'A machinery, not only new, but wild and sublime, [which] seizes on the mind and pervades the whole composition'<sup>30</sup>. *The London Review and Literary Journal* (August 1786) was less effusive in its praise but still saw in the finale 'picturesque description, which more than borders on the sublime'.<sup>31</sup>

This shift from the comic to the sublime is in all likelihood responsible for much of *Vathek*'s enduring appeal. The fates of *Vathek* and his lover leave enough of a mark on the mind of the reader to shape their remembrance of the work as a whole – *Vathek* lives in the memory as a darker and more disturbing work because of it. However, this change in the novel is not only a change from slapstick to brutality, from titillation to erotic obsession or from detachment to nihilism. The introduction of the picturesque and sublime elements of the conclusion represents an alteration in the way in which the novel handles its depiction of curiosity. As I have said, much of *Vathek*'s early treatment of curiosity is, at least in part, a repetition of established criticisms. The false superiority that the curious perspective grants the observer; the love of the ugly and the corrupt rather than the beautiful and refined; and the ungovernable and somewhat onanistic nature of the curious appetite are all initially depicted more-or-less faithfully. This, however, alters significantly in the novel's closing pages. From the moment when *Vathek* confronts and rejects his good genius, it becomes clear that Beckford has moved away from the conventional discussion of fashionable eighteenth-century curiosity. *Vathek* stops being a comic figure and his curiosity stops being risible. It is not hard to see the differences between the first version of *Vathek* we meet, who consoles himself for the 'intruding and unwelcome

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<sup>29</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 119.

<sup>30</sup> Paul Henry Maty, *A New Review: with Literary Curiosities and Literary Intelligence*, Vol. 10 (London: 1786), 412.

<sup>31</sup> *The European Magazine and London Review*, Vol. 10 (London, 1786), 103.

thought of his own littleness, with the thought of being great in the eyes of others',<sup>32</sup> and the last, who aspires to make heaven tremble and rushes fatalistically toward his own damnation. As a novel *Vathek* charts an alteration of curiosity from a comic bumbling to a hideous and terrifying ambition.

We may naturally ask how this version of curiosity – ambitious, transgressive, gothic and amoral – differs from earlier depictions of curiosity. The answer lies in its magnitude and its hint of the sublime. The curiousness that Ward, Pope, Haywood and others tried to restrain was centred in the world of fashionability and conventional human affairs; *Vathek* offers us the curiosity of the celestial. While, for example, the unfortunate Philecta from *Fatal Curiosity* is also doomed by her transgressive curiosity, her transgression and ruination take place in a conventional human world. Vathek's curiosity is, by contrast, titanic. He exceeds not only social, sexual and economic normality, but the limits of heaven's will. Earlier eighteenth-century curiosi may have failed economically or sexually but not in the eyes of God. Perhaps most significantly in this regard, *Vathek* upsets the persistent equation whereby the curious man becomes an object of other's curiosity. Vathek's fall is too frightening, his quest too dramatic to allow for him to remain a mere object of disinterested amusement and speculation. His and Nouronihar's fates are too horrible to smile at.

As such, *Vathek* short-circuits the standard practices of representing curiosity at the same time as it apparently preserves their residue. This applies to the novel's aesthetic representation of curiosity as well as to its depiction of its central characters' own curiousness. These two notions are fundamentally linked; while Vathek's own ambitions and curiousness become more sublime, so too do the aesthetics of the novel. Despite the curious nature of Vathek's quest, the depiction of hell, with its vast underground spaces, towering columns and the burning throne of Eblis himself, is represented in a purely sublime, rather than curious style. Indeed, there is only one explicitly curious depiction in the novel: the already discussed Palace of Sight. While certain other elements Beckford shows us (Carathis' collection of occult ingredients, the assembly of exotic holy men that appear at Nouronihar's father's court, the view from Vathek's tower) have a certain suggestion of curiousness about them, most of the time Beckford eschews the kind of curious aesthetics seen in

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<sup>32</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 4.



work like *The Rape of the Lock*. *Vathek* does not delight in collections and oddities in the same way as previous satires and while Beckford clearly enjoyed (and meant for us to enjoy) the extremities and monstrosities that *Vathek* perpetrates, the final punishment that they entail makes it difficult to view them afterwards as enjoyable freakeries, like those of *Gulliver* or *Gimcrack*. The dark and massive landscapes of hell overshadow the whimsical oddities and wonders of curiosity.

In many ways *Vathek*'s hell represents an intermingling of the sublime and the curious. I have already pointed out that, given *Vathek*'s explicitly curious ambitions, we might reasonably expect hell to be constructed, at least in part, as a curious spectacle; the final reward for the Caliph's many terrible misdeeds in pursuit of his own colossal curiosity. Interestingly, both Eblis and the Giaour seem to anticipate this expectation. Both appear to emphasise the expansiveness of hell and the multiplicity of wonders to be found therein, as well as the freedom that is to be afforded to *Vathek* and *Nouronihar* in their observations of these wonders. Eblis tells them:

Ye are numbered amongst my adorers: enjoy whatever this palace affords: The treasures of the pre-adamite sultans; their fulminating sabres; and those talismans, that compel the dives to open the subterranean expanses of the mountain of Kaf, which communicate with these. There, insatiable as your curiosity may be, shall you find sufficient objects to gratify it. You shall possess the exclusive privilege of entering the fortress of Aherman, and the halls of Argenk, where are portrayed all creatures endowed with intelligence; and the various animals that inhabited the earth prior to the creation of that contemptible being whom ye denominate the father of mankind.<sup>33</sup>

Aside from his Luciferan arrogance, Eblis' speech sounds very much like a Virtuoso's opening remarks to his guests. I have already mentioned his assertion that 'insatiable as your curiosity may be, [here] you shall find sufficient objects to gratify it', but Eblis

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<sup>33</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 111.

also offers them the enjoyment of ‘whatever the palace affords’ and ‘the exclusive privilege of entering the fortress of Aherman and the halls of Argenk’. The prince of hell briefly appears in the guise of an infernal Hans Sloane, offering his guests the run of his collection. The Giaour does something similar; although with considerably more sadistic delight, given that Vathek and Nouronihar now realise the terrible nature of their punishment. After the couple learn of their imminent damnation, their guide tells them,

A few days are allotted to thee previous to this fatal period:  
employ them as thou wilt; recline on these heaps of gold;  
command the infernal potentates; range, at thy pleasure,  
through these immense subterranean domains: no barrier shall  
be shut against thee.<sup>34</sup>

Again, the emphasis is placed on the extent of the pair’s freedom to wander and their freedom to command. The Gioaour’s injunction to ‘range at thy pleasure... no barrier will be shut against thee’ cannot but recall the ‘romantic wanderings’ that Beckford claimed were such an important part of his own and his guests’ enjoyment of the 1781 Christmas party at Fonthill House; an experience which, in the context of Beckford’s description, seems essentially curious. Despite its inmates’ insistence on the availability and curiousness of its pleasures, however, the spectacles and wonders with which the underworld is supposedly stocked never fully materialise. The list of spectacles promised to us by the Giaour and his master seem, even when expanded on by Beckford’s copious notes, slightly insignificant when compared to the contents of the Caliph’s own palaces. On one level this bears out the final message that *Vathek* imparts to us: the sinfulness and dangerousness of Nouronihar and Vathek’s curiosity. After their fate becomes clear to them, the two lose all their enthusiasm for the delights that Eblis’ realm affords them. As Beckford writes:

The Caliph and Nouronihar remained in the most abject  
affliction... indifferent which way they turned their steps.  
Every portal opened at their approach. The dives fell prostrate

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<sup>34</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 114.

before them. Every reservoir of riches was disclosed to their view; but they no longer felt the incentives of curiosity, of pride or avarice.<sup>35</sup>

However, even before this, *Vathek*'s hell does not appear convincing as a site of curious interest. Its spaces are too immense; too sublime. The images Beckford invokes to describe it are of thunder, wide deserts and the sun 'dart[ing] his last rays athwart the ocean'. It is clearly too overwhelming a vision to provide the lovers with the kind of curious amusements they seek. The sublimity of hell is even more surprising when we return to consider that it was these scenes that Beckford directly related to his infamous Christmas party. In his 1838 recollection of it, it was to the party's 'intricate [and] vaulted labyrinth [which] occasioned so bewildering an effect that it became impossible for anyone to define where he stood; where he had been, or to whither he was wandering – such was the confusion [that] so many illuminated storeys of infinitely varied apartments gave rise to'<sup>36</sup> that Beckford attributed his vision of hell. 'No wonder,' he observed, 'such scenery inspired the description of the Halls of Eblis.' The fact that Eblis' realm had its origins in Beckford's own private amusements and fantasies seems somewhat incongruous. The Fonthill party was (at least in its host's recollections of it) an almost quintessentially curious occasion. The interlocking and maze-like sets of rooms; the bizarre lighting and optical effects designed by Louthenberg (the 'mystagogue' as Beckford called him); the galleries 'filled with curious works of art and precious cabinets' and the 'strains of music [...] delicious viands and fragrant flowers – [gliding] forth, by the aid of mechanism at stated intervals, from the richly draped, and amply curtained recesses of the enchanted precincts', all suggest that the Fonthill party was created in accordance with the aesthetics of curiosity. Mechanisms, optical illusions, curious art works and cabinets were long-established 'talismans' of curiosity culture. Clearly, however, somewhere between the inspiration of his curious Christmas party and its realisation in the sublime Halls of Eblis, the character of Beckford's imaginative vision changed.

It is tempting, given Beckford's own personal tastes as well as his obsessive affair with his sister-in-law Louisa, to attribute the nature of *Vathek*'s finale to its author's own emotional conflict. As one of his biographers suggested, 'He knew

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<sup>35</sup> Beckford, *Vathek*, 114-5.

<sup>36</sup> Oliver, *The Life of William Beckford*, 91.

that the fate of Vathek and Nouronihar must sooner or later be the fate of William and Louisa'.<sup>37</sup> In this case, the transformation of the Christmas party into the Halls of Eblis represents the visible sign of a private psycho-drama: the party represents Beckford's own aesthetic desires, and the halls, his fear of the consequences of those desires. *Vathek's* hell then shows both the promise of curiosity and its death; temptation and punishment. However, I think that the suggestion that *Vathek's* treatment of curiosity is due entirely to Beckford's private fears is to reduce it too far. While it is easy to see parallels between the spoiled Caliph and William Beckford himself, the novel also represents a shift in the standard patterns of curious discourse. *Vathek* imitates and then perverts the recognised depiction of the curious man. Beckford may have begun with a character who was a grotesque laughing-stock, but he ends with one who comes close to being an authentic and potent anti-hero. In Vathek's shift from mock-virtuoso to damned grandeur, in Beckford's shift from the wonders and curios of the Fonthill party to the terrible abyss of Eblis' caverns, we can see a shift in the concept of the curious identity.

*Vathek* is a work that seems to be continually at odds with itself: a satire that becomes serious, a curiosity that becomes sublime. It is locked in a struggle to realise its own character as a work and to realign the portrayal of the curious. Beckford captures a moment when the discourse of curiosity was in the process of being reshaped. The standard tropes of curiosity culture and its aesthetics remain in the novel but only as pale imitations of what they once were. They have been all but stripped out; the aesthetics of collecting, exotica, oddities and singularities are replaced with the picturesque and the sublime. *Vathek* 'gothicises' the curious man and the curious impulse. As the fashions of the late eighteenth century began to move away from the aesthetic of curiosity and the self-consciously curious and collected personality, the discourse associated with curiosity begins to change. The representation of the curious personality ceases to be a representation of someone who is merely a collector, a voyeur or an amateur investigator, and moves toward portraying a more 'gothic' image of the curious: someone whose ambitions and desire for knowledge are greater, deeper and, therefore, more profoundly dangerous than other people's. In a sense, Beckford's imaginative transplanting of the curious party into the sublime underworld stands as a miniature of the process by which the remnants of curiosity culture were

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<sup>37</sup> Oliver, *The Life of William Beckford*, 102.

repurposed to serve newer and more contemporary and exciting aesthetics. Like the visitors to Mr Knightley's Donwell Abbey, who spurn the collection in favour of the more modern and exciting picturesque aesthetics of Donwell itself, the fashionable consciousness had moved on. Even Beckford, who clearly loved the curious, could not help but be partly seduced by the sublime. This transformation of the fashionable consciousness is important because it effectively pulls the culture of curiosity apart. The debate over the legitimacy and decorum of curiosity continues, but in a completely new context. Curiosity is now associated with questions about the nature of ambition and the sublime personality. This colonisation of curiosity by fresh preoccupations and fresh aesthetics leaves certain ideas detached from their original frame of reference. The strange collection, the disconnected multiplicity of spectacle and the process of defining oneself through one's possessions coalesce around the symbol of the phantasmagoria. The bizarre, the singular and the exotic no longer dominate the discourse of curiosity. Instead they are replaced by the gothic, the sublime and the picturesque. It is these last three that predominate in the best-known work on curiosity in the English language – Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

Like *Vathek*, *Frankenstein* reshapes curiosity into sublime ambition. Indeed, Victor Frankenstein's ambitions are of an even more obviously sublime character than the caliph Vathek's, because they are less morally dubious. While Vathek pursues a curiosity that is wholly based in self-aggrandisement, Victor continually, almost compulsively, affirms his desire to make his curiosity be of use and benefit to mankind as a whole. As a child, he concludes that 'Wealth was an inferior object; but what glory would attend the discovery, if I could banish disease from the human frame and render man invulnerable to any but a violent death!'<sup>38</sup> And during his conversation with Walton he laments: 'I had begun life with benevolent intentions, and thirsted for the moment when I should put them in practice, and make myself useful to my fellow-beings'.<sup>39</sup> Again, like Beckford, this treatment of curiosity simultaneously recycles and reinvents its material. Victor's constant emphasis on the utility of his curiosity recalls the prevalent eighteenth-century notion that popular curiosity was primarily defined by its uselessness – a mere hunger for novelty and sensation. As such, the frequent assertions that Shelley puts into her character's mouth

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<sup>38</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, ed. Marilyn Butler (London: William Pickering, 1993), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 71.

serve a dual purpose. Most obviously, they enhance the tragedy of Victor's 'fall'. His ruination is all the more terrible because it apparently proceeds from a desire to do good and to confer a benefit on others. More than this though, it establishes Victor as belonging to a professional, public-spirited and constructive class of curious people. Shelley is at some pains to distinguish Victor from the 'petty experimentalists',<sup>40</sup> as M. Waldman calls them, and to elevate his curiosity beyond mere dilettantism. Both M. Waldman and Victor's other mentor, the uncouth M. Krempe, make a point of separating their endeavours from the chimerical wonders promised by the ancient occultists who at one time fascinated the young Victor. Shelley therefore asserts a newly institutionalised, modern role for curiosity which nevertheless carries within itself the remains of a certain paranoia; a desire to segregate itself from a purposeless, fashionable curiosity, which, as we have seen, was distinctly obsolete by the beginning of the nineteenth century.

These references to the utility of Victor's curiosity are one of a number of aspects of *Frankenstein* that can be easily related to specific elements of the older satirical and fashionable curiosity cultures. Shelley's novel sheds even more of the existing cultural tropes previously associated with curiosity than *Vathek* does. If *Vathek* appears to be a novel pulled apart by the transition from one manifestation of curiosity to another, from one aesthetic to another, then in *Frankenstein* the transformation seems to have been completed. Where Beckford presents the reader with the various, easily recognisable ingredients that usually went into the comically curious character, Shelley's treatment of curiosity is completely disconnected from established satires. Frankenstein's curiosity is never comic; it is always serious and alloyed with terrible but grand ambition. Vathek's tragic potential only becomes a reality as he approaches hell and the novel's end. By contrast, Frankenstein's curiosity is always portrayed as tragic; he is perpetually haunted by the transgressive and dangerous character of his curiosity, no matter how altruistically motivated. Given that the 1818 and 1831 editions of *Frankenstein* often have subtle but important differences in their presentation of the main characters' curiosities, it is worth examining both in order to give a fuller picture of Shelley's handling of curiosity and how this departs from the eighteenth-century model that we are already familiar with.

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<sup>40</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 31.

In the later edition, for example, Victor recounts how, as he listens to M. Waldman's lecture,

my mind was filled with one thought, one conception, one purpose. So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein, – more, far more, will I achieve: treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.<sup>41</sup>

Victor's intention to do good is constantly connected to a sublime but also invasive ambition; invasive, because it seems to trespass into the territory of the divine. Victor claims that 'Life and death appeared to me as ideal bounds, which I should break through',<sup>42</sup> and opines that 'the masters of science [once] sought immortality and power; such views, although futile, were grand; but now the scene was changed'.<sup>43</sup> In this way he confirms the majestic form taken by his curiosity and his frustration at the limits, as he sees it, which have been imposed on him by lesser minds.

This ambitious curiosity causes Frankenstein to reject friends and family, the love of nature and beauty, everything not directly associated with his work. He descends into a private obsession, confining himself within his 'workshop of filthy creation'<sup>44</sup> where his preoccupation with the secrets of the charnel house and graveyard lead him to become increasingly removed from normality and sanity. 'Often,' he tells us, 'did my human nature turn in loathing from my occupation [...] my eyeballs were starting from their sockets in attending to the details of my employment'.<sup>45</sup> Despite pleading the potential usefulness and benefit of his actions, Victor falls, in a newly terrible and gothic manner, into one of the classic failings of the curious man: he fails to keep his distance. The object of his curiosity comes to dominate and define his entire being; he fails to restrain it, tame it and make it socially acceptable. Unlike the appropriately curious man identified by Lorraine Daston and

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 2003), 49.

<sup>42</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 36.

Katherine Park in their discussion of Newton,<sup>46</sup> Victor abandons the intellectual rigour, dignity and restraint necessary to engage with the curious and still remain a proper part of society. Later, on Walton's ship, the older Victor seems to be keenly aware of his failing in this regard. He recalls that, at the time of his experiments, 'my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature',<sup>47</sup> and goes on to state that:

I am now convinced that [...] a human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never allow a passion or transitory desire to disturb his tranquillity. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule. If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections, and destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind.<sup>48</sup>

Victor's obsessive curiosity disrupts balance, both in his mind and in his own life; he becomes alienated from himself and from the world. Shelley, however, portrays this alienation in a new and frightening way. For the eighteenth century, the alienation caused by curiosity was primarily sexual or economic. (Pope impishly invites us to question who, among the giants, Lilliputians, stable boys and horses, Gulliver might actually be having sex with, if not his wife.)<sup>49</sup> Their failures lead them to fail publicly and comically. Their wives' infidelities, their own bankruptcies and, above all, the mockery of their peers are the consequences of these failings. Frankenstein's curiosity however, leads him, like Vathek, into a private madness and self destruction. He no longer simply breaks down in his duties as a gentleman; in his attic workshop Frankenstein's monstrosity, even more than Vathek's, is a private and distressing monstrosity; a self disintegrating under the strain of its own colossal ambitions.

This disintegration represents a new consequence of curiosity and the pursuit of curious ambitions. Earlier satires of curiosity present us with the ironic

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<sup>46</sup> See Lorraine Daston and Catherine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (New York: Zone, 1998), 303-4.

<sup>47</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 37.

<sup>49</sup> See *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen & Co, 1963), 486.



process whereby excessive curiosity transforms the curious individual into an object of curiosity themselves. Both *Vathek* and *Frankenstein*, by contrast, invent a scenario in which the fulfilment of curious ambition results in a moment of supreme horror and collapse. In both novels the protagonists' curiosity leads them toward a terrifying revelation that allows them to see the illicit nature of their desires. For *Vathek*, it is the moment that he discovers the certainty of his own damnation, and for Victor the moment when he imbues his Creature with life. This revelation, this moment of terrible discovery, coincides with the attainment of their ambitions. In this way, the actions of discovery and ambition are themselves appropriated to illustrate the dangers of excessive enquiry and curiosity: both men seek to uncover hidden truths but are shocked and appalled by what they discover. The narrative of excessive curiosity no longer ends in eccentricity and ridicule but transforms into something darker and more dramatic; both novels envisage curious ambition as leading to profane horror. Similarly, both depict their curious protagonists descending into isolation and madness as their emotional ties dissolve and their sanity is eroded. Here, curiosity loses its association with simple oddness and instead comes to stand for a totalising ambition that destroys totally. It is shown to lead inexorably, not toward the bizarre and inappropriate, but toward the horrifying and destructive.

Shelley continually emphasises Victor's isolation, his separation from the greater community of humankind. During his assembly of the Creature, Victor recalls the advice given to him by his father before his departure for Ingolstadt:

'I know that while you are pleased with yourself, you will think of us with affection, and we shall hear regularly from you. You must pardon me, if I regard any interruption in your correspondence as proof that you other duties are equally neglected.'

I knew well therefore what would be my father's feelings; but I could not tear my thoughts from my employment, loathsome in itself, but which had taken an irresistible hold of my imagination. I wished, as it were, to procrastinate all that

related to my feelings of affection until the great object, which swallowed up every habit of my nature, should be completed.<sup>50</sup>

Victor's humanity is, in his own words, 'swallowed up' by his curiosity – a phrase which recalls the classic characterisation of curiosity as an appetite that enlarges even as it is fed. His desire to 'procrastinate all that related to my feelings of affection' divorces him, not only from the human race, but also from his own human nature, so that his inclinations become strangely inverted and conflicted. His investigations are at once repulsive and alluring; he is simultaneously disgusted by them and incapable of abandoning them. This radical separation from human affection is something from which Victor never seems to fully recover. Throughout the rest of the novel he asserts his belief in a 'barrier' that continues to separate him from communion with those close to him. After Justine's execution, he laments that:

This state of mind preyed upon my health, which had perhaps never entirely recovered from the first shock it had sustained. I shunned the face of man; all sound of joy or complacency was torture to me; when alone I could fill my mind with the sights of heaven and earth; the voice of Henry soothed me and I could thus cheat myself into a transitory peace. But busy, uninteresting, joyous faces brought back despair into my heart. I saw an insurmountable barrier placed between me and my fellow men.<sup>51</sup>

Strangely, while Victor consistently laments his isolated condition, he also seems to seek out this isolation and to be at his most comfortable when totally alone. After he destroys the female creature, Victor wanders along the shore of the island on which he has taken refuge. The image of the barrier reappears in his description of the scene: 'I walked on the beach of the sea, which I almost regarded as an insuperable barrier between myself and my fellow creatures; nay, a which that such should prove the fact stole across me. I desired that I might pass my life on that barren rock, wearily, it is

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<sup>50</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 36-7.

<sup>51</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 163.

true, but uninterrupted by any sudden shock of misery'.<sup>52</sup> Despite Victor's claim that, after sinking down on the grass to sleep, 'when I awoke, I again felt as if I belonged to a race of human beings like myself',<sup>53</sup> it is worth examining how he behaves not long afterwards, when he takes out his small boat to dispose of the remnants of the female creature:

The scene was perfectly solitary: a few boats were returning towards land, but I sailed away from them. I felt as if I was about the commission of a dreadful crime, and avoided with shuddering anxiety any encounter with my fellow-creatures [...] The sky became clouded; but the air was pure, although chilled by the north-east breeze that was then rising. But it refreshed me, and filled me with such agreeable sensations, that I resolved to prolong my stay on the water, and fixing the rudder in a direct position, stretched myself at the bottom of the boat. Clouds hid the moon, every thing was obscure, and I heard only the sound of the boat, as its keel cut through the waves; the murmur lulled me, and in a short time I slept soundly.<sup>54</sup>

The total isolation and separation afforded him by the surrounding waters is something Victor readily embraces. Rather than return to shore and therefore to humanity, he risks his life by prolonging his stay on the ocean. Importantly, the prevailing sensation that he experiences while in this state is one of extreme tranquillity and lassitude. This image of Victor relaxed, free and somnolent in a drifting boat is one that appears several times in the narrative.

After Justine's death, the family Frankenstein relocates to a second home outside of Geneva. Victor states that:

This change was particularly agreeable to me. The shutting of the gates regularly at ten o'clock, and the impossibility of

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<sup>52</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 147.

<sup>53</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein- 1818 Edition*, 149.

remaining on the lake after that hour, had rendered our residence within the walls of Geneva very irksome to me. I was now free. Often, after the rest of the family had retired for the night, I took the boat, and passed many hours upon the water. Sometimes, with my sails set, I was carried by the wind; and sometimes, after rowing into the middle of the lake, I left the boat to pursue its own course, and gave way to my own miserable reflections.<sup>55</sup>

Likewise, during his travels with Clerval down the Rhine, he recalls how, 'I lay at the bottom of the boat, and, as I gazed on the cloudless blue sky, I seemed to drink in a tranquillity to which I had long been a stranger'.<sup>56</sup> In all three of these incidents, Victor's disconnectedness is linked to the passive, dream-like randomness of the boat's progress. The situation appears to embody a particular fantasy of Victor's: the fantasy of a soothing separation from the obligations of human contact. Much as he laments the presence of a rhetorical barrier between himself and his fellow men, it is clear that Victor is most at his ease when he is encircled by a literal barrier that excludes them from him.

It is worth contrasting this passive and enervated picture of Victor with the one that he presents to us of himself in earlier life: intellectually restless, energetic and capable of a degree of application which finally descends into obsession. As I have suggested, this alteration in Victor's personality is a consequence of the terrible moment of revelation that he experiences in animating the Creature. Just as there are parallels between the moment Vathek and Nouronihar discover their fate and the moment Victor brings his creation to life, there are parallels in their behaviour afterwards. The apathy with which Vathek and Nouronihar regard the glories of hell and their solitary damnation thereafter are recalled in Victor's own apathetic desire for solitude; just as the multitudes of the damned cannot endure the looks of their fellows, neither can Victor long endure the presence of other people.

However, this is merely an intensification of the solitude originally produced by their curious natures. In both novels, the solitary condition of the protagonists persists, and is exacerbated, after their ambition has been quashed and

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<sup>55</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein- 1818 Edition*, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 134.

their curiosity abandoned. *Frankenstein* and to a lesser extent *Vathek* fundamentally associate curiosity with a paradoxical Romantic ideal: a sublime ambition that overshoots the commonality and bursts through all restraints. Victor's curiosity is fundamentally associated with a desire for *glory*. As a child he specifically contemplates 'the glory that would attend [his] discoveries'<sup>57</sup> and thinks of himself as a 'pioneer' of 'unknown powers and the deepest mysteries of creation'.<sup>58</sup> Victor's role as a sublime individual is apparently confirmed by Walton's observations: 'What a glorious being he must have been in the days of his prosperity, when he is thus noble and godlike in ruin. He seems to feel his own worth, and the greatness of his fall'.<sup>59</sup> Even in the 1818 edition, where Walton is less hyperbolic in his regard for Victor, he still calls him an 'admirable being'.<sup>60</sup>

The paradox though, is that, while this sublime ambition elevates the individual above the rest of humanity, the failure to restrain it also erodes their connection to them. Curiosity is here presented as a transcendent pursuit, linked to the glorifying and glory-hungry ambition that characterises the condition of the sublime individual. Curiosity acquires an aura of grandeur but is also at once a cause, a symptom and a consequence of a threatening alienation from normal human values and interactions.

Interestingly, Shelley repeats Beckford's final moral from *Vathek* (though without Beckford's mischievous ambiguity). Victor advises Walton,

If no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquillity of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Cæsar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed.<sup>61</sup>

Likewise, the creature, ever ready subtly to mirror its creator, wishes 'that I had forever remained in my native wood, nor known or felt beyond the sensations of

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<sup>57</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 49.

<sup>59</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 214.

<sup>60</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 187.

<sup>61</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 37.

hunger, thirst and heat'.<sup>62</sup> The only counter to sublime and dangerous curiosity is an exaggerated simplicity or domesticity. The parallels between Shelley and Beckford's handling of their gothic visions of curiosity become even more apparent in the 1831 re-edit of *Frankenstein*. Here, Victor imagines himself, like Vathek, having a guardian angel who attempts to divert him from the course of his ruin. After becoming disappointed with the ancient mystics, from whose writings he had attempted to learn the secrets of the world, Victor instead takes enthusiastically to mathematics, abandoning his former passion for natural history:

When I look back, it seems to me as if this almost miraculous change of inclination and will was the immediate suggestion of the guardian angel of my life- the last effort made by the spirit of preservation to avert the storm that was even then hanging in the stars, and ready to envelope me. [...] It was a strong effort of the spirit of good; but it was ineffectual. Destiny was too potent, and her immutable laws had decreed my utter and terrible destruction.<sup>63</sup>

With this rhetoric of destiny, angels and fates, the 1831 edition effectively externalises the drama of Victor's curiosity. His quest for knowledge extends beyond itself into an extraneous world of spirits and predestination, increasing the Miltonic potency of the vision. Victor's imagined guardian is an obviously sublime conceit; it evokes the epic machinery of the supernatural and the tinge of a divine but terrible plan. Here, Victor becomes even more explicitly Promethean than he was before.

The consequence of this is that Victor's fate appears to be not only a cautionary tale but a divinely ordained cautionary tale. Clearly though, the warning provided by his fate is not just intended for the reader, but also, within the narrative, for the aspiring polar explorer and 'proto-Frankenstein' Robert Walton. Walton clearly exhibits many of the same characteristics as Frankenstein. Most obviously, his visions of a land of 'perpetual splendour [...] surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe',<sup>64</sup> a Miltonic paradise locked within

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<sup>62</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 100.

<sup>63</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 43.

<sup>64</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 4.

the arctic ice-sheets, were intended by Shelley to act as an analogue for Victor's own ambitions. Walton, like Victor, has devoted his life to a single passion – in his case that of exploration. His desire to penetrate into the unknown may be literal and geographical where Victor's is metaphorical and scientific, but their motivation and ambitions are the same.

Walton longs to 'sate [his] ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited [or] imprinted by the foot of man'.<sup>65</sup> The word 'sate' again recalls the curious appetite, the hunger for novelty and difference. Also, like Victor's, Walton's curiosity is much less specific than it seems at first. In his first letter to the distant Margaret he writes that:

[The] productions and features [of the polar regions] may be without example, as the phenomena of the heavenly bodies undoubtedly are in those undiscovered solitudes. What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle; and may regulate a thousand celestial observations, that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent forever. I shall sate my ardent curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited, and may tread a land never before imprinted by the foot of man. These are my enticements, and they are sufficient to conquer all fear of danger or death [...] But, supposing all these conjectures to be false, you cannot contest the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite; or by ascertaining the secret of the magnet, which, if at all possible, can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine.<sup>66</sup>

As Victor does, Walton asserts the utility of his curiosity to humankind, seeking to present it as a responsible and controlled undertaking. However, he seems to have no

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<sup>65</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 4.

one definite aim in mind; or rather he has too many. The arctic ice sheets appear to his imagination as a realm of uninhibited possibilities. He vacillates between the quest for the north-west passage, astronomical observations and the secret of the magnet as a reason for his expedition. His letter amounts to a confident declaration of purposelessness: so grand an endeavour, he claims, cannot help but be good for *something*. It suggests that the real purpose of the voyage is to be made; the undertaking only exists to be undertaken. Victor describes his own work in a similar manner. As he devotes himself to fashioning the Creature he fantasises that ‘a new species would bless me as its creator and its source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs’. In the very next sentence, however, his imagination races ahead: ‘Pursuing these reflections, I thought, that if I could bestow animation upon lifeless matter, I might in process of time (although I now found it impossible) renew life where death has apparently devoted the body to corruption’.<sup>67</sup> Victor’s objectives are always expanding. As a child he imagines the possibility of freeing mankind from disease and old age;<sup>68</sup> as an adult he tries to develop his own iteration of mankind. But even as he does this he envisages a further dissolution of the boundaries between life and death. Each objective leads instantly to the next. Both of these men follow the familiar characterisation of the curious man as inherently restless and mercurial, possessed of a curiosity that has no end and can never be satisfied. Shelley again repeats the essence of established curiosity discourse but refines and subtly alters it. Instead of the completely random, eclectic and eccentric interests of Gimcrack and his eighteenth-century successors, Shelley shows us curiosity aligned with a desire for heroic achievement. This is curiosity as conquest instead of collecting; Shelley retains the rhetoric of curiosity but couples it with a new set of aesthetics. It is surely not coincidental that when Walton describes his enterprise to the still bedridden Victor, he tells him that he feels, ‘One man’s life or death were but a small price to pay for the acquirement of the knowledge which I sought, for the dominion that I should acquire and transmit over the elemental foes of our race’.<sup>69</sup> Walton not only manages to fit the word ‘acquire’ twice into one sentence, he presents curiosity as an act of ‘dominion’ over mankind’s natural ‘foes’. The language

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<sup>67</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 35.

<sup>68</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 23.

<sup>69</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 29.



combines the familiar *acquisitive*, accumulative presentation of curiosity with a new grandeur. Curiosity is still a hunger, but the appetite to be fed is no longer for singularities and oddities.

Walton and Frankenstein are defined by their curiosity more than by anything else; their identities are composed of questions and questioning. This, though, is curiosity in the sense of 'inquiry' rather than 'singularity'. They continually ask questions but they are not oddities. Despite being obviously curious, none of the characters in the novel have the 'collected self' which was an inherent part of the curious identity. (The creature may fashion a self out of what he can observe, steal or find by chance but, cut off from society, he is also cut off from the possibility of display. Also, critically, the Creature has no possessions in which to externalise his selfhood.) Shelley's discourse on curiosity is darker and more sober than that of the eighteenth century. It is also more obviously divorced from the aesthetics that were once synonymous with it; substituting, for exotic singularity, a range of freshly minted Romantic preoccupations, such as the picturesque and the sublime. The landscapes in which the novel is set are never presented to us as anything other than picturesque or sublime and the attitudes that Victor and Walton evince as travellers confirm the abandonment of a curious aesthetic.

Seeking to contrast *Frankenstein* with other, earlier works of imaginative literature, Marshall Brown compares Walton to Lemuel Gulliver. 'Gulliver, after all, explores reaches as remote as Walton's; encounters physical, moral and emotional and scientific monsters; finds himself in situations of immense power and utter weakness'.<sup>70</sup> Yet Walton, in spite of his curiosity, is not a curious traveller. Gulliver collects oddities and exotic curiosities, fashioning himself into a curiosity as he goes. His account, like all curious travel writing, is an assemblage of foreign singularities—the immediately and obviously bizarre or inverted. Walton's own narration substitutes the relentlessly acquisitive gaze of the curious traveller for a gently modulated introversion. The only sights which appear to excite him are the sublime images of his destination: his imagined 'country of eternal light'<sup>71</sup> and the chill northern wastes that surround it. St Petersburg and Archangel barely feature in his description at all, aside from the romance of fur-clad sleigh rides and the 'cold northern breeze' which gives

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<sup>70</sup> Marshall Brown, *The Gothic Text* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 202.

<sup>71</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 4.

Walton a foretaste of 'those icy climes to which I am advancing'.<sup>72</sup> St Petersburg becomes a mere waiting room for the sublime arctic vistas ahead. What intrigues Walton is, on the one hand, the huge and dramatic landscapes of the arctic and, on the other, his own emotional affects. He gives detailed accounts of his reactions to both his lieutenant and sailing master, calling them both 'noble' and lending both of them a kind of rugged heroic grandeur of character.<sup>73</sup> Walton ignores the curious process of collecting external observations to produce a more integrated, but also more sentimental vision: his is a narrative of the emotional impacts of sublime nature and the emotional longing for identification.

Frankenstein's journey with Clerval follows a similar pattern. Victor himself identifies the picturesque charms of the Rhine:

The course of the Rhine below Mayence becomes much more picturesque. The river descends rapidly, and winds between hills, not high, but steep, and of beautiful forms. We saw many ruined castles standing on the edges of precipices, surrounded by black woods, high and inaccessible. This part of the Rhine, indeed, presents a singularly variegated landscape. In one spot you view rugged hills, ruined castles overlooking tremendous precipices, with the dark Rhine rushing beneath; and, on the sudden turn of a promontory, flourishing vineyards, with green sloping banks, and a meandering river, and populous towns, occupy the scene.<sup>74</sup>

But his own observations are as nothing compared to Clerval's. Victor's companion achieves a complete and ecstatic identification with the scenes he witnesses. He tells Victor:

'I have seen,' he said, 'the most the beautiful scenes of my own country; I have visited the lakes of Lucerne and Uri, where the snowy mountains descend almost perpendicularly to the water,

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<sup>72</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 3.

<sup>73</sup> The accounts of the sailing master differ very slightly between the 1818 and 1831 editions. See *1818 Edition*, 8-9 and *1831 Edition* 21-2.

<sup>74</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 133-134.

casting black and impenetrable shades, which would cause a gloomy and mournful appearance, were it not for the most verdant islands that relieve the eye by their gay appearance; I have seen this lake agitated by a tempest, when the wind tore up whirlwinds of water, and gave you an idea of what the water-spout must be on the great ocean, and the waves dash with fury the base of the mountain, where the priest and his mistress were overwhelmed by an avalanche, and where their dying voices are still said to be heard amid the pauses of the nightly wind; I have seen the mountains of La Valais, and the Pays de Vaud: but this country, Victor, pleases me more than all those wonders. The mountains of Switzerland are more majestic and strange; but there is a charm in the banks of this divine river, that I never before saw equalled. Look at that castle which overhangs yon precipice; and that also on the island, almost concealed amongst the foliage of those lovely trees; and now that group of labourers coming from among their vines; and that village half-hid in the trees of the mountain. Oh, surely, the spirit of this place has a source more in harmony with man, than those who pile the glacier, or retire to the inaccessible peaks of the mountains of our own country.<sup>75</sup>

His reactions to these scenes, all of which he describes to Victor in great detail, consist of a form of imaginative and emotional projection by which their aesthetic potency becomes partly internalised. The winds across Uri are valued for their sublime action, but also because they evoke the grander, but, critically, *imaginary*, spectacle of the waterspout across the stormy ocean. Likewise, the waves dashing against the mountain prompt an identification with the dead priest, his mistress and the melancholic image of their spirits haunting the scene of their deaths. The essence of Clerval's description is, therefore, not an objective description of the landscape, so much as an intimate relation of its effects upon the observer. His account is an almost perfect encapsulation

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<sup>75</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 134-5.

of Adam Smith's 'indirect discourse' which 'turns upon the mediation of the representation through the response of a represented subject: 'describing the effects [a] quality produces on those who behold it'.<sup>76</sup> The precision and intimacy of Clerval's responses bond us, as readers, to these specific responses. The exactness of Clerval's emotional narration is important because it is intended to be *our* emotional response too. Clerval, in effect, is our proxy within the scene.

His emotional reactions are so vivid that they end in an anthropomorphic identification with the landscape of the Rhine itself. Clerval's evocation of various 'harmonious' or 'retiring' *genii locorum* cannot help but recall Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, with its spirit 'from the land of mist and snow'. In 1831, Shelley also substituted the word 'soul' for the word 'source' in the last sentence of Clerval's narration, making the empathic identification even more apparent<sup>77</sup> – the soul of Clerval is imagined to be in communion with the soul of the landscape. Like Walton's visions of the arctic wastes, the landscape seems to conform to and console the self. Clerval's list of the sights on the shores of the Rhine is also a list of quintessential picturesque tropes. The ruined castles (critically, positioned *above* the viewer, the better to achieve an effect of imposing ruggedness); the tree shrouded islands; the labourers returning from work (again, agreeably rugged), and the village, framed and obscured by massive peaks, are all classic elements of the picturesque aesthetic.

In his article, *The Picturesque and the Sublime*, David Punter identifies this semi-spiritual parity between observed nature and the observing individual as an inherent quality of the picturesque aesthetic. He refers to Dorothy Wordsworth's 1803 journal of her tour of Scotland, which describes how she, her brother and Coleridge were travelling near Loch Lomond when

At a sudden turning, looking to the left, we saw a very craggy-topped mountain amongst other smooth ones; the rocks on the summit distinct in shape as if they were buildings raised up by man, or uncouth images of some strange creature. We called out with one voice, 'That's what we wanted!' alluding to the

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<sup>76</sup> See: Ian Duncan, 'Adam Smith, Samuel Johnson and The Institutions of English', in Robert Crawford, ed., *The Scottish Invention of English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 46.

<sup>77</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 161.

frame-like uniformity of the side-screens of the lake for the last five or six miles.<sup>78</sup>

Punter himself comments that he finds

A deeper mythic resonance in this cry of ‘That’s what we wanted!’ This scene appears to be one version of what the eye might want because it is essentially confirmatory: it does not open avenues towards unconsoling experiences of the outer, but instead relates back direct to the past, to the possibility that the wishes harboured and imaged in the inner world were somehow all along not fruitless or the result of pointless and unenviable solitude; instead this shows that ‘we’ were on the right track, that the comforting and nostalgic images of an ordered, tamed universe had some primal connection with the way things really are.<sup>79</sup>

Here, as Punter says, the picturesque serves an inherently nurturing, consoling and nostalgic function. The nostalgic quality of this scene (and of all picturesque scenes), the ‘direct relation to the past’ that Punter writes about, is not nostalgic in the sense that it recalls a specific past time or experience. Rather, it is nostalgic in the sense that it recalls the innermost self of the observer, reflecting their personality, aesthetic desires and preferences. Nature generously assumes the shape that we would wish it to have but, critically, it does this without our having to impose these wishes on it. This, I would suggest, is the ‘mythic resonance’ that Punter speaks of. The landscape, by obligingly arranging itself into the form we would like it to have, seems to impartially, objectively confirm our self-hood, amounting to an almost ‘divine’ pronouncement establishing the sufficiency and adequacy of our identities. By being what we want, the natural landscape allows us to believe that ‘what we wanted’ was always fundamentally correct and fundamentally natural.

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<sup>78</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, Vol. 1, ed. E. de Selincourt (London: Macmillan, 1941), 255-6.

<sup>79</sup> David Punter, ‘The Picturesque and the Sublime: Two Worldscapes’, in Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, ed., *The Politics of the Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 227.

It seems to me that something very similar is happening in Clerval's ecstatic reaction to the sights he sees. His descriptions seem to reflect back onto a pre-existing vision of the self- an obvious and harmonious agreement between the subject and the observer. The landscape seems not only to be as the observer would wish it to be, in the sense that it naturally conforms to an established desire for an artistically arranged, 'picture-like' landscape, but also to be as *the observer is*; in the sense that it seems to mirror and confirm the fundamental nature of the observer, in a process analogous to the erotic desire to find the self intangibly reflected in another. This may seem like an excessive comparison, but it is worth observing the way Frankenstein describes his friend's emotions during their journey (Clerval, he says, 'enjoyed a happiness seldom tasted by man'), and also Clerval's own effusive comments that 'this country, Victor, pleases me more than all [other] wonders [...] there is a charm in the banks of this divine river that I never before saw equalled'.<sup>80</sup> Victor winds up his assessment of Clerval's virtues with the statement that 'even human sympathies were not sufficient to satisfy his eager mind. The scenery of external nature, which others regard only with admiration, he loved with ardour'.<sup>81</sup>

Although both Victor and Clerval distinguish between the attractions of the picturesque and sublime landscapes (the 'spirit' of the one being harmonious, the other retiring, as Clerval puts it) it is interesting to note that when Victor is exposed to the sublime peaks and glaciers around Chamounix, his attitude is very similar to Clerval's attitude to the Rhine land. This enormous 'presence chamber of imperial nature',<sup>82</sup> in the words of Marshal Brown, 'simultaneously overwhelms and consoles; it is alien yet allied and even subject to the self'.<sup>83</sup> Again, there is the tell-tale longing, empathy and anthropomorphism of the landscape:

These sublime and magnificent scenes afforded me the greatest consolation I was capable of receiving. They elevated me from all littleness of feeling; and although they did not remove my grief, they subdued and tranquillised it. In some degree, also, they diverted my mind from the thoughts over which it had brooded for the last month. I retired to rest at night; my

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<sup>80</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 134.

<sup>81</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 135.

<sup>82</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 99.

<sup>83</sup> Brown, *The Gothic Text*, 203.

slumbers, as it were, waited on and ministered to by the assemblance of grand shapes which I had contemplated during the day. They congregated round me; the unstained snowy mountain-top, the glittering pinnacle, the pine woods, and ragged bare ravine, the eagle, soaring amidst the clouds -they all gathered round me and bade me be at peace.<sup>84</sup>

Victor envisages the landscape encircling him, 'tranquilising' him and nurturing him. Just as Shelley continually emphasises Victor's solitary condition, she also emphasises his association with the sublime landscape. When Clerval identifies the spirit of the Rhine land as being 'in harmony with man', he is implicitly critiquing Victor, who is more than willing to 'pile the glacier, or retire to the inaccessible peaks' at every available opportunity. Victor's own spirit is clearly very far from being in harmonious alignment with mankind. In preferring the picturesque, inhabited landscape over the Sublime, Clerval indicates that he is properly connected to the family of mankind. He delights in seeing nature allied with the human, unlike Victor who, in the same way as he finds comfort drifting upon lonely lakes and oceans, can only feel truly free when he is surrounded by sublime, depopulated landscapes. Shelley further emphasised this aspect of Victor's character in the 1831 edition of the novel. One important distinction between the two editions is that, in the earlier one, the journey to Chamounix is actually suggested by Victor's father, Alphonse, and the entire family make it together. In the later edition, Victor makes the journey by himself<sup>85</sup> for the purpose of forgetting, 'in the magnificence, the eternity of such scenes [...] my ephemeral, because human sorrows'.<sup>86</sup> Frankenstein explicitly contrasts the 'eternity' and vastness of the sublime landscape with the miniscule and insubstantial nature of humanity, as he sees it. On this journey he also contrasts the sublime with the picturesque, as Clerval does later in the novel, by saying that '[Chamounix] is more wonderful and sublime, but not so beautiful and picturesque as [the valley of] Servox'.<sup>87</sup> Victor's preference, however, is clearly for the former. Only in the valley of Chamounix does

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<sup>84</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 99.

<sup>85</sup> See Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 74-5, and Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 97.

<sup>86</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 97.

<sup>87</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 75.

he feel ‘a tingling of long lost pleasure’, where the winds ‘whisper in soothing accents’ and the rushing Avre is his ‘lullaby’.<sup>88</sup>

The different characters may prefer different landscapes, but the way they interact with them is the same. The contemplative empathy of the Romantic vision gives rise to the fantasy of an inanimate subject identifying with its observer, seemingly of its own volition. For Walton and Victor the contours of the sublime landscape seem to merge with the contours of the mind; and the landscape inhabits the self as the self inhabits the landscape. This is profoundly different from the curious traveller, who is primarily excited by the ‘alienness’ of the observed and by its disruption of understood categories. In effect, the curious traveller is most intrigued by sights which do not reflect or console his selfhood. Gilpin, the great originator of the picturesque, might have written of the desire for novelty:

The first source of amusement to the picturesque traveller, is the pursuit of his object – the expectation of new scenes continually opening, and arising to his view. We suppose the country to have been unexplored. Under this circumstance the mind is kept constantly in an agreeable suspense. The love of novelty is the foundation of this pleasure. Every distant horizon promises something new; and with this pleasing expectation we follow nature through all her walks. We pursue her from hill to dale; and hunt after those various beauties with which she every where abounds.<sup>89</sup>

This, however, is a novelty located, as John Wale writes, ‘in the safety of native pleasure-grounds, inside a decidedly male make-believe aesthetic which has tamed, or turned its back on, the terrible threat of cultural otherness’.<sup>90</sup> The suspense and the love of novelty which Gilpin claims as part of the picturesque experience is not the same as the novelty that pervades the curious experience. Here, the novelty is a pleasant fantasy. The picturesque tourists ‘*suppose* the country to have been unexplored’ – their exploration, their hunt, is not an endless quest for difference or

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<sup>88</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1831 Edition*, 98.

<sup>89</sup> William Gilpin, *Three Essays* (London: Printed for R. Blamire, 1792), 47.

<sup>90</sup> John Whale, ‘Romantics, Explorers and Picturesque Travellers’, in Stephen Copley and Peter Garside, ed., *The Politics of the Picturesque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 176.



unfamiliarity but a quest to locate perfect and artful examples of nature; like trying to grow one perfect tulip, rather than cultivating a hothouse full of exotic blooms.

Throughout the novel Shelley generates a portrayal of curiosity that is separated from its traditional aesthetics. Given that *Frankenstein* removes the potential for exotic curiosity from its characters' travels, it is perhaps not surprising that the element of the novel that has the most potential to be viewed as a curiosity is handled in the least overtly 'curious' manner: the Creature itself.

The Creature has many subtle parallels with the aesthetics of curiosity. As a being neither truly living or dead, he confuses and blurs fundamental categories. He is of gigantic size and hideously ugly, yet he is capable of incredible feats of acrobatics and intelligence, recalling the contrasts inherent in sideshow freaks and other human oddities. He is a product of intricate human art and yet also composed of natural elements. The Creature exists on the margins between categories- between the natural and artificial, between life and death. In his capacity to seem simultaneously alive and dead, it is tempting to recall the mechanical automatons that so often delighted the curiosi of past decades. Several times, Victor seems to attribute a significant part of the Creature's supernatural hideousness to the fact of his movement and animation: 'A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived'.<sup>91</sup> And again later: 'When I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred'.<sup>92</sup> The Creature is so hideous because he is fundamentally transgressive: he is an assembly of dead objects given animation.

