

Tide and Time: Midrashic Commentaries on the Phantasmagoria that is History

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Introduction

A midrashic story is not conceived as something that exists outside of the text; rather, it is continuous with it. Midrash implies the failure of the sources from which it comes to evoke a final answer. As metonymy, rather than metaphor—extension rather than representation—midrash reveals the gaps it seeks to fill and extends the primary text in which they exist. It reminds us of the voids that precede it.¹

What Nietzsche saw as a barbaric tide of cultural erasure, Wagner saw as a tide of cultural renewal.²

The phantasmagoria, an elaborated magic lantern show developed in the final years of the eighteenth century, quickly became a metaphorical model for insights into human character, psychology and social relationship at the same time. It drew deeply from folklore and popular entertainments and helped to shape the genres to come in an industrial age. By projecting old-fashioned imagery of Monarchy, Church and Science, emotions suppressed by the French Revolution of 1789 as superstition and rural stupidity, re-emerged under controlled conditions, forming moments of entertainment, since audiences understood this was an artful illusion. The spectacle—with music, flashing lights, shuddering furniture and eerie speeches—was able to present the mind as something more and other than merely a bourgeois field of conscious activities. The once familiar fears and desires now felt as uncanny phantoms themselves could be assigned to mechanical tricks and, at the same, experienced as originating in the dark recesses of self. In some

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¹ Monica Osborne, 'Making the Wound Visible: On Midrash and Catastrophe', *Religion & Literature*, vol. 43, no. 2 (2011), p. 164.

² Sue Prideaux, *I Am Dynamite: A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche* (London: Faber & Faber, 2018), p. 92.

ways, like the emergent novel, which in the period from the French Revolution to the World War I gained new breadth and depth, the phantasmagoria (stage show and figure of speech) provided much of the imagery to express the new sensations of the triumphant bourgeoisie, the secularizing and industrializing society, when it clashed with traditional values and disturbed academic literary forms. In other ways, too, this same field of highly-charged and contradictory psychological spectacle and rhetoric found itself articulating otherwise inchoate feelings of discontent, uncomfortableness and despair.

The inventors of the technology to mount phantasmagorical spectacles meant at once to expose the weaknesses and fraudulence of the previous institutions of religious, political and intellectual authority and yet to evoke the still very powerful passions citizens felt deep in their private and intimate lives. As the century wore on, those same primary emotions that could no longer be credited to church, state or feudal elites—but, rather, seemed to come out of some dark inner space of the mind, frighteningly incoherent and familiar, irrationally constructed and nevertheless a vague cultural memory, seemingly some daemonic force whose origins was unaccountable within the body and yet a part of one's own primary being; or even, in deeper instances of epistemological crisis, like some mysterious formlessness prior to existence itself. But this kind of figurative phantasmagoria, a metaphor of the mind or an allusion to the historical development of personality, when used in modern arguments or literary landscapes does not always come up to critical expectations, and the term often seems awkward and out of place and no more than a passing fancy.

H. G. Wells in the Fantastic Future: A Tangled Web of Perception and Memory

Like the phantasmagoria, photography holds a privileged place as a bridge between the material and the ethereal, the body and the mind, and life and death.³

By the end of the nineteenth century, despite the developments of photography and cinema, the memory of the phantasmagoria as a spectacle of entertainment and education had almost completely faded away. The

³ Didier Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision, and the Invention of Photography* (PhD thesis, McGill University, 2005), p. 71.

term took on a more superficial sense of vague and luminous display that confuses and distorts normal perceptions of reality. We see this loss of historical precision in H. G. Wells' short futuristic novel *When the Sleeper Awakes* first published in 1899. The main character, Graham Isbister, who suffers from insomnia when the narrative opens soon falls into a deep trance-sleep from which he awakens almost two hundred years later. The world in which the hero returns to consciousness is far more radically different than the named predecessor for such an elision in time, Rip Van Winkle. In Washington Irving's *Rip Van Winkle* (1819), the eponymous hero's twenty years' slumber transports him from pre-revolutionary New York to a time after the War of Independence, with a very moderate set of changes to people, places, things and attitudes. However, almost as soon as Graham, "the nineteenth-century man," realizes that he has arrived in the London of the year 2100, he is caught up in a great rebellion, virtually a civil war between the White Council, who would have preferred for "The Sleeper" to remain lost in unconsciousness, as it allows them to rule the entire world in his name; and a majority of citizens of London and the rest of the nations of the earth led by a man called Ostrog. As soon as word spreads that the Sleeper has awoken, Ostrog seeks to put everything into the hands of Graham Isbister, the rightful heir to all wealth and power.