This is not the only categorical confusion that the Creature elicits though- he is apparently defined by a constant intermingling of divided states. By virtue of his simplicity and capacity to live simply and without wants, he seems to represent a purer and more natural form of human life. When trying to convince Frankenstein to grant his request for a female companion, he promises:

I will go to the vast wilds of South America. My food is not that of man; I do not destroy the lamb and the kid, to glut my

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<sup>91</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 39-40.

<sup>92</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 125.

appetite; acorns and berries afford me sufficient nourishment. My companion will be of the same nature as myself, and will be content with the same fare. We shall make our bed of dried leaves; the sun will shine on us as on man, and will ripen our food. The picture I present to you is peaceful and human, and you must feel that you could deny it only in the wantonness of power and cruelty.<sup>93</sup>

Yet despite this the Creature is inherently *unnatural*, both because he is a creation of man and because he is composed of reanimated corpses. By dissolving the distinctions between formal categories, the Creature focuses our questions about what is ‘natural’. By existing outside the boundaries of civilisation, he questions the attitudes and assumptions inherent in civilised society.

In this respect, he has much in common with the ‘curious’ natives of foreign lands as well as human oddities like Mary Toft, a woman who, in 1776, was reported to have given birth to seventeen rabbits and parts of several more, after dreaming of them. Like the curious people exhibited in freak shows, the Creature exposes the hidden processes of nature, reproduction and civilisation by subverting their normal actions. Interestingly, his enormous stature prompts Walton and his crew, after their first, distant glimpse of him travelling across the ice, to speculate that he ‘seemed to be a savage inhabitant of some undiscovered island’,<sup>94</sup> an arctic version of Hawkesworth’s ‘curious’ Patagonian giants.<sup>95</sup> This misidentification, though, is virtually the only time in Shelley’s narrative when the Creature is treated as anything like a curiosity. He never prompts a fully curious reaction; only horror. Even his creator, who might have been fascinated by his form and his animation, is instantly and totally horrified by him. Walton admits to feeling ‘a mixture of curiosity and compassion’ after his first proper contact with the Creature, but goes on to say ‘I dared not again raise my looks upon his face, there was something so scaring and unearthly in his ugliness’.<sup>96</sup> Here, curiosity is an intellectual or empathetic quality, rather than an aesthetic delight in the strange. Curiosity, after all, was traditionally located in the eye

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<sup>93</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 124.

<sup>94</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 12.

<sup>95</sup> See John Hawkesworth, *An Account of the Voyages Undertaken by the Order of His present Majesty for Making Discoveries in the Southern Hemisphere*, Vol. 1 (London, 1773), 28-29.

<sup>96</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 194.

and in the fascinated gaze. Walton, finding himself unable to even look at the Creature, eliminates the traditionally curious response. The novel encourages its readers to establish their reactions to the Creature based on either gothic or sentimental conventions. The characters react in the same way: he either elicits the severe, gothic horror of the unnatural or a kind of indulgent, sentimental empathy for his misfortunes. Both Walton and Victor alternate between these two reactions, never quite settling completely into one or the other. They vacillate between loathing and compassion.

The full passage in which Victor calls his creation a ‘filthy mass’ records these transitions in detail:

His words had a strange effect upon me. I compassionated him, and sometimes felt a wish to console him; but when I looked upon him, when I saw the filthy mass that moved and talked, my heart sickened, and my feelings were altered to those of horror and hatred. I tried to stifle these sensations; I thought, that as I could not sympathize with him, I had no right to withhold from him the small portion of happiness which was yet in my power to bestow.<sup>97</sup>

Those who encounter the Creature, who speak with him, hover between two contradictory emotional states: the desire to commiserate with him in his misfortunes and the disgust occasioned by his presence. Although the reader is deprived of that presence, the novel continually paints the Creature as either an unfortunate victim of circumstances, or a supernatural agent of destruction, ‘My own vampire’,<sup>98</sup> as Frankenstein calls him. The text never encourages us to view him as a fascinating oddity, to delight in his strangeness.

For an obvious contrast, we only need to look at the more ‘curious’ treatment of another ‘filthy mass’: Celia, the decaying prostitute in Swift’s ‘The Progress of Beauty’. In the poem Celia’s ugliness is treated as something fascinating. Although it condemns her hideous ‘fake’ body and beauty, the poem achieves this through a minute examination of her physical peculiarities. Swift dwells on the details

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<sup>97</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 125.

<sup>98</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 57.

of her physical corruption until she, like Frankenstein's Creature, loses human identity and becomes an artificial assembly of objects or a moving corpse. As 'The Progress' puts it, 'Two balls of glass may serve for eyes, / White lead can plaister up a cleft; / But these, alas, are poor supplies / If neither cheeks nor lips be left'.<sup>99</sup> Here that which is grotesque and unclassifiable attracts a perverse attention. Celia's monstrosity and her incongruity are almost admired by the poem as its 'eye' roves across her, absorbing the details of her decay. Because her ugliness is *so* excessive, because she transgresses natural order by seeming both dead and alive, a work of nature and artifice, she automatically becomes an object of fascination; we (both the reader and the poem) cannot tear our eyes away from her.

Unlike Swift, Shelley's narration condemns the Creature as beyond contemplation. The categorical confusion to which he gives rise is identified as the source of his horribleness. It is suggested that this horror is more than simple physical ugliness; it is his 'hideous animation' that causes the human characters to reject him so absolutely. In *Frankenstein* the transgressive body of the Creature conveys only the dread of the unrecognisable and unfamiliar. He is both a 'hideous mass' and a mass of contradictions; these contradictions and excesses make him an object of fear, rather than curiosity. Here, it is worth recalling one fundamental fact about the Creature's existence: he is a failed creation.

Shelley is characteristically vague about Victor's original ambitions and designs for his creation. Such hints as we are given, however, seem to follow a broad pattern. Victor first tells us that 'I resolved, contrary to my first intention, to make a being of gigantic stature; that is to say, about eight feet in height and proportionally large'.<sup>100</sup> He also speculates that the 'new species', of which his Creature is to be the progenitor, will have 'happy and excellent natures';<sup>101</sup> and finally, in his brief description of the finished Creature, he sums up: 'His limbs were in proportion and I had selected his features and beautiful... his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness'.<sup>102</sup> From these remarks, it seems clear that Frankenstein's intention is to produce a perfected and refined version of the human form. The Creature's enormous size is an unfortunate result of technical limitations

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<sup>99</sup> Jonathan Swift, *Major Works*, ed. Angus Ross and David Woolley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 395.

<sup>100</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 35.

<sup>101</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 35.

<sup>102</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 38.

and more than once Victor stresses his desire for proportionality in the Creature's form and beauty in his appearance.

The idea of 'proportion' returns again later in the narrative. After Elizabeth's murder, when Victor tries to convince the Genovese magistrate to pursue and punish the Creature, the magistrate tells him that

I will exert myself; and if it is in my power to seize the monster, be assured that he shall suffer punishment proportionate to his crimes. But, I fear, from what you have yourself described to be his properties, that this will prove impracticable, and that, while every proper measure is pursued, you should make up your mind to disappointment.<sup>103</sup>

The magistrate's insistent reiteration of properties, proportion and propriety illustrates the impotence of conventional authorities to confront or to restrain the Creature. In these lines, it is clear that the Creature is fundamentally defined by its *disproportion*; he is outside of nature, outside of society and outside of the 'proper' order of both. The magistrate's words also, ironically, recall Victor's own plan for the Creature's appearance, his own intention for it to be proportional. This disproportionality and ugliness is what marks the Creature as a failure, but it is also what makes him a curiosity. The gigantic, the excessive, the transgressive, and the grotesque are all among the classic constituents of the curious. The Creature is 'curious' because of his contrariness and monstrosity. However, while intellectually intriguing, these qualities also cement his status as an aesthetic failure. While Shelley's narrative encourages us to sympathise with the Creature, it denies the possible allure of its curiousness. Victor's initial objective is inherently the 'proper' one: an aesthetic comprehensiveness, unity and alignment. While Austen gives us Mr Woodhouse to demonstrate the outdated and unfashionable nature of curiosity, the Creature also implicitly points us toward the absurdity of eighteenth-century curiosity culture. The grotesque, disjointed and contradictory qualities that defined the curious no longer entice. They have been relegated to mere horror and ugliness. Characters are never intrigued by his appearance, only repulsed.

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<sup>103</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 176.

Shelley, however, does more than simply neglect to treat the Creature as a curiosity. Throughout the narrative, he is emphatically associated with a sublime aesthetic, just as his creator is. Victor's love of the sublime landscape and his desire to be free of human contact is ironically reflected back on him in the Creature's statement that 'The desert mountains and the dreary glaciers are my refuge. I have wandered here many days; the caves of ice, which I only do not fear, are a dwelling place to me, and the only one which man does not grudge. The bleak skies I hail, for they are kinder to me than your fellow beings'.<sup>104</sup> Like Victor, the Creature finds his only solace in hostile and imposing nature, which isolates him from humanity. The Creature appears, again, like Victor, to both resent this solitude and to take comfort in it. The peaks and glaciers are his only 'refuge' and 'dwelling' and yet the great constant of the Creature's life is the desire to integrate itself into community and mutual affection. In many ways, as much as it runs counter to his own inclinations, the Creature can be said to enact Victor's fantasy of solitude and his desire for the sublime. The Creature is assimilated into the sublime in a manner that Victor never can be; he is able to survive in conditions that Victor never could. During their conversation amid the mountains, the two retire to a hut where the Creature lights a fire because, as he says, 'the temperature of this place is not fitting to your [Victor's] fine sensations'.<sup>105</sup> The Creature is beyond the physical limitations that restrict man's contact with the sublime. 'Remember', he cautions the reluctant Victor, 'thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine; my joints are more supple'.<sup>106</sup> The Creature is the ideal inhabitant of sublime nature: his body, 'tremendous and abhorred',<sup>107</sup> as Frankenstein calls it, is massive; his constitution allows him to survive hunger and thrive in extreme temperatures; he can scale mountains and cross oceans and fields of ice without effort. His immense size and physical endurance make him at once a more hideous, but also more sublime version of the human form, able to perform feats that no human could attempt and survive. He is able to live as Victor seems to desire to live: alone, surrounded by the vastness of untamed nature. Indeed, he has no option to live otherwise.

As well as illustrating the 'disproportionality' of the Creature, the Genovese magistrate to whom Frankenstein applies for aid also addresses the

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<sup>104</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 80.

<sup>105</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 81.

<sup>106</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 80.

<sup>107</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 79.

Creature's sublime superhuman capabilities: 'I would willingly afford you every aid in your pursuit; but the Creature of whom you speak appears to have powers which would put all my exertions to defiance. Who can follow an animal which can traverse the sea of ice, and inhabit caves and dens where no man would venture to intrude?'<sup>108</sup>

The Creature's extraordinary abilities put him beyond human justice. In essence, the magistrate links the Creature's 'disproportionality', his existence outside of the 'proper' order of nature and society, to his sublime characteristics. The Creature is man beyond man. He is beyond man physically and beyond man's laws: physical, moral and social. Both he and Victor exceed human boundaries and limitations. Importantly though, this quality of being outside of the conventional order does not mark them as curiosities. The fact that they are both beyond the normal pattern of human existence is not treated as an arresting oddness or peculiarity but as a type of transcendence. Victor's ambition and intellect are sublime because they cannot be restrained or limited; the Creature's form is sublime because he cannot be physically restrained or limited. The relentlessly acquisitive nature of Victor's intellect and the unstoppable physical presence of the Creature would, at one time, have marked them as curiosities: inflations and excessive enlargements of normal human characteristics. Instead, this excess becomes an aspect of the sublime character. They vault over the boundaries placed in the way of lesser beings but, as part of this, they are excluded from communion with these 'lesser beings', the remainder of the human race. Rather than curiosities, Victor and the Creature become a strange type of sublime excrescence from humanity. Shelley's presentation of curiosity is a paradoxical one: she preserves parts of the discourse of curiosity but without the aesthetics of curiosity, the comic tone or the notion of the alluring oddity, which were so integral to the eighteenth-century conception of it.

I have tried to suggest that the fact that Shelley treats the Creature as a sublime construct, rather than a curious construct, is emblematic of a shift in the aesthetic associations of curiosity. In this context, it is interesting to observe that he is not only presented to us as a terrible and sublime version of the human form but almost as an incarnation or embodiment of sublime nature in general. The two encounters that Victor has with the Creature after he returns from Ingolstadt both take place within dramatic, mountainous landscapes. When he is returning home, before the

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<sup>108</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 176.

trial and execution of Justine, he stops outside the walls of Geneva to watch a lightning storm over the peaks:

The thunder burst with a terrific crash over my head. It was echoed from Salève, the Juras and the Alps of Savoy; vivid flashes of lightning dazzled my eyes, illuminating the lake, making it appear like a vast sheet of fire [...] while I watched the storm, so beautiful yet terrific, I wandered on with a hasty step. This noble war in the sky elevated my spirits; I clasped my hands and exclaimed aloud, 'William, dear angel! This is thy funeral, this is thy dirge!' As I said these words, I perceived in the gloom a figure which stole from behind a clump of trees near me; I stood fixed, gazing intently: I could not be mistaken. A flash of lightning illuminated the object, and discovered its shape to me; its gigantic stature, and the deformity of its aspect, more hideous than belongs to humanity, instantly informed me that that it was the wretch, the filthy daemon to whom I had given life.<sup>109</sup>

Similarly, when he first sees the Creature in the distance at Chamounix:

From the side where I now stood Montanvert was exactly opposite, at the distance of a league; and above it rose Mont Blanc, in awful majesty. I remained in a recess of rock, gazing on this wonderful and stupendous scene. The sea, or rather the vast river of ice, wound among its dependent mountains, whose aerial summits hung over its recesses. Their icy and glittering peaks shone in the sunlight over the clouds. My heart, which was before sorrowful, now swelled with something like joy; I exclaimed- 'Wandering spirits, if indeed ye wander, and do not rest in your narrow beds, allow me this

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<sup>109</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 56-7.



faint happiness, or take me, as your companion, away from the joys of life.

As I said this, I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing toward me with superhuman speed. He bounded overt the crevices of ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of a man.<sup>110</sup>

In both of these instances, there is a strange confusion as to who (or what) Victor is actually addressing. Although he ostensibly speaks to the spirits of the dead, it is almost as though he is talking to nature itself. He is clearly moved to these utterances by the scenes that he is a witness to and they amount to a declaration, or invocation, of the potency of the sublime landscape. It seems that in both of these exclamations Victor is moved suddenly to express the depth of his emotional identification with the scene before him. He imagines the landscape connecting to him and he calls upon it to conform to his wishes. In the first scene, he imagines it providing a funeral dirge for William, and in the second, although he apparently invokes the wandering spirits of the departed, there is an odd hint of ambiguity about it. The impulse for the utterance so obviously comes from the landscape that he see and the wish he expresses amounts to a desire to either remain there in its presence, or to die – which, given the wandering nature of the spirits, might amount to the same thing. In effect, he seems to be moved to ask to renounce his humanity and to be transported into the landscape itself, in a similar manner to what he experiences when floating upon the lakes and oceans. Critically, it is in this moment of supreme identification, when he seemingly calls out to nature, that the Creature reveals itself to him. As he invokes the potency of the sublime landscape, the Creature seemingly appears out of that landscape, almost as if in response. On both occasions it is literally ‘as he says these words’ that the Creature is revealed to him. It seems unlikely that the similarities between these two scenes are purely coincidental; there is the suggestion that the sublime landscape disgorges the Creature in response to Victor’s entreaty, as if he has been summoned.

This association between the Creature and sublime nature is reinforced by the similes that are often used to describe him. Aside from the various corpse-like

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<sup>110</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 78-9.

images that are applied to him, when the novel comes to describe how the Creature interacts with the natural world, he is chiefly compared to animals. After his disappointment with the De Lacies, the Creature describes himself as being 'Like a wild beast that had broken the toils, destroying the objects that obstructed me and ranging through the wood with a staglike swiftness'.<sup>111</sup> Victor describes how he 'saw him descend the mountain with a greater speed than the flight of an eagle',<sup>112</sup> and after the murder of Elizabeth Victor suggests that 'if he has taken refuge in the Alps then he may be hunted like the chamois and destroyed as a beast of prey'.<sup>113</sup> The Creature is suggested to be a natural inhabitant of these environments and, in effect, an element of the environments themselves. It is as if he were the spirit of the inaccessible peaks and glaciers that Clerval later imagines. The Creature is not a curiosity but is instead appropriated into the sublime, becoming a manifestation of it.

Throughout *Frankenstein* neither the body of the Creature nor the curiosity that drives Victor and Walton is associated with exotic grotesquery. The sights and the landscapes which entice the characters do so not because they are alien or bizarre, but because they fulfil a nostalgic desire for emotional solace. Clerval is attracted to the picturesque because of his love of humanity and human contact, Victor and Walton are enticed by the sublime because of their own sublime ambitions, which rule their personalities. These landscapes are integrated and emotional visions rather than collections of curiosities, and the curiosity experienced by the characters is indicative of an admirable yet dangerous sublime personality, rather than of a hunger for the novel and abnormal. Even the Creature, who might have been expected to be a fascinating curiosity, is not. Victor's curiosity is of a sublime character, so it births a sublime creation.

Two minor scenes crystallise the aesthetics of the novel and the fundamental way in which they are linked to the characters' identities. The first time the Creature observes the family De Lacy, he witnesses the old man playing music for his daughter. He records how he watches them:

The young girl was occupied in arranging the cottage; but presently she took something out of a drawer, which employed

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<sup>111</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 114.

<sup>112</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 126.

<sup>113</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 176.

her hands, and she sat down beside the old man, who, taking up an instrument, began to play, and to produce sounds, sweeter than the voice of the thrush or the nightingale. It was a lovely sight, even to me, poor wretch! who had never beheld aught beautiful before. The silver hair and benevolent countenance of the aged cottager, won my reverence; while the gentle manners of the girl enticed my love.<sup>114</sup>

Despite the fact that this is the first time the Creature has heard music, this is not the thing which strikes him most about the scene. What immediately captivates him is the artistic arrangement of what he witnesses: he reacts not, as we might expect, to the new experience of *music*, but to the *sight* of Agatha and her father playing for her while she sits near him. There is a painterly quality to this scene, in which domestic tranquillity and simplicity combine with the roughness of poverty and the sympathetic appeal of the father's age and infirmity. What we see here is that most essential quality of the picturesque: the seemingly artless conformity of nature to the desires of art, the naïve process by which nature appears to engage with us and our sympathies. This picturesque visual arrangement is what captivates the Creature; in other words, he instinctively possesses a contemporary and visual sense of aesthetics. The Creature does not simply watch the De Lacys, learn from them and long to be one of them; he finds pleasure and emotional and artistic satisfaction when they assume a natural and artless tableau of filial intimacy and affection. There is the same kind of sentimental charge in this scene as Victor finds in the portrait of his dead mother:

[it] stood over the mantel piece. It was a historical subject, painted at my father's desire and it represented Caroline Beaufort [Victor's mother] in an agony of despair, kneeling by the coffin of her dead father. Her garb was rustic, and her cheek pale; but there was an air of dignity and beauty, that hardly permitted the sentiment of pity.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 88.

<sup>115</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 58

There is the same picturesque property, the same rustic simplicity and easily accessible emotionality, as appears later in the Creature's first sight of the De Lacys. The novel and its characters are suffused with these picturesque, Romantic aesthetics; both Victor and the Creature automatically find these scenes emotionally engaging because they both possess an ideal contemporary sense of aesthetics, as, indeed, do Clerval and Walton. This is most significant in relation to the Creature, because he is by nature disconnected from society. Shelley assumes that the Creature's taste and sensibilities develop as those of a model Romantic, even more than as a 'natural man' or 'noble savage'. Peter Brooks identifies the three books that the Creature finds in the woods – Plutarch's *Lives*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* – as 'a possible Romantic *cyclopaedia universalis*';<sup>116</sup> but the extent of the Creature's Romanticism goes beyond this. Before he even finds these books, he responds to contemporary aesthetics with contemporary sensibilities; he is an instinctive Romantic.

The Creature's automatic assumption of these aesthetics illuminates their fundamental underpinning of the novel. They are imagined to be so essential that they are part of the characters' very beings rather than extraneous social impositions. This is not merely a desirable personality of the time, but a universally desirable one.

Later, when Victor and Clerval are travelling through England, they visit the village of Matlock, near Oxford. It is here that the novel makes its one and only mention of a collection of curious objects:

We visited the wondrous cave, and the little cabinets of natural history, where the curiosities are disposed in the same manner as in the collections at Servox and Chamounix. The latter name made me tremble when pronounced by Henry; and I hastened to quit Matlock, with which that terrible scene was thus associated.<sup>117</sup>

Here the curious collection, the emblem of curiosity culture itself, is dismissed in one sentence, overwhelmed by the terrible image of the Creature. It features only as one of

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<sup>116</sup> Peter Brooks, 'Godlike science/Unhallowed arts', in George Levine and U.C. Knoepfelmacher, ed., *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 210.

<sup>117</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein – 1818 Edition*, 139.

number of polite diversions for the interested traveller. If we compare it with the ecstatic reactions occasioned by the countryside of the Rhine or the Swiss mountains, this brief reference seems rather pathetic. The notion that curiosity should provide the basis for aesthetics, attitudes and behaviours has been swept away and replaced with newer picturesque, sublime and sentimental criteria; so totally swept away in fact, that it leaves almost no trace on the novel's own treatment of curiosity. *Frankenstein's* curiosity is a Romantic one – a product of transcendent ambition and a yearning selfhood, rather than the dynamic pluralistic aesthetic of the previous century.

The principal change that takes place in the culture of curiosity towards the end of the eighteenth century is the severing of the discussion of curiosity from the aesthetic of curiosity. Curiosity is converted into a kind of sublime conquest, the signature of a greater spirit that masters the untamed lands of the intellect just as an Alexander or a Napoleon might master the armies of their enemies. This change marks the end of the culture of curiosity as it existed for much of the eighteenth century. As the nineteenth century dawned, to ask questions about the nature of curiosity was no longer to ask questions about taste, material culture and consumption, no longer merely to imply the indecorousness of the curious self or query the sufficiency of fragmentary curious knowledge and curious spectacle. Instead, curiosity is factored into a Luciferian narrative, where the greatest of men are destroyed by the greatness of their own ambitions, divorced from the rest of mankind. Curiosity is still dangerous if unrestrained, but for different reasons: Victor Frankenstein's curiosity is not that of Bonhôte's Curio or Haywood's Philecta. The Romantic curious man has no need of freakeries to 'distinguish himself from others' (in Kames' phrase), he is manifestly distinct already; he does not have to purchase curious objects, because he longs to conquer new worlds. Obviously, this was not a sudden and revolutionary change, but a gradual and sustained alteration in the associations of curiosity – an alteration which by the time of the 1818 *Frankenstein* is essentially complete. Even as this change was gaining momentum, however, the image of the phantasmagoria was beginning to spread into the popular consciousness, ironically (as we shall see) destabilising the very idea of consciousness itself. As a new century was born, while curiosity removed itself into the realm of the sublime, the phantasmagoria shifted the curious aesthetic and the curious preoccupations with identify and consumption into darker and stranger regions of the mind.

## CHAPTER 3

### *In Utter Darkness: The Emergence of the Phantasmagoria.*

The first appearance of the phantasmagoria was in France in the last weeks of December 1792. The previous few months had witnessed the establishment of the Revolutionary Calendar, the storming of the Tuileries Palace and the revelation of King Louis XVI's conspiratorial private correspondence in the infamous *Armoire de fer* incident. In fact, it was in the very midst of the King's trial for high treason that the Parisian daily paper *Les Affiches* published the following advertisement:

PHANTASMAGORIA, apparition of Ghosts and invocation of the Shades of famous Persons, such as Rosicrucians, the *illuminés* of Berlin, the Theosophers and the Martinists. Those who wish to be witnesses of these invocations should have the goodness to present themselves to Paul Filidort, Rue de Richelieu, Hôtel de Chartres, no. 31. He will perform these invocations twice per day, the first at half past five in the evening, the second at nine o'clock, at the start of the Show. The price of admission is 3 Livres. He advises Citizens that these operations have no dangerous influence on the organs, no unpleasant odour and that persons of all ages and sexes may view them without inconvenience.<sup>1</sup>

Although brief, this passage strongly hints at the disconcerting properties of the entertainment it describes. Readers are told that performances only occur after dark, in the evening or at night; not only is there the promise of necromancy but also references to mystical and secret societies, like the Rosicrucians and the *illumines*, remarks which reflect the paranoia and unease of early revolutionary society. The 'apparition of ghosts and invocation of shades' seemed to capture something of the fearful tenor of the time. For many years, this was to be the most obvious facet of the phantasmagoria experience: through the technology of illusions, its operators could

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<sup>1</sup> Laurent Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow: Archaeology of the Cinema*, Translated by Richard Crangle (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 141-142.

terrify their audiences but also disorient and confuse them; they could summon monsters for them but also send them out into the night doubting what, if anything, they had seen. Over time, this illusory property allowed the phantasmagoria to expand into the realm of metaphor. Questions about the nature of sanity and the reliability of the senses hovered around the phantasmagoria, gradually transforming it into a symbol for the nineteenth century's new doubts about the stability of human consciousness.

In many ways, these ghostly images became an embodiment of the potential failure of the enlightenment project, so obviously did they contrast with the prevailing intellectual and aesthetic aspirations of the time (despite what their exhibitors often claimed). No doubt as a result, for most of its history the phantasmagoria was seen as a 'lower' form of amusement, tainted with poor taste and superstitious ignorance. From our examination of *Vathek* and *Frankenstein* in the previous chapter we have seen something of the aesthetic preoccupations of the period: the picturesque and sublime vistas which thrilled Victor, Walton and Clerval also thrilled the Romantic public. Stephen Oettermann writes that the Romantic style of observing a landscape, of seeing it as an integrated, coherent whole, also represents a particular intellectual ambition: '[this] vision is primarily a way of "getting a grip" on things, a grip that leaves what is observed undamaged, but surrounds and seizes the whole.'<sup>2</sup> This gives a useful illustration of the context in which the phantasmagoria appeared, and why it so quickly came to be seen as a destabilizing and disconcerting image. The conventional expectation of the period was of the triumph of rationality, the power of the senses to embrace and understand comprehensively all details of a given subject. In appreciating the harmonious alignment of all elements in a landscape there was implied the harmonious alignment of all the contents of the observer's mind. Behind this desire for aesthetic unity was the faith in the existence of an ordered system of the world and of an ordered mind's ability to wholly grasp that system.

The phantasmagoria, however, with its monsters and deceptions, presented something very different. The experience of the phantasmagoria was not a calm, emotionally restrained observation but a mixture of confusion, amazement and dread. Gradually, it began to represent the repressed anxieties of the early nineteenth century: that the world might not be an ordered system open to observation and analysis, but a chaotic dreamscape that the senses could never hope to comprehend.

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<sup>2</sup> Stephan Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 22.

The phantasmagoria became a germ of doubt growing within the system of rationality – a minute necrosis in the body of reason.

It is because of this subversion of Enlightenment ideals that the spread of the phantasmagoria marked the reappearance of the aesthetic that had once been fundamentally linked to the culture of curiosity: the random, disconnected accumulation of the marvellous and the grotesque. By the early nineteenth century, developing tastes and ideologies had led to the dissolution of the formalised culture of curiosity, but the aesthetic of the abandoned culture of curiosity was revived in the phantasmagoria. As the sense of what it was to be ‘phantasmagorical’ expanded, it came to reproduce many of the elements of curiosity culture: most importantly, the aesthetics that had once defined it. Critically, it allowed for the re-emergence of a curious style of writing and of imagination. The phantasmagorical became the new face of the curious.

To understand this metamorphosis, we have to return to the last decade of the eighteenth century when Paul Philidor (or ‘Filidor’ as he appears in the *Les Affiches* advertisement) first introduced the phantasmagoria to the citizens of revolutionary Paris. The most widely used modern denotation of ‘phantasmagoria’, ‘that most delirious-sounding of English words’,<sup>3</sup> as Terry Castle calls it, is as ‘(a vision of) a rapidly transforming collection or series of imaginary (and usually fantastic) forms, such as may be experienced in a dream or fevered state, or evoked by literary description’ (*OED Online*). But when Philidor invented the word it was as a name for a new type of theatrical entertainment. He had found that by using a mixture of technologies, most notably automata and magic lantern projection, he could produce a variety of dramatic optical effects, enabling him to mount what seemed an exhibition of ghosts and illusions: the phantasmagoria. The intent was obviously to thrill and terrify the audience in equal measure. Laurent Mannoni (who bases his description of Philidor’s phantasmagoria on one published in *La Feuille Villageoise*) describes how, after an initial appearance of the figure of the recently deceased revolutionary Mirabeau, ‘Twenty other phantoms followed and illuminated the shadowy residence in their turn. They came out of the floor, appeared to pass through the roof, descended from the ceiling, and to burst out of the walls’.<sup>4</sup> Even this brief

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Castle, *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Uncanny* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 141.

<sup>4</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 145.



description of the action at 31 Rue de Richelieu is enough to suggest how the meaning of the word 'phantasmagoria' came to expand. The type of experience that its later meaning implies is very similar to the one that the phantasmagoria itself seems to have offered: an encounter with something illusory, dynamic and visual.

Although Philidor was responsible for developing the name and format of this new species of entertainment, he is not the one whose name has most frequently been associated with it. The man who did most to popularise the phantasmagoria was the Belgian scientist, entertainer and aeronaut Etienne Gaspard Robertson. Robertson (he was born 'Robert' but later adopted the anglicised stage name to give himself more gravitas) was obviously a far more imaginative and charismatic showman than Philidor, and he has since become so intimately associated with the rise of the phantasmagoria that it is not unusual to find him described as its original inventor (a belief that Robertson did very little to disabuse people of in his own lifetime.) It is worth noting though, that it was only after Robertson had made the phantasmagoria a famous and fashionable form of entertainment in France that Paul Philidor, by then using the name of Paul de Philipsthal, brought it to London in 1801.

The fact that, somewhere between the closing of his first phantasmagoria in Paris (in or around March 1793) and his reopening in London some eight years later, Paul Philidor changed his name to Paul de Philipsthal is pretty typical of his character. Two later phantasmagoria showmen by the names of Messrs Schirmer and Scholl produced a short account of the history of the phantasmagoria to accompany their show at the London Lyceum in 1805. Throughout this account they usually refer to him as Philidor alias Philipsthal, a none too subtle way of suggesting that they thought him a slippery customer. While these two were hardly unbiased observers, such details as are known of Philidor's life would seem to indicate that he was, putting it charitably, not a man in whom one would have been wise to place one's trust. For starters, the name 'Philidor' was a probably a false one, meant in all likelihood to connect him with François André Danican, the famous musician and chess player; 'Philidor' being a nickname first bestowed by Louis XIII on one of Danican's ancestors and passed down from one generation to another. The phantasmagoria-producing Philidor was at various times suggested to be either English, Flemish, German, or American but since he spoke next to no English when he arrived in

London in 1801, at least two of these seem unlikely.<sup>5</sup> When he was asked by a journalist about his use of the name 'Philidor' he claimed to be a distant cousin of its more famous possessor – a relationship which was 'conveniently vague and difficult enough to prove even at the time'.<sup>6</sup>

Mervyn Heard, in his intricately detailed history of magic lantern illusionism, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, describes an event that befell Philidor in Berlin in March 1789: an event which is not only illustrative of the kind of life that Philidor lived, but also, Heard suggests, had an impact on the eventual character of the phantasmagoria itself. After being exposed by Freiherr von der Reck, the artistic director of Berlin's prestigious *Königliche Schauspiele* theatre, as having faked séances and exhibitions of occult powers by means of a magic lantern, Philidor was expelled from the city.<sup>7</sup> However, he was nothing if not resourceful and, Heard suggests, it was this incident which may have convinced him to move from necromancy to theatrical entertainment.

In his phantasmagoria, Philidor never claimed he was actually able to raise the dead. Instead, the phantasmagoria was directed toward diametrically opposing principles: by producing spectres and illusions, Philidor claimed to be using his techniques to prove that *all* such attempts to produce ghosts were, in fact, deceptions and illusions. His opening preamble from the phantasmagoria makes this explicit:

I will bring before you all the illustrious dead, all those whose memory is dear to you and whose image is still present for you. I will not show you ghosts, because there are no such things; but I will produce before you enactments and images, which are imagined to be ghosts, in the dreams of the imagination or in the falsehoods of charlatans. I am neither priest nor magician; I do not wish to deceive you; but I will astonish you. It is not up to me to create illusions; I prefer to serve education.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 146-147 and Mervyn Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern* (Hastings: Projection Box, 2006), 57.

<sup>6</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 58.

<sup>7</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 63-69.

<sup>8</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 144.

The final lines of this speech, 'I prefer to serve education', are the most significant. With these words, Philidor obviously attempts to yoke the phantasmagoria, albeit counter-intuitively, to the great project of rationalisation and enlightenment. The phantasmagoria becomes the enemy of superstition, turning the enemy's own weapons against him. Philidor understood that the poacher could reinvent himself as a gamekeeper; that what had once been used to spread falsehood, could now be presented as advancing the cause of truth. It was both a brilliant and a necessary innovation. Necessary, because this was the only way to legitimise the 'performance of the supernatural'; it was not only spectacular but also enlightening. As Philidor said, 'I will not deceive you, but I will astonish you'. In opening his act like this, Philidor was making a play for the phantasmagoria to be seen as something that would amaze people but would also serve a vital epistemological function. It could gratify people's love of spectacle but also gratify their minds; it could improve the uneducated, freeing them from ignorance. However, this claim was to create the first of several paradoxes from which the phantasmagoria would never quite be able to free itself. Philidor, and those who followed him, were to be haunted by the inherent contradiction that seemed to be involved in showing people monsters as part of a display of rationality.

This anxiety, the persistent need to distance the phantasmagoria from deception and trickery despite its fundamentally illusory nature, can be seen very clearly in the pamphlet that accompanied Schirmer and Scholl's phantasmagoria of 1805 at the Lyceum theatre in London. The pamphlet, rather cumbrously entitled *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum; and a Short Account of the Origin, History and Explanation of all the Late Optical and Acoustic Discoveries, called the Phantasmagoria, Ergasopia, Phantasmascopia, Mesoscopia, &c*, begins in a similar style to Philidor's opening speech:

In less civilised and enlightened ages and countries, the study of the polite arts and sciences was as much impeded by grave pedantry and dogmatism - as it was degenerated by impudent charlatanism and mysticity. However, in proportion as Arts and Sciences have triumphed over quacks and pedants of all descriptions, they have been courteously received by the Polite

World, and they now begin to enliven the cabinets and studies,  
and even the toilets, of all people of fashion.<sup>9</sup>

Again, these lines served an important function: like Philidor before them, Schirmer and Scholl draw an obvious contrast between their own activities and those of ‘quacks and charlatans’, establishing themselves as part of an authentic tradition of scientific progress. Importantly, they also equate scientific advancement with the advancement of the enlightened values of civilisation. The fashion for optical or ‘scientific’ entertainments like the phantasmagoria is suggested to be a tangible indicator of the widespread triumph of knowledge over superstition and ignorance. In this way, the showmen and the audience are shown to be cooperating with each other in the project of scientific industry: by attending the show, the fashionable public confirm their own rationality, their superiority to the ignorant and the maturity of modern civilisation. Schirmer and Scholl, however, clearly felt the need, not only to assert the legitimacy of the phantasmagoria in general, but also to establish that *their* show had an even higher claim to scientific authenticity than previous ones. Even accounting for the none-too-subtle language of early nineteenth-century showmanship – at one point, the duo claimed that their equipment was of a ‘most scientific construction, such as would have done honour to Isaac Newton himself’<sup>10</sup> – the pamphlet is constantly asserting the moral and technological superiority of Schirmer and Scholl’s production: ‘It is [due to] neither the merit of a scientific discovery, nor to the commendation of the least public utility, but it is the wonderful and *mystic* appearance of a simple metamorphosis or change in the Magic Lantern... that the first exhibitions of the phantasmagoria... have been paid with thousands and thousands of pounds in this country’.<sup>11</sup> Later they claim that other operators, such as Robertson and Philidor, ‘hide the want of real science by terrifying the senses and affecting the nerves of a greater part of the audience’<sup>12</sup> and that this amounts to ‘base prostitution of the beautiful and sublime sciences of Optics and Acoustics’.<sup>13</sup> The phrase about ‘base prostitution’ they clearly liked so much that they used it again a few pages later. Schirmer and Scholl’s attempts to position their show as a genuine, useful and informative scientific

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<sup>9</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum* (London, 1805), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 20.

<sup>11</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 14-15.

<sup>12</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 25.

demonstration extends to their undertaking to explain the methods used by previous phantasmagores to accomplish their effects,<sup>14</sup> though they are much less forthcoming on the subject of their own techniques. Likewise, their *Short Account of the Origin, History and Explanation of the Phantasmagoria* acts as a documentary supplement to their performance, giving solid evidence of its educational and informative content.

Whilst working hard to solidify their show's enlightenment credentials, the *Sketch of the Performances* contains several passages that make it obvious that Schirmer and Scholl were also keen to connect their phantasmagoria to the realist aesthetics of the day. Mostly, their claims rest upon the effectiveness of a new refinement of existing magic lantern technology that they maintained they had pioneered: the Ergascopia. This, according to Heard, was a type of 'camera obscura device for the projection of living people from a concealed chamber into a public auditorium'. Robertson had experimented with a similar technology in Paris some years before.<sup>15</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, in a slightly peevish footnote, compared the appearance of the Ergascopia to that of the more familiar magic lantern projections (the italics are theirs):

Those who never saw any other but *strong lighted Magic Lantern Ghosts*, may think the Ergoscopic Apparitions too little illuminated; but the very idea of a spectre lends reason to fancy a *dim or faint shade in motion*; - and such are the scientific refractions of human bodies in optics. Hence, to desire more light, betrays ignorance of the science. It is calling upon the moon and stars to shine brighter to our eyesight, than a sixpenny torch.<sup>16</sup>

The proprietors may here have been trying to explain away the limitations of their technology, but the way they went about it is significant. They claim that the images produced by their techniques more accurately express current scientific theory on the question of what a spirit might look like than any method used hitherto. Schirmer and Scholl seem to have tried as far as possible to side-step the paradox presented by the

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<sup>14</sup> The word that the French had coined for the operator of a phantasmagoria.

<sup>15</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 73.

<sup>16</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 22.

idea of producing a more scientifically accurate ghost, but their remarks are clearly an attempt to affiliate their phantasmagoria with a more refined and realist sense of taste. Elsewhere, they wrote that '[Messrs Schirmer and Scholl] flatter themselves to prove to an enlightened English Public the great difference between their natural phantoms and those produced by Mr Philipsthal and others, through a Magic Lanthorn'.<sup>17</sup> This word 'natural' recurs later on when they claim that: 'The motion of the *Ergasopic* apparitions is so very natural that several persons have laid high wagers that these *human refractions* were human figures themselves, without considering that they either vanish into the earth [...] or shrink into a point'.<sup>18</sup>

The description of the Ergasopic phantoms as 'natural' is interesting. The word 'natural' in this period was often used to denote an almost exact degree of alignment between an original and its artistic reproduction. It was meant to imply that the image could perfectly duplicate its original and stand in for it.<sup>19</sup> In this context, of course, Schirmer and Scholl faced a problem: there was, in their case, no original to reproduce. What they seem to be trying to claim instead was the reproduction of a deeper scientific truth; their images were embodiments of the science of optics, conveying the truth of scientific principles. The constant reiteration of this argument demonstrates just how important they felt it to be to distance themselves from previous phantasmagorias. And we can also see the extent to which the inherent problem of the phantasmagoria dominated their thinking: the problem that no matter how hard they tried, it seemed impossible to tame the phantasmagoria and reform its mad whirl of illusions into a rational, cerebral entertainment. They even used this very phrase: 'We,' they wrote, 'disdain to frighten Ladies and children, in a Theatre, where nothing but *decent* and *rational* amusements should prevail.'<sup>20</sup>

Sadly for Schirmer and Scholl, their more famous predecessors had been much less concerned about the ethics of putting the wind up their audiences. Robertson in particular had found a very effective solution to the paradox of the phantasmagoria: mixing horror with comedy. The phantasmagoria was, as has been said, always and on many levels an inherently ambiguous exercise. Even the precise format was ambiguous. There is a tendency in modern scholarship to concentrate on

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<sup>17</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Similar to, for example, the 'natural motion' that observers enthused over in descriptions of Phillippe Jacques de Louthembourg's famous 'Eidophusikon', a technological predecessor of the phantasmagoria. See 'Anecdotes of Mr. De Louthembourg', in *The European Magazine*, Vol 1, 182.

<sup>20</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 10.

the magic lantern's role in the production of the phantasmagoria. This is understandable given the prominence of the projected cinematic image in our own culture, since the magic lantern is an obvious forerunner of cinematic technology. But while the magic lantern (and various iterations of it) was undoubtedly the principal weapon in the fantasmagore's arsenal, different showmen used a variety of different techniques to create their illusions. One of Robertson's apparitions was the spirit of Diogenes with his lantern that seemed, suddenly, to appear in the midst of the crowd and slowly to move among them. Diogenes was a sort of large, bunraku-like puppet, whose head was sculpted from fine linen soaked in wax to make it transparent, draped in thin vestments and with a small phosphorous lamp inside so that the figure would appear illuminated from within by a spectral glow.<sup>21</sup> Schirmer and Scholl's phantasmagoria was clearly even more varied. Their program included a number of different automata, two of which represented a young boy playing a pan-flute and a young woman playing a glass harmonica (an instrument that Robertson's shows had made synonymous with the phantasmagoria years before). Act two of their show consisted of what they called 'AEROSTATIC FIGURES': large, sculpted balloons in the shapes of the 'Heathen Deity of the chase and woods, DIANA, seated in a Grecian Car, drawn by beautiful stags' and 'An Ariel Knight mounted on a grey charger'.<sup>22</sup> The program lists their dimensions as 11 feet high, 12 feet long for the Ariel Knight and 12 feet high, 20 feet long for Diana and her stags, chariot etc.; so they probably made an impressive sight floating above the Lyceum's audience. Only in the third act did the Ergoscopic illusions - 'the most graceful phantoms that cannot possibly be distinguished from real or natural life'<sup>23</sup> - make their appearance. Although it makes no mention of where exactly they fitted into the show, Schirmer and Scholl's booklet also lists one of their exhibits as 'The Mesoscopia; or The games of the Pygmies; which are a species of animated Wedgwood figures, full of life and action'.<sup>24</sup> One of the most obvious examples of this mixture of technologies was Paul (by now using the name Philipsthal) Philidor's advertisement for his first London phantasmagoria in 1801. The piece in *The Morning Chronicle* for the 16<sup>th</sup> of November 1801 describes

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<sup>21</sup> See Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 105 and 98-107. Heard's book gives a comprehensive and detailed description of the different theatrical and optical techniques used by Robertson to produce his illusions.

<sup>22</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 8-9.

<sup>23</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 23.

the show as ‘The grand CABINET of OPTICAL and MECHANICAL EFFECTS’.<sup>25</sup> Both Philipsthal and Schirmer and Scholl obviously thought it appropriate to draw attention to the varied nature of their repertoire. The exact nature of a phantasmagoria show seems, therefore, to have been somewhat uncertain. Not only was the show ambiguous in terms of its epistemological function, it was ambiguous in terms of its content. Even Schirmer and Scholl, earnest proselytisers of phantasmagorical enlightenment, were not above varying their program ‘occasionally, into the *Comic* and the true *Grotesque* Representation, including the famous DEAD DANCE’.<sup>26</sup>

This emphasis on mechanical and other theatrical effects in programs and advertisements is significant. It suggests that, even from the first days of its development, the phantasmagoria lacked a particularly clear definition of itself. It seems very rapidly to have developed into a highly varied and nebulously defined collection of illusions and spectacles. This uncertainty of form and function is one of the most apparent features that colour early metaphorical and symbolical uses of the phantasmagoria. The other is an association with a distinctly lowbrow kind of burlesque comedy and horror.

Robertson was the true master of this approach to showmanship, but even his predecessor Philidor, whose skills as an entertainer were nowhere near Robertson’s, had understood that while the phantasmagoria might have enlightenment pretensions, the last thing it could afford to be was boring. The show thrilled people with the very ghosts it claimed it was trying to debunk; but Philidor included several even more obviously crowd-pleasing spectacles. One was a modification of the trick he had attempted to play on Von der Reck’s acquaintance in Berlin. An advertisement in *Les Affiches* on March 14<sup>th</sup> 1793 let it be known that ‘Persons who wish to avail themselves of individual showings, are requested to give notice the previous day: they may then request the apparition of any absent or deceased person of their acquaintance whom it pleases them to mention’.<sup>27</sup> The ‘prior notice’ was a traditional ruse by the conjuror to give himself time to get a description of the deceased and prepare the slide with their image on it. However, Heard suggests that rather than trying to deceive people, Philidor may have produced his apparitions with the full knowledge and

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Novel Exhibition- Lyceum Strand Phantasmagoria’, *The Morning Chronicle*, no. 10137 (16<sup>th</sup> November 1801).

<sup>26</sup> Schirmer and Scholl, *Sketch of the Performances at the Large Theatre, Lyceum*, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 143.



cooperation of the interviewee as a form of audience participation.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, Mannoni records an incident where one of the journalists who had come to review Philidor's show wrote that suddenly 'I saw myself, coming and going, moving in front of me!'<sup>29</sup> It seems most likely that this was a prearranged trick on the part of the journalist's friends and colleagues and that Philidor had again adapted what had once been charlatanism into entertainment. The finale of the phantasmagoria was even more overtly comic and pantomimic. The correspondent for *La Feuille Villagoise* wrote that:

The ingenious scientist ends by making the devil appear, that is to say the grotesque caricature imagined by frocked and mitred sycophants to frighten ladies and little boys; this spectre of fiery red, armed with claws, with horns on its head and showing a satyr's tail, changes astonishment into laughter and finishes by freeing the spectator from the spell.<sup>30</sup>

This clownish figure was clearly intended to both give a suitably amusing end to the show. This was a pantomime devil that the audience could happily laugh at; with its red skin, claws and satyr's horns and tail, it was a ridiculously exaggerated and bombastic depiction. However, a few months later, the Devil was closing the show but with an important modification: 'he makes that distinguished gentleman [the devil] appear sometimes with the face of Égalité [Philippe Égalité, Duc d'Orléans, a famous supporter of the revolution], sometimes with that of Robespierre, Marat or Danton, but always with claws, horns, and a long tail'.<sup>31</sup> By this point in his career Philidor had clearly moved his phantasmagoria into the realm of farce. The red devil was already a somewhat ribald image, transforming him into well known political figures of the day was even more so; the quality of pantomime was well cemented into the phantasmagoria. Given what is known about Philidor's character, it is hard to know whether he was attempting a form of political satire or simply wanted to depict someone recognisable and in authority to make fun of, someone the audience would enjoy seeing made to fill the role of buffoon. Whatever his motivations in executing it,

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<sup>28</sup> See Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 82.

<sup>29</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 145.

<sup>30</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 145.

<sup>31</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 146.

the image does fit into the pattern that the phantasmagoria gradually established for itself. The phantasmagoria was gradually to become linked with ideas of disruption, of disturbing normal rules, certainties and authorities – political, social and aesthetic.

Sadly, the revolutionary authorities would seem to have been less than willing to enjoy Philidor's joke. Marie Tussaud (later the famous waxworks artist) records in her memoirs that her guardian and mentor Philippe Curtius had been forced, on behalf of Philidor's wife, to bribe Robespierre into letting the fantasmagore out of prison, whence he had been confined on account of the satirical content of his show.<sup>32</sup> It was this narrow escape that seems to have precipitated the closing of the first phantasmagoria in 1793 and Philidor's departure from Paris in that same year.

When Robertson opened the first of his two phantasmagoria shows at the Pavillion de l'Echiquier on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1798, he used several devices similar to those that Philidor had used while improving the style and manner of their presentation. Robertson appeared 'fully aware that the terrified responses of some would be matched by the laughter of others. It was an approach that would also become necessary, as old and knowing patrons returned with friends, wives and sweethearts, eager to observe and laugh at their terrified reactions. Playing the performance on two levels, he could scare the uninitiated and cast winks to the knowing'.<sup>33</sup> This mixture of terror and comedy can be clearly seen in the descriptions of Robertson's performances. A variation on Philidor's trick of summoning up the image of a dead or absent loved one can be seen in an article in *L'Ami des Lois* for 28<sup>th</sup> March 1798:

A young dandy begs for the appearance of a woman whom he tenderly loved, and shows her portrait in miniature to the phantasmagorian, who throws onto the burner some sparrow feathers, a few grains of phosphorus and a dozen butterflies. Soon, a woman is to be perceived, her breast uncovered, her hair streaming, gazing steadily at her young friend with a tender and sorrowful smile.

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<sup>32</sup> See Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 83–84.

<sup>33</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 93.

A serious man sitting next to me cries, in carrying his hand to his forehead: 'Oh my God! I think that's my wife!' and he slips out, fearing that it is no longer a ghost.<sup>34</sup>

The 'young dandy' and the husband were clearly plants of Robertson's, placed in the audience to enact this drama. By this means the audience were treated both to the sight of an attractive young woman and to the titillation of possible cuckoldry, exposed (it seemed) through Robertson's magic. The show gleefully tapped into the tradition of domestic farce whereby secrets are uncovered on stage for public scrutiny. Alongside this, Robertson was, if anything, even more willing to include public figures in his shows than Philidor had been. *L'Ami des Lois* described two such incidents at Robertson's first phantasmagoria. When Robertson asked for requests from the audience, one of the attendees (probably another agent of Robertson's) asked to see the shade of Marat:

Robertson pours onto a lighted brazier two glasses of blood, a bottle of vitriol, 12 drops of brandy, and two copies of the newspaper *Hommes-Libres*. Right away, a small, livid ghost gradually begins to appear, armed with a dagger and wearing a red cap. The man with bristling hair recognises it to be Marat; he wants to kiss it, the ghost makes a terrifying grimace and disappears.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Robertson apparently also acceded to a request to summon up the heroic Swiss republican William Tell, and concluded the show with another revolutionary spectre:

'Citizens and gentlemen,' said Robertson, 'until now I have only shown to you one shade at a time; my art is not limited to these trifles, they are only the prelude to the savoir-faire of your humble servant. I can show to kindly men the crowd of

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<sup>34</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley, University of California, 1993), 233.

<sup>35</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 233.

shades who, during their life, have been helped by them; reciprocally, I can make the shades of evil men's victims parade before them.'

Robertson was invited to this test by almost unanimous cheers. Two individuals alone were against it; but their opposition only irritated the desires of those gathered.

Immediately the phantasmagorian throws onto the brazier the reports of May 31, those pertaining to the massacres at the prisons of Aix, Marseilles and Tarascon, a collection of denunciations and decrees, a list of suspects, the collection of judgments of the Revolutionary Court, a bundle of demagogic and aristocratic newspapers, a copy of the *Reveil du Peuple*; then he pronounces with emphasis the magic words: *Conspirator, humanity, terrorist, justice, Jacobin, public safety, exaggerated, alarmist, hoarder, Girondin, Moderate, Orleanist*. One sees groups covered with bloody veils instantly rising up; they surround, they press the two individuals who had refused to give in to the general wish, and who, frightened by this terrible spectacle, run out of the room hastily giving horrible howls... One was Barère, the other Cambon [two ex-members of the committee for public safety].<sup>36</sup>

It is hard to mistake the pantomime quality of Robertson's performance. Look, for example, at the ingredients that make up the ghost of Marat: blood, acid, brandy and revolutionary papers; consider the magic words that Robertson chants to summon up the victims of the Terror. Robertson creates a parallel between the incomprehensible language of political theorists and revolutionaries and the magical cant of the sorcerer; both seem powerful, even deadly, but also illusory and incomprehensible to the man in the street. Similarly, he deprives the revolutionaries of their power and sense of reality and integrates them into an accessible, cartoonist narrative where they play the roles of

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<sup>36</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 233-234.

wicked monsters and phantom bogeymen, juxtaposed with the noble William Tell.<sup>37</sup> This narrative is even more obvious in Robertson's second phantasmagoria.

Robertson ended up having a similar, though less dangerous, run-in with the law to Philidor's. After his Parisian phantasmagoria was shut down by the state, he temporarily relocated to Bordeaux to exhibit it there. When he returned to the capital, however, he discovered that his two former assistants and the owner of the Pavillon de l'Echiquier had gone into business for themselves exhibiting their own phantasmagoria in the space once occupied by Robertson. The showman responded by relaunching his phantasmagoria on a grander scale in the crumbling, gothic surroundings of the abandoned Couvent des Capucines on January 23<sup>rd</sup> 1799.

One of the spectacles in the new program was 'the wraith of *le monstre*, Robespierre, ascending from his tomb. Desirous of attaining the kingdom of the blessed, the despised revolutionary is instead struck by lightning and reduced, tomb and all, to powder'.<sup>38</sup> In stark contrast to the divine vengeance inflicted upon Robespierre was the scene that sometimes concluded the phantasmagoria. An observer wrote that:

It is impossible to offer anything more magical and more ingenious than the experiment which ends the phantasmagoria: in the midst of the chaos, in the bosom of storms and lightning, one sees rise up a brilliant star whose centre carries these characters: 18 BRUMAIRE. Soon the clouds disperse, and permit us to see the peacemaker (Bonaparte): he has just offered an olive branch to Minerva, who receives it, makes it into the form of a crown and puts it upon the head of a French hero. It is hardly necessary to say that this ingenious allegory is always greeted with enthusiasm.<sup>39</sup>

The 'Young Gentleman' who wrote about his Parisian tour for the *European Magazine* in 1803 (and who was himself a great admirer of Napoleon) recorded a similar experience:

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<sup>37</sup> Cohen offers a more explicitly Marxist interpretation of these aspects of Robertson's act. See Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 234.

<sup>38</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 98.

<sup>39</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 111.

A happy compliment is paid to him [Bonaparte] at the phantasmagoria, where the shadow of Diogenes being introduced, looking after a man with a lantern in broad daylight, they produce Bonaparte with the inscription *Vir*, a man, a crown is seen to descend and hover over his head, by way of showing that his actions deserve one, and then passes away.<sup>40</sup>

The *European Magazine*'s article was published in September and, since Robertson left Paris in July 1803, the writer must either have caught one of his very last performances or, much more likely, this scene was produced by one of his numerous imitators, who had sprung up in the aftermath of a disastrous court case that had forced Robertson to reveal many of his methods.<sup>41</sup> Whether the scene was Robertson's, though, or another's, its character was the same. It enacts a broad populist drama of celestial justice: the unpopular and tyrannical Robespierre is blasted to atoms by Jovian thunder, while Minerva rewards the wise and virtuous Napoleon. This kind of simple crowd-pleasing narrative was clearly a common feature of the phantasmagoria in general; the fates of the demonic Robespierre and the anointed Bonaparte were mirrored by those of other public figures in other countries. The phantasmagoria had first crossed to America in 1803, making its debut at New York's Mount Vermont Garden. During a phantasmagoria at Daniel Bowen's Columbian Museum in Boston, 'Washington was beckoned to emerge from his tomb and, to the stunned eyes of Bowen's audience, he materialised, hovering for a few minutes before ascending upwards'.<sup>42</sup> Washington's ascent into heaven repeats the triumphal image of Napoleon; as Wendy Bellion writes, 'Sentiment conjoined with spectacle in [these] performances'.<sup>43</sup> Everywhere, the phantasmagoria enacted the will of the public by punishing the despised and rewarding the popular.

To return briefly to Robertson and the important innovations that he introduced into Philidor's format, the spectacle described by Bellion was Robertson's

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<sup>40</sup> 'A Portrait of Revolutionary Paris', *The European Magazine*, Vol. 44 (September 1803), 198.

<sup>41</sup> See Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 113–116, for a detailed description of Robertson's legal woes.

<sup>42</sup> Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator: Art, Illusion and Visual Perception in Early National America* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina, 2011), 307.

<sup>43</sup> Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*, 308.

work far more than it was Philidor's. In his Parisian shows, Robertson began to introduce suitably gothic and illusionistic scenes from fiction and popular history, most infamously *The Bleeding Nun* from Matthew Lewis' gothic romance *The Monk*. This was a significant transformation of the phantasmagoria format, as Mervyn Heard points out: '*The Bleeding Nun* marks the phantasmagoria's first point of divergence into the realms of fictional fantasy, a turn which was to allow Robertson to give full rein to his imagination and transform the phantasmagoria from a rational display of old fashioned sorcery into a stylish *trompe de théâtre*'.<sup>44</sup> The inclusion of fictional scenes, such as Macbeth being confronted with Duncan's ghost or the Temptations of St Anthony,<sup>45</sup> meant that the phantasmagoria moved toward being an exhibition of grotesques and spectacles, further compromising its epistemological mission. Another side-effect though, was that it introduced the germ of the phantasmagoria's modern meaning. After Robertson's development of the phantasmagoria program, it came to be associated with a type of hallucinogenic, riotous spectacle; ghostly fantasies mingling with scenes from myth and literature, producing a confusing, visionary swirl. It was a combination of these factors that was to dictate how the phantasmagoria featured in the popular consciousness of the period and how the metaphor and meaning of the phantasmagoria was to evolve over time. The characteristic perception of the phantasmagoria, in its early years, was of a somewhat low, populist and burlesque entertainment; a combination of visceral horror and broad comedy. At the same time, it seemed to suggest the possibility of a more complex and elusive experience: one that was at once visual, multiplicitous and suggestive of unreality. This second set of associations was to gain prominence over time, dictating how it was eventually to figure in the nineteenth-century imagination: both as a metaphor for human consciousness and as a spur for the resurgence of curiosity.

The early discourse surrounding the phantasmagoria though, was primarily dictated by how it was seen by contemporary society. The phantasmagoria's ambiguity and populism had effectively compromised its claim to be associated with enlightened modernity. Instead, in these early years, it most often appears in journals, magazines and commentaries as a representation of comedy, trickery and absurdity or of bad taste and sensationalism.

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<sup>44</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 93.

<sup>45</sup> Heard gives a comprehensive list of Robertson's subjects adapted from his memoirs. See Heard *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 107-110.

Philidor, by then going by 'Philipsthal', had brought the phantasmagoria to Britain in 1801. Already popular in France, it became an equally dramatic success in the English capital, partly, it was suggested, because of a sensational incident that took place on the opening night. One of the elements of Philipsthal's show was a device called 'The Red Woman of Berlin'. This was very similar to Robertson's spectre of Diogenes: a tall, black-shrouded frame surmounted by a semi-transparent sculpted face. Again, the showman and a lamp were concealed inside the frame to make it move and appear to glow from inside. However, in this case the face was a distorted and frightening mask, and either the mask itself or the light inside were coloured a bloody red. The performer would start out at a distance from the audience and gradually creep closer, until he was within a few feet of them. He would then, accompanied by suitably terrifying sound effects, thrust the face and lamp toward them, making it seem as if the Red Woman had lunged at them with a horrible scream. An observer wrote that 'the effect was electrical and scarcely to be imagined from the effect of a written description... The hysterical screams of a few ladies in the first seats of the pit induced a general cry of "lights!" from their immediate friends, which it not being possible to instantly comply with, increased into a universal panic... commencing a scrambling to reach the doors'.<sup>46</sup> Philipsthal's English was patchy to say the least; one observer recorded that the extent of it was to portentously whisper 'Hush, hush, de ghost! Hush de ghost!' whenever it seemed dramatically beneficial to do so.<sup>47</sup> He therefore either misunderstood the frantic cries of 'lights!' or misread the audience's terror for enthusiasm. In consequence, the Red Woman leapt at the audience again, causing an even more violent panic which ended up damaging several of Philipsthal's machines and lasted until someone was able to get the house lights back up.

This mistake on Philipsthal's part was to prove fortuitous, because as soon as the audience had escaped into the night, they made it their business to tell their friends about the horrific ordeal to which they had been subjected. Their friends, needless to say, made it *their* business to get tickets as soon as they could. Philipsthal became, literally, an overnight success and the theatre was packed to capacity for the rest of the season. He was alleged to have made something like £8000 from the venture, a colossal sum of money for the time.

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<sup>46</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 141.

<sup>47</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, Chapter 6, Note 25.



Gothic subjects were still popular in literature and on stage and Philipsthal's show seemed to mesh perfectly with this taste. There had already been a mania for phantasmagorias in France. In his memoirs, Robertson resignedly described how:

From that moment, the phantasmagoria became a very common object executed by fantasmagores of all classes, Paris resembled the Elysian Fields for the large number of ghosts living there [...] The fantasmagores mainly gathered on the river banks, and there was hardly a quay which did not offer you a little phantom at the end of a dark black corridor, or the top of a tortuous staircase. The ghost machines also became a commercial item then in Paris and London [...] The smallest amateur scientist, in every land, had his phantasmagoria.<sup>48</sup>

Now, thanks to Philipsthal, the fashion gripped England. The *Morning Post and Gazetteer* for January 30<sup>th</sup> 1802 observed that:

The rise and the progress of *horror* might prove an entertaining and fruitful subject in the hands of an ingenious Essayist. To trace it from the legends of the ensanguined plains of the Germans into their more polished romances and dramas, and from thence into our novels, and on to our stage, would be an interesting and, perhaps, instructive research. But our pursuit must not terminate here, for we should then follow its steps into a magic lantern, and view it presiding over a *Phantasmagoria* ... which shock[s] our feelings, [and] inspire[s] us with this *fashionable horror*.<sup>49</sup>

A consequence of this 'fashionable horror' was not only an increase in the number of professional fantasmagores exhibiting in London and touring the British isles, but also a spread of the techniques into amateur hands. An aristocratic amateur fantasmagore

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<sup>48</sup> Mannoni, *The Great Art of Light and Shadow*, 172.

<sup>49</sup> *Morning Post and Gazetteer*, no. 10396 (30<sup>th</sup> January 1802).

identified only as ‘The German Barron’ entertained the Prince of Wales at a dinner party at the Brighton Pavilion on October 29<sup>th</sup> 1805 and then again at another party on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November.<sup>50</sup> At the opposite end of the social spectrum, an article in the *Bury and Norwich Post* for February 1804 described how: ‘The *Park Ghost* is at last discovered. It actually proves to be a scheme of one of the Westminster boys, who, by means of a *Phantasmagoria*, frightened the centinels in the Bird-cage-walk. He was discovered lately in the empty house adjoining the guard-room, with a dark lanthorn and all the apparatus for producing goblins, and spectres without heads’.<sup>51</sup> The goblins and headless spectres had found themselves equally popular from the highest to the lowest. Unfortunately, this popularity does not seem to have helped to establish the phantasmagoria’s respectability. While London’s Lyceum theatre had introduced the phantasmagoria to the English people, New York’s Lyceum had also seen its fair share of them. In response, in 1808, one writer bemoaned the theatre’s decline ‘into a place of amusement, for vulgar minds, [with] tricks of legerdemain, and where the devil dances on stilts to the tune of a hand organ’.<sup>52</sup> Although its performers still claimed to be enacting a rationalising, educating program, the phantasmagoria was often perceived to be doing the exact opposite. Importantly, like the critics of the culture of curiosity, critics of the phantasmagoria claimed that it sabotaged the enlightenment aims of rationality and aesthetic unity by promoting a taste for monsters and grotesques. In this context, its very popularity could be counted against it because it showed the degeneration of popular standards.

One of the most trenchant examples of this criticism was published in *The Morning Post and Gazetteer* in January 1802. The Right Honourable John Townsend’s poem, ‘Prologue to Urania’, contains the lines:

...Box, Gallery and Pit,  
 The stage itself, will loathe the name of wit;  
 Day after day, our Spectre Dramas cramm’d  
 With heavenly spirits, or with goblins damn’d,-  
 Of tame extravagance, a cumbrous mass,  
 That barren brains on patient fashion pass,-

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<sup>50</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 190 – 191.

<sup>51</sup> *Bury and Norwich Post*, no. 1127 (1<sup>st</sup> February 1804).

<sup>52</sup> Wendy Bellion, *Citizen Spectator*, 48.

By low Phantasmagoria-Farce debas'd,  
The dull Lyceum of degenerate taste!<sup>53</sup>

It is interesting to see how closely Townsend's description of the phantasmagoria as a cumbrous mass of extravagance, crammed with goblins and spirits and exhibited to 'barren brains', parallels Lord Kames' remark in *Elements of Criticism* that 'those who are deficient in taste prefer things that are odd, rare or singular, in order to distinguish themselves from others'.<sup>54</sup> While there is no suggestion of self-aggrandisement in Townsend's criticism, he does reiterate the argument that the taste for the strange and the distorted bespeaks the distortion of the observers' minds. The barrenness of their brains can only be satisfied by empty spectacle. In effect, while the phantasmagoria superficially reproduced some of the same grotesque disunity found in the curious collection, it also prompted critics to respond to it in a similar way.

This underlying sense of vulgarity seems to have transferred into other early textual uses of the phantasmagoria as well; it most commonly seems to have been understood to have had a set of basically comic and illusionistic associations. The character of the representations mirror the character of the phantasmagorias themselves. Two early examples of the use of the figure of the phantasmagoria are a series of three articles called *The Phantasmagoria* that appeared in the *European Magazine* between March and August 1803, and a comic ballad entitled *Phantasmagoria; or the Ghost of a Song*, printed around 1801. Both of these are broadly similar in that they use the phantasmagoria as an image for contemporary society. By comparing society to the phantasmagoria, both claim to reveal a hidden truth: that it is made up of illusions, grotesques and ridiculous monstrosities. The four verses of the ballad run as follows:

Since life's but a phantom we know,  
As every sage Don must remark,  
My chapter of Phantoms I'll show,  
Without leaving you all in the dark;  
Quack Doctors attack ev'ry ill,

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<sup>53</sup> John Townsend, 'Prologue to Urania', *The Morning Post and Gazetteer*, no. 10392 (26<sup>th</sup> January 1802).

<sup>54</sup> Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism- The Seventh Edition* (Edinburgh, 1788), Vol. 1, 269.

And pretend that can always restore ye,  
But if they would show all they kill;  
It would make a fine phantasmagoria.  
sing Tol lol lol tol lol de rol de rol la.

Our beaux in their dresses so spruce,  
Look like goblins to wondering beholders,  
For finding their heads of no use,  
They have sunk them quite in to their shoulders;  
With each lady my simile's good,  
For when fashion so thinly had deck'd her  
Howe'er she be true flesh and blood,  
She looks like a tall castle spectre.  
sing Tol lol lol, &c.

The phantom of honour some wed,  
And in duels for phantoms will bleed,  
But if you get shot thro' the head,  
You're a phantasmagoria indeed;  
But a truce about fighting and war,  
With bullets no longer we'll bore ye,  
Smiling Peace surely's better by far,  
And may that prove no phantasmagoria.  
sing Tol lol lol, &c

Of Pic-nic, the secret you know,  
If not I can easily unlock it;  
It means that wherever you go,  
You carry your fare in your pocket,  
In the pocket of everyone here,  
Who stands with good humour before ye  
May the king's pretty picture appear,  
And that is no phantasmagoria.

Here, the phantasmagoria's parade of ghouls and ghosts is replaced with a parade of stock contemporary characters: the quack, the fashionista and the young soldier. The 'chapter of phantoms' though, is deployed for comic, rather than for horrific, effect. Its purpose is to mock the illusions and falsehoods that make up modern life. Except in the final verse (which amounts to the balladeer's traditional appeal for generosity from his listeners), the characters described are associated with deception, either of others or themselves. The quack doctors 'pretend they can always restore ye,' the young lady is 'thinly deck'd' by fashion, both concealing her appearance and also suggesting a cerecloth, and the soldier is wed to the phantom of honour. In this context, the phantasmagoria is principally understood to be a symbol of illusion and fakery. The phantasmagoria, in showing people sights with no substance, became the ideal mechanism for portraying things that seemed themselves to be powerful but which also lacked substance: foolish honour, false promises and empty vanity. Because it was defined in the popular mindset as a burlesque and comic spectacle, the phantasmagoria first appears as a comic and burlesque trope. The ballad assumes the facetious tone of satire; it assumes the right to laugh at the emperor with no clothes on. This tone is mirrored in the way the ballad uses the word 'phantasmagoria' itself. Two of these uses associate the phantasmagoria with death, saying that the quacks' victims would make a fine phantasmagoria and that 'if you're shot through the head, / you're a phantasmagoria indeed'. Again though, the threat of death is deployed as morbid comedy brought about by foolishness. Much like the grinning spectres that menaced the audience in the Lyceum, this is a pleasurable kind of morbidity. The other two times the word 'phantasmagoria' is used in the piece, it is essentially synonymous with illusion. The hope that peace and wealth may 'prove no phantasmagoria' repeats the connection between the phantasmagoria and deception. Here, the word phantasmagoria is not just *suggestive* of illusion but actually stands in for it. *Ghost of a Song*, then, obviously dramatises the shape that the phantasmagoria had in the minds of its immediate contemporaries: parades of grotesques, nervous laughter and illusion. The *European Magazine's* articles do the same thing.

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<sup>55</sup> *Phantasmagoria; or, Ghost of a song* (London, 1800).

*The Phantasmagoria*'s author adopts the conceit that the reader is in the audience of a real phantasmagoria listening to the impresario describe the sights on display. Only, instead of monsters and demons, the images are those of their fellow citizens:

[This evening's entertainment] consists, Ladies and Gentlemen, of representations of characters of real life, that is, of some who have lived, and some who are still alive; in short, a motley group, selected for your amusement: and if by chance, Ladies and Gentlemen, you should discover your own shadows, don't be frightened at them, like children, but consider them as mere nothings, particularly if they should happen to be at all ugly; for in that case it must be the fault of the picture.<sup>56</sup>

In this opening, the metaphor of the phantasmagoria is again deployed as a sort of satirical mirror. By calling the world a phantasmagoria, by warning people that they may see themselves in this motley band of spectres and illusions, the writer encourages the readers to see the ridiculous illusions that make up the world and inform their own selves. The author / impresario spells this out in the very next lines:

Here, Ladies and Gentlemen, you will see living folly, dying envy, departed merit, ancient errors and modern philosophy: this last is a perfectly new shadow. Besides those I have mentioned, you will have the shades of genius, the phantom of honour, the resemblance of honesty, the bugbear of patriotism, the spirit of party, and the will of the wisp called friendship: these are all phantasmagoriæ of the present day.<sup>57</sup>

The spectacles which this phantasmagoria produces are figures and ideas of the present age. The phantasmagoria acts as a pattern or symbol, for the world itself; but it

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<sup>56</sup> 'The Phantasmagoria- Number 1', *The European Magazine*, Vol. 43 (March 1803) (London, 1803), 187.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Phantasmagoria- Number 1', 187.

is an inherently subversive symbol to describe an anarchic world, which is portrayed as a mass of illusions and grotesques. The shades that the article exhibits are authors, critics, publishers, booksellers, lawyers and judges. The phantasmagoria seems to stand, in fact, for a society that is unknowable, illusory, ridiculous; it is again used to undermine contemporary tastes. Mimicking Robertson's comic summonings, the second article in the series refers to: 'the present taste, the ingredients of which may not be unaptly described as follows: Twelve ounces of a monster's brains; six of a modern philosopher's principles, without a scruple of religion; twenty drops of the spirit of spectres; and a mono dram of the hydrophobia mixed up *secundum artem* in the shape of a dramatic bolus'.<sup>58</sup> The phantasmagoria acts not only as a symbol of the degeneracy of the modern age, it is also a symptom of that degeneracy; the love of monsters and spectres suggests something spectral and monstrous in the makeup of their consumers.

Interestingly, Robertson himself seemed to grasp how efficacious the phantasmagoria could be as a comic symbol. In his memoirs, describing his brush with the revolutionary authorities that had forced him temporarily to leave Paris and shut down his first phantasmagoria, he wryly observes that:

They [the police] searched everywhere where there might be any trace of a ghost, and at that point, I had the thought, confirmed before and since, that to run after shadows and to grasp at phantoms, in order to transform them into realities, often very fatal, is one of the principle means of existence and one of the most frightening necessities of the secret police.<sup>59</sup>

With this observation, Robertson anticipated the satirical uses of the phantasmagoria. Here it becomes associated with the frightening and incomprehensible, but also slightly ridiculous, activities of the apparatus of state control. Like the phantasmagoria, the activities of the enforcers are by turns both terrifying and foolish; suspicions that exist as mere phantasms in the minds of the police can nevertheless turn horribly and fatally real for those over whom they wield power. However, they

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<sup>58</sup> 'The Phantasmagoria- Number 2', *The European Magazine*, Vol. 43 (April 1803) (London: Printed by James Asperne, 1803), 270.

<sup>59</sup> Heard, *Phantasmagoria: The Secret Life of the Magic Lantern*, 94.

also peer intently into nooks and crannies looking for any evidence of ghosts, hunting for that which does not exist. Like the magical words, *Conspirator*, *Jacobin*, *alarmist*, *Orleanist*, etc. these agents of the revolution would be comic if they weren't so dangerous. Behind many of Robertson's remarks is this sense of a revolutionary paranoia and hysteria breaking through the mask of the obedient citizen; of the preponderance of falsehoods and illusions that seem to dominate the society in which he lives; and of being trapped in a system that is both horrific and nonsensical. Indeed, both Robertson and Philidor's performances seem to have lent the phantasmagoria a strongly anti-authoritarian air. They showed the leaders of the Revolutionary government alternately running after phantasms (the police), being themselves run after by them (Barère and Cambon) or themselves turning into phantoms and devils (Philidor's cloven-hoofed devil). In the context, this political critique was especially effective because the phantasmagoria was inherently subversive. In its form, it showed the disintegration of certainties, of (as we shall see) clear demarcations between the realms of the real and the unreal; as a symbol, it seemed to reveal the lies behind conventional social narrations and the failure of perceived social order. Instead of a rational utopia, the phantasmagoria showed a monstrous arrangement of illusions that could not be made to submit to organising principles or a controlling authority. For the British, the phantasmagoria displayed the failure of the rationalising project, but for the French, it also suggested the failure of the Revolutionary project itself. The phantasmagoria, as a performance, as a metaphor and as an aesthetic, seemed to represent something that could not be effectively governed, something that could not be ordered, rationalised or restrained; it expressed the breakdown of order and certainty.

In all the works so far described, the phantasmagoria appears in a comic context to illustrate a satirical vision of the world; but the image of the phantasmagoria came progressively to be defined entirely by illusion and multiplicity and to lose its comic associations. In her essay 'Phantasmagoria and the Metaphorics of Modern Reverie', Terry Castle outlines the evolution of the phantasmagoria from 'an initial connection with something external and public (an artificially produced 'spectral' illusion) [...] to something wholly internal and subjective: the phantasmic imagery of the mind'.<sup>60</sup> Castle argues that the phantasmagoria and, indeed the entire rationalising

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<sup>60</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 141.



project of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, produced an unforeseen and unfortunate side effect. In essence, by successfully arguing that ghosts were merely images in the mind's eye, malfunctions in the mind's mechanism of perception, the idea appeared that the mind *itself* might be full of ghosts. If spirits were merely hallucinatory, if they had no objective reality but people seemed to see them anyway, then the possibility emerged that the mind might go terribly wrong and produce them itself. This was a frightening kind of epistemological back-fire: it gave rise to the idea that, instead of being a unified, rational, observing whole, the mind was in fact alienated from itself and that its products and actions might impinge upon the senses in an alarmingly unclear and hallucinogenic manner. As Castle writes, 'If ghosts were thoughts, then thoughts themselves took on – at least nominally – the haunting reality of ghosts [...] by relocating the world of ghosts in the closed space of the imagination, one ended up supernaturalising the mind itself'.<sup>61</sup> This disconcerting sense that in the nineteenth century thought had become, in Castle's words, somehow 'spectralised', began to crystallise around the phantasmagoria. The experience of the phantasmagoria seemed to ideally mirror this vision of human consciousness: dark, illusory, unable to tell reality from fantasy, unable to control its own fantasy; powerless before its terribly atavistic imagination, producing spectres within itself like maggots in a block of cheese, this was the phantasmagorical model of the mind.

Early uses of the image of the phantasmagoria had portrayed an inherently comic view of the world and a comic view of human nature. To say that we were living in a phantasmagoria had meant living among the lies and grotesquery of society, it had been a reflection of the deplorable state of modern life. Now, to suggest that we were living in a phantasmagoria was a reflection of the nature of ourselves. The phantasmagoria was something within us; in fact, it *was* us and we could not escape from it. Thus, to paraphrase Castle, could Thomas de Quincey write, in *Confessions of an English Opium Addict*, about the multifarious 'phantasmagoria' playing in his brain, while Byron in *Don Juan* described fears and nightmares spreading 'their loathsome phantasmagoria o'er the mind'.<sup>62</sup>

Castle describes the progression and ramifications of this idea of spectralised thought in detail, as well as the role played in it by the phantasmagoria, in 'The Metaphorics of Modern Reverie'. I have attempted to provide a brief overview of

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<sup>61</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 161.

<sup>62</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 157.

Castle's theories and how they apply to the metaphorical role of the phantasmagoria in order both to suggest some minor additions to Castle's interpretation and also to integrate it into the evolution of the curious, later phantasmagorical, aesthetic. Castle identifies some of the early comic associations of the phantasmagoria; specifically she points to a poem called *Phantasmagoria* that appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in June 1802 which 'preserves the facetious tone of eighteenth-century satire, but nonetheless makes [it clear that] the true phantasmagoria is the human brain itself'.<sup>63</sup> However, for a fuller picture of the progression of the phantasmagoria's metaphorical function, I think it important to emphasise this initial association with comedy and how it reflects the phantasmagoria's own character. As we have seen, the phantasmagoria was already regarded as something inherently subversive, something opposed (often despite itself) to rationalising enlightenment values. The ambiguity of its mission and the variety of its format meant that, from its earliest days, it was associated with spectacle and uncertainty; it was seen to be undermining ideas of good taste and rationalist ideology even before it became a symbol for the *futility* of that ideology. The phantasmagoria went from being perceived as merely socially subversive, to representing the subversion of thought itself. It became a symbol for the mind's inability to govern itself.

As well as being subversive, though, it was also spectacular. This spectacular quality of the phantasmagoria is something which Castle gives less attention to in her work. She focuses predominantly on the baleful and hallucinatory associations of the phantasmagorical symbol. However, as I have said, from its beginning the phantasmagoria was understood to be astounding as well as illusionistic. Castle mostly describes sources that understand the phantasmagorical as having a negative emotional weight – representing the frightening deceits that the mind might perpetrate upon itself. Castle opens her essay with one of the most potent uses of the phantasmagorical in this context. In his *French Revolution*, Carlyle used the image of the phantasmagoria to represent the terrible disorder of those times: 'the reader,' he says, 'who looks earnestly through this dim Phantasmagory of the Pit [as he calls the period of the Revolution], will discern few fixed objects'.<sup>64</sup> The chaotic grotesquery of the phantasmagoria exemplifies the chaotic grotesquery of the revolution; the delirium

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<sup>63</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 157.

<sup>64</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 140.

of the phantasmagoria becomes ‘the delirium of history itself’.<sup>65</sup> Like the French Revolution, the phantasmagoria seems to erode certainties and obscure clarity. The period takes in the aspect of a shadowy pandemonium, where it is all but impossible to differentiate between real and unreal. By referencing the phantasmagoria, Carlyle projects the image of the revolution as a type of historical nightmare. Carlyle’s use of this image is predicated upon the notion that there is something inherently nightmarish about the phantasmagoria itself; the phantasmagoria has become the expression of nightmare and delirium.

It is important to understand, though, that there were also many who would have understood it to represent something much more positive. With its multiplicity and air of unreality, the phantasmagoria could illustrate *both* the terrors of nightmare and the wonders of dream. Castle herself acknowledges that ‘The emotional value of the metaphor fluctuated. Some writers, to be sure, used the phantasmagorical image fairly light-heartedly, to evoke pleasurable or whimsical states of imaginative experience’.<sup>66</sup> The phantasmagoria could, on the one hand, represent the imagination as something terrifying alive and alienated from the self: an invasive parasite or tumorous outgrowth of the consciousness. Simultaneously, it could be used to represent the imagination as something *vibrantly* alive, a creative faculty that was in a constant state of excited animation. In both cases, the phantasmagoria preserves fundamentally the same meaning: a vibrant, multiplicitous spectacle that was, somehow, vaguely unreal, like a riotous carnival in the brain. What varies is how people react to this experience – as either an alarming derangement of the mind, or a spectacular flowering of the imagination; as an awful delirium, or a potent spectacle. Often, it was understood to be both at the same time.

In 1835, Washington Irving described the chivalric fantasies that filled his thoughts while wandering in the sun-dappled woods near Byron’s ancestral home, Newstead Abbey: ‘Such was the phantasmagoria that presented itself for a moment to my imagination, peopling the empty place before me with empty shadows of the past.’<sup>67</sup> For Nathaniel Hawthorne too the phantasmagoria presented itself as an image of unconstrained imaginative freedom. In the preface to *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), Hawthorn, in disavowing any direct connection between his community of

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<sup>65</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 141.

<sup>66</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 158.

<sup>67</sup> Castle, *The Female Thermometer*, 158.

Blithedale and the real life socialist community at Brook Farm, writes that: '[my only] concern with the socialist community [at Brook Farm in Roxbury] was merely to establish a theatre, a little removed from the highway of ordinary travel, where the creatures of [my] brain might play their phantasmagorical antics, without exposing them to too close a comparison with the actual events of real lives'.<sup>68</sup> For both of these men, the phantasmagoria is an image of imaginative freedom and dynamism. Hawthorne's metaphor of creating a theatre for his 'phantasmagorical' imagination is especially telling. By calling the community a theatre, Hawthorn implies that it and indeed the novel as a whole is a metaphorical space in which to play out a mental 'phantasmagoria'. The result of this metaphor is to suggest the underlying idea that there is something essentially phantasmagorical about the action of the imagination itself. Rather than a regulated process of composition and creation, a mimetic recombination of elements already found in reality, imaginative creativity is presented as a semi-mystical, uncontrolled and spontaneous emergence of fantastic images altogether separate from real life; the forms of the romancer's imagination come to mirror the vague, spectacular forms inhabiting the phantasmagoria. Later, this view of the imagination becomes even more pronounced when Hawthorne proposes that 'what the American Romancer needs' is to cultivate 'an atmosphere of strange enchantment' in his work. He writes that 'In its absence, the beings of imagination are compelled to show themselves in the same category as actually living mortals; a necessity that generally renders the paint and pasteboard of their composition but too painfully discernable'.<sup>69</sup> This cultivation of a pervasive sense, or 'atmosphere', of the fantastical is one of the most subtle but also most powerful aspects of the phantasmagoria experience. By invoking this 'strange' and 'enchanted' atmosphere, Hawthorne links the novel, its characters and events, with the realm of dream. Rather than aping the forms of reality, Hawthorne emphasises the novel's *disconnection* from reality. The characters and events are suggested to be products of the realm of imagination and the atmosphere of enchantment that surrounds them legitimises this rejection of reality by turning the novel into a sort of phantasmagoria. In effect, we are presented with the image of the novel as a window into the phantasmagorical realm of the imagination; the novel becomes a way of encapsulating the intoxicating forms of the imagination itself. This concept also creates an equivalence between the act of imaginative

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<sup>68</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Boston: Osgood, 1871), pp. iii- iv.

<sup>69</sup> Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance*, p. iv.

production and the act of exhibition. The writer displays the products of his imagination like the fantasmagore exhibiting his creations or like the curioso exhibiting his collection.

These examples are from several decades after the first exhibition of the phantasmagoria. Hawthorne, for example, was writing in 1852, sixty years after Philidor first set up shop on the Rue de Richelieu. The phantasmagorist's contemporaries, though, seem also to have been vividly aware of its imaginative potential. Robertson himself seems to have had a remarkable degree of insight into the metaphoric functions of his creation, reproducing in his memoirs Sébastien Mercier's response to it, which represents one of the most powerful and direct illustrations of the phantasmagoria as a symbol of the imagination:

I would rather see hell than total destruction. Demons frighten me less than the mute horror of the naked abyss. Another world is at Robertson's.

There, things are as they are dreamed each night. The dream! who has excavated the dream? You sleep: the divine rod strikes you or mercy consoles you. It is in the dream that we live, it is there that our soul takes pleasure with all its authority over nature.<sup>70</sup>

The answer to Mercier's question, 'who has excavated the dream?', we might assume to be Robertson himself, with the phantasmagoria as his instrument. Mercier's vision is of the phantasmagoria opening up, the dominion of dreams, and releasing it into the conscious world. This projection of unrefined dreams is notably similar to the 'atmosphere of strange enchantment' that Hawthorne described. Critically, Mercier does not describe this as a fearful or alienating experience. Instead of a horrible fragmentation of the self, the phantasmagoria is where we truly live, a manifestation of the inner world where the soul has its supreme authority. Like Irving and Hawthorn, Mercier sees the phantasmagoria as a pattern for the imagination itself. In doing this, Mercier also reflexively arrives at the idea that the imagination must itself be phantasmagorical: unpredictable, unbound by rules, pluralistic and brilliantly alive.

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<sup>70</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 244.

The phantasmagoria was repeatedly used in this way over the coming decades. Often, this association with imaginative intensity and energy is made very explicit. In 1843, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* published a romance called 'Ignacio Guerra and El Sangrador: A Tale of Civil War'. The work features a scene in which the young title character Ignacio tries to sleep beneath an overhang of rock, sheltering himself from a violent storm: 'Throwing himself on the ground, with his feet toward the flames, he endeavoured to get a little sleep... but it was in vain. ... Gradually, a sort of phantasmagoria passed before his "mind's eye", wherein the various events of his life, which, although a short one, had not the less been sadly eventful, were represented in vivid colours.'<sup>71</sup> Similarly, in March 1837, *The Morning Post* carried a review of 'Mr Ainsworth's New Romance, "Crichton"':

'Crichton' assuredly is a work of high pretension... A finer field for the romancer's uses could hardly have been selected than the Court of Henri Trois; in the foreground its masquerade of figures, gorgeous and mysterious – the voluptuous Marguerite of Valois and the inscrutable Catherine de Medicia dogged by her creatures, Ruggieri and Brantome, and Ronsard, and the crew of lively courtiers and Court beauties hardly less liberal; and in the background the Huguenots – a stern and pale group, whose miseries and endurances furnish a fine contrast to the artificial and corrupt scenes of the Court revel and intrigue. A better field could hardly have been selected, even had the novelist not chosen to make this vivid phantasmagoria revolve round one central figure of surpassing brilliancy and interest [...] no less a personage than Europe's one perfect gentleman, Crichton, the Admirable.<sup>72</sup>

Each of these articles describes its particular phantasmagoria as 'vivid'. This repetition is important because it strongly suggests that, in this context, the phantasmagoria was not meant to convey the dread of madness or insidious delirium, but to convey instead

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<sup>71</sup> 'Ignacio Guerra and El Sangrador: A Tale of Civil War', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 53 (January-June 1843), 797.

<sup>72</sup> 'Mr Ainsworth's New Romance', *The Morning Post*, no. 20669 (8<sup>th</sup> March 1837).

a particularly vigorous and colourful imaginative experience. Obviously, there is a slight ambiguity in *Ignacio Guerra's* use of the phantasmagoria symbol. Ignacio's phantasmagoria is hallucinatory, the result of 'thoughts that he was unable to drive away'.<sup>73</sup> The mixed value of the phantasmagorical metaphor was that it could suggest an imagination that was at once unrestrained but also out of control. There is no ambiguity in *The Morning Post's* usage though: it is unequivocally positive. The book contains a 'masquerade... gorgeous and mysterious'. The phantasmagoria is a symbol for an experience that is thrillingly alive and thrilling in its variety. In the mind of the reviewer, the elements of the novel whirl around each other and contrast with each other: the heroic Crichton, the austere Huguenots and the beautiful but corrupt courtiers. Like Mercier's depiction of it as the realisation of dream, this 'vividness' of the phantasmagoria associates it with wonder and astonishment. The reviewer's reference to the masquerade suggests a certain degree of parity between the two concepts: the aesthetic appeal of the masquerade is the same as the aesthetic appeal the phantasmagoria. Both emphasise the variety of sights and the quantity of sights; both represent an unsystematic, contrasting and vividly alive type of wonder.

Similar wondrous connotations can be seen in an article from the 1830s that Walter Benjamin reproduces in *The Arcades Project*. It is an advertisement for the 'Nocturnorama', a concert in which 'All that the music expresses... will be rendered visible through painted transparencies'. The assertion was that 'Haydn's *Creation*... accompanied by the appropriate phantasmagorias, will no doubt doubly captivate the senses of the audience'.<sup>74</sup> Again, the phantasmagoria is used, comparatively simply, to imply an arresting, enticing, almost magical visual spectacle: the synesthetic experience of music made visible. While there is a potentially hallucinogenic property to this performance, it is obviously intended to beguile rather than terrify. The phantasmagoria suggests dreamy intoxication and whimsy instead of mental derangement.

Likewise, another article from *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* from November 1844 on the writing of the French poet and politician Alphonse de Lamartine praises 'the splendid phantasmagoria with which his memory is stored', but points out that the consequence of this is that 'He is too rich in glowing images; his

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<sup>73</sup> 'Ignacio Guerra and El Sangrador: A Tale of Civil War', 797.

<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Belknap Press, 2002), 530.

descriptions are redundant in number and beauty. The mind even of the most imaginative reader is fatigued by the constant drain upon his admiration – the fancy is exhausted in the perpetual effort to conceive of the scenes which he portrays to the eye'.<sup>75</sup> Even more clearly than in the advert for the Nocturnorama, the phantasmagoria here encapsulates the idea of imaginative excess, of being overcome by wonder and the sheer quantity of delights on display.

At the same time though, the phantasmagorical metaphor acquired another related association, derived from its quality of multifariousness. In 1825, Maria Jane Jewsbury published a two volume collection of writings under the title *Phantasmagoria*. The work consisted of a variety of essays on philosophy, modern life and history, as well as poetry and short stories, among them 'Cursory remarks on modern ballads', 'The Relief of Lyden' (a prose story), 'The parting of David and Jonathan', 'Lines sent with an hour glass', 'Lines suggested by seeing two lovely infants at play', 'On the habit of analysing our emotions', and 'Recollections of a Tour'. This last is representative of the mainly comic and light-hearted tone of Jewsbury's essays in general. In it, she cheerfully admits to having totally failed to find poetic inspiration on her tour of the north of England (a shameful position for a professional author to find herself in), and uses the essay as an opportunity to make fun of many of the features of picturesque travel literature. In the conclusion of the work, she applies this same self-effacing tone to a discussion of how she arrived at the title for her book. After describing the relative difficulties of finding titles for novels, books of poems, travellers' tales, and sermons, Jewsbury writes that:

There is yet another class of literary name-wanters, and these claim undivided sympathy. The authors of the sketch and scrap-book – the caterers of viands *en papillote* – the manufacturers of literary small-wares – the stitchers of intellectual patch-work – the writers of books as multifarious in their contents, as the pocket of an old lady or the head of a young one! – words can never convey any adequate idea of the trouble of christening such amphibious productions [...] On the prudent plan of being the first to own, what is sure to be

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<sup>75</sup> 'Lamartine', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 56 (July-December 1844), 663.



eventually discovered, I willingly admit, that other books of the same nature have better names, but humbly take leave to suggest *that* as the reason that mine is not so good; and if the reader please to consider it absolutely bad, I can only assure him, that he has escaped some infinitely worse [...] [and, by contrast] PHANTASMAGORIA would strike him as delightful.<sup>76</sup>

Aside from the humorous suggestion that she lit upon ‘phantasmagoria’ out of simple desperation to find *something* to call the book, Jewsbury’s justification of the title hinges upon one fact: the variety of the two books’ contents. None of Jewsbury’s writings could be convincingly labelled as grotesque, or even fantastical, but they are, as she says ‘multifarious’. The work is an eclectic ‘scrapbook’ assembled from different forms of writing and she presents it to the reader as something self-evidently disconnected. Significantly though, despite the disconnectedness, the individual essays are of a very conventional character; calling the work ‘phantasmagoria’ does not refer to any strange, delirious or wondrous property on the part of the contents. Instead, it is used merely to convey the diversity of the material on offer. Deprived of hypnagogic associations, we can see that the sense of what it is to be phantasmagorical is here almost synonymous with the idea of a collection; specifically, an *incongruous, disjointed* collection. To refer back to the OED’s definition of phantasmagoria, we can see that this sense of being a collection is an essential part of that definition. (One grotesque or a single spectacle does not a phantasmagoria make.)

What is significant is that Jewsbury uses the word phantasmagoria to convey something very similar to what the word ‘curious’ would once have meant: a disconnected, unsystematic assembly of disparate elements. Indeed, in general, the term ‘phantasmagoria’ had come, by the late Romantic period, to occupy the same semantic space once occupied by the culture of curiosity. The aesthetics of the phantasmagoria mirror the aesthetics of curiosity. In its positive sense, the phantasmagorical conveyed a sense of wonder and astonishment. Even as a spectacle of horror, to be phantasmagorical was to be visually arresting and compelling. The phantasmagorical experience was also inherently the experience of a collection. Like

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<sup>76</sup> Maria Jane Jewsbury, *Phantasmagoria*, Vol. 2 (London, 1825), 305-308.

the curious collection, the phantasmagoria was unsystematic. Order and rational formulation would have reduced its power, and so like its curious predecessor it emphasised juxtaposition, variety, scale and oddity. The last of these essential features of the phantasmagorical aesthetic was its air of unreality. This dream-like, intoxicating dimension of the phantasmagoria reiterates the random, lackadaisical progression of the visitor to the curious collection or the dazed observer of the masquerade. Both the curious and the phantasmagorical contain the sense of an altered reality – a fusion of consciousness and dream.

Like the phantasmagoria, the curious aesthetic was an assembly of singularities; it derived its power from the contradiction of normal certainties and conventional systems of knowledge. From its earliest days, the phantasmagoria was understood to symbolise the breakdown of rational certainties and systematic order. Even in its infancy, as a satiric representation, it was used to show the world as being composed of ridiculous monstrosities and institutionalised falsehood. Later, it seemed to undermine the validity of rational observation and restrained imagination. Where conventional enlightenment discourse held out the promise of universal vision and comprehension, the power to grasp ‘the full scope of a whole epoch of human intellectual development’,<sup>77</sup> the phantasmagoria suggested the collapse of a rational, controlling self. This disruptive quality of the phantasmagorical aesthetic can be seen in its subsequent literary incarnations.

Despite all these points of similarity, there is an important difference between the curious and the phantasmagorical that had a significant effect upon how they manifested themselves. The phantasmagoria was, with a very few exceptions, essentially linked with the imaginative. Not only was the phantasmagoria an imaginative, fantastical experience, but as a metaphor it was quickly internalised and came to articulate something about the nature of imagination itself. The phantasmagorical embodied the shadowy quality of dream or nightmare and seemed to exist on the periphery of consciousness. Unlike curiosity, it never existed as a codified set of cultural institutions; in fact it was actively opposed to such codification. Curiosity culture had, at least nominally, been founded upon the pursuit of scientific investigation and its fashionable offshoots had been derived from what was regarded as a more authentic form of curious activity. Curiosity, despite its unsystematic nature,

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<sup>77</sup> Stephen Oettermann, *The Panorama: History of a Mass Medium*, translated by Deborah Lucas Schneider (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 38.

implied the advancement of knowledge. The phantasmagorical, by being internalised, manifested itself as a particular imaginative literary mode, instead of an obvious cultural activity.

As Castle suggests, the creation of the phantasmagorical metaphor produced a compelling new pattern for describing imaginative activity. It gave rise to the notion of an imagination that could not be restrained by the mind's own rationalising principles; a mind that might suddenly and tyrannically impose delirium upon itself at any time. Critically though, there were those who regarded this kind of unrestrained, bizarre extremity of imagination as something compelling and seductive, something to be deliberately produced and cultivated. Hawthorn had envisioned producing a metaphorical theatre where his imagination could play out its phantasmagorical antics. Others took this concept far further. The subconscious absorption of the phantasmagorical model of the imagination created the preconditions necessary for a phantasmagorical form of literature. Writers transformed their texts into a conceptual space in which they could exhibit the most extreme products of their imaginations: collecting its most bizarre, exotic or alarming creations. The defining feature of this phantasmagorical literature was that it produced a phantasmagorical impression on the mind of the reader, who was immersed in this textual phantasmagoria and exposed to all its spectacle, multiplicity and intoxicating unreality. In this way, the phantasmagoria provides the impetus for the relocation of the curious aesthetic, and much of its associated discourse, into the realm of the imagination. Eighteenth-century writers had produced fictional versions of the curious traveller and collector for the purpose of satire and social critique; later writers produced curiosities because of the seductive appeal of their very strangeness – the phantasmagorical attraction of the curious. By imitating some of its features and altering others, the phantasmagoria led to the reinvention of curiosity as a specific type of imaginative exercise and aesthetic preoccupation.

Of the writers who cultivated this phantasmagorical quality in their work, one of the first and most influential was Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's use of the phantasmagorical in his works is sometimes very explicit. In 'The Fall of the House of Usher', for example, the word is used twice: once near the beginning of the story to describe the 'phantasmagoric armorial trophies' that crowd the interior of Usher's

ancestral home,<sup>78</sup> and again a few pages later, to characterise one of Usher's paintings – a 'Phantasmagoric conception' that 'may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words'.<sup>79</sup> In these examples, the phantasmagoria is invoked as a way of suggesting some disturbing, hallucinatory property in the object under consideration. These phantasmagorical things seem to have the power of sapping the narrator's sense of reality, contaminating it with the fantastical images of the mind. He describes how:

while the objects around me – while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy – while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this – I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up.<sup>80</sup>

The 'phantasmagoric' nature of the suits of armour and their accoutrements reflects their power to produce these 'unfamiliar fancies'. Like the spirits in a phantasmagoria, Poe suggests, they form a huge, claustrophobic multitude which, along with the carvings, the oppressive 'ebon blackness of the floors' and the 'sombre tapestries', seem to crowd in upon the characters, trapping them in a maddening phantasmagorical space. Again, like the illusions produced by the magic lantern, the subtly unreal quality of the House of Usher seems to be transferring itself into the minds of the characters, gradually infusing them with the fear that they have lost the ability to determine what is real and what isn't. In this context, the narrator's repetition of 'while' becomes especially disturbing, conveying a desperate attempt to temporise, to hold off admitting his awareness of the strange and unfamiliar actions that are occurring in his mind. This may also constitute a darkly punning reference from Poe, since the narrator and Roderick Usher will, for the rest of the story, try purposelessly to 'while' away their time until the final deaths of Roderick and Madeline and the subsequent implosion of their ancient home.