Unfamiliar with the layout of the city into which he has awoken to and confused by the events occurring around him, Isbister only gradually over the following days is made aware of the history of the two hundred years in which he has been unconscious. The protagonist tries to see through the tumultuous political and military actions occurring all around him. And at this point, Wells' narrator attempts to describe for the reader this brave new world through Graham's eyes:

He squeezed his knuckles into his weary eyes. Suppose when he looked again he found the dark trough of parallel ways and that intolerable altitude of edifice gone? Suppose he were to discover the whole story of these first few days, the awakening, the shouting multitudes, the darkness and the fighting, a phantasmagoria, a new and more vivid sort of dream. It must be a dream; it was so inconsecutive, so reasonless. Why were the people fighting for him? Why should this saner world regard him as Owner and Master?

So he thought, sitting blinded, and then he looked again, half hoping to see some aspect of the life of the nineteenth century...⁴

⁴ H. G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Awakes* (Frankfurt: Verlag, 2018), p. 82.

While there are many other passages which set out the vast complications and confusion, the immense crowd of ant-like people racing about through the labyrinthine structures of this twenty-second-century London, and the undefined and unrecognized forces marshalled against one another in this great rebellion, it is only here that the narrator calls the dream-like perceptions of Graham Isbister a phantasmagoria.

The very first sentence begins with a physical attempt by the protagonist to rub away the confusion from his eyes by pressing on his knuckles on the eyeballs themselves, an action that is partly an instinctive movement to refocus his sight on this unfamiliar and dangerous scene. It is also known that such a pressure on the sensitive eyeballs creates distortions in sight similar to those occasioned by hallucinogenic drugs. This contradictory action sets forth a series of interrogatory suppositions the narrator makes about what Graham might see when he opens his eyes again and these lead to a number of explicit questions on what ought to be discovered—Suppose he were... Suppose he were... It must be... Why were... Why should this—There is then a start to Graham's troubled thoughts and disturbed feelings that arise from his state of confusion, this time looking at him from the outside with a sort of objectivity. Sight is noted as located within "thought" and then moves to a position where the protagonist is "blinded"; and when he "looked again" he was not vacantly gazing or objectively observing whatever might be there but, guided by "half-hopes," he seeks some evidence of the familiar nineteenth century. Thus, overwhelmed by the unfamiliar structures of the twenty-second century and lacking in some "aspect" of his own pre-trance life in Victorian England, Graham cannot register clearly what he sees.

Whether actually rubbing his eyes or metaphorically shaping his perception around hoped for familiar markers, the narrator calls what he is doing a *phantasmagoria* because it is more a dream than a reality, or rather, his long dream in the trance-sleep from which he had awoken only three days earlier and that slowly clarifies into a partly understood and recognizable reality. In the historical *fantasmagories* staged at the close of the eighteenth century in Paris, another period of epistemological crisis, things no longer appeared to be or to mean emotionally what they had, so that audiences enjoyed the spectacle of a world made uncanny in a darkened space, surrounded by an eerie music, and shocked by a series of spectacles projected through a magic lantern, all of which evoked the phantoms of the past and suggested (in the mesmeric or hypnotic sense) realms of

experience no longer possible to entertain as logically possible, and yet which seemed thrillingly vivid, as they filled the void of lost faith and sceptical reliance on modern (that is, Enlightenment) science.

Nevertheless, in this novel, Wells is not really exploiting the historical or philosophical significations of the word *phantasmagoria*. Instead, *phantasmagoria* is, at best, casually used, brought in more for its superficial associations than for any deeper meanings. In the next example for discussion I will address, however, the author, while he does not use the word *phantasmagoria*, does implicitly allude to the historical entertainment, setting it forth, both as metaphor and guiding light to his descriptions of a confusing reality, the accumulated power the term had gained by the end of the nineteenth century. The epistemological crisis lies between what common sense assumes we are experiencing and what technology and mathematical science argues must be there. It is not just the mind or the eye conceived as a *camera obscura* through which communication between an external world and an internal consciousness in an ambiguous and unstable illusion of perception, but also a sense that the real geographical and geopolitical world, like the North Sea—with its shifting currents, variable tides and hidden channels—is in itself a threatening if often unseen reality. What is dangerous about this reality lies more in how we think we perceive the world of both nature and of history than in the unstable memories upon which we have always believed we have based our knowledge of self and others.