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<sup>78</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (London: Penguin, 2006), 129.

<sup>79</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 133.

<sup>80</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 129.

Usher's paintings generate a similar effect, being both indicative of Usher's own madness and capable of somehow transmitting something of that madness to the observer. Usher's friend tells us that 'If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher'; they convey 'an intensity of intolerable awe' as well as 'a vagueness at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered not knowing why'.<sup>81</sup> However, there is a more subtly phantasmagorical quality to both the painting and Usher's malady. It can be seen most clearly in the details of the painting:

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points in the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernable; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour.<sup>82</sup>

The most immediately disturbing quality of the picture is the nature of the illumination that it depicts. The light itself appears to be almost tangible, to have a physical presence in the subterranean chamber. The preponderance of liquid imagery used to describe it reinforces this: it is a 'flood' that 'rolls' through the chamber and 'bathes' it. Like the phantasmagorical spirit, this light is at once (or, perhaps, neither, such is its confusing and contradictory status) substantial and insubstantial, at once corporeal and ethereal. The light also has no source; it seems to be emitted from the substance of the chamber itself. Like the watery description of the light, this seems to erode the distinction between material and immaterial natures. Usher's picture illustrates a frightening, hallucinatory vision, in which normal mechanisms of sensation are deranged or have become irrelevant. Like the phantasmagoria, Poe uses Usher's painting to confront us with a horrible sensory miscegenation – merging the visual with the tactile.

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<sup>81</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 133.

<sup>82</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 133.

In addition to this direct referencing of the phantasmagoria, Usher's own mind is often presented to us in luminous or ethereal terms. The narrator describes how his friend's 'excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphurous lustre over all'. More disturbingly, when he tries to alleviate the 'darkness' in Usher's mind he discovers that '[For him, it was] as if an inherent positive quality poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom'.<sup>83</sup> Usher's madness is characterised by phantasmagorical images; this is how Poe describes it to us and how it manifests itself in his painting. These inversions and contradictions – light with an inherent physicality, darkness that radiates like light – represent the mind's own sense of disorder and contradiction. These luminescent images are echoed in the final storm that engulfs the titular house of the Ushers, in which the clouds themselves seem to glow with their own light, and which the narrator attempts to explain as 'electrical phenomena' or as having 'their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn',<sup>84</sup> similarly vague and nebulous explanations for vague and nebulous events. Indeed, the narrator's attempted explanation only serves to highlight the futility of reason when confronted with such obviously maddening occurrences. Finally, the poem that Usher composes in order allegorically to portray the collapse of his sanity ends on the most explicitly phantasmagorical image of the entire story. Having portrayed his once sane mind as a green valley 'by good angels tenanted', Usher ends by describing his final descent into madness with the lines:

And travellers now within that valley,  
Through the red-litten windows, see  
Vast forms that move fantastically  
To a discordant melody;  
While, like a rapid ghastly river,  
Through the pale door,  
A hideous throng rush out forever,  
And laugh – but smile no more.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 132-133.

<sup>84</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 140.

<sup>85</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 135.

Here the phantasmagoria is literally playing in Usher's brain as he imagines a 'hideous throng' rushing through his mind. Crucially the final verse of the poem, though disturbing, is full of activity and spectacle; it is colourful, full of the phantasmagorical experience, at once intensely visual, multiplicitous and indicative of unreality.

From these details we can see the potently phantasmagorical influences that predominate in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'. As well as providing a stock of imagery with which to define Roderick Usher's madness, the story (like many of Poe's other works) portrays a largely phantasmagorical conception of thought. The influence of the house's furnishings on the narrator is one instance of this. The 'unfamiliar fancies' which they produce are an example of the malleable nature of the mind. Rather than a firm beacon of rationality, the mind can be moulded and reshaped by its environment; its surroundings have an unaccountable power to impose new forms and thoughts on it. As the story begins and the narrator rides up to the crumbling House of Usher, he wonders:

What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth.<sup>86</sup>

Following on from these speculations, the narrator naïvely attempts to impose some sort of conscious control on these mental impressions:

It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I

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<sup>86</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 126-127.

reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodelled and inverted images of the grey sedge and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows.

In these passages, we get the sense of the insubstantial and, more importantly, incomprehensible nature of thought. The mind is at the mercy of external influences – alienated from itself and its own actions. The narrator’s attempt to reorder these actions by simply reordering the elements of the scene proves the whimsical nature of thought and the characters’ inability to resist this. It is suggested that continued exposure to this place has had a profound effect, not just upon Usher himself, but his whole lineage: ‘an effect which the *physique* of the grey walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence’.<sup>87</sup>

But, what exactly *is* the ‘morale’ of Usher’s existence? He is certainly melancholic, afflicted with hypochondria, prone to fatalism and to ‘an excessive nervous agitation’,<sup>88</sup> which manifests itself sometimes in abstruse philosophising and fantasy and sometimes in a frighteningly intense kind of mental application. So intense is this mental activity and collectedness that the narrator compares it more than once to the effects of opium or alcohol.<sup>89</sup> Usher’s mind, it seems, has reached the point of being able to intoxicate itself, so that what would conventionally be termed ‘intoxication,’ has become its normal state of being. Usher dwells in a realm that is part dream, part nightmare, recalling Mercier’s enraptured response to Robertson’s phantasmagoria (‘it is the dream in which we live’).<sup>90</sup> What Poe also gives us, though, is an extended description of Usher’s personal tastes. Like the painting that he produces, Usher’s aesthetic preferences are primarily intended to be a reflection of his mental state. Consequently, his tastes are everywhere for the strange, the intricate, the highly refined and the bizarre. In effect, Usher’s taste, in books, music and painting, is for the curious. For example, we are told that Usher’s love of music, in classically curious form, runs to ‘a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than

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<sup>87</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 131.

<sup>88</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 130.

<sup>89</sup> See Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 131 and 134.

<sup>90</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 244.



to the orthodox and easily recognisable beauties, of musical science'.<sup>91</sup> This regard for intricacy, for elaborateness and strangeness, rather than for more conventional merits, is a hallmark of the curious taste. Even the phantasmagorical painting that illustrates Usher's mind would once, with its strange optical effects, tricks of perspective and choice of subject, have been regarded as a very curious work. Thomas Browne describes similar sorts of work in his *Musæum Clausum* with similarly curious tricks of colour and shading.<sup>92</sup>

In essence, in rendering the phantasmagorical quality of Usher's mind, Poe reproduces the curious aesthetic; he develops a kind of parity between the curious and the phantasmagorical where the taste for the curious is not only symptomatic of the deranged and phantasmagorical mind, but also co-opted into a phantasmagorical aesthetic. The passage in which this becomes most explicit is the one in which Poe describes Usher's library:

Our books—the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works as the *Ververt et Chartreuse* of Gresset; the *Belphegor* of Machiavelli; the *Heaven and Hell* of Swedenborg; the *Subterranean Voyage* of Nicholas Klimm by Holberg; the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, of Jean D'Indagine, and of *De la Chambre*; the *Journey into the Blue Distance* of Tieck; and the *City of the Sun* of Campanella. One favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African Satyrs and Ægipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic – the manual of a forgotten church – the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*.

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<sup>91</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 127.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Browne, *The Works of Sir Thomas Browne*, Vol. 3, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (London: Faber, 1964), 113.

I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac.<sup>93</sup>

In this passage we can see a clear overlap of curious and phantasmagorical influences. Thomas Mabbot greatly enlarges on Poe's descriptions of these works in his essay 'The Books in the House of Usher', and in doing so makes what Poe calls their 'character of phantasm' even more obvious. All of these works have odd, contradictory and unclassifiable natures or expound strange varieties of philosophy and mythology. Niccolo Machiavelli's *Belfagor arcidiavolo* describes a fallen angel who comes to earth where he performs several acts of demonic possession until he finally returns to hell to escape his shrewish wife; the works on chiromancy (palm-reading) describe 'a mysterious relation between the stars, the configuration of the palms, and so forth; that is, between the microcosm and macrocosm';<sup>94</sup> and Swedenbourg's *Heaven and Hell* relates mystical visions of the nature of the afterlife. At one time, such works would have readily found their way into the library of the curioso; the words 'curious' is even used to describe the *Vigiliae Mortuorum*. The fact that none of these books are inventions of Poe's is intriguing. While, as we shall see, he did apply a slight imaginative finesse to his description of *Vigiliae*'s contents, all of these books are real and their inclusion is the result of Poe's own researches. Poe is almost as enthusiastic about these books as Usher is. Mabbot points out that 'Poe was himself as much of a bibliophile [as Usher was, and] as his dreadfully limited purse ever allowed him to be'.<sup>95</sup> By writing them into the story, by listing them, researching them and describing their imaginative effects upon his characters, Poe is almost performing an act of collection – assembling these works within his text. There is a strangely vicarious aspect to Poe's description of Usher's collection; in dwelling on them so lovingly, Poe seems to reveal something of his own passion. It is not hard to draw a line of descent from the library in the House of Usher to the equally phantasmagorical libraries of Des Esseintes and Dorian Grey (which also seem to reflect their author's own tastes).

As well as being a curious collection, the books also form a kind of phantasmagoria, an assemblage of strange and exotic oddities. Significantly, the books

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<sup>93</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 136–137.

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Mabbott, 'The Books in the House of Usher', *Books at Iowa*, no. 19 (November 1973), 5.

<sup>95</sup> Mabbott, 'The Books in the House of Usher', 4.

at once embody Usher's personality and have power to provoke his fantasies; they reflect the shape of his mind and also have an effect upon it, moulding his thoughts and his dreams. Poe's selection of titles for Usher's library was clearly intended to convey the essence of Usher's personality to the reader. Poe imitates the idea of the collected self familiar from curiosity culture; he presents us with a collection that acts as an externalisation of the collector's mind, an incarnation of his personality in objects. As with Usher's tastes in painting and music, the curious collection of books conveys the phantasmagoria that is Usher's character. More than this though, as well as illustrating Usher's internal phantasmagoria, these books also produce this phantasmagoria. Towards the end of the passage, the phantasmagoria of the books begins to merge with their owner's phantasmagorical imaginings of satyrs and ægipans. Usher seems to look *through* these books into a distant dreamland. The books acquire an almost supernatural dimension; Usher is apparently inspired by contact with them, by reading them and handling them he is elevated into a fantastical intoxication. This is the allure of the phantasmagorical object – their appeal is not just to the sense of beauty or to the intellect, instead they have the seemingly magical property of inducing dream, of quickening the imagination.

Poe's source for Usher's 'chief delight', the *Vigiliae Mortuorum*, was, according to Kevin Hayes, a short story by Thomas Raikes which appeared in *Bentley's Miscellany* in June 1838.<sup>96</sup> The story, called 'The Bibliophilist', centres on an elderly book-seller and ex-monk, Don Vincente, who after selling his rare books to his clients tracks them down and murders them in order to recover his prized possessions, thereby alleviating his financial distress without losing parts of his treasured collection. A comparison of how the *Vigiliae* is described in 'The Bibliophilist' and in 'Usher' provides an insight into Poe's phantasmagorical use of the book. Don Vincente describes the book as 'an exceedingly curious work.'<sup>97</sup> Clearly, it was these words, 'exceedingly curious' – reproduced exactly in the 'House of Usher' – which drew Poe to the *Vigiliae*. He obviously felt that a book with such a title and described in such terms was ideally suited to reflect Usher's character. What Poe added, though, was the claim of 'wild ritual' in the work. Indeed, according to the editors of Poe's *Tales and Sketches: 1831- 1842* (who based their remarks on an actual

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<sup>96</sup> Kevin J. Hayes, 'Another Source for "The Fall of the House of Usher"', *Notes and Queries*, Vol. 57 Issue 2, 214-216.

<sup>97</sup> T. Raikes, 'The Bibliophilist', *Bentley's Miscellany* Vol. 3 (London: Richard Bentley, 1838), 575.

examination of the *Vigiliae*), ‘Poe... may have supposed the work unorthodox, but incorrectly. [Indeed]... the rites of Mainz in 1500 differed little, and in nothing very important, from those in use in Baltimore in 1839’.<sup>98</sup> This embellishment of the work, while apparently trivial, is actually highly revealing because it exemplifies how Poe and his character found something altogether different in the work than Raikes and *his* character did. The author of ‘The Bibliophilist’ uses the work simply as a rare piece of ephemera and Don Vincente loves it purely as a scholar. ‘Man is mortal’, says Vincente, ‘... But scientific books must be preserved above everything; their value is irreplaceable’.<sup>99</sup> The use of the word ‘scientific’ shows us exactly how Don Vincente thinks of the book. By contrast, Usher’s love of his books is founded upon their imaginative potential. Poe apparently grasped that, while Usher’s books needed to be curious and rare, they had, in addition to this, to possess some other property – an air of darkness, fantasy, medieval morbidity and strange philosophy – the title probably suggested these attributes to his imagination.

Usher’s books, while curious, are not *only* curious, they are constituents of dream. The curious is reformed, altered so that, in this new context, the curious object can seem both real and unreal, solid yet fantastical, an element of a phantasmagoria. This is the most basic manifestation of the phantasmagorical style of writing. By assembling a collection of curious, wondrous, and grotesque objects with the narrative, their very strangeness, their juxtapositions and fantastical effects create the sensation of the phantasmagoria – the hallucinatory feeling of being immersed in dream.

Usher’s taste for the curious and the phantasmagorical nature of his personality dominate ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. It is significant that the tale begins, as the narrator approaches the house, with the explicit failure of the sublime. He observes that: ‘[The insufferable gloom] was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible [...] There was an iciness, a sickening of the heart – an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime’.<sup>100</sup> This inability to find anything elevating in the ‘desolate or terrible’ elements of the scene represents the failure or the

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<sup>98</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *Tales and Sketches: 1831- 1842*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott, Eleanor D. Kewer and Maureen Cobb Mabbott (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 421.

<sup>99</sup> Raikes, ‘The Bibliophilist’, 575.

<sup>100</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 127.

insufficiency of conventional aesthetic standards. Neither the 'desolate' ruggedness of the picturesque nor the 'terrible' sublime is appropriate to the vision we are presented with. In these lines, Poe dismisses the normal Romantic responses to the brooding power of the landscape, the poetic response is impotent when confronted with the house of Usher which, surrounded by its dark miasma, seems like something out of the realm of the unreal. In many ways, the phantasmagorical style of writing, like curiosity before it, represents the disintegration of a unified, ordered system of aesthetics.

Similarly, when the narrator attempts to remodel the 'particulars of the scene' into a more pleasing arrangement, he is in effect attempting to follow the conventional aesthetic dictates of his time, attempting to adjust the framing and the elements of the picture he is presented with, so placing them in a more harmonious and balanced alignment with each other. However, all he achieves is an even more hideous prospect. Again, we see that the phantasmagorical resists being managed by conventional authorities or absorbed into conventional narratives. The phantasmagoria emphasises disorder and the phantasmagorical exists outside regular aesthetic dictates; subverting traditional standards, it rejects not only social authority (as can be seen in Robertson and Philidor's political satire) but aesthetic authority as well.

The failure of the sublime that opens 'Usher' is not merely an indication of the house's effects upon the narrator, but also an indication, an advance warning to the reader, that conventional systems of aesthetics cannot contain Poe's phantasmagorical imaginative vision. These references to the picturesque and the sublime stand in obvious contrast to the style of Poe's own writing and Usher's curious tastes.

Usher is, however, if anything, one of Poe's less obviously curious and phantasmagorical characters. The unnamed narrator of 'Ligeia' and the eccentric Prince Prospero from 'The Masque of the Red Death' are both responsible for more phantasmagorical spectacle than Roderick Usher. The distraught husband who tells the story of 'Ligeia' repeats several elements of familiar eighteenth-century curiosity discourse, but altered and presented in a new and darkly phantasmagorical fashion. The phantasmagoria in 'Ligeia' is contained in one room, the bridal chamber of the house into which he takes his second wife. The narrator describes the furnishings of the room in elaborate detail, and it is worth reproducing the whole of this description, in order to convey the sense of the depth and complexity of Poe's phantasmagorical creations:

There is no individual portion of the architecture and decoration of that bridal chamber which is not now visibly before me. Where were the souls of the haughty family of the bride, when, through thirst of gold, they permitted to pass the threshold of an apartment so bedecked, a maiden and a daughter so beloved? I have said that I minutely remember the details of the chamber – yet I am sadly forgetful on topics of deep moment—and here there was no system, no keeping, in the fantastic display, to take hold upon the memory. The room lay in a high turret of the castellated abbey, was pentagonal in shape, and of capacious size. Occupying the whole southern face of the pentagon was the sole window— an immense sheet of unbroken glass from Venice—a single pane, and tinted of a leaden hue, so that the rays of either the sun or moon, passing through it, fell with a ghastly lustre on the objects within. Over the upper portion of this huge window, extended the trellice-work of an aged vine, which clambered up the massy walls of the turret. The ceiling, of gloomy-looking oak, was excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device. From out the most central recess of this melancholy vaulting, depended, by a single chain of gold with long links, a huge censer of the same metal, Saracenic in pattern, and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them, as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-coloured fires.

Some few ottomans and golden candelabra, of Eastern figure, were in various stations about—and there was the couch, too—the bridal couch—of an Indian model, and low, and sculptured of solid ebony, with a pall-like canopy above. In each of the angles of the chamber stood on end a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor, with their aged lids full of immemorial

sculpture. But in the draping of the apartment lay, alas! the chief phantasy of all. The lofty walls, gigantic in height—even unproportionably so—were hung from summit to foot, in vast folds, with a heavy and massive-looking tapestry – tapestry of a material which was found alike as a carpet on the floor, as a covering for the ottomans and the ebony bed, as a canopy for the bed, and as the gorgeous volutes of the curtains which partially shaded the window. The material was the richest cloth of gold. It was spotted all over, at irregular intervals, with arabesque figures, about a foot in diameter, and wrought upon the cloth in patterns of the most jetty black. But these figures partook of the true character of the arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view. By a contrivance now common, and indeed traceable to a very remote period of antiquity, they were made changeable in aspect. To one entering the room, they bore the appearance of simple monstrosities; but upon a farther advance, this appearance gradually departed; and step by step, as the visitor moved his station in the chamber, he saw himself surrounded by an endless succession of the ghastly forms which belong to the superstition of the Norman, or arise in the guilty slumbers of the monk. The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies—giving a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole.<sup>101</sup>

This chamber, to which Rowena, the narrator's second wife, is apparently confined, is relentlessly phantasmagorical. Like the curious collection, there is 'no system' to it; it is instead, purely a random 'fantastic display'. The objects arranged within are all culturally alien to European society and, crucially, culturally alien to each other as well. Poe's description emphasises disassociation and an uneasy hybridity. Thus we have the carved 'semi-gothic, semi-druidical' devices of the ceiling, the 'Saracenic'

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<sup>101</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 119-120.

ensor with its multi-coloured lights, Turkish and Indian furniture and the huge black granite Egyptian Sarcophagi. The decorations of the phantasmagorical fabric covering the walls and floor is of another character again, being, somehow, at once arabesque, Christian and pagan. The description of the chamber quickly becomes an account of a collection of bizarre and freakish exotica. The freakishness is emphasised by the continual reiteration of the chamber's lack of order and proportion: the walls are 'unproportionally' high, the ceilings 'excessively lofty'. Likewise, the decorations appear to take on a disturbing semblance of life, with the tapestries moving in 'hideous and uneasy animation' and the censor's light writhing with 'serpent vitality'. These qualities not only lend the objects a supernatural dimension, a kind of dark, frightening charisma, they also associate them with the traditions of curiosity culture. The sense of disproportion – the massive and the miniscule – and the union of opposites – to be both animate and inanimate at once – were inherent to defining what made an object curious.

While his house (it is strongly suggested that Rowena's bridal chamber is typical of the rest of their home as well) is full of curiosities, the narrator's own personality also repeats aspects of typical eighteenth-century curiosity criticism. Like Usher, his taste for curiosities is suggested to be indicative of an underlying mental dysfunction or derangement. Poe's depiction of Usher and the Husband is derived from the idea that the love of the disordered, or monstrous, bespeaks the disorganised or monstrous nature of the collector, their failure to restrain the appetite and forge a coherent, respectable personality. Here though, the idea is not treated comically but as something darkly serious. There is something seriously otherworldly about the Husband and about Usher that finds its expression in their tastes for the curious and phantasmagorical. The narrator of 'Ligeia' desperately excoriates himself for creating the bridal chamber and for allowing Rowena to enter it. He describes it as being the result of 'a child-like perversity'. He elaborates by saying that:

For such follies, even in childhood, I had imbibed a taste, and now they came back to me as if in the dotage of grief. Alas, I feel how much even of incipient madness might have been discovered in the gorgeous and fantastic draperies, in the solemn carvings of Egypt, in the wild cornices and furniture, in the Bedlam patterns of the carpets of tufted gold! I had become



a bounden slave in the trammels of opium, and my labours and my orders had taken a colouring from my dreams.<sup>102</sup>

Like the satirical curioso, the Husband's tastes are equated with either the immaturity of childhood or the degeneracy of old age – indicating an improperly developed personality. Importantly though, the notion of pretentiousness, the quintessential failing of the comic curioso, is absent from this depiction. Instead, the chamber indicates madness. The tradition of curiosity culture contained the idea of the collected self, of the collection as an external manifestation of the collector's self-consciously assembled personality. In 'Ligeia' the phantasmagorical chamber becomes an expression not only of the narrator's selfhood but also his dreams. In a disruption of internal and external reality, Rowena's entry into the room is like an entry into her husband's mind. The phantasmagorical nature of the chamber reflects the phantasmagoria of the mind, the potency of dream and nightmare. In effect, the chamber is not only a manifestation of its creator's dreams and fantasies; it also has the power to engender these same fantasies in those who inhabit it. As time goes on, Rowena becomes increasingly prey to 'the phantasmagorical influences of the chamber',<sup>103</sup> experiencing frightening and amorphous hallucinations prompted by the shifting tapestries. The phantasmagorical chamber is not only born out of dream as an expression of the narrator's fantastical visions but like Usher's books it has the power of producing this same dream state, of creating a kind of drug-like feeling of non-reality. The objects contained in the chamber take on an additional spiritual or supernatural vividness; they exist not only as themselves but as embodiments of a phantasmagorical fantasy.

Rowena and her husband no longer seem to live entirely in either dream or reality but instead in a mixture of the two. As his wife's sickness progresses, the narrator admits 'let me confess it, I could not *all* believe... that those gentle variations of the figures upon the wall were but the natural effects of that customary rushing of the wind',<sup>104</sup> and this doubt as to the distinction between the real and the fantastic leads him into the same delusions as hers. Where the phantasmagorical collection of Usher's books prompts a delightful elevation into dream, the phantasmagorical

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<sup>102</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 118.

<sup>103</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 121.

<sup>104</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 121.

collection in the chamber prompts a descent into nightmare. In each case though, the effect is the same, the production of an experience of the unreal through exposure to an multitude of curious spectacles. This phantasmagorical aesthetic is derived from the phantasmagorical model of the mind; its mutability, its uncontrollable imaginative proclivity, spawns an aesthetic based on manipulating these effects.

While both of these stories betray phantasmagorical influences on their invention and portray phantasmagorias at play simultaneously in their narratives and their characters' thoughts, Poe's most entirely phantasmagorical story is probably 'The Masque of the Red Death'. The plot of 'The Masque' is relatively minimal: it describes the story of Prince Prospero and his court, who seal themselves up within the Prince's castle to avoid the deadly plague of the Red Death that is ravaging their lands. The majority of the story is devoted to describing the spectacle that Prince Prospero produces within the castle to keep the inmates amused – a vast masquerade, at the end of which the incarnate spectre of the Red Death itself appears to claim the inhabitants of the castle. Poe begins by describing the castle itself and its interior. Outside, it is 'an extensive and magnificent structure, the creation of the Prince's own eccentric yet august taste'.<sup>105</sup> Inside, the Prince's apartments consist of seven rooms. These are all arranged to turn at right angles to each other and each is decorated predominantly in a single colour. The only source of light for these chambers are tall gothic windows set into the walls, with coloured glass to match the colouring of the room and with braziers behind them so that the artificial coloured light shines powerfully into them.

Poe writes that the eastern end of the room 'was hung, for example, in blue and vividly blue were its windows. The second chamber was purple in its ornaments and tapestries, and here the panes were purple.' This continues with green, orange, white and violet rooms and, as Poe tells us, 'thus were produced a multitude of gaudy and fantastic appearances'.<sup>106</sup> The exception to this is the last chamber which is upholstered in black and illuminated by a deep scarlet coloured light. This final room produces such ghastly effects that 'there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all'.<sup>107</sup>

Through all of these chambers (except the last, fearful one) there proceeds an elaborate masquerade:

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<sup>105</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 37.

<sup>106</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 38.

<sup>107</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 39.

Be sure they were grotesque. There was much glare and glitter and piquancy and phantasm... There were arabesque figures with unsuited limbs and appointments. There were delirious fancies such as the madman fashions. There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the *bizarre*, something of the terrible, and not a little of that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams. And these – the dreams – writhed in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps.<sup>108</sup>

There is much that is obviously phantasmagorical in the Prince's apartments. The masqueraders that seem to be a 'multitude of dreams' are a delirious assembly, combining the alluring and the horrible, the beautiful and the disgusting. These figures not only recall the eighteenth-century masqueraders who excited their contemporaries' curiosity, but also Robertson's phantasmagorias that combined horror, lyricism, comedy and spectacle. Their appeal comes from their variety and their disorder – such that they become dreams made flesh.

The design of Prince Prospero's suite is also significant. Again, with its variety of colours and optical effects, it is not hard to trace its descent from the phantasmagoria. However, what Poe does is to disassemble the phantasmagoria and arrange it spatially. Its effects are spread across the seven rooms, arranged so as to amuse the masqueraders. In this arrangement, it is possible to see something of the passion that the collector has for exhibiting his collection. The phantasmagorical effects become incidental amusements strategically placed throughout the apartments, they become almost like objects in a collection that the revellers and, implicitly, the reader, wander among. They seem to encourage a type of undirected, pleasurable wandering from room to room, the characteristic style of encountering the curious. This combines with the figures of the masquerade to give 'The Masque of the Red Death' a gaudy, colourful but also threatening attractiveness which contrasts with the desolation of the finale. This chaotic and vivid spectacle is embodied in the story by

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<sup>108</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 39–40.

the Prince himself. Like the curious collector or phantasmagorical impresario, he presides over all:

The tastes of the duke were peculiar. He had a fine eye for colours and effects. He disregarded the *decora* of mere fashion. His plans were bold and fiery, and his conceptions glowed with barbaric lustre. There are some who would have thought him mad. His followers felt that he was not. It was necessary to hear and see and touch him to be *sure* that he was not.<sup>109</sup>

The Prince's tastes are even more overtly curious than those of the Husband and of Usher; his is a love of oddness for oddness's sake. Not only is he curious though, he is, in his very being, somehow supernatural. Another important similarity between the curious collection and the phantasmagoria was the notion of a single controlling figure at its heart. The collector could, through possessing his collection, transform himself into a part of it – he became another object of wonder around which all the other wondrous objects circulated. This was the nature of the collected self – the collector's identity became one with his collection. Something similar could be said to occur with the phantasmagoria; by controlling the phantasmagoria, the performer became himself somewhat phantasmagorical. Phantasmagorical literature repeats this paradigm and enlarges upon it. When, in 1822, Byron described King George III as 'a phantasmagoria in himself',<sup>110</sup> the reference was a comical one. Twenty years later, in 'The Masque of the Red Death', Poe treats this same idea with total seriousness. The Prince is literally phantasmagorical. He is in part an embodiment of the whole frightening, astounding spectacle of his castle, like the curious collector who comes to embody his collection. After describing the various light and colour effects that abound in the Prince's rooms, Poe uses the same luminescent imagery to describe the Prince's own personality. He writes that 'His plans were *bold* and *fiery* and his conceptions *glowed* with barbaric *lustre*'. The Prince appears in our mind's eye like a glowing phantasmagorical spirit – somewhat unreal but simultaneously more vivid

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<sup>109</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 39.

<sup>110</sup> George Gordon, Lord Byron, *The Complete Poetical Works*, Vol 4, ed. Jerome J. McGann and Barry Weller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 336.

than reality. He seems to transgress both social limitations and the limitations of normal human nature. He dismisses the dictates of fashion and pursues his own more wondrous and extreme system of taste; like later phantasmagorical figures such as Dorian Grey or Martial Canterel, he seemingly transcends the limits of fashion and conventional imagination. It becomes necessary to see him, hear him and touch him to be sure of his sanity and also, presumably, to confirm that he really exists, that he is not another fantastic grotesque like those that people his castle. So vibrant is he that his very existence becomes questionable. Prospero is the sum of all the phantasmagoria in the story. Like the collector, he simultaneously possesses objects and becomes an object himself; he rules over a phantasmagoria and he becomes phantasmagorical.

The spread of the phantasmagoria marked a renaissance of the aesthetics of curiosity. The phantasmagorical shares many aspects of the curious and conforms to many of its dictates. Importantly though, alongside this resurrection of curiosity culture was something entirely new. The phantasmagoria became a symbol for the spectral, uncontrollable nature of the mind and of the imagination. Because of this, the phantasmagoria moves the curious aesthetic from what had once been nominally a scientific endeavour to an imaginative expression. Poe's stories clearly demonstrate this process: the curious aesthetic, the curious collection, is also the aesthetic of the phantasmagoria. Poe uses it to reflect the phantasmagorical forms of his characters' minds, to the extent that his characters reveal their phantasmagorical natures, the stories become phantasmagorical: it is at once the stories' dominant aesthetic and a symbol for the minds of the characters they present.

As an aside to this though, it is worth noting that all three of these characters, Prospero, Usher and the Husband, who appear to control the phantasmagorias in these stories, end in either madness or death. It is almost as though the phantasmagorical nature of their existences ultimately escapes from them, giving rise to their destruction. If the phantasmagorical aesthetic is an aesthetic of transcendence, it also transcends the control that these characters try to impose on it. The desire to completely break with normality, to completely ignore conventional tastes, social mores and authorities, seemingly leads finally to terrible consequences for them. They provide an early model of the fates of Des Esseintes and Dorian Grey, who are undone by their own phantasmagorical desires. In all three of these stories, Poe's depiction of the phantasmagorical is in some way associated with madness. The

paradox of the phantasmagorical aesthetic was that it showed the limitless potential but also the danger of the imagination – it was simultaneously an aesthetic of transcendence and of lunacy.

Poe was to have many imitators, both those who read his works and were directly influenced by them and those, who, like him, absorbed the phantasmagorical model of the imagination – one that was vibrant, unrestrained and dream-like in its actions. This was the seductive power of the phantasmagorical, that it seemed to transcend the normal: normality of taste, normality of imagination and normality of self; it became an aesthetic of resistance, it offered a vision of the limitless wonders of dream. Poe's desire to capture this effect predominates in much of his work. In 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains', Poe refers to the sight of an Indian City as 'wildly picturesque':

On every hand was a wilderness of balconies, of verandas, of minarets, of shrines, and fantastically carved oriels. Bazaars abounded; and in these were displayed rich wares in infinite variety and profusion—silks, muslins, the most dazzling cutlery, the most magnificent jewels and gems. Besides these things, were seen, on all sides, banners and palanquins, litters with stately dames close veiled, elephants gorgeously caparisoned, idols grotesquely hewn, drums, banners, and gongs, spears, silver and gilded maces. And amid the crowd, and the clamour, and the general intricacy and confusion—amid the million of black and yellow men, turbaned and robed, and of flowing beard, there roamed a countless multitude of holy filleted bulls, while vast legions of the filthy but sacred ape clambered, chattering and shrieking, about the cornices of the mosques, or clung to the minarets and oriels. From the swarming streets to the banks of the river, there descended innumerable flights of steps leading to bathing places, while the river itself seemed to force a passage with difficulty

through the vast fleets of deeply-burthened ships that far and wide encountered its surface.<sup>111</sup>

The description goes on in this style. Here, we can see the city portrayed as the curious traveller would once have done it, as a mass of exotic singularities – a mad accumulation of the alien and the fabulous. Poe's description of it as '*wildly picturesque*' comes across as a deeply oxymoronic attempt to capture the chaotic imaginative energy of his vision, violently breaking through accepted rules of aesthetics, seeking some dynamic, fantastical alternative. This was the vision that Poe's successors were to imitate – collection, intoxication, exoticism, grotesquery and beauty, warping the aesthetics of curiosity into new phantasmagorical forms.

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<sup>111</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 321-322.

## CHAPTER 4

### *The Formula of Dreams: Victorian Decadence, the Phantasmagoria and the Collected Self.*

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the image of the phantasmagoria and of what it was to be phantasmagorical sat at the centre of a dense web of associations and connotations. The phantasmagoria could convey both the terrible abyss of nightmare and the boundless freedom of dream; an imagination alienated from itself and an imagination free from restraints; it was both a comic trope and an aesthetic of rebellion. And beyond these features that were entirely its own, the phantasmagoria also represented a partial renaissance of the eighteenth-century culture of curiosity. The elements of the phantasmagorical experience – most notably as they appear in literature – are the same as the elements of fashionable curiosity: a love of collections of singularities, grotesques and wonders; an interplay between the phantasmagorical collection and those who owned and exhibited it – such that the identity of the owner became bound up in his collection; and an idle, intoxicated wandering that was both unsystematic and directionless. As such, the phantasmagorical was often deeply elusive and hard to define. By its very nature it seemed to embody an element of delirium and illusion.

Perhaps this period's most famous use of the term 'phantasmagorical' comes from Karl Marx's *Capital (Das Kapital)* (1867). Marx uses the phantasmagoria to describe commodity fetishism. Arguing that the market conceals the fact that the commodity is a product of human labour, he writes: 'the commodity form, and the value relation of the products of labour within which it appears, have absolutely no connection with the physical nature of the commodity and the material relations arising out of this. It is nothing but a definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the phantasmagoric form of a relation between things'.<sup>1</sup> Effectively, through the obfuscation of the market, 'the product presents itself as self-

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 165. It is worth noting that many translations of Marx's work use the word 'fantastic' instead of 'phantasmagoric'. However, Caroline Evans notes that 'Phantasmagoric [is] more appropriate, since Marx's earlier references in the same paragraph are to the nineteenth-century science of optics.' See Caroline Evans, *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 89. Marx's phrase in the original German is: 'sie die Phantasmagorische Form eines verhältnisses von Dingen annimmt'; his use of the word 'Phantasmagorische' would seem to confirm Evans's analysis. See Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* Vol. 1 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1955), 78.



producing’,<sup>2</sup> taking on an almost magical dimension. In this context, Marx’s use of the term is comparatively straightforward. ‘The phantasmagoric relation between things’ is one which, like the phantasmagoria itself, is fundamentally illusory and hallucinatory. It captures Marx’s sense of the market as something spectacular but also something that confounds and dissolves the sense of a distinction between reality and fantasy. Here, the metaphor of the phantasmagoria conveys the ‘spectral’ nature of the market in the same way that, in Castle’s analysis, it conveys the spectral nature of thought in general; Marx’s use of the term conforms to Castle’s analysis of its metaphorical function. Following on from Marx, Walter Benjamin uses the term almost obsessively in his work on nineteenth-century material culture. In his writing, Benjamin seemingly ‘settled on the phantasmagoria as *the... master-trope emblematising... the nineteenth century’s “new feeling about life”*’.<sup>3</sup> This sense that Benjamin understood there to be something inherently phantasmagorical in the ‘feel’ of the nineteenth century is obvious throughout, amongst others, his works on Baudelaire, both versions of *Paris – The Capital of the Nineteenth Century* and in the observations contained in *The Arcades Project*. He frequently refers to ‘the phantasmagoria of Parisian life’,<sup>4</sup> the phantasmagoria of the flâneur,<sup>5</sup> the phantasmagorias of the bourgeois domestic interior,<sup>6</sup> capitalist culture,<sup>7</sup> material culture,<sup>8</sup> time and space, gambling, and the crowd.<sup>9</sup>

While it is unclear how far Benjamin comprehended the precise value and historical context of the phantasmagorical metaphor, his use of it, like Marx’s, is surprisingly consistent with Castle’s later analysis; even if he was not consciously aware of its various aspects he seems to have had a subconscious sense of them. His depictions of the phantasmagorical forms of nineteenth-century culture persistently return to interconnected images of dreams, narcotic intoxication, collections of objects (either in private houses or in the market place) and the interior. At different times in *The Arcades Project* he asserts that ‘At bottom, we may say, the collector lives a piece

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<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 2005), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley, University of California, 1993), 239.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, translated by Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), 39 and 41.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 50.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (London: Belknap Press, 2002), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 21 and 12.

of dream life'<sup>10</sup> and that 'The [nineteenth-century interior] disguises itself – puts on, like an alluring creature, the costumes of moods... [it] is itself a stimulus to intoxication and dream'.<sup>11</sup> In the 1939 edition of *Paris – Capital of the Nineteenth Century* he claims that the crowded city streets are the phantasmagoria of the flâneur.<sup>12</sup> All of these are elements of the phantasmagorical experience. The sense of intoxication, of entering into the world of dream (remember, for example, Sebastian Mercier's rapturous assertion that Robertson had 'excavated the dream'),<sup>13</sup> of collections and parades of wonders, are all important components of the phantasmagorical that we examined in the previous chapter. Essentially, it seems clear that many parts of Benjamin's discussion, while he does not always make the connection explicit, are nonetheless inherently phantasmagorical: they conform to the aesthetics of the phantasmagoria. The experiences of the flâneur, the collector, the 'dream of the interior', all these are phantasmagorical experiences. Benjamin therefore establishes a parallel between various aspects of nineteenth-century French society and material culture and the phantasmagoria.

The principal literary sources that Benjamin examines in pursuing this phantasmagorical thread are Charles Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe. Baudelaire was deeply influenced by Poe and Poe himself was fascinated by the phantasmagorical. However, it is not until *after* Baudelaire and after the period of Benjamin's investigation that the phantasmagorical aesthetic in literature reaches its fullest prominence. The phantasmagorical aspects of mid-nineteenth-century culture that so attracted Benjamin are amplified, exaggerated and self-consciously cultivated in the literature of the French and English Decadence in the 1880s and 90s.

The phantasmagorical aesthetic held a unique attraction for decadent writers, and this led to a pronounced flowering of it during the fin-de-siècle period. Many of the social and aesthetic preoccupations of the decadent movement found their natural (or unnatural) expression in the febrile shapes of the phantasmagorical and the curious. The curious collection could satisfy the decadents' love of luxury and material finery as well as of the strange and exotic. Likewise, the cultivation of a collected self – an identity formed from objects – was, like the elaborate posing of the dandy, another way for decadent writers to transform both themselves and their

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<sup>10</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 205.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 216.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 21.

<sup>13</sup> Cohen, *Profane Illumination*, 244.

characters into ecstatic, fascinating and modern personalities. It is worth paying attention, for example, to how often Oscar Wilde uses the term ‘curious’ in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Along with ‘monstrous’ it is one of the most frequently repeated adjectives in the novel, appearing several dozen times in a variety of situations. Although the complex eighteenth-century associations of the word had all but completely disappeared by the time Wilde came to write the book, he uses it in a way that is oddly reminiscent of those associations. In *Dorian Gray*, ‘curious’ often implies a mixture of the alluring and the disconcerting, a contradictory impulse or impression that the characters do not fully understand: Dorian finds a ‘curious charm’ in Lord Henry’s ‘flowerlike hands’,<sup>14</sup> he decorates his rooms with ‘curious Renaissance tapestries’,<sup>15</sup> the poisonous French novel is written in a ‘curious jewelled style’<sup>16</sup> and at one point Dorian imagines ‘curious unpictured sins whose very mystery lent them their subtlety and charm’.<sup>17</sup> This mixture of the odd and the attractive (the oddly attractive and the attractively odd) was at the heart of the curious aesthetic and it held a similar appeal for the decadents. Wilde’s use of it suggests a connection between decadent aesthetic thinking and the culture of curiosity: the allure of the strange.

But for the decadents there were even more compelling attractions to be found in the phantasmagorical. The excess, the wonder and the disorientation of the curious collection and the curious landscape seemed to open up a passageway into dream and unfettered imagination. The dynamism and energy of the phantasmagoria could reflect a vision of the inner life of the imagination that the decadents longed for, banishing the dull reality of normalcy and convention. Here again, the phantasmagoria seemed ideally tailored to decadent needs. In its oddness, in its grotesque and fantastical nature, the phantasmagorical subverted the propriety, the aesthetic unity and the restraint of conventional bourgeois values.

This last is of special importance because it provides the key to the social context of decadent phantasmagorias. In these decades, the phantasmagoria again plays out its role as an aesthetic of resistance. It seemingly disrupts normal certainties and undermines the normal standards of behaviour; it defies the authority of traditional values such as thrift, respectability and industry and escapes traditional aesthetic

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<sup>14</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Robert Mighall (London: Penguin, 2000), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 87.

<sup>16</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 121.

<sup>17</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 118.

categorisation. Interestingly, in re-emerging in the altered form of the phantasmagorical, these curious attitudes and aesthetics provoke many of the same responses as they did in the eighteenth century. The wry observation from Elizabeth Bonhôte's *The Rambles of Mr Frankly* that 'everyone who pretends to singularity is actuated by the love of fame: and was there no panegyric, there would be no antiquary'<sup>18</sup> would not have seemed out of place over a century later. All that would have been necessary would have been to change 'antiquary' to 'decadent'. Even more emphatically than in eighteenth-century curiosity satires, writers like Max Nordau recapitulated the traditional dictum that the taste for the monstrous or the unnatural revealed a person's own inner unnaturalness and monstrosity. Thus, the curious was not only satirised but pathologised in these years.

As to the social context of decadent phantasmagorias, however, it is worth noting the words of Regenia Gagnier that 'decadence [acts as] a tag referring to the relation between artist or work and society rather than a proper style'.<sup>19</sup> It is therefore important to affirm at the outset that the phantasmagorical aesthetic is not *the* aesthetic of decadence. Rather, it is *an* aesthetic that fascinated many individual decadent authors and that also embodied, in its style and historical associations, the social relations that defined and shaped the wider decadent movement. Put simply, not all decadent works were phantasmagorical and, by the same token, the phantasmagorical form of writing was not confined to the decadent period – it was simply the most prominent period for the phantasmagorical in fiction. While the phantasmagoria may have been one of the favourite manifestations of decadent ideals, the phantasmagorical form endured up to our own age, beyond the social and political conditions that gave it such an appeal at the fin-de-siècle.

It does not seem unreasonable to trace the decadent love of the phantasmagoria to Edgar Allen Poe. Poe's characters were often disturbing yet compelling, ruled by private esoteric and aesthetic obsessions and by curious tastes. Their wealth allowed them to amass private collections of exquisite rarities which, in turn, offered them retreats from the outside world and, apparently, into their own dreams. The very strangeness of these men and the worlds they inhabited provided future phantasmagorical writers with an influential template. One intriguing

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Bonhôte, *The Rambles of Mr Frankly* (London: Printed for T. Becket, 1776), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Regenia Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace: Oscar Wilde and the Victorian Public* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1986), 67.

distinction, though, is that, unlike Poe, it is comparatively rare for decadent writers to explicitly reference the phantasmagoria itself. Poe, by contrast, makes the connection quite clear, describing the ‘phantasmagoric armorial trophies’<sup>20</sup> in ‘The House of Usher’ and ‘the phantasmagorical influences’<sup>21</sup> at work in ‘Ligeia’. The later decadent works are obviously phantasmagorical without invoking the magic lantern exhibitions that the aesthetic was derived from. (One notable exception to this is Jean Lorrain’s 1891 short story ‘The Magic Lantern’ which will be covered in more detail later.) The most likely explanation for this is that, given that almost a century separated Huysmans, Wilde, Lorrain and the other decadent phantasmagorical writers from the performances of Philidor and Robertson, the phantasmagoria was no longer as commonly understood a cultural reference as it was for Poe. In effect, later writers had been seduced by Poe’s aesthetics and his curious subject matter without fully understanding their origins in the phantasmagorias of the 1790s and 1800s. Once again, like the transference of associations from the culture of curiosity to the phantasmagoria, we can see the almost unconscious way that these aesthetics pass from one generation to the next, preserving elements of their original identities while the precise knowledge of their origins becomes obscured.

Poe’s influence on Huysmans’s *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*) is not difficult to see; the novel’s protagonist Des Esseintes has obvious affinities with Usher, Prince Prospero and Ligeia’s husband. However, even before *Against Nature*, Huysmans’s ‘breviary’ of the decadence, it is not hard to find examples of the fascination that the phantasmagorical held for decadent writers. Edmond de Goncourt’s 1882 novel *La Faustin*, for instance, describes the life of its titular character, a famous Parisian actress, and provides an early example of the phantasmagorical aesthetic in action. At one point in the novel, overcome by ennui and a vague but pervasive melancholy, La Faustin retires to bed in the middle of the day and begins to read de Quincey’s *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*. At this point, de Goncourt breaks off his narration to address the reader directly, asking if, ‘In the unhappy times of your life, to escape from the unfriendly hours of the day have you never thought of going far away, of absenting yourself from existence during these hours, by the reading of a book by a man with an extravagant, unreasoning and

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<sup>20</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (London: Penguin, 2006), 129.

<sup>21</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 121.

lunatic imagination, and that in the somewhat hallucinatory surroundings of bed and darkness? Ah, well, that was the expedient that La Faustin discovered'.<sup>22</sup> Already, before even describing La Faustin's experience of reading de Quincey in detail, de Goncourt points us toward the alluring quality of the phantasmagoria – its power to arrest the imagination and to offer an escape from reality. What *La Faustin* shows us in this incident is, in effect, a miniature encapsulation of the experience of phantasmagorical literature. De Quincey's 'extravagant, unreasoning and lunatic imagination' stimulates La Faustin's own imagination so that the phantasmagorical quality of the work sets in motion a similar phantasmagoria in her own mind. Like Usher's books, La Faustin's reading of the *Confessions* elevates her to a higher state of imaginative excitement, placing her in an ecstatic dream:

The pages of the little book transported the woman's mind into a strange world, a world of countries of terrifying grandeur; illimitable space, infinite extent, moving waters, the light of fiery planets, architecture of the dream of a Piranese, an incessant file of myriads of human beings in eternal procession, and the interminable sight of women in the robes of the Orient seated upon azure couches.

In her contemplation in the closed chamber, made like night, in her warm torpor, in the vague life of the couch La Faustin saw the approach of the things she was reading about as in a vision. In these supernatural lands all the past returned without order, haphazard, the whole history of humanity, overturned as if in a kaleidoscope, appeared around her in brief magic pictures, every moment upset by changes and intervention of time and space...

While she was in bed reading, there were many things which escaped her, many things to which her lack of instruction did not give her the key, but in reality this book was to her great personality what a fairy tale is to a child, whose tiny intelligence perceives only the marvel of the book.

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<sup>22</sup> Edmond de Goncourt, *La Faustin*, translated by G.F. Monkshood and Ernest Tristan (New York: Brentano's, 1914), 149.

As fast as La Faustin read *The Opium Eater* the intoxication of the imagination of De Quincey took possession of her, and carried her away by a succession intense mental sensations, from the reality of life, from the boredom of the day and from her bad attack of nerves.<sup>23</sup>

La Faustin's experiences are in some ways even more explicitly phantasmagorical than de Quincey's book itself. In fact, those passages that most excite La Faustin, the dramatic and phantasmagorical accounts of de Quincey's opium dreams, only take up a comparatively small amount of space towards the end of his book. Her own mind concentrates the *Confessions* into a series of wild and disconnected visions; her imagination imposes the phantasmagoria of the book on her senses so that she sees it as a kaleidoscopic whirl of magic pictures. Importantly, De Goncourt emphasises the purely sensory and imaginative nature of La Faustin's experiences by stressing her lack of intellectual comprehension. She, like a child, understands the book solely as marvel, only as spectacle. As a result of this, De Quincey's writing, his scenarios and descriptions, have an explicitly drug-like function: they produce, as De Goncourt writes, an 'intoxication of the imagination'. What is significant about this passage is that it demonstrates both the experience that the phantasmagorical reader desired to have, and the effect that the author of such a work desired to produce. De Quincey's book was an account of his experiences with opium and the phantasmagorical nature of his work was an indirect consequence of this. However, later writers deliberately cultivated these phantasmagorias because they wished both to give their own imaginations the 'extravagant', 'lunatic' freedom that De Goncourt described and to offer their readers this same intoxication. La Faustin reads the *Confessions* for its ability to astound her, to transport her out of herself and, like Robertson's phantasmagoria, ecstatically to bewilder her senses and confuse the distinction between material reality and fantasy. In addition to this, in illustrating the visions at play in La Faustin's mind, in describing to us how she views De Quincey's book, De Goncourt also transforms the book into a mass of singularities, a collection of extraordinary spectacles: the 'strange world' of water, fiery planets, dream-like architecture and women clothed in Oriental finery. Again, we can see how the

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<sup>23</sup> De Goncourt, *La Faustin*, 150-152.

experience of the phantasmagorical bears great similarity to the experience of the curious.

The line between the curious collection and the phantasmagoria is difficult to draw in this context – if it exists at all. In reading the *Confessions*, La Faustin imagines herself wandering in a fantastical landscape, observing its most astonishing and disconnected features. In effect, *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* is here presented to us *as a collection*: a collection of spectacular and curious images. Again, we must look back to De Goncourt's description of how La Faustin reads and understands the work. She reads it as a child might read a fairy story, 'perceiving only the *marvel* of the book'. What is significant in these lines is that De Goncourt does not seem to be belittling his character. He certainly does not seem to be trying to suggest anything inauthentic about La Faustin's response or to undermine its potency. Rather, he describes an essential aspect of the experience. The phantasmagorical effect hinges upon the substitution of linear narrative for the panoptic sensation of wandering in a spectacular collection. La Faustin's ignorance of historical context and her tendency to disregard the more traditional features of the work intensifies its phantasmagorical qualities and intensifies her own response to them. In the same way, many works of phantasmagorical literature follow the pattern of the curious collection. They de-emphasise the conventional elements of literature, such as the primacy of narrative, and instead focus on transforming themselves into collections of the marvellous and the peculiar through which the reader is implicitly encouraged to imagine themselves wandering.

One of the works which most famously does this is the novel that is widely felt to have inaugurated, or at least to have popularised, the decadent movement proper: Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature*. Published in 1884, *Against Nature* is notoriously a novel without a plot. Its central (and almost only) character is the French nobleman Jean Des Esseintes, the last member of the ancient, decayed Des Esseintes family. Unmoved by the pleasures commonly available even to the very rich, possessed of an intense revulsion for what he sees as the boring conformity and stupidity of all strata of modern society, Des Esseintes decides to retreat from human contact completely, living out his days in a secluded and elaborately furnished house in the Paris suburb of Fontenay. The bulk of the novel consists of lengthy descriptions of the decorations of the house, Des Esseintes' aesthetic preferences and theories on art, literature, perfumes etc. as well as the occasional memories and musings that Des



Esseintes descends into, lost in solitary contemplation. The end, both of the novel and of Des Esseintes' way of life, comes when his health finally begins to collapse under the stress of this 'unnatural' mode of living. He becomes increasingly prone to reliving unpleasant memories that he cannot control or free himself from; he experiences subtle hallucinations of scents and sensations; he desperately tries to find food that his stomach will still digest and suffers from terrible head-aches, stomach-cramps, neck pains and other maladies. At last, he summons a doctor and is told he must return to the society and the state of normality he despises, or else he will die.

In the same way that La Faustin retreats into bed with her copy of De Quincey to dream away some 'unfriendly hours', Des Esseintes' plan is to retreat into Fontenay with a vast collection of objects in order, effectively, to dream his way through the rest of his life. Des Esseintes describes his project as an attempt to 'organise a life [of] dreamy contemplation'<sup>24</sup> and his house as 'a desert hermitage equipped with all modern conveniences, a snugly heated ark on dry land in which he might take refuge from the incessant deluge of human stupidity'.<sup>25</sup> Between them, these two statements could be said to encapsulate much of the decadent agenda and much of the appeal that Huysmans' book possessed for its admirers. In *Against Nature* we have a protagonist whose desire is always to fall inward, to exalt (as we shall see) the chimerical powers of his own imagination. Likewise, he is almost gnostic in his rejection of conformist, capitalistic nineteenth-century society. It was these two attributes that the decadent movement most enthusiastically embraced and imitated. Interestingly, for Des Esseintes both his dreamy contemplation and his escape from the banal sensations of normality are primarily effected through his interactions with the objects in his collections.

*Against Nature* prioritises description over narration; the number of objects in the novel far outstrips the number of events that take place in it. The novel's plot disappears into the background, overwhelmed by the sheer number of material 'things' that make up its body. Rita Felski writes that 'the style of the text, in spite of its avowed disdain for the commercial, is reminiscent of nothing other than the lavish prose of a consumer catalogue';<sup>26</sup> and to an extent this is quite true. Large sections of

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<sup>24</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, translated by Robert Baldick and Patrick McGuinness (London: Penguin, 2003), 198.

<sup>25</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 8.

<sup>26</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 100.

the book are given over to descriptions of beautiful and alluring objects. At breakfast, Des Esseintes,

[Dips his] toast spread with superlative butter in a cup of tea, an impeccable blend of Si-a-Fayoun, Mo-you-Tannand and Khansky – yellow teas brought from China into Russia by special caravans.

He drank this liquid perfume from cups of that Oriental porcelain known as egg-shell china, it is so delicate and diaphanous; and just as he would never use any but these adorably dainty cups, so he insisted on plates and dishes of genuine silver-gilt, slightly worn so that the silver showed a little where the thin film of gold had rubbed off, giving it a charming old-world look, a fatigued appearance, a moribund air.<sup>27</sup>

When fitting up his sitting room, he begins by

Strewing tiger skins and blue fox furs about the floor, and installing beside a massive money-changer's table of the fifteenth century, several deep-seated wing-armchairs and singing-desks on which deacons of old used to place the antiphony and which now supported one of the weighty folios of Du Cange's *Glossarium mediae et infimae Latinitatis*.<sup>28</sup>

These passages clearly revel in the finery of the objects they describe; they are clearly meant to articulate the pleasure of the collector and the connoisseur, the joys of acquiring and of contemplating delightful things, the delight of owning and using them. However, Felski's description of *Against Nature* as a 'consumer catalogue' is an underestimation of the function of these descriptions. It suggests that they, and indeed the novel as a whole, have a purely mercantile appeal, a fictional recapitulation of the

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<sup>27</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 17.

pleasures of purchase. In reality, the preponderance of these descriptions throughout the novel transforms it into a mammoth collection of finery and grotesquery. The ‘materialism’ of the narrative, its sacrifice of plot in favour of description, imitates the effect of De Quincey’s *Confessions* on Faustin. *Against Nature* is a phantasmagoria that plays out before the eyes of the reader, a mass of beautiful and horrible spectacles. This similarity to the phantasmagoria and the curious collection intensifies when we consider those spectacles in *Against Nature* that are on the one hand less obviously beautiful, and on the other less traditionally material. One of the longest sustained passages of description in the novel occurs when Des Esseintes has a vast collection of exotic plants delivered to him at Fontenay:

There 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 and spattered with drops of oil-paint, streaks of red and white. Here, there were plants like the Bosphorus giving the illusion of starched calico spotted with crimson and myrtle green; there, others such as the Aurora Borealis flaunted leaves the colour of raw meat, with dark-red lips and purplish fibrils, puffy leaves that seemed to be sweating blood and wine.<sup>29</sup>

This parade of exotics continues over several pages, taking up over half of the chapter. As it continues, the plants become increasingly grotesque and the number of shapes, substances and objects to which they are compared multiplies. Different species seemingly recall oilskin, the organs of animals, metals, porcelain and human skin that has been burnt, ulcerated or smeared with medicinal creams and powders; in shape they resemble children’s toys, Cheshire cheeses, iron spikes, oars, German pipes, the tails of pigs or orang-utans and human tongues. Huysmans explains Des Esseintes’s

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<sup>29</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 84.

choices by saying that ‘tired of artificial flowers aping real ones, he wanted some natural flowers that looked like fakes’.<sup>30</sup> His collection of plants is, therefore, an extension of Des Esseintes’s preference for the artificial over the real. Critically, though, as well as looking ‘fake’ like plants made from something other than vegetal matter, they also defy normal definitions of what a plant should look like. They are ‘bizarre and magnificent’, ‘monstrous’ and ‘in defiance of all of the familiar aspects of plant life’.<sup>31</sup> In effect, these plants are, in the classic definition of the term, curiosities – they defy normal rules of categorisation and definition as plants. The plants he collects are apparently alienated from their own ‘proper’ natures, both natural and artificial at once, simultaneously plant-like and disturbingly like something else as well. Des Esseintes’s collection of plants is also a curious collection and the aesthetics of curiosity permeate throughout the novel in general.

Des Esseintes’s highly specialised and rarefied tastes in books and paintings are further prominent examples of this. Huysmans tells us that ‘by diligent self-examination, he realised first of all that to attract him, a book had to have that quality of strangeness that Edgar Allen Poe called for; but he was inclined to venture further along this road, and to insist on Byzantine flowers of thought and deliquescent complexities of style’.<sup>32</sup> Des Esseintes’s preferences are always for works that are in some way overtly strange or defamiliarising; he requires them to be exotic or nostalgic, containing no point of reference to contemporary life and no similarity to contemporary taste. His collection of books is made up of grotesque oddities and singularities. Even among his favourite authors he seeks out bizarre or a-typical examples of their work, preferring Flaubert’s *The Temptation of St Anthony* (*La Tentation de Saint Antoine*) to *Sentimental Education* (*L’Education Sentimentale*) and Goncourt’s *La Faustine* to *Germinie Lacerteaux*. Indeed, *La Faustine* is one of Des Esseintes’s favourite works, which he admires for ‘its dream-inducing suggestiveness.’<sup>33</sup> Just as Goncourt has his heroine sink into a phantasmagorical reverie whilst reading De Quincey, Huysmans has Des Esseintes read *La Faustine* to achieve the same effect. Again, we can detect an alignment between the curious and the phantasmagorical. Like Usher’s books, Des Esseintes’s collection of strange and curious works is both a phantasmagorical assembly of literary oddities and also

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<sup>30</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 83.

<sup>31</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 83-85.

<sup>32</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 165.

<sup>33</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 168.

prompts phantasmagorical imaginings and dreams in Des Esseintes's own mind as he reads them. This link between the phantasmagoria and dream will be explored in more detail later on, but for the moment I want to remain with Des Esseintes's curious collections.

The works that make up Des Esseintes's library are filled with 'grandiose pageantries',<sup>34</sup> 'exalted flights of sensibility, morbid caprices of psychology',<sup>35</sup> and cluttered with 'philosophical lumber'. Their esoteric, frightening and fantastical qualities are also to be found in the paintings hanging on the walls of Fontenay's ground floor. His favourites are two works by Gustave Moreau, 'Salome Dancing Before Herod' and 'The Apparition'. Mesmerised by these works, Des Esseintes speculates of the artist that: 'With no ancestors and no possible descendants, he remained a unique figure in contemporary art. Going back to the beginning of racial tradition, to the sources of mythologies ... [he produced] architectural mixtures, sumptuous and unexpected combinations of dress, materials and hieratic allegories whose sinister quality was heightened by the morbid perspicuity of an entirely modern sensibility'.<sup>36</sup> In Des Esseintes's analysis, Moreau's works stand outside any period or artistic movement. Such is their inherent strangeness that they seem to emerge from nothing that preceded them and to be incapable of being imitated by anything that comes after. The images also somehow unify the primordial with the modern. The 'sensibility' of the works crosses the millennia, eliminating not only any possible point of artistic reference but any historical one as well. Moreau's paintings appear to Des Esseintes as an insoluble mystery but also a fascinating one. Lying both outside time and outside of artistic tradition, rendering their viewer confused and enthralled, the works seemingly embody the paradoxical allure of the curious object. Even in painterly technique, according to Des Esseintes's description, the works combine contradictory disciplines and styles:

Never before, in any period, had the art of water-colour produced such brilliant hues, never before had an aquarellist's wretched chemical pigments been able to make paper sparkle so brightly with precious stones, shine so colourfully with

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<sup>34</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 167.

<sup>35</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 170.

<sup>36</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 56.

sunlight filtered through stained-glass windows, glitter so splendidly with sumptuous garments, glow so warmly with exquisite flesh tints...

You were left amazed and pensive, disconcerted by this art which crossed the frontiers of painting to borrow from the writer's art its most subtly evocative suggestions, from the enameller's art its most wonderfully brilliant effects, from the lapidary's and etcher's art its most exquisitely delicate touches.<sup>37</sup>

The complexity and obscurity of Moreau's techniques blur the distinctions between painting and other disciplines. Again, they hark back to the curious object that is curious because it is curiously wrought; the object that amazes because the means by which it was produced are impossible to fathom. Moreau's paintings cease to be entirely like paintings; they become suggestive like poetry, intricate like jewellery and brilliant like enamel-ware. They contain the mystification of curiosity. However, they share this quality of curiousness with Des Esseintes's other paintings. In his boudoir, the works of Jan Luyken are studies in 'lugubrious fantasies and ferocious cruelty'<sup>38</sup>; in the adjoining room, Randolphe Bresdin's 'Comedy of Death' and 'The Good Samaritan' suggest 'the work of a primitive or an Albert Dürer of sorts, composed under the influence of opium';<sup>39</sup> and alongside them, in thin gold frames, drawings by Odilon Redon 'defy classification, most of them exceeding the bounds of pictorial art and creating a new type of fantasy, born of sickness and delirium'.<sup>40</sup> These works transcend the boundaries, not only of painting but of rationality. They all break with normal aesthetic standards of subject and style, defy categorisation and resist being easily processed by traditional systems of artistic appreciation and assessment.

The sheer number of curiosities that appear in *Against Nature* is somewhat overwhelming. Indeed, the novel is actively trying to *be* overwhelming in order to better cultivate its phantasmagorical effects. Even the most apparently normal and conventional incidents in the novel become occasions to deploy another collection of singularities. During Des Esseintes's only excursion from Fontenay to Paris, he

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<sup>37</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 56-57.

<sup>38</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 59.

<sup>40</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 60.

visits a small bodega packed with visiting Englishmen and Americans. Even in portraying this everyday scene, Huysmans' description becomes a collection of people, wines, adverts and oddly-shaped bottles of beverages – an assembly of singularities:

Looking around him he saw on one side a row of great casks with labels listing the entire range of ports, light or heavy in body, mahogany or amaranthine in colour, and distinguished by laudatory titles such as 'Old Port', 'Light Delicate', 'Cockburn's Very Fine' and 'Magnificent Old Regina'; and on the other side, standing shoulder to shoulder and rounding their formidable bellies, enormous barrels containing the martial wine of Spain in all its various forms, topaz-coloured sherries light and dark, sweet and dry - San Lucar, Vino de Pasto, Pale Dry, Oloroso and Amontillado.

The cellar was packed to the doors. Leaning his elbow on the corner of a table, Des Esseintes sat waiting for the glass of port he had ordered of a barman busy opening explosive, egg-shaped soda-bottles that looked like giant-sized capsules of gelatine or gluten such as chemists use to mask the taste of their more obnoxious medicines.

All around him were swarms of English people. There were pale, gangling clergymen with clean-shaven chins, round spectacles and greasy hair, dressed in black from head to foot - soft hats at one extremity, laced shoes at the other and in between, incredibly long coats with little buttons running down the front. There were laymen with bloated pork-butcher faces or bulldog muzzles, apoplectic necks, ears like tomatoes, winy cheeks, stupid bloodshot eyes and whiskery collars as worn by some of the great apes. Further away, at the far end of the wine-shop a tow-haired stick of a man with a chin sprouting white hairs like an artichoke, was using a microscope to decipher the minute print of an English newspaper. And facing him was a sort of American naval officer, stout and stocky,

swarthy and bottle-nosed, a cigar stuck in the hairy orifice of his mouth and his eyes sleepily contemplating the framed champagne advertisements on the walls – the trademarks of Perrier and Roederer, Heidsieck and Mumm, and the hooded head of a monk identified in Gothic lettering as Dom Pérignon of Reims.<sup>41</sup>

In this passage, Huysmans imitates the perspective of the curious traveller. His writing fragments the scene into its separate elements and highlights the strangest and most unusual ones. His vision is defamiliarising, turning the cellar into a collection of separate striking and comical observations. The people become a gallery of caricatures, their appearances suggestive of animals or vegetables, bending themselves into odd and comic poses. Rather than a comprehensive or realist description of the scene, Huysmans presents us with yet another collection of curiosities, the diners in the bodega arrayed at their tables like the objects in the house at Fontenay.

The phantasmagoria of *Against Nature*, however, extends beyond purely material objects and spectacles. Indeed, the novel is arguably at its *most* phantasmagorical when it portrays the various imaginative conceits in which its protagonist indulges. Throughout *Against Nature*, Des Esseintes self-consciously attempts to cultivate illusions and fantasies in his own mind. Some examples of this process are relatively uncomplicated. Early on, when considering what colour the walls of his study should be, Des Esseintes dismisses the various shades of purple because ‘it struck him as utterly futile to resort to this range of tints, in so far as it is possible to see purple by ingesting a specified amount of santonin, and thus it becomes a simple matter for anyone to change the colour of his walls without laying a finger on them’.<sup>42</sup> Des Esseintes is always keenly aware of the mercurial nature of his own perceptions and their inherent vulnerability to subtle illusions and deceptions, as well as to overt chemical alterations. Indeed, he delights in this very vulnerability and many of his decorative choices are specifically engineered to exploit it, to deceive and confuse his own impressions and to surround himself with illusions. The extent to which he attempts to manipulate his own senses can be seen in the design of his bedroom and of his dining room. Of the former, Ruth Antosh observes that ‘since Des

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<sup>41</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 123.

<sup>42</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 15.



Esseintes has no intention of introducing anyone else into this world of illusion, one can only assume that the room represents an exercise in self-deception'.<sup>43</sup> Both of these rooms, by their creator's design, disguise themselves as a different type of room in a different place altogether. The bedroom appears to be the cell of a monk, although it uses costly materials to simulate the monastic simplicity: the walls are decorated with saffron-coloured silk to imitate yellow stucco and a rich carpet patterned in red squares stands in for cold tiles on the floor. Similarly, the dining room resembles a ship's cabin. There, while inhaling artificially introduced aromas of pitch-pine, 'he could imagine himself between decks in a brig, and gazed inquisitively at some ingenious mechanical fishes driven by clockwork, which moved backwards and forwards behind the pot-hole window and got entangled in artificial sea weed'.<sup>44</sup> Antosh suggests that, while the bedroom may express Des Esseintes's sublimated need for religious solace, both rooms convey his desire for total exclusion from the outside world. (This is especially obvious given frequent descriptions of Fontenay as an 'Ark' to escape a 'deluge of human stupidity' taking place beyond his walls.) The 'self-deception' is, therefore, both concealment from himself of his own religious impulses and the illusion of a more profound isolation than the house alone offers him. However, these rooms also suggest that Des Esseintes' illusory initiatives are informed by a sense of the fundamentally phantasmagorical nature of his own mind and perceptions.

Like the characters in Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher', Des Esseintes is subject to subtle fancies and influences produced by his environment. His mind and the processes of his thoughts are, in Castle's use of the term, phantasmagorical, because of their malleability, the ease with which they can be reshaped and reformed by their surroundings. The critical difference between Des Esseintes and Usher is that Des Esseintes is aware of this malleability and deliberately propagates it within himself; he tries to control it and wield it for his own amusement while Usher can only submit to it. Just as Huysmans's book is unfailingly phantasmagorical, Des Esseintes treats his own mind like a literal phantasmagoria, a magic lantern that plays its images constantly behind his eyes, an endless sequence of hallucinations, deceptions and fantastic shapes that beguile and astound him. In his efforts to escape the boring

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<sup>43</sup> Ruth B. Antosh, *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J. K. Huysmans* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1986), 37.

<sup>44</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 20.

normality that he so deeply despises, Des Esseintes unleashes the full potential of his imagination. *Against Nature* is full of people, objects and places that are transformed by its protagonist's imagination. In consequence, the novel becomes a grand exhibition of the most exotic creations, not only of Des Esseintes's imagination, but of Huysmans's as well.

Among the first of these metamorphoses are the monstrous yet beguiling 'steam engine women' that Des Esseintes imagines running on the Northern Railway. He asks himself:

Does there exist, anywhere on this earth a being conceived in the joys of fornication and born in the throes of motherhood who is more dazzlingly, more outstandingly beautiful than [these] two locomotives...?

One of these, bearing the name of Crampton, is an adorable blonde with a shrill voice, a long slender body imprisoned in a shiny brass corset, and supple catlike movements; a smart golden blonde whose extraordinary grace can be quite terrifying when she stiffens her muscles of steel, sends sweat pouring down her steaming flanks, sets her elegant wheels spinning in their wide circles and hurtles away, full of life, at the head of an express or a boat-train.

The other, Engerth by name, is a strapping saturnine brunette given to uttering raucous, guttural cries, with a thick-set figure encased in armour-plating of cast iron; a monstrous creature with her dishevelled mane of black smoke and her six wheels coupled together low down, she gives an indication of her fantastic strength when, with an effort that shakes the very earth, she slowly and deliberately drags along her heavy train of goods-wagons.<sup>45</sup>

Engerth and Crampton are weird hybrid figures, their forms imaginatively united with their opposites. When they are initially introduced, their huge mechanical bodies are

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<sup>45</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 23-24.

equated not only with femininity but also with feminine sexuality and sexual pleasure. While apparently transcending them, they also by virtue of their almost supernatural 'womanliness' suggest those very same 'joys of fornication and those of motherhood'. The machines are here given a frighteningly animalistic sexual allure that connects them to those women who, at 'unconventional supper parties', maddened with wine, 'loosen their dresses at dessert and beat the table with their heads';<sup>46</sup> as well as to Vanda, the Jewish prostitute with her 'slow preliminaries and savage climaxes'.<sup>47</sup> Mechanical components such as brass tubing, wheels and paint possess the same erotic appeal as hair, skin and elegant limbs; materials adopt qualities not native to themselves. Huysmans's description of them merges colossal, steam-powered, cast iron dynamism with coquettishness and the promise of sexual ecstasy. It is not hard to see the parallels between these two and another of Des Esseintes's imaginative transformations: the American acrobat and gymnast, Miss Urania. Des Esseintes becomes briefly enamoured of this woman when he sees her perform at the circus. Her incredible strength and athleticism inspire him with 'curious fancies': 'The more he admired her suppleness and strength, the more he thought he saw an artificial change of sex operating in her; her mincing movements and feminine affectations became ever less obtrusive, and in their place there developed the agile, vigorous charms of the male'.<sup>48</sup> Huysmans emphasises that the masculinity Des Esseintes detects in Miss Urania is entirely the product of his own fantasies by ironically observing that 'he sought confirmation of these dreams in the facial expressions that she unconsciously assumed, reading his own desires into the fixed, unchanging smile she wore on her lips as she swung on the trapeze'.<sup>49</sup>

Like the locomotives, Des Esseintes fantasises Miss Urania into a shape other than her own, his imagination remoulding his perceptions of her. Unlike Crampton and Engerth though, here his dreams literally control his view of her, confusing his senses with illusory impressions that he attempts to confirm through observation. Miss Urania is another of the fantasised spectacles that populate the novel thanks to the artifice of Des Esseintes's imagination. Despite his assertion of

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<sup>46</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 8.

<sup>47</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 69.

<sup>48</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 97.

<sup>49</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 97-98.

rationality and the allegedly empirical basis of his beliefs,<sup>50</sup> Des Esseintes perceptions are consistently at the mercy of his neurotic and erethismic imagination. The hallucinatory aroma that he fears may have possessed him like an evil spirit of the middle ages<sup>51</sup> is an early indication of this process slipping out of his control. The most elaborate of his synesthetic pleasures, the most complex of his confusions of imagination and sensation, though, are to be found in his collections of perfumes and alcoholic drinks.

Even more overtly than the collections of plants, books and paintings, these two collections are imaginatively transfigured by their owner. Huysmans dramatises how Des Esseintes experiences them, turning them into different sensations entirely; the whiskeys, brandies and liqueurs become notes in a musical symphony, while the floral essences, spices and musks become the elements of a dream-like landscape.

In his dining room, Des Esseintes keeps a device which he calls his ‘mouth organ’, a collection of casks connected to silver spigots and minute cups. By means of a button concealed in the wainscoting, it is possible for him to fill all of the cups simultaneously: ‘The organ was then open. The stops labelled “flute”, “horn” and “vox angelica” were pulled out, ready for use. Des Esseintes would drink a drop here, another there, playing internal symphonies to himself, and providing his palate with sensations analogous to those which music dispenses to the ear’.<sup>52</sup> Huysmans continues to elaborate on this conceit, delineating Des Esseintes’ belief in the correspondences between particular drinks and the different qualities of music. His drinks cabinet becomes an orchestra:

Dry curaçao was like the clarinet with its piercing, velvety note; kümmel like the oboe with its sonorous, nasal timbre... there was kirsch, blowing a wild trumpet blast [and] gin and whiskey raising the roof of the mouth with the blare of their coronets and trombones... string quartets might play under the palatial arch, with the violin represented by an old brandy,

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<sup>50</sup> See, for example, the ‘mathematical’ validity that he attributes to his belief in the correspondence between the preference for certain colours and different personality types: Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 15.

<sup>51</sup> See Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 115.

<sup>52</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 45.

choice and heady, biting and delicate; with the viola simulated by rum... Once these principles had been established, and thanks to a series of erudite experiments, he had been able to perform upon his tongue silent melodies and mute funeral marches; to hear inside his mouth crème-de-menthe solos and rum-and-vespetro duets.<sup>53</sup>

Here Huysmans offers us the chance to, as he puts it, ‘listen to the taste of music’,<sup>54</sup> morphing one set of sensations into another, lovingly dwelling on the collection of liqueurs and imbuing them with the ethereal attributes of music. From the initial premise, he continues to build this structure of imaginative excess and perversity, accumulating more and more peculiar spectacles: alcoholic duets, solos, symphonies and marches. Similarly, when Des Esseintes begins to play with his collection of perfumes, Huysmans renders it as a visual spectacle, an illusory landscape summoned into being by the aromas that Des Esseintes releases:

With his vaporisers he injected into the room an essence composed of ambrosia, Mitcham lavender, sweet pea and other flowers... Then into this meadow he introduced a carefully measured amalgam of tuberose, orange and almond blossom; and immediately artificial lilacs came into being, while linden trees swayed in the wind, shedding on the ground about them their pale emanations.<sup>55</sup>

The scene continues to evolve as Des Esseintes calls up a party of picnicking women using stephotis, ayapana, opopanax, chypre and syringa, and then dismisses them, replacing their ‘laughing rollicking pleasures’ with a ‘horizon filled with factories’ belching fire, chemical products and coal tar. This industrial intrusion is then in turn dispensed with – the resin of styrax that produced it locked away in a hermetic box – and the spring meadow turns to summer filled with new-mown hay. Finally, he unleashes all of his most exotic perfumes in an orgy of scents, filling the room with

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<sup>53</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 45-46.

<sup>54</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 46.

<sup>55</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 110.

‘an unnatural yet charming vegetation, paradoxically uniting tropical spices such as the pungent odours of Chinese sandalwood and Jamaican hediosmia with French scents such as jasmine, hawthorn and vervain’.<sup>56</sup> This constantly evolving landscape of aromas is another instance of Des Esseintes process of ‘re-experiencing’. *Against Nature* celebrates the scale and power of the creative capacity. It simultaneously shows us a character whose imagination is phantasmagorical – both because it cannot be restrained and because it constantly overwhelms his senses – and in doing so plunges its reader into their own phantasmagoria. Huysmans’s book is a parade, not only of curious objects, like the tropical plants, books and painting, but also of wonderful and curious imaginings. It becomes a carnival of grotesque and whimsical figures; like a masquerade, its pages are stuffed with steam engines that become women, women who become men, illusory ships that can never travel anywhere, symphonies of alcohol and panoramas of scent. As in Irving and Hawthorne’s descriptions, the phantasmagorical aesthetic of *Against Nature* is an embodiment of the imagination allowed to run riot; its collections of spectacles become a way for the novel to encapsulate the raw, intoxicating and ungovernable processes of the imagination itself. Just as Des Esseintes tries to escape out of reality and into his own dream world, so the novel, despite the naturalist origins of Huysmans’s writing style, offers us a means to access the realm of the imagination. The phantasmagorical aesthetic fulfils, in fiction, Sebastienne Mercier’s longing to ‘excavate the dream’.

Des Esseintes’s own nature is, as we have seen, formed in a resolutely phantasmagorical fashion. However, we may also say that there was, in the society of the late nineteenth century, something of a fashion for the phantasmagorical. Des Esseintes’s obsession with the malleability of his own sensations, the fecundity of his imagination and, his most intense longing, to disperse the divisions between reality and fantasy and pass into his own perfect dream world, all embody widespread preoccupations of the decadent movement. Many of these preoccupations have their origins in the phantasmagorical effects documented by Terry Castle and dramatised by Edgar Allen Poe. The rationalising project of the enlightenment having displaced the supernatural into the realm of the hallucinatory, this came to be increasingly widely reflected in literature. For decadent authors, there was a ‘progressive interiorisation of the supernatural, which came to be depicted as occurring, not only on the level of

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<sup>56</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 110-111.

objective reality, but as a consequence of perpetual disturbances. Thus there gradually emerged a psychopathological form of the fantastic, in which phantoms became identified with phantasms'.<sup>57</sup> The progress of this movement can be seen in Jean Lorrain's 'The Magic Lantern' in which the narrator's nostalgia for the traditional gothic is dismissed as 'gallows, undulous plants and cemetery crosses.' 'Admit it,' he narrator's friend laughingly exclaims, 'you miss all that Tony Johannot stuff'.<sup>58</sup> By 1891, when Lorrain wrote the story, the terrors of the gothic were almost cosy compared to the terrors the mind could summon for itself; Tony Johannot's early nineteenth-century gothic illustrations inspire Lorrain's narrator only with nostalgia. This removal of the supernatural into the brain of the observer and the consequent development of a literature that was, like Poe's 'Usher' and 'Ligeia', one part fantasy and one part psychology, expresses the prevalence of a phantasmagorical model of the mind. The sense of the unreliable nature of sensations and a delight in the untameable nature of the imagination recur throughout discussions of decadent culture and decadent literature. Paul Bourget, in his 1889 work *Etudes Anglaises* (an account of a journey he made to the English lake district in 1882) eulogises both of these phantasmagorical qualities. His speculations on the nature of consciousness reveal both the problems and the potential inherent in this way of visualising the human mind:

Hurled abruptly into this measureless universe that assaults us with so many confused impressions, what do we know of it, other than the idea we form of it? The idea, that is to say a floating image that in the darkness of our mind continually takes the place of absent reality... And so we move through life, each imprisoned in a personal circle of phantoms... [However] When one's brain has been moulded in a particular metaphysical way, how is one not to wonder if it would not be better, since this universe is nothing but an invincible and unverifiable appearance, to come to terms with that fact once and for all, and courageously augment one's inner power to

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<sup>57</sup> Jean Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 147-148.

<sup>58</sup> Jean Lorrain, 'The Magic Lantern' in Roger Luckhurst, ed., *Late Victorian Gothic Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 173.

feed off illusion and to live upon mere appearances? ... Opium and hashish, and, to a lesser degree, that cruder opium of the West, strong drink, are one way of unlocking the door to a more intense, more systematic, and more opulent dream world.<sup>59</sup>

In Bourget's writings, we can see how the Poe-esque dread of subtle influences perverting our senses and the underlying inability of those senses to truly grasp an immutable picture of our world, nevertheless gives way to a celebration of the opportunities that this state of being affords us. The illusions produced in the brain, in fact, provide solace for the soul. In this sense we can see how decadent discourse preserves much of the ambiguous character of earlier representations of the phantasmagorical. The potency of the imagination at once threatens the stability of sanity and rational perceptions and seemingly frees us from the tyranny of the real. Its paradoxical character can be seen in Pierrot's analysis of contemporary observations on the decadent artist, a description that might equally have applied to Usher, Ligeia's unfortunate husband or Des Esseintes: '[There was an] exacerbation of their nervous sensibilities that led artists to live in a state of constant mental erethism; an atrophy of the will eventually resulting in the triumph of uncontrolled association of ideas and anarchic reverie'.<sup>60</sup> However, this hyperactivity of the imagination is also something to be celebrated, cultivated and, as we see in Bourget's words 'courageously augmented'. This is, of course, what Des Esseintes does in his zealous pursuit of self-deception and the imaginative embellishments of his experiences. His great project (enthusiastically imitated by later decadents) is, in his own words, to 'organise a life of dreamy contemplation',<sup>61</sup> or, as Bourget puts it, to escape into that 'more intense and more opulent dream world'. Indeed, the preponderance of dream imagery that appears within *Against Nature*, and that occurs throughout contemporary decadent discourse in general, is significant in understanding the role that the phantasmagorical plays in the literature of the period. Huysmans himself referred to *Against Nature* as a 'cauchemar raffinée' – a refined nightmare. However, throughout much of Huysmans art criticism, 'the word is used in a favourable sense and is suggestive of escape... [Likewise] the

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<sup>59</sup> Quoted in: Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 35-36.

<sup>60</sup> Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 61-62.

<sup>61</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 198.



word ‘raffinée’ is of major importance here, for it suggests a retouching of the actual raw material of dreams’.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, when Zola complained to Huysmans about the book’s lack of an orderly, scientific study of the development of Des Esseintes’s neuroses, Huysmans responded that he agreed and would, in fact, have liked to have set the entire novel in the realm of dreams – rather than keeping it tied to the ground of reality – where flaws in logic would have been irrelevant.<sup>63</sup> Huysmans’ remark bears an obvious similarity to Hawthorne’s advocacy of ‘an atmosphere of strange enchantment’ in the works of the American Romancer.<sup>64</sup> Huysmans seems to want his book to tap into a place of unreality, to exalt the fantastical and sever its connection to normal, real-world experiences. Des Esseintes’s preference for a nocturnal; existence (awake between five in the evening and five in the morning<sup>65</sup>) conforms to this. Not only is he up and about while the rest of the world is asleep – intensifying his sense of isolation – this way he lives his whole life enveloped in darkness and the time of dreams, sleeping through boring daily reality.

This is one way in which the dream is persistently figured in this period, as an alternative to reality and a means by which to break free of the real. Again, it is worth recalling that, through its phantasmagorical qualities, *Against Nature* both distances itself from any sense of a connection to normal experience and also revolves around a character who, himself, wishes to pass entirely into his own dreams. To more fully develop the connection between the phantasmagorical and the decadent love of dream it is worth looking back to Bourget’s remark that opium, hashish and strong drink are ‘one way of unlocking the door to a more intense, more systematic, and more opulent dream world’. This association between the narcotic and the dream world is almost endemic in decadent literature. Remembering the decadent movement in the early decades of the Twentieth Century, Camille Mauclair made the remark that ‘dreams were their cocaine’,<sup>66</sup> suggesting that not only was the narcotic a gateway to dream but one could, in a sense, become intoxicated with dreams. This mirroring of the action of drugs in the action of dreams can be seen in Jean Lorrain’s *Monsieur de Phocas*. When the protagonist, the young Duc de Fréneuse, is given opium at a party,

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<sup>62</sup> Antosh, *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J. K. Huysmans*, 88.

<sup>63</sup> Antosh, *Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J. K. Huysmans*, 93.

<sup>64</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Boston: Osgood, 1871), p. iv.

<sup>65</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 19.

<sup>66</sup> Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 181.

the effect is an obviously phantasmagorical series of visions, owing much of their character of mingled horror and exoticism to De Quincey's own opium dreams:

I sank into a chaos of brief, incoherent and bizarre hallucinations, in which the grotesque and the horrible kept close company. Prostrate, as if I were being garrotted by invisible cords, I floundered in anguish and dread, oppressively ridden by the most unbridled nightmares. A whole series of monsters and avatars swarmed in the shadows, coming to life amid draughts of sulphur and phosphorus like an animated fresco painted on the moving wall.

There followed a turbulent race through space... [where] In the extreme distance, amid bamboos and flowering mangroves, luminous, millennial pagodas descended towards the water on stepped terraces.

Herds of elephants were on sentry duty, using the tips of their soft trunks to gather blue lotuses from the lakes for the gods.<sup>67</sup>

A more subtle example appears in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When Dorian contemplates opening the bejewelled ebony cabinet in which he keeps his supply of narcotics, he throws himself down upon a sofa and 'His eyelids drooped till the long fringed lashes almost touched his cheek'.<sup>68</sup> Even contemplating the drugs is enough to drop him into a somnambulistic reverie, as if they are capable of acting upon him at a distance, before he even touches them. The significance of this similarity between dreams and narcotics is that it exposes the way that dreams were understood in this context. One might use narcotic intoxication to reach into dreams but dreams could also create a kind of intoxication. In effect, it was possible, even desirable to become saturated with dream. Drugs mirrored this state of complete reverie, opening up a vast internal landscape of imagination in which one might become delightfully lost and consumed. The phantasmagorical is instrumental to this process because it replicates this experience of being overwhelmed by dream; it both encapsulates the dream world and allows access to it. This link between phantasmagoria and dream becomes even

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<sup>67</sup> Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, translated by Francis Amery (Sawtry: Dedalus, 1994), 139.

<sup>68</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 174.

more apparent when we consider that the term ‘dream’ was rarely used in a sense that related to the specific, psychological exploration of the functioning of the subconscious. As Jean Pierrot writes, ‘The more one becomes aware of the extraordinary inflation to which the concept of dream was subjected in this period, the more one begins to suspect that it had ceased to have any precise meaning, that “dream” had become merely a synonym for escape from the real’.<sup>69</sup> Implicit in this as well, is the idea that ‘dream’ also acts as a synonym for the kind of imaginative exaltation that was expressed in the phantasmagoria; that is, for the ungoverned, infinitely free imagination.

Through collections of spectacles and wonders, the phantasmagorical text rejects reality and offers the reader a doorway into dreams. Importantly though, this desire for dream works itself out in an interesting way in the phantasmagorical aesthetic. The collections we are often presented with are not merely collections of objects. As wondrous as they may be, the objects seemingly – by their very natures – have some extra, supernatural dimension; they become concrete manifestations of an abstract state of wonder; the collections become collections of magical elements of dream.

We can see this in action in Huysmans’s account of Des Esseintes’s library. The love that Des Esseintes feels for his books is, in part, a purely material and sensual type of bibliophilia, but it is also alloyed with something more complex. When Huysmans first introduces the reader to Des Esseintes’s collection of contemporary authors, he has him lavish his attentions on the physical charms of the volumes themselves. Des Esseintes is apparently more deeply enamoured of his books’ outward appearance than of their contents:

In Paris in former days he had had certain volumes set up just for himself and printed on hand presses by specially hired workmen... Deciding one fine day that he was tired of ordinary expensive papers... he had ordered special hand-made papers from the old mills at Vire... [and] to help mark his contempt for other bibliophiles, a Lübeck manufacturer supplied him with glorified candle paper, bluish in colour,

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<sup>69</sup> Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 182.

noisy and brittle to the touch, in which the straw fibres were replaced by flakes of gold such as you find floating in Danzig brandy.

In this way he had got together some unique volumes, always choosing unusual formats and having them clothed by Lortic, by Trautz-Bauzonnet, by Chambolle, By Capé's successors, in irreproachable bindings of old silk, of embossed ox-hide, of Cape goat-skin – all full bindings, patterned and inlaid, lined with tabby or watered silk, adorned in ecclesiastic fashion with metal clasps and corners, sometimes even decorated by Gruel Engelmann in oxidized silver and shining enamel.<sup>70</sup>

Des Esseintes's devotion to the material qualities of his books, the specifically chosen style of the type-faces, the feel of the paper and the craft of their bindings, recalls Pope's mocking comment that the eighteenth-century collector was curious 'in books, not authors',<sup>71</sup> valuing a book's outward oddities more highly than its artistic or scholarly qualities. Despite the supposedly rarefied nature of his intellectual appetites, Des Esseintes's love of literature is at first apparently manifested only in his love of exclusive commodities: costly objects made of the finest materials by the most skilled of craftsmen. Huysmans contrives to mock his character's physical, almost sexual, appreciation of books in Des Esseintes's reaction to a volume of poetry by Mallarmé. He tells us that 'Des Esseintes derived a certain perverse pleasure from handling this miniature volume, whose covers, made of Japanese felt as white as curdled milk, were fastened with two silk cords, one China pink, the other black. Concealed behind the covers, the black ribbon met the pink ribbon... thereby giving a discreet intimation, a vague warning, of the melancholy regrets that follow the appeasement of sexual desire, the abatement of sexual frenzy'.<sup>72</sup> It is worth noting that Des Esseintes apparently achieves a greater degree of erotic arousal from handling this book than he ever does from any of the women that he encounters in the novel. Baudelaire might have written that 'the more a man cultivates the arts, the less often he gets an

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<sup>70</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 131-132.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen & Co, 1963), 593.

<sup>72</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 182.

erection... Only brutes get really good erections',<sup>73</sup> but Huysmans makes it clear that Des Esseintes's sexuality has not been left behind – the useless relic of a less elevated, less aesthetically cultivated way of life – but instead displaced into perverse and ridiculous channels. Again, Huysmans's mockery of his own character directly parallels the conventional satire of the curious men of the eighteenth century, whose lusts might run to a microscopic insect or a stuffed crocodile, but only rarely to their wives.

However, it is also clear that Des Esseintes's love of books does, in fact, go beyond their material characteristics. At one point, he lays out the essential qualities that a work of literature must possess in order to be of interest to him:

He demanded a disquieting vagueness that would give him scope for dreaming until he decided to make it still vaguer or more definite, according to the way that he felt at the time. He wanted, in short, a work of art both for what it was in itself and for what it allowed him to bestow upon it; he wanted to go along with it and on it, as if supported by a friend or carried by a vehicle, into a sphere where sublimated sensations would arouse within him an unexpected commotion, the causes of which he would strive patiently and even vainly to analyse.<sup>74</sup>

Like the library of Roderick Usher, Des Esseintes' chief demand from his books is their imaginative potential, their capacity to allow him to dream. His perception of his favourite books is significant: their 'vagueness', their 'disquieting' properties suggest that, for him, they have something indeterminate and somewhat unreal in their natures. He chooses books that will provoke him to dream, that have in his eyes something dream-like about them. His books are essentially a way of activating reverie, of opening up an internal world of dream, the 'sphere of sublimated sensations' that Des Esseintes refers to. In a sense, the books become small, tangible pieces of dream that he can interact with, that he can use to trigger his immersion into a deeper dream-state. Once we understand the almost magical idea that Des Esseintes seems to have of his books, then his compulsion to fit them up in fine covers, archaic types and exotic

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<sup>73</sup> Baudelaire, *Mon Coeur mis à nu*. IN: Regenia Gagnier *Idylls of the Marketplace*. p. 82 Find original?

<sup>74</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 165.

papers becomes less simply materialistic. While it is undoubtedly still a materialistic impulse, it is an elaborate form of materialism. Des Esseintes's desire for his books to appear in a beautiful form is here depicted as a reflection of the depth of influence that they have over his imagination. Their attractiveness as physical objects is linked to their imaginative potency, their ability to propagate the dreams of their reader. In this context, Huysmans's observation that '[Des Esseintes] could not bear to have his favourite authors printed on rag-paper, as they were in other people's libraries, with characters like hobnails in a peasant's boots'<sup>75</sup> takes on a more subtle implication. By being such exquisite objects, the books – in the mind of their owner – better serve their function as tangible triggers for Des Esseintes dream life. Their physical beauty seems to merge with the effect that they have on his imagination, producing a composite identity. In a way, Des Esseintes's books become a type of dream-object; by being so appealing to look at and to handle, they are made into physical manifestations of the dreams they provoke; pieces of wonder made physical, or the abstract state of dreaming rendered into a tangible form.

In many ways, this is the basic condition of the phantasmagorical object, and the condition that most directly parallels Marx's use of the phantasmagoria to illustrate the nature of consumerism. A more direct example occurs in Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. When Wilde describes Dorian's vast collections of exotic and expensive objects (an exercise that occupies almost the whole of the chapter in which it occurs) it quickly becomes apparent that Dorian's love of his possessions is not predicated only upon the objects *themselves* but also upon the images and associations that they summon to his mind:

He collected together from all parts of the world the strangest [musical] instruments that could be found, either in the tombs of dead nations or among the few savage tribes that have survived contact with Western civilisations, and loved to touch them and to try them. He had the mysterious *juruparis* of the Rio Negro Indians, that women are not allowed to look at, and that even youths may not see till they have been subjected to fasting and scourging, and the earthen jars of the Peruvians

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<sup>75</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 131.

that have the shrill cries of birds, and flutes of human bones such as Alfonso de Ovalle heard in Chili, and the sonorous green jaspers that are found near Cuzco and give forth a note of singular sweetness. He had painted gourds filled with pebbles that rattled when they were shaken; the long *clarin* of the Mexicans, into which the performer does not blow, but through which he inhales the air; the harsh *ture* of the Amazon tribes, that is sounded by the sentinels who sit all day long in high trees, and can be heard, it is said, at a distance of three leagues; the *teponaztli*, that has two vibrating tongues of wood, and is beaten with sticks that are smeared with an elastic gum obtained from the milky juice of plants; the *yotl*-bells of the Aztecs, that are hung in clusters like grapes; and a huge cylindrical drum, covered with the skins of great serpents, like the one that Bernal Diaz saw when he went with Cortes into the Mexican temple, and of whose doleful sound he has left us so vivid a description. The fantastic character of these instruments fascinated him and he felt a curious delight in the thought that Art, like Nature, has her monsters, things of bestial shape and with hideous voices.<sup>76</sup>

As Wilde describes them, the instruments are not merely objects of great rarity, they become material embodiments of the alluring monstrosity that Dorian finds in the music they produce. Again, like Poe's description of Usher's books, as Wilde continues to enumerate the items that Dorian has in his collection, an increasingly magical, legendary dimension begins to emerge and to assert itself beyond the mere corporeal fact of the objects' existence. The actual instruments themselves become a type of material synecdoche for the half-fabulous accounts of South America and its inhabitants. Although Dorian's collection of instruments is apparently make up almost exclusively of South and Central American items,<sup>77</sup> this air of abstract exoticism

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<sup>76</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 129-130.

<sup>77</sup> Wilde obtained his information about these instruments from a short chapter on 'The American Indians' in Carl Engel's *Musical Instruments* which he found in the South Kensington Museum (later the Victoria and Albert Museum). See G. A. Cevasco, *The Breviary of the Decadence: J.-K. Huysmans's À rebours and English Literature* (New York: AMS Press, 2001 ), 83.

mingled with an equally abstract barbarism is even more apparent in Wilde's depiction of the 'curious concerts' Dorian gives in a 'long, latticed room, with a vermillion-and-gold ceiling and walls of olive-green lacquer'. Wilde describes how 'mad gypsies tore wild music from little zithers, or grave yellow-shawled Tunisians plucked at the strained strings of monstrous lutes, while grinning negroes beat monotonously upon copper drums, and, crouching upon scarlet mats, slim turbaned Indians blew through long pipes of reeds or brass, and charmed, or feigned to charm, great hooded snakes and horrible horned adders. The harsh intervals and shrill discords of barbaric music stirred him at times when Schubert's grace, and Chopin's beautiful sorrows, and the mighty harmonies of Beethoven himself, fell unheeded on his ear'.<sup>78</sup> The use of the word 'barbaric' is significant here, because it highlights the music as something wholly alien and threatening. It is not merely a different sort of music, or a different musical tradition; it implies something radically different and shocking, a violation of the very idea of music itself. There is also no differentiation between the different nations or cultures that the various musicians come from – they are lumped together, portrayed collectively as inhuman, deranged and monstrous. They are representations of an abstract, infinitely heterogeneous exotica; they are presented to the reader like the headless skeletons, goblins and spectres in Robertson's phantasmagoria. They, like the instruments Dorian owns, are representatives of an unspecified, dream-like 'other' – a remote fantasy land of wonder and of horror. The instruments that Dorian owns are material embodiments of this fantasy land. Rather than serving a scientific or ethnographic function, rather than being understood as artefacts of a specific culture, Dorian's instruments exist for him purely in this 'magical' dimension; they exist only as signifiers of the exotic, the fabulous and the demonic. Dorian's love of 'touching and trying them' implicitly puts *him* in touch with this mystical dream-scape. Similarly, when Wilde describes how Dorian can 'often spend a whole day settling and resettling'<sup>79</sup> his collection of jewels in their cases, considerably more time is spent recounting the 'wonderful stories' Dorian has learnt about jewels than is spent on Dorian's collection of real stones. He may own 'wine-yellow topazes, carbuncles of fiery scarlet', 'three emeralds from Amsterdam of extraordinary size and richness of colour and a turquoise *de la vielle roche* that was the envy of all the connoisseurs', but these are of less importance than his other, imaginary, collection. His handling of these

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<sup>78</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 129.

<sup>79</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 130.



gem stones allows a magical transposition to occur, whereby he is placed in contact with the ‘gem in the brain of the dragon’, ‘the bezoar found in the heart of the Arabian deer’ and the legendary ‘rosary of three hundred and four pearls, one for every god that he worshipped’,<sup>80</sup> that the King of Malabar showed to Marco Polo. Tactile contact with these objects activates the dreams of other even more fabulous objects and cultivates a fantastic reverie. The objects cease to be simply themselves and become artefacts of dream.

In this sense, these collections serve the function of the phantasmagoria, overwhelming the characters and readers with a sense of the unreal, giving free rein to the excesses of imagination. However, this can also be directly related to Marx’s critique of the phantasmagorical nature of materialism. The fantasy that these real objects can stand in for other, unreal objects, the belief that they contain within themselves some remote projection of a distant wonderland of dream and myth, is strikingly similar to what Marx identifies as one of the great delusions of capitalism: the fantasy of the object as self-producing. The attribution of a magical quality to these objects conceals their presence within a cycle of economic exchange; their actual monetary value and the resources that go into obtaining or producing them are veiled behind the romanticisation of the object itself. When the object become magical, when it exists only as a corporeal manifestation of wonder, when its only point of origin is a disordered dream of history and legend, it ceases to be an item that can be manipulated, exchanged, purchased and consumed: it is elevated out of the system of capitalism. This, then, is one of the inherent paradoxes of the decadent use of the phantasmagorical aesthetic. There is the desire to portray the allure of objects, of the phantasmagoria of the marketplace, of collection, of elite consumption and sumptuous materialism that, however, exists without a capitalistic materialistic framework. This is the fantasy of a materialism which doesn’t include acquisitive, capitalist impulses and which venerates objects beyond their worth as commodities. If we return to some of the examples that were used to illustrate the lavish materialism of *Against Nature*, we can see the evidence of this desire.

When Des Esseintes comes to furnish his sitting room, we are told that he includes ‘a massive money changer’s table’<sup>81</sup> from the fifteenth century. Likewise, his morning cup of tea (that impeccable blend of Si-a-Fayoun, Mo-you-Tann and

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<sup>80</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 131.

<sup>81</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 8.

Khansky that Huysmans may or may not have intended as a joke) comes ‘from China into Russia by special caravans’.<sup>82</sup> Both the money changer’s table and the tea caravans suggest commercialism, but not a modern, industrial variety. Instead they imply a form of commerce resonant with historical romance: Eastern caravans and Renaissance bankers. In this way, the materialism of the book is carefully disengaged from any modern commercial activity. Similarly, when Des Esseintes imagines the locomotives of the northern railway as beautiful women, he strips the machines of their industrial, commercial function and converts them into objects of elite connoisseurship. He no longer has to contemplate the railways’ place in the economic and social realities of his time – realities which he finds profoundly distasteful anyway. To paraphrase Marx, through Des Esseintes’s phantasmagorical imagination the steam engines no longer embody the relations between men – the relations of labour and capital – but can be processed in purely aesthetic terms, as exotic spectacle, like an actress of a courtesan. As such, the phantasmagoria of the collection is, in decadent literature, also in part a Marxist phantasmagoria: it enables an elevation into dream but also disguises the social relations expressed in the objects themselves.

Des Esseintes’s rejection of the values of bourgeois capitalism is wholehearted and throughout the novel it becomes clear that this defines the majority of his aesthetic opinions. While he loves material finery, he resents its connection to the world of commerce. His materialism is, therefore, linked to the celebration of his own imagination and his desire to escape from reality into dream. By imaginatively alchemising his dream world into physical form in the objects he possesses, he comes into closer contact with the dream and also signals his rejection of the system that values these objects on solely economic grounds. He interprets these objects into a new scheme of values which removes them from profane capitalism. This is most obvious when he comes to select a number of gem stones for the typically idiosyncratic purpose of mounting them on the shell of a pet tortoise:

The diamond, he told himself, has become terribly vulgar now that every businessman wears one on his little finger; Oriental emeralds and rubies are not so degraded and they dart bright tongues of fire, but they are too reminiscent of the green and

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<sup>82</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 44.

red eyes of certain Paris buses fitted with headlamps in the self-same colours; as for topazes, whether pink or yellow, they are cheap stones, dear to people of the small shopkeeper class who long to have a few jewel-cases to lock up in their mirror wardrobes. Similarly, although the Church has helped the amethyst to retain something of a sacerdotal character, at once unctuous and solemn, this stone too has been debased by use in the red ears and on the tubulous fingers of butchers' wives whose ambition it is to deck themselves out at little cost with genuine, heavy jewels. Alone among these stones, the sapphire has kept its fires inviolate, unsullied by contact with commercial and financial stupidity. The glittering sparks playing over its cold, limpid water have as it were protected its discreet and haughty nobility against any defilement. But unfortunately in artificial light its bright flames lose their brilliance; the blue water sinks low and seems to go to sleep, to wake and sparkle again only at daybreak.

It was clear that none of these stones satisfied Des Esseintes' requirements; besides, they were all too civilised, too familiar. Instead he turned his attention to more startling and unusual gems.<sup>83</sup>

Des Esseintes attempts to redefine the criteria by which value is assigned to an object. He rejects familiar stones that are highly regarded only because of their monetary costs, and instead selects more unusual specimens, both real stones and artificial ones. Des Esseintes's desire is to attribute a higher form of taste to himself, to separate himself from the 'commercial and financial stupidity' of the 'common herd'<sup>84</sup> that, in his eyes, know only conformity and understand only money. It is clear that he completely rejects the aesthetic characteristics of the more common stones; their popularity automatically renders them repulsive to him. The exception to this is the sapphire which, thanks to its lack of popularity or prohibitive cost, Des Esseintes still considers acceptable. In describing the sapphire, Des Esseintes creates an interesting

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<sup>83</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 42.

<sup>84</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 43.

association of ideas. The jewel has both an aristocratic and a soporific character. In delineating its appeal, Des Esseintes creates a link between aristocracy, beauty and sleep. This association does much to illuminate the nature of Des Esseintes's aesthetic standards: the aristocratic superiority to bourgeois manners and bourgeois money-grubbing, the love of material finery unsullied by mass production and mass consumption and the cultivation of a highly personal, highly somnolent state of reverie and imaginative indulgence. These three factors merge together to form the pattern for Des Esseintes's behaviour and aesthetic preferences: beautiful objects better serve their function as aids to dream, objects can only qualify as beautiful if they are obviously disconnected from bourgeois tastes and by living an isolated haughty life of dreamy contemplation, he consistently reaffirms his superiority to middle class mediocrity and common sense.

This logic of exclusivity informs many – if not all – of Des Esseintes's aesthetic decisions. He despises oriental rugs because of their commonplace vulgarity, such that 'upstart tradesmen could now buy them in the bargain basement of any department store'.<sup>85</sup> He dislikes 'those works that it is good form to enthuse over' and dismisses Molière and Rabelais as 'knockabout turns given by clowns at a country fair'.<sup>86</sup> Des Esseintes's desire for exclusivity, however, exposes the important contradictions that underlie the decadent phantasmagorical collection: it attempts to reject the materialistic, capitalistic impulses of late nineteenth-century society by attributing a higher, 'magical' property to its objects. But in doing this it conforms to the Marxist illusion that commodities do not emerge from human labour but from a magical non-place of the market. Similarly, as Rita Felski points out, the desire for exclusive objects, for 'ever more arcane objects not yet trivialised by mass reproduction, echoes the same cult of novelty which propels the logic of capitalist consumerism'.<sup>87</sup> In this respect, Des Esseintes's attitudes provide us with a useful template for decadent social ideology and for decadent literature's use of the phantasmagoria. If we return to Regenia Gagnier's remark that 'decadence' is, in effect, 'a tag referring to the relation between the artist or work and society'<sup>88</sup> rather than a specific style of writing, not only can we see that Des Esseintes's distaste for the middle classes is, in a sense, typical of decadent literature in general, we can also

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<sup>85</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 134.

<sup>87</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 99.

<sup>88</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 67.

see that decadent literature is, by its very nature, defined by an active resistance to the middle classes and to middle class values.

Huysmans's protagonist is entirely overt in his loathing for the middle classes. Beyond trying to separate himself from them through his aesthetic decisions, he clearly articulates his feelings about them when he is forced to contemplate returning to the society from which he has fled:

More cunning and contemptible than the impoverished aristocracy and the discredited clergy, the bourgeoisie borrowed their frivolous love of show and their old world arrogance, which it cheapened through its own lack of taste, and stole their natural defects and turned them into hypocritical vices. Overbearing and underhand in behaviour, base and cowardly in character, it ruthlessly shot down its perennial and essential dupe, the mob, which it had previously unmuzzled and sent flying at the throats of the old castes.

Now it was all over. Once it had done its job, the plebs had been bled white in the interests of public hygiene, while the jovial bourgeois lorded it over the country, putting his trust in the power of his money and the contagiousness of its stupidity. The result of his rise to power had been the suppression of all intelligence, the negation of all honesty, the destruction of all art.<sup>89</sup>

The depth of his disgust is obvious, as are the principle reasons for it: the proliferation of the middle-class values of conformity and capitalism throughout the whole of society.

Although the rejection of the middle class is less obvious in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* it can still be clearly seen, as Gagnier points out, in the total absence of that class from the novel; as a 'reaction against middle class materialism, Wilde divided the world of *Dorian Gray* between the upper and lower classes exclusively'.<sup>90</sup> The novel's plot alternates between the world of idle aristocrats and artists, and the

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<sup>89</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 202-203.

<sup>90</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 57.

poverty of the Vane's theatre and the 'streets like the black web of some sprawling spider'<sup>91</sup> to be found in the East End. Interestingly, Wilde's description of Dorian's trip into the East End parallels the threatening exoticism to be found in his collections: 'Most of the windows were dark, but now and then fantastic shadows were silhouetted against some lamp-lit blind. He watched them curiously. They moved like monstrous marionettes, and made gestures like living things'.<sup>92</sup> Like the foreign musicians, the inhabitants of poverty-stricken parts of London are portrayed as vaguely fantastical and inhuman; they have the same mixture of the exotic and the malevolent. In this way, they are paradoxically linked to the upper class world of elite consumption and refinement. Dorian's aristocratic world of art galleries, operas and collections is a world of aesthetic spectacle; the squalid East End represents another – but similar – kind of spectacle. Only the middle class is ignored because only the middle class is boring, only the middle class is utterly devoid of the exotic and the shocking.

Gagnier interprets the vitriolic reaction against Wilde's book in terms of the class conflict it enacts through this omission. Middle class journalists and critics interpreted Wilde's elision of the middle class and middle class morals as a provocative refusal of those same morals: 'The reviewers felt that Wilde violated the social function of art – that is, to present the normative values of society, to present the middle class. In exclusively representing the part of society that he did – idle aristocrats and romantic artists – Wilde offended an ethic of industry and productivity'.<sup>93</sup> The bourgeois ethic of industry was the very thing that both the French and English decadents sought to define themselves by opposing. Not just Wilde, but other decadent writers and artists such as Machen, Whistler, Beardsley and Shiel attempted to construct specifically 'anti-bourgeois identities ... that signalled their resistance to Victorian middle class consumer culture'.<sup>94</sup> This sentiment naturally manifests itself in decadent literature and explains both the decadent use of the phantasmagorical aesthetic as well as their sometimes paradoxical interaction with the forces of capitalism – especially as contained in the phantasmagorical collection. This desire to create an identity and mode of living that would militate against the stifling influence of middle-class conformity also explains the decadent preoccupation with

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<sup>91</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 177.

<sup>92</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 177.

<sup>93</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 65.

<sup>94</sup> Kirsten MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence: High Art, Popular Writing and the Fin De Siècle* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 12-13.

dream and with escaping from 'the real'. In this context, 'the real' can be understood to be almost synonymous with those virtues espoused by the bourgeoisie: thrift, industry, propriety and practicality – specifically a practical engagement with the world of commerce and finance. Bourgeois values are apparently located in the everyday and the unimaginative; by a process of reaction, the dream comes to emblemise the opposite of this: individuality, license and indulgence. The act of dreaming also helps to signal an independence from the capitalist system. The dreamer can afford the time it takes to do nothing; the active bourgeoisie on the make dare not take the time to dawdle. The ascent (or descent) into dream is, therefore, the great realisation of both individuality and economic indifference. This goes a long way toward explaining Pierrot's observation about the generality with which the word 'dream' is used in this period. As we saw, Pierrot wrote that the concept of dream seemed to have lost a precise meaning in the late nineteenth century and to have 'become merely a synonym for escape from the real'.<sup>95</sup> This is, in fact, completely accurate. The idea of dreaming becomes an idea of negation; the act of dreaming becomes an act designed to outrage bourgeois sensibilities. By rejecting 'real life', the decadent rejects middle class definitions of maturity, masculinity and economy. It apparently elevates them out of the lower realms occupied by the bourgeois and into a higher state of individuality, creativity and aestheticism.

This method of establishing the superiority of the decadent personality to the middle-class, 'gentlemanly' personality, also has the effect of placing the decadent into a different relationship with the market. As well as allowing for a personal kind of superiority – an imaginative, creative superiority – it also gives rise to an apparent superiority of taste. The cultivation of the imagination also leads to a cultivation of the sense of aesthetics. While the bourgeoisie consumes without discrimination, buying only what is in fashion, assuming that financial cost automatically translates into aesthetic quality, the decadent claims a superior taste. The decadent consumes only those things of which the public is ignorant, only those things which, by their oddness or exoticism, seem to suggest some other, stranger type of experience. Here too, the idea of the dream becomes an important factor. As we have seen, in the phantasmagorical collection, objects assume dream-like properties, they become embodiments of the dream-life. As such, they acquire a 'dream value' which is

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<sup>95</sup> Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 182.

(allegedly) fundamentally superior to any real life values – values that the bourgeois might be able to understand and process into their world view. In this way, objects are valued because of some fantastical component that escapes easy definition and also escapes from conventional economic categorisations: in decadent materialism, the physical market value of the object is superseded by another value, one based on a set of highly *personal*, highly *fabulous* associations.

How effective is this method of rejecting conventional market materialism though? After all, by injecting an element of the magical into an object, decadent materialism found itself returning to the Marxist illusion that the market itself was somehow magical. Similarly, this quest for exclusivity echoes the functioning of fashion and advertising. Elite consumption is governed by the same rules as bourgeois consumption. Those who wish to assert their aesthetic and cultural superiority have to be constantly ‘on the move’, always in search of the avant-garde and the new, while entrepreneurs and their customers follow on behind them, refitting their discoveries for sale to the masses. Less enterprising consumers constantly attempt – with more limited means – to imitate the fashions of these pioneers in order to feel like they too belong to a cultural elite, while the elite themselves do the very same thing: constantly seeking to find new ways to affirm their uniqueness before the mob arrives and threatens to make them look just like everyone else. Because of this, the decadent’s ‘attempt to create a uniquely individual style reveals his inevitable reliance upon the very categories of evaluation against which he ostensibly pits himself’.<sup>96</sup> There are, therefore, two contradictions inherent in decadent materialism, trapped as it was between the Marxist illusion of the marketplace and the inexorable power of consumerism to absorb and distribute their stylistic uniqueness. Something of this kind of contradiction can perhaps also be seen in the decadent’s social agenda: their desire to bamboozle the middle classes. Kirsten MacLeod goes into great detail to establish that, while the decadents might have aspired to the position and pose of aristocratic dandies, they often came from middle class backgrounds – albeit in the professional middle class of doctors, lawyers, clergymen and civil servants, rather than in the capitalistic, entrepreneurial business middle class.<sup>97</sup> To an extent, by ‘fashioning

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<sup>96</sup> Felski, *The Gender of Modernity*, 99.

<sup>97</sup> See MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, 21-37.



their self-image as aristocrats and bohemians who held bourgeois society in contempt, decadents mystified their class origins'.<sup>98</sup>

It is important to understand, though, that this apparent contradiction does not automatically establish a fundamental hypocrisy at the heart of decadent ideals. Their objections to middle class capitalism and conformity remain valid despite their own backgrounds. The decadent critique of the middle-class was a middle-class critique of itself; middle-class subjects who objected to the values that were imposed on them by their own background. Their adoption of the pose of aristocratic indolence and monetary indifference was an attempt to find an alternative way of life. In the process, this gives an internal criticism the semblance of an external one: the middle-class criticising itself, but doing so with the voice of the aristocracy. While it does not invalidate decadent criticisms, however, this apparent contradiction does inform the decadent use of phantasmagorical materialism. On the one hand, it is important to understand the often inherently artificial, constructed nature of the decadent identity and on the other it is worth highlighting the insecurity that this artificiality and these contradictions produced. The phantasmagoria was in many ways an ideal aesthetic for the decadents to adopt. It was an aesthetic of resistance, so it seemed to defy traditional bourgeois standards of restraint, aesthetic unity and aesthetic uniformity; it was an aesthetic of dream, so it symbolised the triumph of individual imagination and an escape from normality; it was an aesthetic of collection so it allowed for an unashamed indulgence in materialism and a celebration of elevated taste. In many ways, though, the decadents found themselves in a mirror image of the position in which the eighteenth-century curiosity satirists had found themselves. While the satirists had set out to mock the curious's pretentiousness, economic naiveté and contravention of sexual and social mores, they were often seduced by the aesthetics of curiosity. From the other side, as it were, the decadents sought to reject bourgeois materialism and moral conformity but found they could fully escape neither. Wilde, for example, found it necessary to impose a somewhat contradictory moral onto *Dorian Gray*. Despite the book's love of objects and material finery, it is Dorian's love of a purely superficial existence that ruins him. Throughout the book he loses his identity as a moral human being, being reduced to nothing but the mere surface of his painting. Similarly, 'to a great extent, *Dorian Gray* is about *spectators*, from

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<sup>98</sup> MacLeod, *Fictions of British Decadence*, 22.

spectators of the beauty of others such as Basil of Dorian's and Dorian of Sybil Vane's to "spectators of life", as Wilde called Wotton'.<sup>99</sup> Huysmans resolved the contradictions of the decadent phantasmagoria more effectively with comedy, making Des Esseintes both a tragic outsider and a pretentious buffoon.

As Des Esseintes's inability to tolerate solid food worsens, he acquires a device called a patent digester which works by boiling food down into small quantities of a thin soup that his stomach will accept. In the same chapter in which he begins to use this device, Huysmans also gives us what is probably the depiction of Des Esseintes's ideas about contemporary literature. Importantly, he has Des Esseintes describe the modern prose poem as 'a novel concentrated in a few sentences and yet comprising the cohabited juice of hundreds of pages... the dry juice, the osmazome of literature, the essential oil of art'.<sup>100</sup> Towards the end of the chapter, Huysmans alludes more and more to Des Esseintes's digestive problems – paralleling his sporadic, whimsical and fastidious way of absorbing nutrition with his manner of absorbing literature. We are told that he regards Mallarmé as 'the quintessence of Baudelaire and Poe; their refined and potent substances distilled yet again to give of new savours, new intoxications'.<sup>101</sup> Des Esseintes has – both literally and figuratively – a problem with taste. This motif builds until, his health having gotten so bad that he has been forced to send for a doctor, we see him enthusiastically embracing the enemas that he has been prescribed to rebuild his strength: 'Des Esseintes could not help secretly congratulating himself on this experience which was, so to speak, the crowning achievement of the life that he had planned for himself; his taste for the artificial had now, without even the slightest effort on his part, attained its supreme fulfilment'.<sup>102</sup> Excited by the potential of this new experience, Des Esseintes immediately sets his imagination to work on it, 'composing novel receipts and even planning meatless dinners for Fridays'.<sup>103</sup> The message here is obvious: Des Esseintes's desire to distinguish himself has reached such an extreme pass that his aesthetic doctrines are in the end, quite literally, shoved up his own arse. As well as pointing out the ridiculousness of Des Esseintes's compulsion to be different – a recapitulation of the eighteenth-century theme that the curious man would end up by becoming a curiosity

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<sup>99</sup> Gagnier, *Idylls of the Marketplace*, 57.

<sup>100</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 183.

<sup>101</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 184.

<sup>102</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 193.

<sup>103</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 194.

himself – Huysmans also establishes a link between his philosophy and his illness. Des Esseintes’s doctor tells him that, to have any chance of recovering, ‘he would have to abandon this solitary existence, to go back to Paris, to lead a normal life again, above all to try to enjoy the same pleasures as other people... The radical change of life that he prescribed was in his opinion a matter of life and death – it meant the difference between a good recovery on the one hand and insanity speedily followed by tuberculosis on the other’.<sup>104</sup> Des Esseintes’s taste literally does sicken him; it is both an effect and a cause of his condition. As the novel ends, his rebellion against bourgeois mediocrity becomes a symptom of this disease; not a revolution but a sort of existential vomiting. Yet it is this sickness that makes him admirable and tragic. In the last lines of the novel, as he contemplates returning to Paris as his doctor has ordered, he despairs:

‘Well, it is all over now. Like a tie-race, the waves of human mediocrity are rising to the heavens and will engulf this refuge, for I am opening the flood-gates myself, against my will. Ah! but my courage fails me, and my heart is sick within me! – Lord, take pity on the Christian who doubts, on the unbeliever who would fain believe, on the galley-slave who puts out to sea alone, in the night, beneath a firmament no longer lit by the consoling beacon-fires of the ancient hope!’<sup>105</sup>

Here we can see something of the self-consciousness that the contradictions of decadent ideology provoked. While Des Esseintes tries and fails to reject the society into which he has been born, his eventual condition also affirms the status quo. The novel cannot fully endorse Des Esseintes’s plan to escape consumerism and bourgeois values by retreating into a personal phantasmagoria; presumably because Huysmans could sense the flaws at the heart of Des Esseintes’s agenda: the difficulty of opposing materialism by being materialistic, the fear that by trying to outrage the bourgeoisie, one might reveal oneself to be one of them. This is not to say that, even as Huysmans was codifying decadent ideology, he was also aiming to negate it, but he could obviously see the inherent problems it presented.

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<sup>104</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 196.

<sup>105</sup> Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 204.

Given the underlying sense of these contradictions, the concern that the phantasmagoria might simply be bad taste, it is not surprising that some of the most phantasmagorical of decadent writing appears in a comic form. Although it was left unfinished at the time of his death in 1898, Aubrey Beardsley's *Venus and Tannhäuser* resolves many of the difficulties of the decadent phantasmagoria into an ironically comic and elaborately pornographic fantasy. The book is a retelling of the classic German folk tale (made even more popular by Wagner's 1845 opera based on the same story) of the poet Tannhäuser who spends a year living in the subterranean realm of the goddess Venus. Eventually Tannhäuser becomes convulsed with remorse and leaves the 'Venusberg' to seek forgiveness for his sins from the Pope. His Holiness, however, refuses, saying that it is as impossible for him to forgive Tannhäuser as it would be for the papal staff to sprout flowers. After Tannhäuser leaves Rome, the staff does indeed begin to bloom, showing that he has obtained God's forgiveness after all, but before the Pope's messengers can reach him, Tannhäuser returns to the Venusberg, never to be seen again. The section of *Venus and Tannhäuser* that Beardsley completed covers Tannhäuser's arrival at the Venusberg and the early part of the time that he spends there but ends before his attack of guild and his return to the surface world.

Like Dorian Gray's vast collections, Beardsley's phantasmagorias largely consist of massive lists of luxurious objects. Venus's boudoir, for example, contains:

shoes of grey and black and brown suede, of white silk and rose satin, and velvet and sarcenet; there were some of sea-green sewn with cherry blossoms, some of red with willow branches, and some of grey with bright-winged birds. There were heels of silver, of ivory, and of gilt; there were buckles of very precious stone and set in most strange and esoteric devices; there were ribbons tied and twisted into cunning forms; there were buttons so beautiful that the button-holes might have no pleasure till they closed upon them; there were

soles of delicate leathers scented with maréchale, and linings of soft stuffs scented with the juice of July flowers.<sup>106</sup>

Again, we can see the materialist fantasy of the decadent phantasmagoria. The Venusberg is insulated from the cheapening effect of mass production – from the conditions of modernity which, in Walter Benjamin's terms, strip an object of its uniqueness, of its aura.<sup>107</sup> As such, all of the objects in the Venusberg are elaborately fashioned and intricately decorated. In many ways, *Venus and Tannhäuser* is the most explicitly and completely phantasmagorical of all decadent works. The idea of the collection dominates the book even more fully than in *Against Nature*; each new scene leads into a new mass of people, furniture, shoes, frocks, masks and other objets d'art that Beardsley enumerates in detail. Even individual objects seem to erupt outwards into accumulations of attributes, characteristics and qualities, becoming almost like collections in themselves. In the middle of one of the Venusberg's terraces, for example, there is 'a huge bronze fountain with three basins'. Beardsley tells us that:

From the first [basin] rose a many-breasted dragon and four little loves mounted upon swans, and each love was furnished with a bow and arrow. Two of them that faced the monster seemed to recoil in fear, two that were behind made bold enough to aim that shafts at him. From the verge of the second sprang a circle of slim golden columns that supported silver doves with tails and wings spread out. The third, held by a group of grotesquely attenuated satyrs, was centred with a thin pipe hung with masks and roses and capped with children's heads.

From the mouths of the dragon and the loves, and from the swans' eyes, from the breasts of the doves, from the satyrs' horns and lips, from the masks at many points and from the

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<sup>106</sup> Aubrey Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, ed. John Glassco (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1995), 30.

<sup>107</sup> See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, translated by Hannah Arendt and Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 217.

children's curls, the water played profusely, cutting strange arabesques and subtle figures.<sup>108</sup>

Like the fountain, everything in Venus' domain is complex and variegated, everything is covered in baroque encrustations of decoration until each individual object and setting becomes essentially phantasmagorical because of the sheer number and variety of different forms they seem to contain.

Similarly, the book is structured around the idea of large-scale, disconnected visual spectacle. The narrative of *Venus and Tannhäuser* is, in reality, a sequence of scenes or tableaux that are to some extent disconnected from each other even though they include the same characters and take place in proximal locations. Despite, or rather because of, the façade of ceaseless activity produced by the book's phantasmagoria, there is an oddly static, pictorial quality to *Venus and Tannhäuser*: the narrative does not seem to move organically between different scenes: 'Each chapter, while centring on one elaborate scene, unravels in a plethora of static heterogeneous details, disrupting any narrative line'.<sup>109</sup> We see characters most often in a state of inactivity: we see Tannhäuser pausing to arrange his attire and contemplate a series of carvings before entering the Venusberg, we see Venus in her dressing room preparing for a party to celebrate his arrival, but we don't see Tannhäuser actually enter Venus' kingdom, we don't see them meet or see them arrive at the party; the next scene is them sitting together at supper. The novel, perhaps because Beardsley's imagination was that of an illustrator, is arranged as a series of hugely detailed, intensely phantasmagorical 'pictures'. The narrative jumps from one to the next while most of the actions that the characters perform are skipped over by Beardsley's writing or hidden between chapters. This is the prioritisation of description over narration taken to the extreme. Although the novel superficially contains a great deal of confusion and activity, this is most often presented as a list of occurrences; action becomes, in effect, a collection of events that do not progress to a definite end. For example, after Venus' preparations for the party to celebrate Tannhäuser's arrival:

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<sup>108</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 35-36.

<sup>109</sup> Chris Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 172.

When the toilet was at an end all her doves clustered around her feet loving to frôler her ankles with their plumes, and the dwarves clapped their hands, and put their fingers between their lips and whistled. Never before had Venus been so radiant and compelling. Spiridion, in the corner, looked up from his game of Spellicans and trembled. Claude and Clair, pale with pleasure, stroked and touched her with their delicate hands, and wrinkled her stockings with their nervous lips, and smoothed them with their thin fingers; and Sarrasine undid her garters and kissed them inside and put them on again, pressing her thighs with his mouth. The dwarves grew very daring, I can tell you. There was almost a mêlée.<sup>110</sup>

In this way, the story is flattened out into a kind of perpetual pictorial synchronicity in which events seem to happen either in an indeterminate order or all at once. As is common in phantasmagorical literature, Beardsley's narration imitates the perspective of the curious observer, apparently selecting those incidents that strike him most powerfully – implying the existence of a great many others – and transforming *Venus and Tannhäuser* into a collection of singularities, an endlessly reforming, living phantasmagoria that takes place without any comprehensible order. In this sense, the novel is more completely phantasmagorical than *Against Nature* or *Dorian Gray* because it more completely ejects plot in favour of a simulated act of observation; what happens to the characters is less important than what happens around them; where the characters go is less important than what the reader observes (as it were, in the background) while they are on their way. *Venus and Tannhäuser* is, in effect, a sequence of phantasmagorias; a collection of collections.

In common with other decadent phantasmagorias, the febrile materialism of *Venus and Tannhäuser* has its roots in an intensely anti-bourgeois sentiment. The voice of the novel is the voice of the elite connoisseur, continually referencing obscure details of works such as 'the well-known engraving by Lorette that forms the frontispiece to Millevoye's *Architecture du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*'<sup>111</sup> and comparing the works of great and obscure artists. It tells us that 'a painting of Carrot's is like an exquisite

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<sup>110</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 31.

<sup>111</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 61.

lyric poem, full of love and truth; whilst one of Claude's recalls some noble eclogue glowing with rich and concentrated thought'.<sup>112</sup> While there is an element of self-awareness, nor to say self-parody, in *Venus and Tannhäuser's* use of it, this was clearly a pose that Beardsley himself was keen to maintain in his public image. In an interview in the March 1897 edition of *The Idler* (much of which Beardsley seems to have written himself) the artist, 'faultlessly dressed', points the interviewer towards 'a goodly collection of Chippendale furniture – two rare old settees in particular' that he owns, as well as towards 'the titles and dates of some of his rare editions, making up a collection sufficient to cause a bibliophile's eyes to bulge with envy'.<sup>113</sup> In reality, Beardsley was forced to live much more frugally than the interview suggested and, as with Poe, Huysmans and Wilde before him, there was clearly an element of wish fulfilment at work in his rendering of the Venusberg's huge reserves of material finery. *Venus and Tannhäuser* represents, in classically phantasmagorical style, the imagination let loose to indulge itself and expand without limits. However, it is also obviously an imagination set free from the restraints of economic necessity and social order. The collections in the book clearly reject bourgeois consumerism by creating an exaggeratedly elite form of connoisseurship. Again, though, they clearly also represent the fantasy of materialism without the requirement of material production. This is more literal in *Venus and Tannhäuser* than in other works because the book takes place in an actual magical kingdom. Even within the fictional setting, the objects that appear in the novel are disconnected from reality, requiring no labour to produce and having no value beyond their own aesthetic qualities. The social aspects of the book are similarly unreal. The social structure of the Venusberg is like a greatly exaggerated version of that found in *Dorian Gray*; the population of Venus' realm belong entirely either to the class of servants or the aristocracy of the goddess's court. In an even greater social subversion, there are almost no formal divisions between these two classes: anyone seems to be able to more-or-less freely associate with anyone else, and more importantly, anyone seems to be able to have sex with anyone else as well.

The sexuality of *Venus and Tannhäuser* is the most direct way in which the novel seems to militate against bourgeois morality and here too, the logic of the phantasmagoria predominates. Sex in the Venusberg is omnipresent as well as multi-denominational; not only does the novel portray a universal freedom and openness

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<sup>112</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 58.

<sup>113</sup> Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, 322.



about sexuality, it also portrays a universe that is *characterised* by sexual extremity and peculiarity. At breakfast, for example, Tannhäuser notices a nervous young man watching Venus from a distance:

‘That’s Felix,’ said the Goddess, in answer to an enquiry from the Chevalier; and she went on to explain his attitude. Felix always attended Venus upon her little latrinal excursions, holding her, serving her, and making much of all she did. To undo her things, lift her skirts, to wait and watch the coming, to dip a lip or finger in the royal output, to stain himself deliciously with it, to lie beneath her as the favours fell, to carry off the crumpled, crotted paper – these were the pleasures of the young man’s life.

Truly there never was a queen so beloved by her subjects as Venus. Everything she wore had its lover. Heavens! how her handkerchiefs were filched, her stockings stolen! Daily, what intrigues, what countless ruses to possess her merest frippery? Every scrap of her body was adored. Never, for Savaral, could her ear yield sufficient wax! Never, for Pradon, could she spit prodigally enough! And Saphius found a month an intolerable time.<sup>114</sup>

Similarly, not only do Tannhäuser and Venus have sex in public at various times, Tannhäuser appears to be equally open to sex with men, women and young boys. Beardsley places the main emphasis of the book on sexual variety and erotic strangeness. In effect, as well as being a phantasmagoria of materialism, the novel is also a phantasmagoria of sexuality – its main interest is in the scale of sexual activity and the exoticism and grotesquery to be found therein. Snodgrass points out that Beardsley ‘manages to call into question the nature of bourgeois ideology by, in effect, dandifying as well as scandalising the entire landscape’.<sup>115</sup> Beardsley dismisses the conformist ideal of heterosexual monogamy by creating a world in which everyone and everything is a source of sexual and aesthetic pleasure. As such, the

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<sup>114</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 71.

<sup>115</sup> Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, 212.

phantasmagorical nature of the novel is fundamentally linked to its rebelliousness, giving it an uncontrolled anarchic quality that resists middle class order and normality. The phantasmagorical quality of the book's eroticism can also be seen in the way in which Beardsley handles specific sex acts in *Venus and Tannhäuser*. Although he describes the general nature of the acts that take place, he rarely describes them in detail; Beardsley almost entirely avoids telling the reader who did what to whom and in what order. In keeping with the novel's preference for spectacle over action, Beardsley is always more interested in the spectacle of sex than the action of sex. The sex in *Venus and Tannhäuser* is, in reality, a collection of sex acts, with the strangest, most imaginative and unusual varieties of copulation laid out for the reader. The sense of a collection is intensified when we realise that many of the acts that the characters engage in have literary and historical origins. Tannhäuser, for example, calls the boys that attend him in his bath his 'pretty fish', 'because they love to swim between his legs',<sup>116</sup> a description that recalls the Roman historian Suetonius's remark in *The Twelve Caesars* that the Emperor Tiberius 'trained little boys whom he called his "minnows", to chase him while he went swimming and get between his legs to lick and nibble him'.<sup>117</sup> Just as Poe populated Usher's library with real books, collecting them within his own text, so Beardsley collects different literary-sexual oddities for his characters to indulge in.

In this way *Venus and Tannhäuser*'s eroticism is treated in the same way as its materialism, as something huge, exotic, dandified, and subject to highly sharpened connoisseurship; something that repels bourgeois scrutiny from its hardened and bejewelled surface, whilst at the same time entertaining a deep sense of irony and mischievousness about its rejection of normality. Deborah Lutz asserts that the 'real' pornographic qualities of *Venus and Tannhäuser* 'can be found not in the meeting of bodies in penetration, but in the sheer debauchery of materialism'.<sup>118</sup> Similarly:

The locating of the orgasm is no longer the straight-forward matter that it is in [pre-decadent] pornography – it has now moved out into a jewelled materialism. Ecstasy explodes out

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<sup>116</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 62.

<sup>117</sup> Suetonius. *The Twelve Caesars*. p. 132 ?

<sup>118</sup> Deborah Lutz, 'Dandies, libertines and Byronic lovers: Pornography and Erotic Decadence in Nineteenth-Century England', in Paul Fox, ed., *Decadences: Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature* (Stuttgart: Ibidem, 2006), 265.

from the body to the folds of drapery, the shine of a Sèvres china teacup, the whiff of Indian spice perfume. It is here that we must locate the erotic sublime in Decadent works. The overwrought senses inundated by beautiful objects bring the aesthete to a transcendental place where his soul might dissolve out into universality.<sup>119</sup>

Here, Lutz creates a parallel between the orgasm and the supreme imaginative freedom offered by the phantasmagorical. The phantasmagoria is the form of the imagination at its most active and explosive, the realisation of the imagination not bound by any restraint. The decadents had turned this attribute into a social function by using the phantasmagoria to show the individual imagination freed from bourgeois control. Similarly, the phantasmagoria seemed to catapult the reader into a dream, away from the constraint of the normal, allowing them a sort of transcendence. The ‘dissolution of the soul’ that Lutz associates with the materialism in *Venus and Tannhäuser* is the function of the phantasmagoria, the intoxication of the imagination and its elevation into a realm less bound by reality. Again, though, Beardsley undergoes this process more literally than other decadent writers. Des Esseintes retreats out of reality into his dream hermitage at Fontenay; both Tannhäuser and Beardsley retreat out of reality and into the Venusberg where the phantasmagoria can be more fully realised and is more completely shielded against the problematizing influences of real life. The Venusberg is the dream world that the phantasmagoria aspires to. Once again, the phantasmagoria acts as an aesthetic of resistance, an aesthetic characterised by its inability to be ordered or restrained, rejecting normal aesthetic and social dictates. The Venusberg is both expressed in phantasmagorical terms and is the ‘place’ that the phantasmagoria attempts to access. The phantasmagorical aesthetic of the novel is fundamentally aligned with its social agenda – the campaign of rejecting bourgeois sexual and social conformity and of breaking through to some state of being where this conformity no longer applies. However, in keeping both with the nature of the phantasmagorical aesthetic and with the self-awareness that often underlies decadent applications of it, this resistance to normality does not translate unequivocally into a definite social agenda.

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<sup>119</sup> Lutz, ‘Dandies, libertines and Byronic lovers’, 266.

The social stance of *Venus and Tannhäuser* is clearly of a different ‘flavour’ to the Gnosticism of Des Esseintes or the semi-spiritual, Pater-esque aspirations of Dorian Gray. It is much more fabulous, more burlesque, and the characters – most notably Tannhäuser himself – are far less tormented. In part, this is again explicable by the fact that the Venusberg is the ideal location to which the phantasmagoria aspires. The contrast becomes more evident if we take the example of Des Esseintes, who exiles himself from society first into the aesthetically cultivated haven of Fontenay and then into his own dreams; his only prospect of escape is an imaginative one. Although the original Tannhäuser legend is also one of a man who exiles himself from the world that he knows, in Beardsley’s rendering of it, Tannhäuser arrives in a literal dream world; he doesn’t have to develop his powers of reverie because his dreams are actualised in the world he inhabits. Similarly, the principal struggles of other decadent characters come from their inability to assimilate their selves (or, more romantically, their souls) to the modern world that they inhabit. The characters in *Venus and Tannhäuser* do not have this problem because their world is completely fantastical: they escape from the problems that the aberrant individual encounters when they try to assimilate themselves into a society that does not share their values. As such, the idea of a wholesale but also quite generalistic rejection of contemporary values that appears in works like *Against Nature* is even more pronounced in *Venus and Tannhäuser* because it severs all of its connections to the society that enshrines those values. Consequently, its tone is lighter but it is even more provocative in the extremity of its imagination. *Venus and Tannhäuser* is a more impish piece of work; it is less focused and articulate in its rejection of bourgeois values, taking delight in the shock and excess of its own invention, celebrating a kind of festive anarchy. This is the idea of the phantasmagoria as an aesthetic of resistance taken almost to its limit. The novel has the superficial qualities of satire – the fabulous materialism and transformations of Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* are an obvious influence – but it lacks the moral imperative of satire or considers the moral imperative to be irrelevant; it is a satire without a target, or which targets itself, expressing only a highly personal imaginative freedom.

Like other phantasmagorical writing, however, there is also a certain amount of self-consciousness about this imaginative indulgence. This in turn contributes to the difficulty of pinning *Venus and Tannhäuser* down to a particular social agenda, because of its willingness to be seen to be mocking its own affectations.

As we have seen, the sexuality of the book is so outlandish and exaggerated that it is hard to interpret it as a serious manifesto for reforming Victorian sexual morality. Chapter Eight, for example, is entirely taken up with Venus administering a hand job to her pet unicorn, Adolphe. At the end of the chapter we learn that the extreme volubility of Adolphe's orgasm is the daily signal for the population of the Venusberg to sit down to breakfast. Like Saveril, with his sexual attachment to earwax, as *Venus and Tannhäuser* goes on its eroticism persistently veers toward the comic and the ridiculous. Likewise, Beardsley appears to be quite happy to mock Tannhäuser's dandified pretensions. Although he is obviously meant to oppose the Victorian ideal of masculinity, Tannhäuser is also frequently a figure of fun. We first encounter him before he enters Venus' domain, preening himself and 'troubled with an exquisite fear lest a day's travel should have too cruelly undone the laboured niceness of his dress'.<sup>120</sup> He is momentarily inconvenienced by the fact that:

A wild rose had caught upon the trimmings of his ruff, and in the first flush of displeasure he would have struck it brusquely away, and most severely punished the offending flower. But the ruffled mood lasted only a moment, for there was something so deliciously incongruous in the hardy petal's invasion of so delicate a thing, that Tannhäuser withheld the finger of resentment and vowed that the wild rose should stay where it had clung – a passport, as it were, from the upper to the lower world.

'The very excess and violence of the fault,' he said, 'will be its excuse.'<sup>121</sup>

The joke here is that not only is Tannhäuser's lace more delicate than the rose – so much more so that the flower seems 'hardy' by comparison – but that Tannhäuser himself is so artificially cultivated and precious, so over-refined, that the rose becomes more violent than him. He also attributes a kind of roguish insouciance to the flower, demonstrating the inherent pretentiousness and self-indulgence of a world-view that perceives literally everything as an aristocratic aesthetic exhibition for the benefit of

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<sup>120</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 21.

<sup>121</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 23.

the observer; Tannhäuser imaginatively figures the rose as being like an impish urchin vying for his notice and his patronage. In effect, the world centres on him and on the question of where he will choose to bestow his attention. Here, Beardsley's hero is obviously supposed to recall figures such as the foppish Sir Plume from *The Rape of the Lock* and the illustrations he produced to accompany *Venus and Tannhäuser* reinforce this connection. They are very similar to those he created for an edition of *The Rape of the Lock* itself, and it is worth examining this resemblance.

The two images are elaborately overdrawn, the different elements of the pictures – people, furniture, clothes – all tending to merge into a single mass of overwhelmingly grey detail. Max Beerbohm said that the picture of Venus 'cries aloud for some blank spaces that would... distinguish the many figures'.<sup>122</sup> Both the pictures of Venus and the pictures of Tannhäuser show, as *The Rape of the Lock* does, people in the process of merging with the ornate decoration of their environment and their clothes and losing their unequivocal identity as human beings in the process.

The image of Tannhäuser shows him as a comically tiny (and comically feminine) figure lost in the massive folds of cloak, hair and lace sleeves. His body is seemingly composed more from fabric than flesh, and the elaborate corrugations of his clothing blend into the bizarre vegetation surrounding him, so that the feathers on his head are not immediately recognisable as part of him or part of the background. In the same vein, the lute poking up over his shoulder has a deceptively organic form, hinting that it might be another flower, a spider's web, or something else entirely.

The effect is even more confusing in the picture of Venus where at first it is almost impossible to tell, for example, whether the structure behind Venus's head is part of a folding screen or if it is an elaborate rococo headdress; whether the leg jutting out from under Venus's gown is her own or the leg of a chair; where her dress ends and where the dressing table begins; and whether the hands touching her hair and holding a mirror belong to the goddess or to the androgynous, black-swathed form of Cosmé, the coiffeur, who stands behind her. Venus at her toilet resembles an exaggerated version of Belinda's toilet from *The Rape of the Lock*. Despite the intensive eroticism she gives off, the goddess is more readily identified with artificial decoration than she is with humanity. Beardsley's references to Pope are even more obvious when he writes that:

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<sup>122</sup> See Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley, Dandy of the Grotesque*, 168.

Her three favourite girls, Pappelarde, Blanchemains and Loreyne, waited immediately upon her perfume and powder in delicate flacons and frail cassolettes, and held in porcelain jars the ravishing paints prepared by Châtelaine for those cheeks and lips that had grown a little pale with anguish of exile. Her three favourite boys, Claude, Clair and Sarrasine, stood amorously about with salver, fan and napkin. Millamant held a slight tray of slippers, Minette some tender gloves, La Popelinière – mistress of the robes – was ready with a frock of yellow and white, La Zambinella bore the jewels, Florizel some flowers, Amadour a box of various pins, and Vadius a box of sweets.<sup>123</sup>

These lines read like a colossally inflated version of the perfumes, pins, combs, ‘Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles and Billet-doux’<sup>124</sup> that Belinda’s maid hands to her and which cover her dressing table. In a further parallel with *The Lock*, Beardsley creates a sense of equivalence between the people that attend on Venus and the objects they carry. People and objects have an equal place in the phantasmagorical confusion of her dressing room, so that the people, bearing strange names and fascinating items, become another part of the disordered spectacle of the chamber. The attendants and the things around them seem to have similar properties so that both appear to be vibrantly but also artificially alive. The people are animated only in the illusory way that the beautiful objects are animated, as an alluring but also insubstantial and phantasmagorical surface. Their identities as people become fragmented and distributed into the superficial decorations of their bodies and the objects they carry. Also, in the Toilet scene, Venus’s elderly manicure is portrayed as a collection of strange and vaguely grotesque characteristics:

Mrs Marsuple’s voice was full of salacious unction; she had terrible little gestures with her hands, strange movements with the shoulders, a short respiration that made surprising wrinkles

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<sup>123</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 27.

<sup>124</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, ed. Cynthia Wall (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 57.

in her bodice, a corrupt skin, large horny eyes, a parrot's nose, a small loose mouth, great flaccid cheeks, and chin after chin. She was a wise person, and Venus loved her more than any of her servants, and had a hundred pet names for her, such as Dear Toad, Pretty Poll, Cock Robin, Dearest Lip, Touchstone, Little Cough Drop, Bijou, Buttons, Dear Heart, Dick-Dock, Mrs Manly, Little Nipper, Cochon-de-lait, Naughty-naughty, Blessed Thing and Trump.<sup>125</sup>

The old woman becomes an inverted version of Venus or of Pope's Belinda. Where they seem to be created from glittering decorations and cosmetics, Mrs Marsuple is the result of heaping together a mass of monstrous elements; she is the aggregate of separate monstrosities. Beardsley's presentation of her highlights the separateness of her different parts; he disintegrates her body so that each piece seems to come from a different species or a different body, stitched together like an anatomical prank. The bizarre and subtly disquieting list of nicknames Venus gives her suggests another layer of disturbing behaviour on top of her disturbing physicality. Her relationship with Venus is apparently a mostly maternal one, an idea reinforced by the name 'Marsuple' which would seem to suggest 'marsupial' and the marsupial ability to raise offspring in a pouch. The names Venus gives her, though, suggest the strange contradictions and confusions of her character. They imply ugliness, maternity, childishness, bestiality, manliness and sexuality, as well as alarming combinations of these. Her ugliness and her motherliness are both sexualised; she is both a mother and a child at once; she is something to be doted on like a doll and repelled by like a brute. In this way, Mrs Marsuple becomes the end result of a collection of different pieces. Her body and her personality are discontinuous; each part of her body and each aspect of her character is a separate object unrelated to a unified whole. Like Venus and Tannhäuser themselves, and like their exemplars in *Rape of the Lock*, she is not so much a person as an accumulation of singularities.

This objectification of the characters in *Venus and Tannhäuser* reaches its apex in the masquerade scene in Chapter Three. In one of the most massive and phantasmagorical passages in the book, Beardsley tells us that:

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<sup>125</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 28.



[The company] boasted some very noticeable dresses, and whole tables of quite delightful coiffures. There were spotted veils that seemed to stain the skin with some exquisite and august disease, fans with eye-slits in them, through which their bearers peeped and peered; fans painted with figures and covered with the sonnets of Sporion and the short stories of Scaramouche; and fans of big, living moths stuck upon mounts of silver sticks. There were masks of green velvet that make the face look trebly powdered; masks of the heads of birds, of apes, of serpents, of dolphins, of men and women, of little embryos and of cats; masks like the faces of gods; masks of coloured glass, and masks of thin talc and of india-rubber. There were wigs of black and scarlet wools, of peacocks' feathers, of gold and silver threads, of swansdown, of the tendrils of the vine, and of human hairs; huge collars of stiff muslin rising high above the head; whole dresses of ostrich feathers curling inwards; tunics of panthers' skins that looked beautiful over pink tights; capotes of crimson satin trimmed with the wings of owls; sleeves cut into the shapes of apocryphal animals; drawers flounced down to the ankles, and flecked with tiny, red roses; stockings clocked with fêtes galantes, and curious designs; and petticoats cut like artificial flowers. Some of the women had put on delightful little moustaches dyed in purples and bright greens, twisted and waxed with absolute skill; and some wore great white beards, after the manner of Saint Wilgeforte. Then Dorat had painted extraordinary grotesques and vignettes over their bodies, here and there. Upon a cheek, an old man scratching his horned head; upon a forehead, an old woman teased by an impudent amor; upon a shoulder, an amorous singerie; round a breast, a circlet of satyrs; about a wrist, a wreath of pale, unconscious babes; upon an elbow, a bouquet of spring flowers; across a back, some surprising scenes of adventure; at the corners of a

mouth, tiny red spots; and upon a neck, a flight of birds, a caged parrot, a branch of fruit, a butterfly, a spider, a drunken dwarf, or, simply, some initials. But most wonderful of all were the black silhouettes painted upon the legs, and which showed through a white silk stocking like a sumptuous bruise.<sup>126</sup>

The party-goers are here subjected to fantastical transformations wrought on them by their costumes. Their humanity is less important than the decorations covering their bodies, making them into marvellous elements of a phantasmagoria. The components of the human body are systematically obscured: their faces covered with exotic masks, real hair replaced with metal, plants and fabrics, their skins covered with inks and paints; the body is transfigured by disease, morphed into different species, reconfigured into a painting or a page of print; they convey the fascination of the beautiful and the aberrant. *Venus and Tannhäuser* reaches almost the ultimate extent of dandification; the complete metamorphosis of the person into the art object; the substitution of a material identity for a personal one.

This was another aspect of its expression that the decadent phantasmagoria inherited from its prototype in eighteenth-century curiosity culture: the idea of the collected self; the self externalised as a collection of objects and the self as the finest and rarest of these objects.

The character of Dorian Gray is a particularly obvious example of this; the mysterious transference of identity between Dorian and his portrait is the main action of the book's plot. The 'magic' of the picture, though, works in two directions at once: not only does Dorian become a kind of object, a fixed image of unchanging, never degrading beauty, but his portrait acquires a life of its own, registering the form of a living soul. The scene in which Basil unveils the portrait is full of allusions to Dorian's relationship with objects and his sense of *himself* as object. When Dorian first sees the picture it is 'as if he had recognised himself of the first time',<sup>127</sup> an idea which reappears when he comes into contact with the poisonous French novel that Lord Henry gives him. Wilde writes that for Dorian 'the hero... became to him a prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the

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<sup>126</sup> Beardsley, *Venus and Tannhäuser*, 37-38.

<sup>127</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 27.

story of his own life, written before he had lived it'.<sup>128</sup> Dorian's image of himself is principally resolved through objects; it is only by acquiring objects that seem to reflect some part of himself that his selfhood acquires any definition. Even if we assume that the text, as opposed to the book, is not an object per se, Dorian principally thinks of it as an object and interacts with it as one, acquiring 'from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition... bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods.'<sup>129</sup> Even before he becomes a collector, his identity – whether he wills it or not – is strongly externalised. In his first encounter with it, the painting is referred to as his 'shadow'<sup>130</sup>. When Basil asks Dorian if he appreciates the painting, Dorian responds with 'Appreciate it? I am in love with it, Basil. It is part of myself.' Basil's ironic response is to tell him that 'as soon as you are dry, you shall be varnished, and framed, and sent home. Then you can do what you like with yourself'.<sup>131</sup> Even at this early stage, the portrait is, in fact, Dorian's Self.

It is also Basil – crucially, the only character in the novel who *produces* objects rather than objectifying himself – who asks Dorian, 'you are not jealous of material things, are you?',<sup>132</sup> a question that may be said to define the decadents' relationship with the collected self and the phantasmagorias that it is predicated upon. Dorian *is* envious of material things; not only that, he has the supreme empathy with them that makes them part of his own being. The chapter in which Wilde describes Dorian's collections is also a description of Dorian's personality, a description of who he has become as a result of contact with the picture and Lord Henry's aesthetic doctrines. His frightening musical instruments, dazzling jewels, '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'<sup>133</sup> are all elements of his personality that exist independently in the world outside himself. Like the eighteenth-century virtuoso showing off his collection, Dorian *becomes* the collection; he is the one object that is a microcosm of all the others, and from which all those others are derived. The exoticism of his self exists in direct proportion to the exclusivity of his consumption. Susan Stewart describes something like this when she writes about the appeal of eclecticism in interior design.

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<sup>128</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 123.

<sup>129</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 123.

<sup>130</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 27.

<sup>131</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 29.

<sup>132</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 28.

<sup>133</sup> Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, 134.

In furnishing a space in an eclectic style, an individual asserts something about their own identity: ‘eclecticism, rather than pure seriality, is to be admired because it marks the heterogeneous organisation of the self, a space capable of transcending the accidents and dispersions of historical reality’.<sup>134</sup> The collected self embodied by Dorian is a more extreme version of this. The self does not merely assimilate different cultures and styles, it seems to assimilate things which are fantastical or otherworldly. The phantasmagoria seems to disassociate those who experience it from reality. Similarly, the phantasmagorical object conveys an existence beyond its physical properties. Both conditions signify that, by defining itself through the existence of the phantasmagoria, the collected self takes on these properties. Such a person is no longer simply an arbiter of fashion, but a wondrous entity beyond human norms – a phantasmagoria made manifest, the dream made flesh. Stewart writes that the ownership of exotic objects produces ‘an exoticism of the self’<sup>135</sup>. In these phantasmagorias, the self is exoticised not only by the separate, individual exoticism of the objects (their remoteness from typical, familiar cultures and aesthetics) but also by the fact that they are chaotically juxtaposed with one another. The self seems to contain this bewildering discontinuity, these fantastic reversals and transformations, so that we are left with a human being that is superhumanly bewildering and fantastic. The collected self is, therefore, another negation of conformity and capitalist practicality. In part, it is a state of being that seems to embody the conditions of exclusive consumption, of an aesthetic refinement and elaboration unavailable to any but the most dedicated. As well as this, though, it is the realisation of the ambition of the decadent dreamer: by its presence it conveys the essence of the dream and implies an existence outside normal reality. The collected self is, therefore, not only a self created from objects but a self created to oppose normality: a dandification of the soul.

In the same way that the eighteenth-century collector tried to create a curious selfhood that was also the modern self, the decadents’ collected self was also meant to express an idealised version of the decadent principles of the modern age. The collected self of the decadents rejects conformity, utility and practicality; it simultaneously affirms both a dominance and a dismissal of the principles of capitalism by rejecting consumption but claiming for itself the aura of the precious

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<sup>134</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1993), 158.

<sup>135</sup> Stewart, *On Longing*, 148.

object. However, if Wilde portrayed the collected self as the apotheosis of decadent principles, then a later decadent writer, Jean Lorrain, perceived in it something far more equivocal.

Of all the decadent phantasmagorical writers, Lorrain was perhaps the one who felt most keenly the parity of living human beings with inorganic items. However, while Wilde and Beardsley seem to have interpreted this as an elevation of the human being into a realm of more than human beauty – the elaborate and ornate sex-acts Beardsley devised for these elaborate and ornate bodies to engage in probably convey a great deal about the seductiveness he felt them to possess – Lorrain’s work conveys a mixture of fascination and repulsion. Other decadent phantasmagorias expresses the dandification of the imagination, the spectacle of creative potency and freedom, by contrast, Lorrain’s use of the phantasmagorical aesthetic recalls ‘The Mask of the Red Death’ or ‘Ligeia’. His phantasmagorias contain a combination of the spectacular and the morbid, a dread of the contamination of the senses by imagination or subtle influences.

If Huysmans began the decadent movement with *Against Nature*, then Lorrain may be the author with the best claim to have chronicled its end. Even before the end of the century, as an author and newspaper columnist, ‘a great deal of his rhetoric [in the 1890s] had drawn on the fact that the nineteenth century was winding down, approaching an end that was devoutly to be desired’.<sup>136</sup> Lorrain’s use of the phantasmagorical is, in consequence, coloured by a certain post-mortem sensibility. The decadence he portrays and the world that produced it stand (even more apparently than with other decadent writers) on the edge of an ending. For Francis Amery, with the arrival of that great monument to modernity, the Paris Exposition Universelle in 1900, ‘It was as if Lorrain had fallen out of fashion instantly, by prior appointment’.<sup>137</sup> Lorrain himself, in his 1901 novel *Monsieur de Phocas*, had his protagonist – the over-stimulated, spiritually exhausted and probably demented Duc de Fréneuse – proclaim that ‘The beauty of the twentieth century is the charm of the hospital, the grace of the cemetery, of consumption and emaciation’.<sup>138</sup> While this may seem at first straightforwardly morbid, it is more subtle than this. Here, the twentieth century has no identity of its own; instead it merely represents the death of the nineteenth - it is the

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<sup>136</sup> See Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 18.

<sup>137</sup> See Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 18.

<sup>138</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 39.

nineteenth century that is the patient who is sick, consigned to hospital and then to the grave. Lorrain does not prophesy that the twentieth century will be an age of degradation but that it will be the death of the already terminally degraded nineteenth century. It is Lorrain's own epoch that is the real subject of these lines: its own imminent end and, because of this, its flavour of (and taste for) images of mortality and corruption. In Lorrain's works, the phantasmagoria does not seem to offer an escape from the iniquities of modern living; the vibrant inner life that consoled Des Esseintes and Dorian Gray is conspicuous by its absence. Instead, it figures as a means of portraying the spiritual conditions of both society and the individual. In this way, Lorrain's writing offers something of a reiteration of the earlier uses of the phantasmagorical: in 'Magic Lantern' (1891) for example, it stands as a symbol for the grotesqueness and anarchy of contemporary society, a use which directly recalls its role in early nineteenth-century satire, and, in *Monsieur de Phocas* (1901) the thoughts and perceptions of Fréneuse are almost perpetually being influenced and distorted by random ideas, works of art and other people, a condition familiar from Roderick Usher and the characters in 'Ligeia'. Importantly though, Lorrain's use of the phantasmagorical repeats almost the whole of the pattern of the decadent phantasmagorical aesthetic; his works convey a vivid sense of spectacle, and include collections of material exotica, identities formed from material possessions, and a strong sense of provocative resistance to contemporary world views and values. The qualification to this is that the phantasmagoria no longer provides a shelter from the real world. Tannhäuser was never forced back into the world he had sought refuge from and while Des Esseintes was, he at least succeeded for a while in finding solace in his own dreams. This is not an option for Lorrain's characters. Perhaps Lorrain felt that such an escape into an aesthetically and imaginatively idealised dream world was no longer possible, or even imaginable. In any case, while his phantasmagorias remain provocative, they are no longer escapist. The phantasmagorias of 'Magic Lantern' and *Monsieur de Phocas* are compelling, even thrilling, but also frightening.

In Lorrain's short story 'Magic Lantern' he transforms Parisian society into a literal phantasmagoria – a collection of monsters and spectres. An unnamed narrator sits in a concert given by the Orchestra Colonne. During the interval, enlivened by the romance of the music and annoyed by its incompatibility with the scientific, industrial modern age, he voices his complaints to his neighbour, the physicist André Forbster. 'Admit, Monsieur,' he urges him, 'that it is as well [the

composer] was born in 1803. Had he been born yesterday , he would undoubtedly have included an electrophone in his symphony, or the submarine cable or some other phonographic apparatus... Modern science has killed the fantastic, and with the Fantastic, Poetry – which is also Fantasy. The last Fairy is well and truly buried – or dried, like a rare flower, between two pages of Monsieur Balzac'.<sup>139</sup> Forbster responds that, in reality:

Never – never, in any era, not even in the middle ages, when the Mandrake shrieked in the middle of every night beneath the frightful dew dripping from the gallows – never has the Fantastic flourished, so sinister and so terrifying, as in modern life. We live in a world full of sorcery. The Fantastic surrounds us; even worse than that, it invades us, chokes us and obsesses us – and one would have to be blind or very obstinate not to see that.

[...]

We live, even in the fullness of modernity, in the midst of the damned, surrounded by the spectres of human heads and other horrors; every day we brush up against vampires and ghouls.<sup>140</sup>

With the aid of his opera glasses, Forbster then proceeds to take the narrator on a 'tour' of the theatre, pointing out to him the ghouls, demoniacs, Vampires, Incubi and Succubi lurking beneath the respectable exterior of civilised society. Says Forbster:

Look over there, at those three elegant women on the balcony dressed in plush with fashionable hats: three unmarried women, evidently. Look at those chalky complexions, those eyes blackened with kohl and the scarlet stains of their painted lips, like bloody wounds gaping in the flesh of those dead faces. Are they not veritable ghouls: damnable cadavers spewed from the tomb and escaped from the cemetery into the world of the living: flowers of the charnel house sent forth to

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<sup>139</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 171.

<sup>140</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 172-173.

seduce, enchant and ruin young men? What is the magic that emanates from such creatures – for they are not even pretty, these marrow-crushers, but rather frightful, with their mortuary tint and their blood-tinged smiles?<sup>141</sup>

In ‘Magic Lantern,’ the image of the phantasmagoria (an image made explicit by the story’s title) returns to the illusionistic associations that dictated many of its early uses. Lorrain’s story is perhaps a more overtly horrifying version of *The Ghost of a Song* or *The European Magazine*’s article ‘The Phantasmagoria’ from 1801 and 1803. As in these two works, the phantasmagoria again acts as a kind of magic mirror for contemporary civilisation. By portraying modern life as the product of a magic lantern and modern humanity as spectral and hideous, Lorrain underlines the illusory and meretricious appeal of modernity; a superficial lustre of civility disguising corruption and immorality. The phantasmagoria acts as a pattern for the world, rather than a means of escaping it, inverting the normal decadent paradigm. Indeed, Forbster’s transformation of the world into a phantasmagoria arguably makes the narrator’s discontent even worse: before, modernity was merely boring, now it has become actually hideous. The imagination is not the decadent’s sanctuary, instead, it makes contemporary life even harder by inflating its soullessness to fantastic levels.

Lorrain at first seems to articulate two different and contradictory views of the contemporary world. One is capitalistic, mercantile, deprived of imagination and running only on bourgeois scientific rationalism: as the narrator complains, ‘We no longer have a trace of illusion in our heads Monsieur. We have an abstruse mathematical treatise in place of the heart, the appetites of a piglet in the belly, bridles and racing tips in the imagination, and a clockwork movement in the brain. Look at the man we have all become, manufactured by the progress of science!’<sup>142</sup> His complaint about the lack of illusion is ironic given that it is the uncontrollable and frightening illusions suggested by Forbster that give rise to the second view of the modern world – as a gothic phantasmagoria. Both these portrayals, however, complement each other and both conform to the underlying decadent dissatisfaction with life in the fin de siècle. Just as at the end of *Against Nature*, where Des Esseintes imagines bourgeois mediocrity elevated into an apocalyptic deluge, in ‘Magic

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<sup>141</sup> Lorrain, ‘Magic Lantern’, 174.

<sup>142</sup> Lorrain, ‘Magic Lantern’, 171.



Lantern' the moral dysfunctions and aberrations of the 'common man' are transmogrified into supernatural forms. The way Lorrain ends the story makes it hard to know how he intends us to interpret the revelation that has been given to the narrator; Forbster's description simply breaks off when the concert begins again: 'But excuse me Monsieur, the music is beginning. Much obliged'.<sup>143</sup> Throughout the story, though, Lorrain does inject black humour into the horrific images he describes. Forbster's last exhibit is a 'pretty brunette' who has devoured the vitality of three husbands and 'whom the Holy Inquisitions of the fifteen and sixteen hundreds would most certainly have put on the rack, pricked and burnt', but of whom he remarks, 'I shall not point her out to you because she is my friend'.<sup>144</sup> Forbster's showman-like narration, then, transforms modern society into a spectacle, a collection of monsters to admire and be amused and horrified by. The phantasmagoria of 'Magic Lantern' may not be a refuge, but it is still spectacular. Lorrain's imaginative excesses give the world a new form that is more vibrant, if more fearful than before.

The logic of 'Magic Lantern' is one of display, with Forbster as Robertsonian fantasmagore, guiding both the narrator and the reader through the exhibits. The way the narration moves from one 'creature' to the next emphasises this. At the outset, Forbster asks the narrator to 'take up those opera classes and follow the directions I will give you'. We proceed around the concert hall, inspecting the monsters confined there: 'Look over there, at those three elegant women on the balcony'; 'Would you like to read a tale by Hoffmann now? Look down there, to the right of the fore-stage; see the beautiful Madame G -'; 'Use the opera-glasses to delve into the dim depths of the ground-floor boxes'; 'Up there, in the second tier' and 'Over there, three rows of seats behind us'.<sup>145</sup> As he gives his commentary Forbster might as well be saying, 'If you will direct your attention, Ladies and Gentlemen...'. Underlying this, though, is not only a sense of the monstrosity of the current society – such that the only solution may be, like Forbster, to find bleak satisfaction in contemplating it – but also a sense of the objectification of modern humanity. They are 'objectified' in the sense that they are spectacles and objects in a collection, true, but Lorrain's description of them emphasises something inhuman, even 'un-living' in their natures. As well as the three terrible 'ghouls' who 'enchant and ruin young men', Lorrain

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<sup>143</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 176.

<sup>144</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 175.

<sup>145</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 174-175.

points us to a young beautiful girl who reminds Forbster of Olympia from E. T. A. Hoffmann's story 'The Sandman' – a mechanical doll in the shape of a woman with whom Hoffmann's young protagonist falls in love, believing her to be a real person:

Take note of those eyes, with their irises of crystal, and that gleaming tint of porcelain! Her hair is silken, her teeth authentically pearly, like those of dolls. She is enamelled, one presumes, to the navel, so that her ballgowns may be cut as low as fashion requires. Thanks to the articulated springs in her bodice she can say 'Papa', 'Mama', and 'Bonjour, Excellency'. Produced for export, she is bound for America. She knows how to handle a fan, to curtsy deeply, to flutter her eyelashes and to appear to breathe like a real person... And if a mechanism does not actually animate that mannequin on parade, what sort of vague intermediary soul could possibly inhabit that breast? To hold between one's arms that rotating Sidonie, to run into those lips, as cold as wax: does not the idea make you shudder?'<sup>146</sup>

Likewise, in the ground-floor boxes there are assembled a number of women:

See those flared nostrils, those linen pallors, those hypnotic eyes, those bloodless arms poking out of red crushed velvet, the nervous and febrile hands clutching bottles of salts or flapping fans. Those are the great megalomaniac women of the world... the wives of Merchant Bankers and Sugar refiners, all of them morphinated, cauterised, dosed, drugged by psychotherapeutic novels and ether: medicated, anaemiated androgynes, hysterics and consumptives. They are the possessed of the new aristocracy.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 174-175.

<sup>147</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 175.

Lorrain's rendering of these people implies something inherently mechanical or artificial about them. For the Doll this is obvious, since Forbster describes her body as a contraption of crystal, porcelain and silk, animated by springs. But the possessed, too, have skins of linen and bloodless arms, implying that they have inorganic natures; and the 'vague and intermediary soul' (words which recall Marx and Benjamin's ironic description of the commodity soul) that inhabits the doll-girl has its parallel in the possession to which the megalomaniac women are subjected. Their somnambulistic, anaesthetised actions suggest demonic possession because they appear to be animated only by some force outside of themselves; they act, it seems, as the sleepwalker acts, deprived of purpose, functioning like automata.

Beyond this artificiality, Lorrain frequently returns to the idea of consumption – the consumption of food, commodities, and human bodies. The ghoul women do this most overtly, converting their cadaverous sexuality into financial gain through cannibalistic feasting. 'Do you see the thinnest?', Forbster asks the narrator. 'One of my friends killed himself for her. She has already devoured three racing stables and their proprietors, and is at this moment consuming Bompard, the fat banker of the Rue des Petits-Champs. The others are of the same ilk'.<sup>148</sup> In the same vein, Forbster points to 'a young woman, as honest and fresh as a rose, who never misses an execution... She is an exquisite young woman, but she has adored assassins for twenty years, and shivers with profound sensuality every time she sees the fall of a severed head – eternally young, though, as if kept fresh by the sight of blood!' After her comes a 'a great hearty fellow with huge russet moustaches and the torso of a horseman [who] only loves consumptive women. All his mistresses die within the year ... that kind of bizarre love should be classified under the heading of Demonality'.<sup>149</sup> Finally, there is Forbster's friend: 'That lovely woman is on her forth experiment; three gallant husbands have already died in harness: a master of wolfhounds and two perfectly healthy captains of the army, one of them a cuirassier. Two years in the household: going, going, gone. Emptied, crushed to the marrow, breasts hollow, legs shaking: broken puppets ... they melted like wax in the warmth of her bed'.<sup>150</sup> Like Beardsley, Lorrain uses these depictions of strange and unnatural sexualities to antagonise conventional morality. Lorrain, though, implies that contemporary society is so

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<sup>148</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 174.

<sup>149</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 175.

<sup>150</sup> Lorrain, 'Magic Lantern', 175-176.

sickened and deformed that it can only express sexual desire if it is also a desire for consumption, or a desire for death. What is clear in these lines is that underlying Lorrain's vision is a deep sense of people not only as objects but also specifically as consumables, and of a terrible equivalence between this state and death. The logic behind these connections can again be understood through Marx's analysis of the phantasmagorical quality of the market. Lorrain's fantastical terror of the living object is predicated upon a type of Marxist thinking, his portrayal of his characters echoes Marx's perspective on the commodity. The pervasive illusion that the object is magical and self-generating produces the fantasy that the object may also be self-determining – that it may have a life of its own. Once this fantasy takes hold, it becomes more difficult to distinguish consumers from objects of consumption; people and objects begin to lose their mutual distinctiveness. We can see a subtle example of this in Benjamin's 'Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire'. When discussing the flâneur, Benjamin writes:

The intoxication to which the *flâneur* surrenders himself is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.

If the soul of the commodity which Marx occasionally mentions in jest existed, it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would have to see in everyone the buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle. Empathy is the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd.

[...]

Baudelaire was a connoisseur of narcotics, yet one of their most important social effects probably escaped him. It consists in the charm displayed by addicts under the influence of drugs. Commodities derive this same effect from the crowd that surges around them and intoxicates them. The concentration of customers which makes the market, which in turn makes the

commodity into a commodity, enhances its attractiveness to the average buyer.<sup>151</sup>

For our analysis of Lorrain, what is important here is that Benjamin, in the course of his analysis, begins to write from *within* the phantasmagorical illusory state that he is describing; he assumes the point of view of his subject by conflating people and material possessions. Not only is the experience of the flâneur best explained by comparing it with the experience of the commodity, the commodity comes magically to life – it becomes the active partner in its relationship with the customer; it empathises rather than receiving empathy, it becomes intoxicated rather than acting as an intoxicant. This language of intoxication to which Benjamin returns so frequently in this passage is also the language of the phantasmagoria and its disassociation between reality and fantasy. The conditions of living people and the conditions of objects begin to overlap, but not in a clearly defined way: both appear to merge together and to lose the integrity of their self-hoods in a druggy, hallucinogenic response to the forces of capitalism. This is why, for Lorrain, there were so many ghouls in the modern age: as man becomes a commodity, he loses his humanity and is consumed by other inhuman people; human beings devour each other. But in his eyes, there was also a more disturbing aspect to this process: as human beings become more like objects, they become less like living things and more like corpses. In ‘Magic Lantern’ Lorrain portrays the fin-de-siècle not only as a dying age but an age of the dead. The Doll, Madame G-, is a particularly vivid instance of this; her ‘vague, intermediate soul’ is the characteristic soul of the modern age, an age in which people are no longer clearly alive or dead. She is a particularly strange idea: a woman imagined to be a machine imitating a woman – in her, the human form has begun to be seen as a replica of itself. In Hoffmann’s story, the fear was of a machine being mistaken for a human – the fear in ‘Magic Lantern’ is of life itself becoming mechanical. If Beardsley (perhaps ironically in this context) thought the conversion of the body into objects to be an enlivening process, Lorrain gives us the obverse of this: the reduction of people to the living dead.

This is even more prominent in Lorrain’s novel *Monsieur de Phocas*. The novel tells the story of the Duc de Fréneuse: young, incredibly wealthy, a lover of

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<sup>151</sup> Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 55-56.

beautiful objects, yet also spiritually agitated, capable only of isolated moments of contentment derived from aesthetic contemplation. Fréneuse loathes the society in which he finds himself but is also paralysed into almost total inertia, incapable of doing anything to relieve his condition or to free himself from the potent manias, hallucinations and occasionally violent urges to which he is prone. The overwhelming obsession of the Duc's life is his quest for the sight of 'a certain blue and green *something*', a search that has dominated his life since he was a child. In the opening chapter he tells the narrator, to whom he gives a first-hand manuscript account of the previous five or six years of his life:

Whether it is the gleam of a gem or a gaze that I lust after – worse, that I am *bewitched* by – I am *possessed* by a certain glaucous transparence. It is like a hunger in me. I search for this gleam – in vain! – in the irises of eyes and the transparency of gemstones, but no human eye possesses it. Occasionally, I have detected it in the empty orbit of a statue's eye or beneath the painted eyelids of a portrait, but it has only been a decoy: the brightness is always extinguished, having scarcely been glimpsed.<sup>152</sup>

Fréneuse's story is loosely based on Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, with the difference that the Duc is a more passive and less stable character even than Dorian. Also, unlike Dorian, Fréneuse narrates his own story via the device of the manuscript which he hands over to the narrator at the beginning of the book; though, especially towards the end, the narrator intrudes into Fréneuse's account to point out that the dates and details of the narrative contradict each other, forcing the reader to question what is reality and what the Duc's own fantasy. The analogue for Lord Henry Wotton in *Monsieur de Phocas* is an exiled English artist by the name of Claudius Ethal. Ethal acquires an almost irresistible influence over Fréneuse, manipulating his already intense revulsion from modern life and his love of the strange and the grotesque. Throughout the novel, Ethal's actions and their effects on his young follower are explicitly drug-like (a resemblance intensified by the fact that Lorrain may have meant

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<sup>152</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 29.

Ethal's name to suggest an adjectival form of the word 'ether' – a drug Lorrain himself had been semi-addicted to since about 1887); Ethal constantly promises to cure the ineffectual and tormented Fréneuse of his spiritual maladies but only feeds him progressively stronger doses of *bizarrierie* – in the form of exotic curiosities and art – temporarily relieving the Duc's symptoms while aggravating his condition even further. Gradually Fréneuse forms the idea that Ethal loves evil and mental derangement for their own 'artistic' sakes and is trying to poison his soul for this reason – Ethal having allegedly, literally, poisoned several of his models for paintings and sculptures in order to give them a sickly, etiolated appearance and thereby achieve better artistic results. However, it is difficult to be sure of the Duc's conclusions in this regard because he seems to be on the verge of insanity, and it is a strong possibility that Ethal may be a delusion of his in any case. Having been pushed too far by Ethal, Fréneuse murders him by the unusual method of forcing Ethal's hand into his own mouth so that he bites down on a poisoned ring he wears, killing himself instantly. After Ethal's murder, Fréneuse has a vision of the goddess Astarté whose eyes may be the shade of blue green which have always haunted him; he then changes his name to Monsieur de Phocas and departs for the ancient but less degraded civilisations of Egypt and the East. Whether the departure and name-change indicate, as Jennifer Birkett suggests, that Fréneuse/Phocas plans to continue his violent, homicidal career in Egypt where there is less chance of discovery,<sup>153</sup> or that by ridding himself of Ethal (either physically or spiritually) he has finally got his life in focus (Phocas) is unclear.

Throughout Fréneuse's narrative, he is continually dogged by the same fear that informed 'Magic Lantern': the fear of people becoming (dead) objects or of objects inheriting or stealing life from people. The novel repeats 'Magic Lantern's' depiction of the grotesque, ghoulish and blackly comic spectacle of modern society. At a party thrown by Ethal (at which Fréneuse takes opium) one of the guests is described as 'a great opossum encrusted with diamonds', another is said to have become famous in England because of 'Swinburne, Baudelaire and Incest'<sup>154</sup>, and an elderly and decrepit duchess is called 'a splendid idol... beneath [the] spolia opima of her diamonds' and also 'a Madonna of the Terror, in a procession of penitents painted by

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<sup>153</sup> Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914* (London: Quartet, 1986), 207.

<sup>154</sup> The guest in question is a young lady equally renowned for giving poetic recitations and for being rumoured to be sleeping with her brother.

Goya'.<sup>155</sup> The chapters which cover the party are called 'Some Monsters', 'The Larvae' and 'Towards the Sabbat' recalling the demonic and deathly associations of Lorrain's short story. In addition to viewing them as spectacles, though, the novel also draws attention to the overlapping identities of people and objects. When the Duc de Fréneuse is first introduced, not only is he described in terms of the objects decorating his person, his form is fragmented – most notably, great attention is paid to his hands, both here and throughout the narrative – and the individual parts of his body seem to be artificial. The narrator first realises that the mysterious M. de Phocas who has come to call on him is in fact the famous Duc de Fréneuse when he recognises the 'thin platinum bracelet studded with opals around his right wrist':

I had seen that frail, white thoroughbred wrist before, and the narrow circlet of jewelled platinum. Yes, I had seen them, but on that occasion they had been working through the select jewel-cases of a prestigious artist, a master goldsmith and engraver.

[...]

Delicately pale and clear, like the hand of a princess or a courtesan, the hand which had been stripped of its glove by the Duc de Fréneuse – for I also knew his real name now – had glided that day with infinite slowness above a veritable heap of lapis-lazuli, sardonyxes, onyxes and cornelians, pierced here and there by topazes, amethysts and rubicelles. That hand, ungloved by the Duc de Fréneuse, had sometimes settled like a waxen bird, designating with a finger the selected gem...<sup>156</sup>

When two acquaintances of the narrator discuss the Duc, they each specifically focus their attentions on his hands and his eyes – stressing the 'icy, lax, gentleness' of the hands, and the eyes 'hard as diamond [with] such a frosty gleam they might have been made of lapis-lazuli or steel.'<sup>157</sup> In the same conversation, one of them summarises his impression of the Duc: 'That pallor of decay; the twitching of his bony hands, more

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<sup>155</sup> Jean Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 114-116.

<sup>156</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 24-25.

<sup>157</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 31.



Japanese than chrysanthemums; the arabesque profile; that vampiric emaciation'.<sup>158</sup> Fréneuse's identity is initially made up of jewels; the bracelet gives a better clue to who he is than his face does; the narrator's memories connect him the massed cases of the jewel-smith. Similarly, the hand almost becomes the bracelet that encircles it – cold, metallic and smooth - when it is not being compared to some other, alien form: waxen, feminine, bird-like, osseous or like a flower. Again, because of their artificiality, they are also death-like. Ethal's hand too is often given an aura of the synthetic. More than once it is compared to the claw of a vulture, covered in exotic rings 'like nacreous pustules'.<sup>159</sup>

As well as jewels, Fréneuse's other obsession is with eyes – both human eyes and the eyes of sculptures and portraits – in which he hopes to catch a glimpse of the blue green something. Indeed, they are, at their root, different facets of the same obsession. Since they all evoke some slight trace of this 'something', Fréneuse conflates these three in his mind so that for him there is always the peculiar sense of his being watched by jewels, a desire to find empathy and emotion in the eyes represented in works of art and a brittle prismatic quality in the eyes of other human beings. The manuscript entry for October 30<sup>th</sup> 1891 reads:

True beauty is only to be found in the faces of statues. Their immobility is a kind of existence very different from the grimaces of our features. It is as if a divine breath animates them sometimes – and then, how intense the gaze of their eyes becomes!

I have spent all say at the Louvre. The marble gaze of the *Antinous* still pursues me. With what softness and warmth – at the same time knowing and profound – its long-dead eyes settled upon me! For a moment, I believed that I perceived a green glimmer lurking there. If that bust belonged to me, I would mount emeralds in its eyes.<sup>160</sup>

A later, even more unhinged entry complains:

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<sup>158</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 32.

<sup>159</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 102.

<sup>160</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 35.

There is nothing to be found in human eyes, and that is their terrifying and dolorous enigma, their abominable and delusive charm. There is nothing but what we put there ourselves. That is why honest gazes are only to be found in portraits.

[...]

As you live in the museums, what eternal life, dolorous and intense, shines out of you! Like precious stones enshrined between the painted eyelids of masterpieces, you disturb us across time and across space, receivers of the dream which created you!

You have souls, but they are those of the artists who wished you into being, and I am delivered to despair and mortification because I have drunk the draught of poison congealed in the irises of your eyes.

The eyes of portraits ought to be plucked out.

The very next lines (claiming to be from November 1896, the preceding passage is undated) complete the trifecta of interconnections by saying, ‘There are also eyes in the transparency of gems, antique gems above all... from whose depths the centuries watch you’.<sup>161</sup> Fréneuse compares the blankness of human eyes with the ‘honest gazes’ of pictures. For him, artificial eyes are seemingly capable of an intensity that human eyes lack. Yet despite this assertion, there appears to be an inherent similarity between the two, a similarity that Fréneuse is unable, or terribly afraid, to articulate to himself. After all, both are enigmatic, dolorous and terrifying; he states that, ‘The madness of eyes is the allure of the abyss’.<sup>162</sup> Gems also seem to draw him in, to look back into him as he looks into them. For Fréneuse, though, the most frightening thing is not to be looked at, but the soulless quality of this look. Gems, human eyes and the eyes of pictures all seem to *receive* a soul but not to possess one of their own. Look at the similarity of sentiments between his claim that there is nothing in the eye that is not put there by the observer and his feeling that pictures and sculptures somehow ‘inherit’ the souls of their creators. Both seem to live a kind of half life, to have

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<sup>161</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 46-47.

<sup>162</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 45.

second-hand, proximal souls. Perhaps what prevents Fréneuse from fully explaining this fear to himself is the deep attraction that this quality also has for him. The immobility of the statue has a beauty that humans can never equal. The paradox is that it seems to be ‘animated by divine breath’; there is ‘softness and warmth’ in its gaze while ‘there is nothing but instinct, nervous ticks and the batting of eyelashes’<sup>163</sup> in living eyes; the portraits have an ‘eternal life’ in museums but the eyes of Antinous are the eyes of the ‘long dead’. Fréneuse is a man lost in the phantasmagorical merging of people and things. What appals and attracts him is that while objects have been imbued with a magical pseudo-life, humanity has been contaminated by a germ of the undead. For Lorrain, the attraction of the phantasmagorical object is the attraction of the vampire or the possessed; the compulsive desire for – and fear of – the human being that is animated by something other than humanity.

The Duc de Fréneuse’s fear of objectified people leads him quickly into a recurring hallucination in which he sees people as nothing but objects (and occasionally vice versa). This fear often resolves itself – like the statues and portraits – into objects that imitate human features. Masks feature in some of his most vivid delusions: ‘Masks! I see them everywhere... I see masks in the street, I see them on stage in the theatre, I find yet more masks in the boxes. They are on the balcony and in the orchestra-pit. Everywhere I go I am surrounded by masks. The attendants to whom I give my overcoat are masked; masks crowd around me in the foyer as everyone leaves, and the coachman who drives me home has the same cardboard grimace fixed upon his face!’<sup>164</sup>

Similarly, when he is in a party of people with a fashionable singer, he becomes convinced that ‘I did not hear the singing of a living woman but of some automaton pieced together from disparate odds and ends – or perhaps even worse, some dead woman hastily reconstructed from hospital remains.’<sup>165</sup> Here, perhaps more vividly than in any work since Swift’s ‘Progress of Beauty’, we can see the link between artificially beautified, objectified humanity and death; in Fréneuse’s mind, the two concepts are essentially the same. Ethal tries (or claims to try) to relax the Duc’s fixation on masks by exposing him to Ethal’s own collection of masks. When he visits Ethal’s studio, Fréneuse observes:

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<sup>163</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 46.

<sup>164</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 65.

<sup>165</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 66.

In one corner [there was] a tall Imperial cheval-glass, mounted in a mahogany frame decorated with masks.

There were Debureau masks: the pale faces of Pierrots with pinched nostrils and tight smiles. There were Japanese masks, some in bronze and others in lacquered wood. There were masks from the Italian *commedia*, made of silk and painted wax, and a few of black gauze stretched over brass wire. There were enigmatic and cleverly horrid Venetian masks, like those of the characters of de Longhi.

An entire garland of grimaces had been posed around the sleeping pool of the mirror.

[...]

Moving aside, with the peculiar grace of a dancer, Ethel displayed to me a mahogany sleeping-couch decorated in the same fashion as the cheval-glass: a whole heap of masks encumbered the cushions.

There were charming ones as well as terrible ones, that I must admit. The painter was particularly entranced by Japanese masks: warriors' actors' and courtesans' masks. Some of them were frightfully contorted, the bronze cheeks creased by a thousand wrinkles, with vermilion weeping from the corners of the eyes and long trails of green at the corners of the mouths like splenetic beards.

'These are the masks of demons,' said the Englishman, caressing the long black swept-back tresses of one of them. 'The Samurai wore them in battle, to terrify the enemy. The one which is covered in green scales, with two opal pendants between the nostrils, is the mask of a sea-demon. This one, with the tufts of white fur for eyebrows and the two horsehair brushes beside the lips, is the mask of an old man. These others, of white porcelain – a material as smooth and fine as the cheeks of a Japanese maiden, and so gentle to the touch – are the masks of courtesans.'

[...]

Now he took up the light edifices of gauze and painted silk which were Venetian masks. ‘Here is a Cockadrill, a Captain Francasse, a Pantaloon and a Braggadocio. Only the noses are different – and the cut of their moustaches, if you look at them closely. Doesn’t the white silk mask with enormous spectacles evoke a rather comical dread? It is Doctor Curucucu [...] and what about that one, with all the black horsehair and the long spatulate nose like a stork’s beak tipped with a spoon? Can you imagine anything more appalling? It’s a duenna’s mask; amorous young women were well-guarded when they had to go about flanked by an old dragon dressed up in something like that. The whole carnival of Venice is put on parade before us beneath the cape and domino, lying in ambush behind these masks.’<sup>166</sup>

Ethal’s masks achieve a variety of phantasmagorical effects. Most obviously, they ape the forms of human beings and in their very natures suggest the fantastical situation in which objects assume the features of living people. Ethal’s arrangement of them intensifies this; they parody the human form by staring back at us out of mirrors and reclining on couches. Lorrain implies that this is a deliberate decision on Ethal’s part. The painter claims that he is familiar with Fréneuse’s spiritual distress and that this is one of the reasons for his leaving London. ‘The fuliginous atmosphere and the fogs which rise out of the Thames fashion spectres and mannequins out of all mankind, in a manner too dreadful by far to be endured. I can breathe so much more easily since I began to live with masks!’<sup>167</sup> Ethal poses the masks in such a way as that Fréneuse will be more inclined to conflate them with people. Similarly, Ethal maintains that there is an essential parity between the masks he owns and the ‘spectres and mannequins’ he is confronted with in the street. In Ethal’s view, there is no real difference between an increasingly artificial humanity and the objects that imitate them: in effect, they represent only differing degrees on the same uncanny continuum. As such, his ‘treatment’ for Fréneuse is an almost homeopathic one, exposing him to a

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<sup>166</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 72-74.

<sup>167</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 73.

lesser form of the phenomenon that extends throughout late nineteenth-century society, so that he can cultivate a resistance to it. Whether this is really what Ethal wants to happen is another matter, since the younger man frequently points out that all Ethal's 'medicine' seems to do is to further irritate his condition by cementing his delusions. Ethal is far more comfortable and better able to comprehend the plastic nature of modern life than Fréneuse is; he can diagnose and treat himself with a skill Fréneuse could never achieve. As *Monsieur de Phocas* progresses, Ethal seems to become increasingly manipulative and Mephistophelean in his character, and he also comes to be more completely associated with collections of objects that are both magical and vaguely suggestive of undeath.

The masks Fréneuse comes to see, as well as addressing the hybridisation of people and possessions, also partly reiterate the familiar magical or wondrous qualities of the phantasmagorical object; they summon up the romantic, exotic aura of the Japanese Nō or the Venetian Carnival. Ethal describes them as having an 'ugliness born of dreams' and encourages Fréneuse to 'study them at [his] leisure; handle them; penetrate their inspiring and horrifying ugliness'.<sup>168</sup> These injunctions, particularly the one to handle them, are reminiscent of the ways in which Dorian Gray behaves with his collection. Again, the vaguely sensual, tactile interaction with the objects implies a contact between their possessor and a distant dream world; again, the objects themselves are portrayed as having emerged from dreams, as being composed from a material of unreality. In the opening chapter of the novel, Fréneuse has a similar conversation with the narrator in which he praises the narrator's articles on a goldsmith of whose work they are both admirers:

You have understood and described in poetic terms, the multitudinous and turbid glimmers that constitute the prismatic art of that goldsmith-magician. [...] You have elegantly sung the praises of that golden flora, which is at once Byzantine, Egyptian and Renaissance! You have grasped the coralline quality of those submarine jewels – yes, submarine, for it is as if the almost-cerulean bloom of beryls, peridots, opals and pale sapphires, the colour of seaweeds and waves, has rested for a

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<sup>168</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 73.

long time at the bottom of the sea. Like the rings of Solomon or the cups of the king of Thule, they belong to the caskets of cities engulfed by the sea; the daughter of the king of Ys must have worn such jewels when she delivered the keys of the lock-gates to the demon.<sup>169</sup>

These lines at first appear to conform to the familiar rhetoric of the phantasmagorical object. The goldsmith Barruchini is not only an artisan but a magician; the phantasmagoria of his gems is also the phantasmagoria of history as they summon up Egypt, Byzantium and the Renaissance, as well as the legends of Solomon, Thule and Ys. The designs of the gems themselves are also suggestive and curious: they are ‘golden flora’, ‘glazed fruits [and] flowers of polished stone set in gold’.<sup>170</sup> While the fashionability of using floral forms in jewellery at this time probably contributed to this description,<sup>171</sup> it also suggests a kind of curious workmanship in which the organic is confused with the metallic. Fréneuse rhapsodises that these jewels ‘make one dream’, but for Lorrain, the nature of the dream is more disquieting than it is for other authors. After extolling their charms, the Duc rapidly changes his tone, warning the narrator that ‘no one has suffered more than myself from the morbid attraction of these jewels; and [I am] sick unto death – seeing that I am being carried away by their translucent glaucous poison’.<sup>172</sup> Remember that these wondrous things – both Barruchini’s jewels on the one hand and Ethal’s masks on the other – are always in some way associated with Fréneuse’s madness- his obsession with the interconnectedness of living eyes, jewels and works of art. Just as Ethal drives the Duc more fully into distraction and hallucination, Fréneuse himself asks the narrator, ‘do you want me to tell you how the showcases of Barruchini have exasperated my illness?’<sup>173</sup> These objects cannot help but suggest the horrible overlapping of life and death that Fréneuse so fears; the dream into which they propel him is not the sheltered haven of *Des Esseintes* or *Dorian Gray*, rather it has the compulsive and destructive quality of some addictive drug. This is the poison that Fréneuse imagines dripping from jewels and the eyes of portraits. In this context, it is worth remembering how

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<sup>169</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 27-28.

<sup>170</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 27-28.

<sup>171</sup> Pierrot, *The Decadent Imagination*, 217.

<sup>172</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 28.

<sup>173</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 29.

Ethal dies, not only ‘by his own hand’ (the very hand that so vividly symbolises his artificiality) but by swallowing the poison that is concealed in his emerald ring. The way phantasmagorical objects seem to work for Fréneuse is similar to the way they work for the bereaved husband in Poe’s ‘Ligeia’. The narrative makes it obvious that Fréneuse’s desire for phantasmagorical objects is a compulsion that he cannot control and that it is part of his aberrant state of mind: the common connection between personal grotesqueness and a taste for the grotesque, here taken to an even more extreme degree. Lorrain also makes it clear that these phantasmagorias intensify the young man’s hallucinatory obsessions. Like Rowenna, the second wife from ‘Ligeia’ who gradually succumbs to ‘the phantasmagorical influences’<sup>174</sup> of her husband’s home, Fréneuse is subjected to subtle and maddening influences from these objects. The phantasmagorias of materiality generate the phantasmagorias of the mind, preying on its mutability and the frenetic vulnerability of the imagination. For Lorrain, the phantasmagoria is associated with a feeling of claustrophobia, an impression that the characters are trapped in a place, or a society, that has the potential to derange them. In *Monsieur de Phocas*, the phantasmagorical object is not a magical, dream-inducing panacea but a proof of the vulnerability of the mind to suggestion and of the contamination of the soul produced by modern life.

As Ethal shows Fréneuse more of his collections, the Duc’s fears and uncertainties about the relationship between people and objects continue to build. Ethal shows him a life-size wax doll of a thirteen-year-old Spanish Infanta, like ‘a little princess... captive in a block of ice’.<sup>175</sup> This is the crowning glory of Ethal’s collection of wax death-masks, comprised entirely of the faces of women and young boys, some famous – such as Marguerite de Valois and Mary Stewart – and some everyday. His sentimental favourite is the bust of a young Italian boy called Angelotto that Ethal sculpted himself. Ethal recounts how he found Angelotto dying of consumption on the streets of Paris and brought him back to his studio to model for him before he died. ‘I sensed that he was living on borrowed time and might easily slip through my fingers. The very next day I made him pose. What could I do?’ While working on the bust Ethal claims that he felt he was ‘moulding a soul’<sup>176</sup> and this statement is strangely echoed in a delusion that grips Fréneuse a few minutes later.

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<sup>174</sup> Poe, *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, 121.

<sup>175</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 97.

<sup>176</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 101.



While Ethal caresses the head of the sculpture with his hand, Fréneuse seems to see that hand turn into the claw of a vulture, decorated with bejewelled rings. At the same time, the head of Angelotto seems to come to life: ‘By means of some bizarre retrospective hallucination, I saw that vulturine claw wringing the last gasp out of the little Italian’.<sup>177</sup> This impression returns to him more powerfully at the end of the novel and it is this recurrence which gives him the final impetus to suddenly and violently turn on Ethal:

One hand had come to rest, mechanically on the painted wax hair of the Italian bust, which was enthroned on a small pedestal some distance away. I could no longer see anything except that hand.

Decorated with metal and mother of pearl, the fingers were clenched like claws, kneading the bulging forehead of Angelotto. It was the talon of a vulture descending upon the effigy of the poor child. In the midst of all those pearls the poisoned emerald gleamed like an eye and it seemed to me that within the grip of that cruel hand the dolorous face slowly convulsed with suffering.<sup>178</sup>

Ethal’s hand is described immediately after this as an ‘armature of livid jewels’; it is telling that the bust of the young boy seems to come to life at the same time as Ethal’s hand becomes more artificial, becoming at once intensely predatory and intensely synthetic. Both Ethal and the bust seem to have some oddly vital but also unliving quality about them. Fréneuse’s fantasy, however, is not that Angelotto’s bust has acquired life *from* Ethal, but that, with the boy’s death, he has somehow been transformed by Ethal into his own bust. This is a fantasy founded upon Lorrain’s association of death with objectification. The illusion is all the more potent because not only does Ethal seem – as he recounts the first time he shows the bust to Fréneuse – to have stolen Angelotto’s life in order to create his sculpture of him, but because this seems to be a fundamental feature of his art. Ethal loves to paint and sculpt the sick and the dying. At the interview at which his protégé kills him, Ethal displays three

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<sup>177</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 102.

<sup>178</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 252-253.

portraits of his which he is overjoyed to have reacquired (thanks to the resolution of a lawsuit brought by the husband of one of his subjects). In his diary for that morning, Fréneuse wryly observes that ‘Bluebeard has invited me to come and visit his dead women this evening’.<sup>179</sup> The Bluebeard comparison not only reflects the submerged danger of Ethal’s personality, it also speaks to the spectacular and supernatural elements of his portrayal. The way Ethal shows off the portraits is intensely theatrical. As the Duc arrives Ethal announces that he has come to ‘The ball of victims!’; ‘What a showman!’ Fréneuse remarks, ‘His studio was full of amaryllids and huge lilies mounted high and low’.<sup>180</sup> The flowers are ostensibly arranged like this to suggest a wake for the women in the portraits. But it is interesting that while feasting his eyes on the pictures of the women, Ethal muses: ‘Are they not beautiful lilies themselves: three delicately tormented lilies; three great white lilies in the process of withering away?’<sup>181</sup> By comparing them to the flowers surrounding them, Ethal objectifies the women in a strange way. He seemingly collects these three women – turning them into their portraits; he displays them in the same way he displays the huge bunches of flowers and in the same way that he displays Angelotto. Fréneuse, looking at one of the portraits, cannot help but imagine it to be ‘a *psychic* painting – for that figure [...] seemed more like the image of a soul than a flower’.<sup>182</sup> Lorrain may very well have been inspired here by Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* in which Dorian’s portrait objectified not only his body but the essence of his selfhood. Lorrain, though, makes a different use of the idea. Rather than revealing the inner life of a character or implying the limitations of that inner life, Lorrain returns to the images of supernatural, ghoulish consumption that dominated ‘Magic Lantern’. Ethal apparently enchants people into objects, capturing their souls and imprisoning them in his artworks. The conditions that define Ethal’s art are the conditions of the phantasmagoria of the marketplace: the semblance of magic about the object, and the fear that life can no longer be said to belong exclusively to people but must be divided between them and the things they consume.

As an aside, in Lorrain’s works, *wax* would seem to be the substance that most clearly symbolised this horrible indeterminacy of being alive. Lorrain almost obsessively returns to it and whenever it appears, it suggests a tactile but also corpse-

<sup>179</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 242.

<sup>180</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 244.

<sup>181</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 244.

<sup>182</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 245.

like quality to the thing that is being described. There are Ethal's wax death masks and dolls, in the first part of *Monsieur de Phocas* the Duc's hand is compared to a 'waxen bird'<sup>183</sup> and a great emerald that he wears in his cravat catches the narrator's eye because 'its fine, polished facets seemed almost as if they had been modelled in pale wax'<sup>184</sup>, implying a fundamental link between the inanimate object and its possessor. In 'Magic Lantern' as well, there is the doll Madame G-, whose fearful, deathly sexuality is conveyed by 'lips, as cold as lips of wax'<sup>185</sup> and the story ends with the image of the three husbands of the 'pretty brunette' who 'melted in the warmth of her bed'<sup>186</sup> – an image that not only suggests putrefaction but also impotence. Wax, being synthetic but also at the same time evoking the feel of skin obviously stood out for Lorrain as an image of the modern blurring of life and death, synthetic and organic.

In *Monsieur de Phocas*, Fréneuse is a man tormented by materiality; Ethal, on the other hand, is a man inspired by it. If the goldsmith Barruchini is a magician, then Ethal is surely a necromancer of the world of objects. We have already seen how, in those moments when Ethal's artworks seem most alive – when the 'captured souls' within them seem to visibly writhe in pain – Ethal himself is often at his most malevolently artificial. This fact exposes the heart of Ethal's personality: his entire being is defined through objects; the main way that he asserts himself in the narrative is through his control of objects and his display of objects. Fréneuse himself sees that Ethal's instincts are principally those of a showman. In another parallel between the decadent phantasmagorical aesthetic and eighteenth-century curiosity culture, Ethal represents another form of the collected self. Like the curioso, his identity is projected outward into the objects he owns, objects which are themselves supernatural, which assume the qualities of the living and which trigger strange fantasies in the febrile soul of Fréneuse. Ethal sends his friend engravings by Goya, Ensor and others; Fréneuse writes that: 'I sense that all these dispatches of hideous and hallucinatory engravings are starting something. They are deranging and depriving my brain, populating my imagination with the produce of stupor and trance [...]'<sup>187</sup> Fréneuse's cousin cautions him about Ethal's 'Candaridian cigarettes, opium pipes,

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<sup>183</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 25.

<sup>184</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 24.

<sup>185</sup> Lorrain, 'The Magic Lantern', 175.

<sup>186</sup> Lorrain, 'The Magic Lantern', 176.

<sup>187</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 90-91.

venomous flowers, Far-Eastern poisons and murderous rings’;<sup>188</sup> a warning that implicitly defines Ethal by his ownership of these exotic and threatening items. Making this connection even more explicit, after the party of ‘monsters’ to which Ethal invites the Duc, a former friend of Ethal’s called Sir Thomas Welcome tries to alert Fréneuse to the danger that the English artist poses:

His bizarrerie – and, worse than mere bizarrerie, his *love* of the bizarre, the abnormal and exotic – might be fatal to a sensitive and imaginative being. One would surely be led astray were he to fall under Ethal’s influence [...]

Like certain great doctors and philosophers, he is fascinated by various rare and little-known maladies; he approaches such cases with a cerebral fascination. He watches out for them, researches them and selects them; he is a collector of the flowers of evil. You saw what a divine collection of orchids he carefully brought together the other evening. You may be certain that that great exhibition of cosmopolitan depravity, pent up all night in his studio, was one of the most delectable evenings of his life.<sup>189</sup>

In these statements, we often see foregrounded the idea of Ethal’s influence over others. Like many other aspects of Fréneuse and Ethal’s relationship, the passage reads like an exaggerated and more frightening extrapolation of the relationship between Dorian Gray and Lord Henry Wotton – Wotton’s power to influence Dorian taken to a gothic extreme. But there is more here than simple force of personality; there is much in the way that Ethal is presented that recalls the phantasmagorical Prince Prospero from ‘The Masque of the Red Death’. Like the Prince, Ethal becomes a sort of fantasmagore – a collector and master of strange and frightening spectacles – the summation of his whole collection. The fact that Ethal occasionally appears to lose his human nature is a literal reflection of the fact that his identity is displaced into objects – as his self is distributed into possessions, possessions are reflexively displaced into *him*. The influence that he wields over people is the influence of the wondrous object;

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<sup>188</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 96.

<sup>189</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 146.

he has the power to make himself into a collection and also to ‘collect’ those around him. The hand caressing Angelotto’s head brings this process into sharp and terrible focus for the Duc. It starts him on a chain of thought, at the end of which he realises that while he was being shown the monsters at Ethal’s party, he too was being shown off: the revelation comes to him that ‘I was part of the collection myself’<sup>190</sup> – he has come to be ‘owned’ by Ethal. This realisation of Fréneuse’s demonstrates that Ethal’s influence is also an act of appropriation, a function of his collected nature which allows him to aggregate objects into himself and turn people into objects. His personality becomes almost unreal and reaches satanic dimensions.

Like the Prince, Ethal places himself in a position above those he takes an interest in, he develops and ‘improves’ them according to his designs – this is why both the party-goers and the subjects of his paintings are compared to flowers. Welcome even goes so far as to make the connection for us: ‘Ethal cultivates and develops these flowers of criminality, much as he is accused in London of cultivating pallor, anaemia, languor and consumption in his models’.<sup>191</sup> Likewise, he is cheerfully above normal moral and social constraints – he happily admits to stealing those objects in museums that he finds intriguing. Not only does this put him above the law, it also intensifies his power of ownership: he has mastered the system of capitalist acquisition so that anything he desires may belong to him but he acknowledges no claim to ownership on the part of anyone else – not even of their own selves. He appears, therefore, in the light of a wondrous being (or an intimidating one, given his obvious villainy) exceeding both the boundaries of the human body and moral restraints: his being is made up of objects, he has power over objects and has the power to turn people into objects. In this regard, it is worth looking at the language Welcome uses to describe Ethal’s love for his ‘flowers of evil’. (Remember that, according to Benjamin, Baudelaire was – like Ethal – a ‘connoisseur of narcotics’. Remember also that, in Lorrain’s world, there is very little difference between the narcotic and the poisonous.) In these lines, Ethal is portrayed as a collector – hunting for sin in the same way that another man might hunt for a Sèvres china teacup – but also as something akin to a researcher, or an investigator. He is compared to a ‘great doctor or philosopher’, to a horticulturalist who ‘cultivates and develops’. Only a few paragraphs later, Welcome tells Fréneuse: ‘it is for his own edification that he

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<sup>190</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 251.

<sup>191</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 146.

contrives marvellous spectacles. He will collaborate wholeheartedly with a man's vices, in order to see how far that man will carry the torch of depravity'. Above all, Ethal 'has an inquiring mind'.<sup>192</sup> Before the murder, Fréneuse recalls the party and remembers how, then and later, Ethal described his guests to him: 'Not one of them found favour [...] all their ignominies and all their lusts had been slowly stirred by the abominable Englishman [...] [all] had been evaluated [...] and found equally wanting'.<sup>193</sup> What unites all of these remarks about Ethal is the sense of the almost empirical attitude that he has towards what Fréneuse calls his 'menagerie';<sup>194</sup> not a completely scientific detachment – he is far too enthusiastic for that – but a superiority of vision that is quasi-scientific: the separation between scientist and specimen that is here also the separation between connoisseur and objet d'art. Ethal's character creates a parallel between the critical gaze of a scientist examining a specimen and the critical gaze of an aesthete examining a work of art. Like Forbster, who takes the narrator of 'Magic Lantern' on a tour of society's evils, Ethal enjoys the omnipresence of moral corruption while being above his subjects' vices; if not morally superior, at least possessed of a superiority of vision – the ability to see their vices and comprehensively analyse their failings. What unfolds for us here is a system in which this clarity of vision, the capacity to comprehend society's flaws, automatically suggests acquisition and ownership. Owning an object allows one to develop one's comprehension of it, to investigate and examine it; understanding and display become visible signs of control. Ethal and Forbster's unfolding of the state of modern man results in a theatre of mastery: people are examined by them, assessed by them, admired by them and ultimately displayed and owned by them. The dissecting power of their gaze transforms their relationship with people into a relationship between consumers and commodities. This is another part of Ethal's charisma as a collected self: not only does he fantasise and exoticise his personality and form by aggregating them into objects, he has an insight into those around him that, because of the condition of the society in which they live, is synonymous with possession.

In this sense, Ethal is a subversive figure without being an aspirational one. He critiques the hypocrisy of contemporary society and rises above the demands of institutionalised capitalism. However, in keeping with Lorrain's perspective on the

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<sup>192</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 146-147.

<sup>193</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 250.

<sup>194</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 251.

decadent phantasmagoria, Ethal offers no promise of escape from these conditions despite his own phantasmagorical nature. The great question that dogs Lorrain's portrayal of Ethal is, if being a commodity is to be dead, what is it to be an owner? The reduction of human beings into the undead creates a reflexive reaction whereby Ethal becomes more than moral. His actions and his state of being are more complex than the consumption engaged in by the ghouls and succubae who feed off their fellow men. As Jennifer Birkett points out, in Lorrain's world 'consuming, using and killing are not choices that mark out individuals for distinction. They are acts of submission and co-option into a system which is both repugnant and desirable'.<sup>195</sup> If anything, the actions of Fréneuse and the grotesques that pack the opera boxes in 'Magic Lantern' mark them out as *losing* their individuality, losing their identity in an exploitative system. The fact that this system is both horrible and attractive is confirmed by the mixture of desire and fear that Fréneuse experiences when he looks into people's eyes or the depths of gems. Ethal alone avoids being subsumed by this system because he embodies the system. Ethal, the collected man, is also the optimal man of capitalism. His existence is bound up in objects and he therefore lacks human vulnerabilities. In Fréneuse, Ethal sees a man who cannot free himself from the fear of the commodity. For the Duc, objects suggest only existential dread and confusion; they signify the uncertain definitions of life and death, this is the poison he sees congealed in the eyes of portraits. By contrast, Ethal's objects transmit coherent narratives; he gives Fréneuse detailed accounts of Angelotto and the three women who posed for his 'lily' portraits. Similarly, the emerald ring he wears (the poisoned ring that eventually kills him) is an exact replica of one worn by Philip II of Spain. The gem in the ring originally (according to Ethal) served as a false eye in the face of Philip's mistress, given to her by him after he had himself torn out the real one in a fit of rage.<sup>196</sup> The story not only fits into the pattern of Fréneuse's obsessions, it also demonstrates Ethal's relationship with objects. Here, we have another object that claims to be a metaphorical human being. For Ethal, even though it is a replica, it not only conveys the woman but also her story. Ethal makes objects his servants while Fréneuse is enslaved by them; Ethal's objects speak to him while they rob Fréneuse of whatever articulacy he may once have had.

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<sup>195</sup> Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers*, 201.

<sup>196</sup> Lorrain, *Monsieur de Phocas*, 103-105.

In this, we can see the frequently repeated logic of decadent resistance to conformity and capitalism. The decadents adopted the paradoxical strategy of using elite connoisseurship against mass consumption; paradoxical since it is reliant on the same mechanisms of capitalism that it tries to reject. This is the attempt to resist bourgeois consumerism by perpetually outpacing it; by refining consumption to a point beyond what is commonly available. The collected self works in the same way. When the self becomes comprised of objects, then the refinement of the self is also the refinement of consumption. The collected self is the sign of an individual who has perfected their relationship with things. In *Monsieur de Phocas*, Lorrain produces Claudius Ethal as an illustration of demonic aspects of this process – a man who is free only because of the frightening skill with which he enslaves others.

The underlying impulse governing the use of the phantasmagorical in decadent literature was the rejection of the normative, conformist values of the society in which it was produced. In the early nineteenth century, the phantasmagoria became a symbol for the disintegration of rational certainties: political certainties, moral certainties and empirical certainties. Faced with a middle class that defined itself by rationality, order and practicality, decadent writers claimed the phantasmagorical as a symbol of resistance – an aesthetic which dispensed with order, undermined rationality and sacrificed the real world in favour of the dream. In the decadent rhetoric that eulogises the dream, we can see real-world social conflict, the desire for writers and artists – the majority of whom were themselves middle-class – to embrace an alternative way of life to that offered by bourgeois capitalism. Here also, the phantasmagoria became their weapon of choice. In resisting the acquisitive impulses of capitalism and petty consumerism, the phantasmagoria offered a way to effectively beat them at their own game. Marx identified the magical, phantasmagorical quality that attached itself to objects in the marketplace. For the decadents, this aura that surrounded these objects lifted them out of the realm of profane capitalism and into a more complex, more fabulous context. Their ideology was intensely materialistic but at the same time it was intensely anti-capitalist; objects were imagined to have a higher value than mere money and collecting them not only put the collector in contact with a wondrous fantasy world, it also became an emphatic signal of the resistance to the mind-set which valued objects only as commodities to be traded.

The final result of collecting these objects was that their owner came to be defined by his collection. The collector's identity became assimilated into his



objects, through them he transformed into a phantasmagoria himself. In this, there was also a final signal of the rejection of the appropriate identity for a Victorian gentleman and the decadent's devotion to an alternative mode of living.

In the collector's becoming a collected self we can see just one example of the connections between the decadent phantasmagorical aesthetic and the curiosity culture of the eighteenth century. There is a continuum which links the curious collection to Robertson's phantasmagoria, Robertson's phantasmagoria to the stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Poe's stories to the phantasmagorias of the decadence. The curious object that combined opposites within itself and projected exotic strangeness was also beloved by the decadents; the curious collection that emphasised shocks and juxtapositions was also the form of their collection; the curious vision that ignored the system in favour of the singularity was also their way of seeing the world. Even where the 'real' culture of curiosity did not provide the genesis of the decadent phantasmagoria, its satires did, through the imaginative spectacles of Pope and Swift. The vision of the decadents was a curious vision, the dreams of the decadents had phantasmagorical forms. The decadent movement resurrected the culture of curiosity and refitted it for its own needs in its own age.

## CONCLUSION

After the turn of the twentieth century, much of the social dissatisfaction that had fuelled the decadent use of the phantasmagoria transferred itself into new forms. Despite this, the phantasmagorical aesthetic remained an influential presence in Modern literature. As the decadent movement began to fade into the new age's collective memory, the phantasmagoria underwent another of those metamorphoses that had often characterised its history. Successive generations of writers – often in surprisingly well-known works – return to the spirit of the phantasmagoria, drawing on its essential tropes and themes; chief among them being the idea of the fabulous collection and of a manic, quasi-magical fecundity of the imagination. As the intellectual and social landscape changed, writers adapted the aesthetic to fit new preoccupations; the hectic images of the phantasmagoria put on new forms for the new century.

In the immediate post-decadent period there were several writers who reinvented elements of the decadent phantasmagoria in their work. G.K. Chesterton's first novel *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (1904) displays the same reverence for the imaginary dream life and disdain for capitalist 'common sense' as the decadent phantasmagoria. Decadent ideas about the fabulous, transformative power of the imagination are also developed in the work of the Anglo-Irish fantasy writer Lord Dunsany who, between 1910 and 1920, produced some of the most intensely phantasmagorical writing to be found after the fin de siècle. Outside of the English speaking world, novels like Alfred Kubin's *The Other Side* (*Die andere Seite*) (1909) and Raymond Roussel's *Locus Solus* (1914) both imitate and reinterpret the late nineteenth century's fascination with the dream and the fantastic collection.

Chesterton's *Napoleon of Notting Hill* tells the story of the changes that are wrought on the city of London when the newly elected king of England, Auberon Quin, attempts to reformulate everyday life on a pattern of medieval pageantry, designing ceremonial robes and coats-of-arms for the different London boroughs, commanding men at arms to carry swords and pikes and so on. Quin's ideas (which even he considers to be little more than an elaborate joke) are taken up by a young man of Notting Hill called Adam Wayne and, due to Wayne's enthusiasm, military

skill and force of belief, London is gradually transformed into a kind of wonderland based on chivalric romances. Both Wayne and Quin are repeatedly described as artists and dreamers, men out of step with everyday reality who long for a more romantic and imaginatively exciting way of life. Early in the novel, Quin's friends talk about him in a way that makes him sound very similar to the decadent dreamer and collector: 'Do you know that he has the one collection of Japanese lacquer in Europe? Have you ever seen his books? All Greek poets and medieval French and that sort of thing. Have you seen his rooms? It's like being inside an amethyst'.<sup>1</sup> Later, once his orders have been put into effect and he is at a meeting of the newly-costumed provosts of the London boroughs, Quin sees the room 'roaring in a sunset of colour, and he enjoyed the sight, possible to so few artists – the sight of his own dreams moving and blazing before him'.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Wayne is 'a genuine natural mystic, one of those who live on the border of fairyland';<sup>3</sup> a man who 'finds himself in the midst of a heraldic vision, in which he can act and speak and live lyrically'.<sup>4</sup> The personalities of these two men suggest more active, more playful (in Quin's case) and more passionate (in Wayne's case) versions of the decadent dreamer. The principal subject of *Notting Hill* is the process by which the personal fantasy of these two men spreads to an entire city, and possibly to the rest of the country as well. Chesterton gives this process a specific manifestation so that the reader can see the extent of the changes. Before Quin's dream has been fully embraced by Londoners, Wayne wanders into a grocer's shop and gives the confused grocer Mr Mead a romantic and spectacular interpretation of his own profession. Wayne says:

I can imagine what it must be to sit all day as you do surrounded with wares from all the ends of the earth, from strange seas that we have never sailed and strange forests that we could not even picture. No Eastern king ever had such argosies or such cargoes coming from the sunrise and the sunset, and Solomon in all his glory was not enriched like one of you. [...] Your dates come from the tall palms of Barbary, your sugar from strange islands in the tropics, your tea from

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<sup>1</sup> Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London: John Lane, 1914), 28.

<sup>2</sup> Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 100.

<sup>3</sup> Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 131.

<sup>4</sup> Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 132.

the secret villages of the Empire of the Dragon. That this room might be furnished, forests have been spoiled under the Southern Cross, and leviathans speared under the Polar Star.<sup>5</sup>

Twenty years later, Auberon Quin visits the same shop and finds the same Mr Mead now dressed in a robe of blue, brown and crimson, 'interwoven with an Eastern complexity of pattern':

The whole shop had the sombre and sumptuous look of its owner. The wares were displayed as prominently as in the old days, but they were now blended and arranged with a sense of tint and grouping, too often neglected by the dim grocers of those forgotten days. The wares were shown plainly, but shown not so much as an old grocer would have shown his stock, but rather as an educated virtuoso would have shown his treasures. The tea was stored in great blue and green vases, inscribed with the nine indispensable sayings of the wise men of China. Other vases of confused orange and purple, less rigid and dominant, more humble and dreamy, stored symbolically the tea of India. A row of caskets of a simple silvery metal contained tinned meats. Each was wrought with some rude but rhythmic form, as a shell, a horn, a fish or an apple, to indicate what material had been canned in it.<sup>6</sup>

The comparison of the grocer to an 'educated virtuoso' is especially telling here because it connects him not only with Quin specifically – who has been established already as an aesthete and collector – but with the general mind-set of the artist and the collector, in which objects are viewed as visual spectacle, romanticised and given the appearance of magic. Now that he is transformed into a collector, the grocer's goods are no longer so much for sale as for admiration and amazement; they no longer exist as part of a capitalist exchange of commodities, but as an artistic statement. The primary function of his wares is no longer to be sold but to be imaginatively

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<sup>5</sup> Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 139-141.

<sup>6</sup> Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, 261-262.

suggestive; the primary function of the shop is no longer to sell objects, but to show them off, like the laboratory of a wizard or the treasure house of an Ali Baba. In effect, the whole of London now lives in Wayne and Auberón's phantasmagoria. As well as transforming the spirit of the age, the two have seemingly done away with the spirit of capitalism. The book conveys the same romantic longing for an idealised dream world and disdain for reality that was to be found in the decadent uses of the phantasmagoria. Likewise, the phantasmagoria (for this is how Chesterton presents the wondrous and elaborate vision of transformed London) is the form of that dream.

The same sort of phantasmagorical dream world appears, even more obviously, in several of Lord Dunsany's short stories. Dunsany's first book, *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905), was advertised as 'a pagan phantasmagoria'<sup>7</sup>. Another collection of Dunsany's stories called *A Dreamer's Tales*, from 1910, includes the short story 'Idle Days on the Yann', probably the most clearly and self-consciously phantasmagorical of all Dunsany's works. 'Yann' is essentially a kind of fantasy travel narrative, with the conceit that Dunsany himself is narrating in first person an actual voyage he has made down the imaginary river Yann, describing the various spectacular sights and civilisations he encounters on his journey. (Dunsany later wrote two sequels to this story, describing further wanderings of his. These three tales, 'Idle Days on the Yann', 'A Shop in Go-By Street' and 'The Avenger of Perdóndaris' were collected as a trilogy named 'Beyond the Fields We Know' included in *Tales of Three Hemispheres* in 1919.) On a basic level, 'Idle Days on the Yann' follows the structure of the curious travel narrative. Dunsany often makes it clear to the reader that he is simply wandering through 'a land of wonders'<sup>8</sup> in search of marvels to enjoy, rather than for any commercial or scientific purpose. The narrative is essentially a collection of disconnected fantastical observations, including the passage on the Wanderers who Dunsany finds in the city of Nen:

And the Wanderers were a weird, dark tribe, that once in every seven years came down from the peaks of Mloon, having crossed by a pass that is known to them from some fantastic land that lies beyond. And the people of Nen were all outside their houses, and all stood wondering at their own streets. For

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<sup>7</sup> Lord Dunsany, *Fifty-One Tales* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1915), p. ii.

<sup>8</sup> Lord Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1920), 102.

the men and women for the Wanderers had crowded all the ways, and everyone was doing some strange thing. Some danced astounding dances that they had learned from the desert wind, rapidly curving and swirling till the eye could follow no longer. Others played upon instruments beautiful wailing tunes that were full of horror, which souls had taught them lost by night in the desert, that strange far desert from which the Wanderers came.

None of their instruments were such as were known in Nen nor in any part of the region of the Yann; even the horns out of which some were made were of beasts that none had seen along that river, for they were barbed at the tips. And they sang, in the language of none, songs that seemed to be akin to the mysteries of night and to the unreasoned fear that haunts dark places.<sup>9</sup>

Like the curious travel narrative, Dunsany never makes any attempt to explain or understand the things he sees; likewise, in terms of capitalism: these Wanderers don't seem to be in town for trade, but to dance and seduce with their strangeness. Dunsany's observations – or, more accurately, the inventions he pretends are observations – are purely superficial, simply passing from one weird spectacle to another, without any definite sense of purpose. This point is underscored by the frequency with which he begins new paragraphs and sentences with the word 'And'. The story even starts with a connective: 'So I came down through the wood to the bank of the Yann'<sup>10</sup>. Dunsany is constantly emphasising continuity in 'Idle Days on the Yann', a perpetual but also indeterminate progression from one observation to the next. It was this undisciplined wandering that characterised first the curious and later the phantasmagorical impulse.

However, the phantasmagoria of 'Idle Days on the Yann' is to be found not only in its narrator's curious wandering and the omnipresence of fantastic oddities in the story, but also in the way in which Dunsany handles the power of imagination. Early on in 'Idle Days on the Yann' he establishes that, even within the framework of

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<sup>9</sup> Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, 98-99.

<sup>10</sup> Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, 71.

the narrative, Yann, the surrounding lands and everything else he describes are actually imaginary. Dunsany describes how he is a wanderer in ‘The Land of Dream’<sup>11</sup>; he has, in effect, passed out of the real world and into a separate realm that is the manifestation of human fancy. As such, the spectacular quality of the things he sees on his travels are merely a reflection of the spectacular quality of the imagination *in general*. The story, in fact, literalises the process of imaginative reverie so beloved of the decadent movement. The immaterial activity of dreaming is here converted into a physical act of wandering around inside one’s own dream world. Like Chesterton’s London, Dunsany’s dreamlands are a realisation of the uncontrollable, phantasmagorical character of imagination itself. And, also like Chesterton, Dunsany’s stories preserve the imprint of the decadent contempt for suburban, bourgeois normality, which he portrays as rejecting imagination in favour of respectability and social conformity. In ‘The Distressing Tale of Thangobrind the Jeweller’, a wealthy London banker promises his only daughter to the thief Thangobrind if he can steal a giant sapphire from the temple of the spider-god Hlo-hlo in the fantastical city of Moung-ga-ling. After Hlo-hlo kills the thief, sparing the banker’s daughter, Dunsany ends the story by telling us: ‘[she] felt so little gratitude for this great deliverance that she took to respectability of a militant kind, and became aggressively dull, and called her home the English Riviera, and had platitudes worked in worsted upon her tea-cosy, and in the end never died, but passed away at her residence’.<sup>12</sup> In this way Dunsany indicates rather clunkily his mocking contempt for middle-class ‘respectability’. Similarly, in the last story of the Yann trilogy, ‘The Avenger of Perdóndaris’, Dunsany describes the playing of musicians which he overhears in a palace in the land of dreams:

And 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 then [...] you would be gentle no more but the thoughts that run like leopards over the far free lands would come leaping

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<sup>11</sup> Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, 72.

<sup>12</sup> Lord Dunsany, *Time and the Gods* (London: Gollancz, 2000), 349-350.

into your head even were it in 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.<sup>13</sup>

Once again, we see a repetition of the late nineteenth century's opposition of unimaginative middle-class reality with a hyper-creative and highly individualised state of dreaming: the contrast of vibrant dreams with the aesthetic limitations and emotional etiolation of the real world. Dunsany's transformation of this concept, though, is both subtle and significant. By imagining the 'Kingdom of Fantasy' ('which pertains to the Lands of Dream [and] the region of Myth')<sup>14</sup> as a place that a dreamer can actually be present in and explore, Dunsany makes the act of dreaming simultaneously internal and external. It preserves the romantic idea of personal imaginative freedom but also converts this into an active undertaking different from the passive reverie of the decadents.

This kind of change is also observable in Alfred Kubin's *The Other Side*. Published in 1909, the novel recounts the story of its narrator's attempt to live in The Dream Country, a small nation created and ruled over by the narrator's childhood friend Patera, who has come into possession of immense wealth. Much of *The Other Side* reads like a parody or exaggeration of fin-de-siècle ideals of disengagement with reality. The inhabitants of The Dream Country are individually and collectively highly introverted and indolent, prone to fantasies and neurological disorders. Franz Gautsch, the agent of the Dream Kingdom's founder who invites the unnamed narrator to move there, remarks that it is 'non-existent things that constitute the quintessence of our aspirations'.<sup>15</sup> The narrator himself observes that new arrivals to the dream kingdom 'talked a great deal about the world outside, with its progress and its wonderful innovations. But we Dreamers were not at all interested; we would say casually, "Yes, yes, quite so," and then change the subject. To us the Dream Kingdom seemed limitless and grandiose; the rest of the world was not worth consideration; we forgot

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<sup>13</sup> Lord Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, 131-132.

<sup>14</sup> Lord Dunsany, *Tales of Three Hemispheres*, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Kubin, *The Other Side (Die andere Seite)*, translated by Denver Lindley (London: Golancz, 1969), 14.



it'.<sup>16</sup> While Kubin's interpretation of the dream is far less active than Dunsany's, he produces a similar effect: the act of dreaming is changed from a purely mental process into a physical activity that takes place in the real world. The dream becomes a country that people can visit and become trapped in. This country is shrouded in a perpetual misty twilight, its houses are all old, having been bought and shipped from all over Europe, and it is wholly suffused with a deep sense of nostalgia.

As well as considering the nature of dreaming as an activity, *The Other Side* also maintains a version of the strange relationship between people and objects to be found in decadent phantasmagorias. Gautsch describes Patera as 'more a collector of antiquities in general than an art collector, but he is that on a grand scale... But there is more to it than that. He has a memory that goes beyond my understanding; he holds in his mind almost every object in his Kingdom'.<sup>17</sup> Gautsch adds that as well as hunting down rare and precious artworks and antiquities, Patera's agents are also tasked with highly specific requests for trivial, neglected or broken objects. As the agent remarks:

It often baffles me where our Master gets his knowledge of all these things...

Valuable objects and what is obviously old trash are demanded with equal insistence. How often I have had to search for worthless rubbish in some middle-class family's attic or wine-cellar or in some remote mountain farmhouse! Often the people themselves did not know they owned the thing in question – a broken-down chair, old fire tools, a piperack, an egg-timer, or something of that sort... Frequently, I had trouble convincing the people that they had what I was looking for. In the long run, however, it was always found.<sup>18</sup>

Patera's willingness to devote as much time, effort and money to acquiring rubbish as to acquiring rare or beautiful objects effectively undermines the idea of the exclusive commodity. Importantly, Patera does not just buy junk with as much relish as he buys

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<sup>16</sup> Kubin, *The Other Side*, 141.

<sup>17</sup> Kubin, *The Other Side*, 23.

<sup>18</sup> Kubin, *The Other Side*, 24.

artworks, he sends his agents to track down the specific pieces of junk that he wants, applying the same standards of aesthetic refinement to both the greatest and the least of material things. In a way, this is similar to the decadent approach to materialism. Patera does not simply dismiss material culture, he instead adds another layer of exclusivity and complexity on top of it. The standards by which he judges the value of an object are more elaborate than those which are normally used. Like Des Esseintes, who assigns value to objects based in their romantic, dreamy suggestiveness, Patera also hunts for things with a 'dream value'. Their nostalgic potency is attested to by the narrator's comment after hearing the list of Gautsch's acquisitions for Patera: 'Oh, I love old things', he enthusiastically exclaims; the love of 'old things' (according to Susan Stewart) implying comfort and familiarity, the 'warmth' of a vaguely defined but reassuring cultural 'childhood'.<sup>19</sup>

*Locus Solus* displays a similarly complex relationship with objects. Roussel's novel describes a group of admirers being shown around the palatial gardens of the home of the great inventor Martial Canterel. 'Locus Solus' is the name of Canterel's estates and the gardens of his home are filled with exotic machines, artworks and performers. Canterel escorts the group around and, as he goes, tells them various stories about the objects, describing how they came to be there, how they operate and why they look the way they do. The various narratives that are contained in *Locus Solus* emerge out of the objects in a way that is similar to the exotic fantasies that emerge out of Dorian Gray or Des Esseintes's collections – the objects exist to narrate and to be narrated. *Locus Solus* may be considered heavily phantasmagorical because it describes a tour of a collection; its only plot is a continuously evolving account of fantastic objects: a device that constructs an elaborate mosaic out of human teeth; an antique mud statue of a child from Timbuktu; playing cards that can be made to glow because they contain – within their few millimetres of thickness – not only an exquisite clockwork engine but also a species of rare bioluminescent insects. As Canterel leads the group around his collection, he also comes to conform to the idea of the collected self. His whole identity is contained in the objects that he displays, his charisma comes principally from owning things and being able to explain them to those less well-informed than himself.

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<sup>19</sup> See Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1993), 145-146, for a more detailed examination of the assignment of nostalgic value to objects of consumption.

Canterel differs from the decadent version of the collected self in one or two significant ways, though. For one thing, he is an oddly conformist figure. Despite the strangeness and elaborateness of his artworks and machines, he is a good capitalist (his inventions have made him rich and he describes a number of successful investments he has made), a man of the world and an elegant raconteur. Despite having an identity derived almost entirely from his collection, he (and Roussel with him) has little interest in questioning the predominant values of his society. The decadent discourse of distaste for the populist and their desire for the privacy of dream is wholly absent from *Locus Solus*. In an important break from the decadent phantasmagoria, Roussel makes it clear that Canterel's gardens are open to the public and Canterel's party often crosses paths with other groups of tourists and idlers. Again, Roussel ignores the notions of aesthetic exclusivity and refinement that were typically attached to the phantasmagorias of the previous century. In the end, it may be possible to read *Locus Solus* as representing the final result of the process by which the market converts criticisms of itself into fresh objects of consumption. Rita Felski writes that the decadent aesthete's search for 'ever more arcane objects not yet trivialised by mass reproduction, echoes the same cult of novelty which propels the logic of capitalist consumerism'.<sup>20</sup> Roussel represents the conclusion of this action: in Canterel's pleasure garden, we can see the exclusive oddities of the phantasmagoria assimilated into the world of fashion and novelty. *Locus Solus* tries to merge the phantasmagorical with the populist.

Taken together, the works of these four authors imply an important change in the identity of the phantasmagorical in the early twentieth century. In all of their works, the phantasmagoria largely becomes exterior and public rather than interior and private. The imaginative impulse is also externalised – to a greater extent directed outward, away from the intense introspection that characterises decadent imaginings. Underlying this change it is possible to detect a new view of society, the sense that it is no longer sickening and dying as it was felt to be in the last years of the preceding century. And alongside this there is perhaps also a new view of the individual as a person no longer automatically marginalised, no longer directly and irreconcilably opposed to the mainstream.

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<sup>20</sup> Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 99.

The possible exception to this is Kubin's *The Other Side*, which ends with the annihilation of the Dream Kingdom. However, in Kubin's novel, decadence and social decay are isolated in the Dream Kingdom and end with the death of its ruler; the outside world remains unaffected.

After this point, the echoes of the decadent movement become less pronounced in twentieth-century phantasmagorical literature, though the form itself retains its vitality and appeal for writers. One who did consciously invoke the memory of the decadence was the American H. P. Lovecraft, whose phantasmagorical horror story 'The Hound' (1924) mentions the 'sombre... thrills' of Huysmans and Baudelaire.<sup>21</sup> In a more light-hearted vein, Charles Finney's *The Circus of Dr Lao* (1935) describes the visit by a fantastical circus to the fictional town of Abalone in rural Arizona. More famously, Italo Calvino and Jorge Borges occasionally veer into the phantasmagorical, providing a model of it for later writers. Among their works, Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (*Le città invisibili*) (1972) and Borges's *Book of Imaginary Beings* (known as both *Manual de zoología fantástica* and later *El libro de los seres imaginarios*, in Spanish) (1957) perhaps most clearly show the traces of the phantasmagorias of Chesterton and Dunsany. In the introduction to the 1967 edition of *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, Borges remarks that the work 'is not meant to be read straight through; rather, we should like the reader to dip into these pages at random, just as one plays with the shifting patterns of a kaleidoscope',<sup>22</sup> suggesting the random progress and miscellanea of a phantasmagorical collection.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s – particularly among the so-called 'New Wave' of Fantasy and Science Fiction – writers continued to experiment with phantasmagorical forms in popular fiction. One obvious example is Michael Moorcock. His 'Dancers at the End of Time' trilogy (comprising *An Alien Heat*, 1972; *The Hollow Lands*, 1974; and *The End of All Songs*, 1976) describes a society of people living just before the end of the known universe. Inspired by 1890s dandyism and the blithe comedies of Oscar Wilde, the immortal and careless inhabitants of the End Time amuse themselves by employing their near-limitless powers to create endlessly strange and beautiful objects, buildings, landscapes and items of apparel that fill their homes and cover the face of Moorcock's future Earth.

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<sup>21</sup> H. P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu and Other Weird Stories*, ed. S. T. Joshi (London: Penguin, 2002), 81.

<sup>22</sup> Jorge Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*, translated by Norman Thomas Giovanni (London: Vintage, 2002), 12.

Among later writers influenced by Borges and Calvino, the most notable for our purposes is Umberto Eco. In *The Name of the Rose* (*Il nome della rosa*) (1980) and *The Island of the Day Before* (*L'isola del giorno prima*) (1994), collections of wonderful and seemingly magical objects are highly prominent. The monastery in which *The Name of the Rose* is set and the sailing ship 'Daphne' aboard which the hero of *The Island of the Day Before* is confined are both stocked with a variety of phantasmagorias: in the first case, with collections of books, luscious illustrations, carvings depicting heaven and hell, holy relics and jewelled reliquaries; in the second, with exotic birds, tropical plants, fish and ingenious mechanical clocks. Besides this focus on phantasmagorias, these two novels also betray Eco's fascination with the philosophies and theories that the people of past ages (and, by implication, our own age as well) use to understand and explain their world. In *The Name of the Rose*, Eco is irresistibly attracted to medieval philosophies of the divine and the place of the church in society. In *The Island of the Day Before*, he takes as his subject the seventeenth-century quest to discover the secret of longitude, filling the novel with intricate theories of time and navigation. What are we to make of this conjunction between the phantasmagoria and these subjects that Eco so often returns to in his writing? It may be that, just as the early nineteenth-century phantasmagoria suggested the fallibility of the idea of a rational order to the world, Eco's phantasmagorical collections, by their mere presence, signify the dream-like insubstantiality of past ages, as well as their – and our own – attempts to impose a subjective and flawed scheme of understanding on our surroundings.

At the same time as Borges, Calvino and later Eco, the British author Angela Carter was producing works which continued the process begun in the immediate post-decadent period of moving the phantasmagorical into public space. Carter's penultimate novel, *Nights at the Circus*, is probably her most overtly phantasmagorical work. It is predominantly the story of Fevvers, a woman who, while achieving fame as an acrobat and circus performer, claims to have been hatched from an egg and later developed fully functional wings. Set immediately before the turn of the twentieth century, the novel not only reinterprets several of the familiar aspects of curiosity culture, but also directly engages with the social and material conditions that produced decadent phantasmagorical writing in the first place: an aspect of the work no doubt underpinned by Carter's regard for writers such as Wilde and Huysmans.

One particular incident crystallises the novel's handling of the phantasmagorical. At one point, Fevvers encounters a Russian Grand Duke whose house in St Petersburg is, *Locus Solus* like, filled with exotic mechanical toys and costly artworks. While she is his guest, alone with him in his home, the Duke informs Fevvers that, 'I am a great collector of all kinds of *objets d'art* and marvels. Of all things, I love best toys – marvellous and unnatural artefacts'.<sup>23</sup> This phantasmagorical sentiment precedes Fevvers's realisation that the Duke can – more literally even than Lorrain's Claudius Ethal – magically change people into objects, and that he threatens to turn Fevvers into just such a toy, inside a Faberge Egg.

In this exchange with Fevvers, the Duke is clearly supposed to represent a particularly predatory, wealthy interpretation of the phantasmagorical collector. After all, not only are his collections material, private and built upon a vast accumulation of capital, but he also reveals exactly how he sees Fevvers and in what image he would like to remake her: a toy, 'marvellous and unnatural'. For him, she is a 'curiosity' to be observed and, if possible, added to his collection. The way the Duke and Fevvers relate to each other is only the most obvious instance of a set of ideas that Carter develops throughout the book. Here and at other times, Fevvers struggles with the perennial problem of the person who identifies themselves as a 'curious' object of spectatorship. Like dwarves, giants and other exotic or freakish eighteenth-century human curiosities, Fevvers has to resolve the question of how one remains an object of fascination without becoming an object of consumption. Fevvers is well aware of her potential value as a type of rare commodity; that there is money to be made from displaying herself to the public. On her way to the Duke's palace, Carter has Fevvers debate this very point with herself; she spells out her nature as 'the kind of spectacle people pay good money to see'.<sup>24</sup> Anticipating her meeting with the Duke, she ponders that: 'The sums he is about to squander on this bright pretty useless thing, myself, have nothing to do with my value as such. If all the women in the world had wings, he'd keep his jewels to himself... My value to him is as a *rara avis*'.<sup>25</sup> Fevvers is keenly aware of her own status as a rarity and a spectacle. As she wanders through the Duke's house, observing the wealth of his possessions, she 'add[s] a further sum to the price she'd already put upon whatever entertainment she might be called upon to

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<sup>23</sup> Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus* (London: Vintage 2006), 220.

<sup>24</sup> Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 217.

<sup>25</sup> Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 218.

provide'.<sup>26</sup> Fevvers understands that the money she extracts from her 'spectators' is a result of her rarity. She has to perpetually reinforce the idea of herself as an exclusive item, glamorous and only available at the highest prices; in effect, she has to introduce a scarcity into the commodity that is her own being. Her relationship with the Duke is one of control and economics. The fear of him that she begins to feel as the evening wears on comes from her growing sense that it is *he*, and not herself, who is in control of the exchange between them. The Duke (again, in a manner that is vaguely reminiscent of the all-devouring Ethal) is the master of this system of commodities, of which Fevvers has willingly made herself part. Her fear of him comes from her realisation that, rather than commanding a high price for her sexuality and exoticism, his wealth allows him to buy *her* – to treat her as another intriguing toy for his collection. Fevver's attempt to maintain control through exclusivity means nothing to him. This struggle between Fevvers and the Duke is the struggle of the human curiosity; the struggle to sell the spectacle of one's self without losing ownership of one's self; to remain an exclusive commodity; to retain control of the market. This is a struggle that is reminiscent of the relationship between Dorimemus and Philecta in Haywood's *The Masqueraders*, as also of the 'objectification' of Swift's Gulliver and Celia.

In terms of the evolution of the phantasmagorical, the significance of this exchange between the Duke and Fevvers is that the phantasmagoria is being used here to dramatize a set of definite social relations. For the decadents, the appeal of the phantasmagoria was, in no small part, that it displayed a superiority of taste and a fantasy of wealthy indifference to capitalism. Fevvers identifies the Duke as having just this quality: 'he is so rich that money hasn't any *meaning* for him'.<sup>27</sup> In the Duke – and in Fevvers's attempts to sell herself to the Duke while he in turn tries to buy Fevvers for himself – Carter shows us the traditional decadent phantasmagoria from the outside. The Duke's collection represents the sterility of accumulated wealth and social dominance. The vital factor here is the shift in perspective. We are no longer seeing the phantasmagoria from within, as an attempt to out-pace and out-refine bourgeois consumption, but as Fevvers sees it, as a representation of the precariousness and vulnerability of her social position: a moment's carelessness may precipitate her from being an all but unobtainable object of desire to being a mere toy

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<sup>26</sup> Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 218.

<sup>27</sup> Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 217.

to be used and discarded at will. . Among the decadents, the phantasmagoria had served as a means for middle-class subjects to reject normative middle-class conformity – to escape *upwards* into an imagined state of ‘aristocratic’ dreaminess, taste and indulgence. Post-decadent phantasmagorias arguably begin a process of moving the phantasmagoria towards the public sphere, allowing the middle and working classes to participate in the phantasmagorical experience, becoming themselves phantasmagorical entities – witness, for example, the grocer in Chesterton’s *Napoleon of Notting Hill*. (Indeed, in *Locus Solus*, Roussel succeeds in making the phantasmagoria entirely bourgeois, even locating it in that most bourgeois and genteel of spaces, the public pleasure garden.) In *Nights at the Circus*, the Duke’s phantasmagorical collection becomes a means to critique his social station and financial dominance. Carter’s revisionist phantasmagoria reflects back on the conditions that led to its creation.

The Duke’s collection, though, is not the only phantasmagoria that Carter includes in the work. The titular circus in which Fevvers performs – with its anarchic clowns, highly intellectual but also alien-seeming chimpanzees, dancing tigers, acrobats, strongmen, oracular pigs and Fevvers herself – is surely more than a little phantasmagorical. Likewise, before she embarks on her career as a circus performer, Fevvers is recruited into a combination brothel and freak-show run by the emaciated Madam Schreck. Among Schreck’s employees are, as Fevvers recalls, ‘[other] prodigies such as I. Dear old Fanny Four-Eyes; and the Sleeping Beauty; and the Wiltshire Wonder, who was not three foot high; and Albert/Albertina, who was bipartite, that is to say, half and half and neither of either; and the girl we called Cobwebs’.<sup>28</sup> Schreck’s brothel is another phantasmagoria. There is an important difference, though, between these groups of spectacular people and the Duke’s collections. Although these individuals are all involved in the sale of themselves – or the sale of the spectacle of themselves – to a paying public, they are also *communities*. Here, we can again perhaps detect that pattern of moving the phantasmagorical away from an elite consumerist mind-set and towards a more ‘democratic’ form. The idea that seems to shape the phantasmagorical after the end of the nineteenth century is the idea of a phantasmagorical place or a phantasmagorical people; the claustrophobic phantasmagorias created by Poe and his successors are apparently displaced by less

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<sup>28</sup> Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*, 66.



confined, less introspective and less socially restrictive visions. In a way, this may be said to be the fulfilment of one of the paradoxes of the nineteenth-century phantasmagoria: that not only were many phantasmagorical works highly popular despite their claims to exclusivity (witness, for example, *Against Nature* (*À Rebours*) and *Dorian Gray*) but also that these phantasmagorias – that were so insistent in their rejection of the middle-class – were in fact produced by authors that were themselves middle-class. The change in the character of the twentieth-century phantasmagoria may in fact be only the realisation of factors that were already present in its nature.

The discussion of this shift, however, leaves one important question to be addressed. How does this change in the social and materialistic associations of the phantasmagorical aesthetic effect its other main aspect, its connection to imagination and dream? Without a more thorough analysis, the answer to this question must necessarily remain partly speculative, but some productive material may be found in the fact that, in the last years of the twentieth century and in the first years of the twenty-first, the phantasmagorical aesthetic not only becomes more prominent in the popular consciousness, but also becomes more intimately associated with the fantastic. Probably the best example of this change is to be seen in the popularity of the New Weird movement in the first part of the twenty-first century. Essentially a shift in emphasis within fantasy genre fiction, the New Weird takes its inspiration from the ‘weird tales’ produced by writers such as H. P. Lovecraft in the early twentieth century, as well as from later writers such as Michael Moorcock, M. John Harrison and Neil Gaiman (all of whom, it should be noted, at different times made use of the phantasmagorical aesthetic in their own works). The New Weird, in common with the phantasmagorical, self-consciously identifies itself with concepts like, as Jeff Vandermeer writes, the ‘surrender to the weird’ and an emphasis on ‘visionary, surreal images’,<sup>29</sup> enthusiastically embracing an excess of strangeness. This kind of language obviously recalls the decadent rhetoric of surrendering to dream, of being intoxicated by a plethora of fantastic images. The New Weird is, therefore, a naturally receptive medium for the phantasmagorical aesthetic. Works like China Miéville’s *Perdido Street Station* (2000) are purposefully written so as to astonish the reader with the plurality and strangeness of their imaginative inventions. Miéville’s novel is continually phantasmagorical: set in an ancient, decaying city of subterranean

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<sup>29</sup> Jeff Vandermeer, ‘The New Weird: “It’s Alive?”’, in Jeff Vandermeer and Ann Vandermeer, ed., *The New Weird* (San Francisco: Tachyon Publishing, 2008), pp. xi-xii.

punishment factories, clockwork automata, grotesque magical transformations, and human beings hybridised with machines, cacti, insects, frogs and birds, the novel is perhaps the most overt example of this new phantasmagorical paradigm. Every turn into a new street reveals some new spectacle of mingled astonishment and horror, the urban spaces of the city unfolding to expose a continuous stream of exotic or frightening images:

Strange vapours wafted over the roofs. The converging rivers on either side ran sluggishly, and the water steamed here and there as its currents mixed nameless chymicals into potent compounds. The slop from failed experiments, from factories and laboratories and alchemists' dens, mixed randomly into bastard elixirs. In Brock Marsh, the water had unpredictable qualities. Young mudlarks searching the river quag for scrap had been known to step into some dicoloured patch of mud and start speaking dead languages. Or find locusts in their hair, or fade slowly into translucency and disappear.

[...]

The pub was empty of all but the most dedicated drinkers, shambolic figures huddled over bottles. Several were junkies, several were Remade. Some were both: The Dying Child [the pub] turned no one away. A group of emaciated young men lay draped across a table twitching in perfect time, strung out on shazbah or dreamshit or very-tea. One woman held her glass in a metal claw that spat steam and dripped oil onto the floorboards. A man in the corner lapped quietly from a bowl of beer, licking the fox's muzzle that had been grafted to his face.<sup>30</sup>

The phantasmagorical is used in *Perdido Street Station* to imply the excesses of the entirely unrestrained imagination. Miéville's intention here is clearly to suggest a kind of imaginative anarchy, to allow the reader to experience a much more extreme

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<sup>30</sup> China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2000), 30-31.

version of the pleasurable delirium familiar from the phantasmagorias of the nineteenth century. Crucially though, while Miéville's approach to the phantasmagorical recalls that of the decadents, he also continues the relocation of it away from the exclusive space of the collector. *Perdido Street Station* is less concerned with objects than it is with people and metropolitan spaces. The phantasmagorias of the novel are the phantasmagorias of the city itself and its inhabitants.

The novel – and this may be taken to be equally true of the New Weird movement as a whole – sets out specifically to astonish and bewilder its reader with the anarchic scale of its imaginativeness. In this sense, the phantasmagoria remains an inherently rebellious and disruptive aesthetic. This is also true of its social agenda. While superficially, the novel appears to depict a hyperbolic representation of the variety and strangeness of the modern urban environment, in opposition to the homogenous, oligarchical regime that rules over it, in reality Miéville establishes that the phantasmagoria is as much associated with this regime as it is with the people it rules over. Indeed it is arguably in the crime lord Mr Motley, a shapeless unrecognisable mass of hooves, teeth, hair, horns, metal and flesh, that the phantasmagoria of the novel finds its clearest expression. Motley is part of the violent ruling elite of the city, despite his phantasmagorical form. And, as the novel wears on, the protagonists are increasingly co-opted into the same kind of acts of violence and exploitation as have been used to oppress them. In the conclusion, for example, they are forced to kill a homeless vagrant, in order to preserve the city itself – including its government. In *Perdido Street Station*, the ambiguity of the phantasmagoria is made apparent. We have seen how, in the nineteenth century, the phantasmagoria represented not only a means of escape from materialist culture but also the omnipresence and possible inescapability of that materialism. The phantasmagoria has this same paradoxical character in Miéville's writing: it suggests both the impulse to rebellion and the danger of such a rebellion being absorbed into the very systems it opposes, into exploitation and authoritarianism. For Miéville, the phantasmagoria is therefore both an expression of imaginative vitality and, like Carter's *Nights at the Circus*, a mechanism of social analysis.

It is these aspects of the phantasmagoria that remain most consistent throughout its history. The phantasmagoria inherited the culture of curiosity's preoccupation with consumerism, and it was the combination of this overt

consumerism with its aggrandisement of imagination that made it so appealing to the decadents of the late nineteenth century. However, as the twentieth century wears on, the phantasmagoria gradually becomes less directly focussed on the acquisition and collection of material objects. What remains constant is its role as an aesthetic of dream and resistance. For successive generations of authors, celebrating the freedom of creativity suggested both the rejection of social constraints and the difficulties and contradictions inherent in such a rejection. In the writing of Miéville, Carter and others, we can perhaps see the echo of the phantasmagorias of Robertson and Philidor, hosts of monsters which mocked the architects of The Terror but were also entrepreneurial enterprises; which violated the certainties of the enlightenment but claimed to do so in the spirit of rationality; which rejected the authority of Robespierre and the committee, but which later showed Napoleon anointed by destiny. The phantasmagoria suggests the disruption of conventional order – the order of society, aesthetics and the self. At the same time, it is fundamentally paradoxical and self-critical. In its hallucinogenic concoctions, there is both dream and nightmare, chaos and freedom. This beguiling ambiguity is the hallmark of the phantasmagoria, like the twisting shapes in a kaleidoscope or the monstrous colours of unbound imagination.

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