Erskine Childers and the Secret Currents of the Sea: History as Undertow and Shifting Sands

This is just what the Daguerreotype has done. It has fixed the most fleeting of our illusions, that which the apostle and the philosopher and the poet have alike used as the type of instability and unreality. The photograph has completed the triumph, by making a sheet of paper reflect images like a mirror and hold them as a picture.⁵

Sometimes, that is, without stating explicitly that a *phantasmagoria* is being described, the thing in itself shines through, rooting itself in the specifics of

⁵ Oliver Wendell Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph', *The Atlantic* (June 1859), at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1859/06/the-stereoscope-and-the-stereograph/303361>. Accessed 11 July 2020.

its historical origins in the theatres of fantasy, horror and terror from which it all began in the final years of the eighteenth century and prestidigitation shows and then the cinematic projections at the start of the twentieth. Audiences had to make a leap of faith (and scepticism) from real actors and artificial props to celluloid illusions and animated cartoons, grasping after the most elusive feature of all that would, should it be attained, destroy the very nature of phantasmagoria completely, a reasonable, coherent and developing plot. A central character in a novel, acting on behalf of the spectator's eye, lives out a storyline that convinces more than the shimmering lights on a smoky cloud or a wavering cloth screen. By the start of the twentieth century, the phantasmagoria has been internalized in several ways, through the introspective gaze of the novel, but also through the sensitive and analytical psychoanalyst's third eye.

Erskine Childers's spy-thriller novel of 1903, *The Riddle of the Sands* is an intense, slow-moving account of two Englishmen exploring the eddies, islands and sand banks off the coasts of Germany, Denmark and Holland in 1902. For the British and German navies, entering into great rivalry in these crucial years before World War One, whoever can understand and map the secret scheme of shifting currents, sands, and winds will have the means either to defend the coast from foreign invasion or have the facility to navigate across the North Atlantic and the English Channel to invade Britain. As a spy novel, the narrative unfolds around the attempt by these two young Englishmen to discover what the German Navy is hiding behind the barrier of small islands and sand bank, and particularly and in great detail what they learn about the intricate and complicated interplay of the sea around the Frisian Islands. They not only enter into these forbidden and forbidding waters, but they measure and chart the unseen tides and currents; and what they can extrapolate as to the strategic plans of the German navy. In so doing, what emerges is a texture of secret, subtle and subversive sea and river currents and erratic winds which stand as an emblem of the modern world itself at the very start of the twentieth century.

Let me cite a key passage in Childers' text, interspersed with analysis:

He busied himself with his logbook, swaying easily to the motion of the boat; and I for my part tried to write up my diary, but I could not fix my attention.

The narrator sits aboard the little flat-bottomed ship *Dulcibella* writing up his notes from the day's explorations of the shallow, inlets, bays, and tidal rivers as they flow into and out of the Baltic Sea along the coasts of

Denmark, Holland, and Germany. The passage opens with his mental state drifting away from the common sense of the patriotic duties he is attempting to fulfil. His mind at first fixed on the business to hand, the narrator begins gradually to enter a hypnotic trance as the little ship sways in the tidal flow, and his attention wanders into a somnambulistic (sleep-walking) dream.

Every loose article in the boat became audibly restless.

The slipping away from ordinary perceptions and memories continues, as the accompanying sleep-inducing sounds take up his consciousness. The restless noises are occasioned by the rising tide and various objects in the ship that slip about.

Cans clinked, cupboards rattled, lockers uttered hollow groans.

The sounds, however, are not neutral and natural; they begin to waken metaphors in the discourse that allude to and then become the embodiment of a different form of literature altogether, that of the nineteenth-century Gothic romance and the emergent fantasy world of repressed dreams. The sounds metamorphose from *clink* to *rattle* to *groan*, increasingly losing any naturalistic or substantial quality, until they become pure emotional sensation—the eerie presence of something seemingly supernatural.

Small things sidled out of dark hiding-places, and danced grotesque drunken figures on the floor, like goblins in a haunted glade.

The transformation of reality into fantastic unreality continues, and the incoherence of sounds and emotional feelings coalesce into a scenario with a set of characters and a recognizable form of movements. Now strange unworldly figures sidle out from their dark hiding places and begin to dance about like drunken figures or rather like goblins in a haunted glade, that is, the images clarify into a fantastic and at the same time artificial scene of a magical performance of a *danse macabre*.

The mast whined dolorously at every heel, and the centre-board hiccoughed and choked.

The next sentence seems to slip back a few stages in this transformation of idle dreamy thoughts into a choreographed and staged phantasmagorical scenario focused on feelings that are simultaneously the whining steps of a faltering drunk who hiccoughs and chokes but yet never loosed from the actual sounds of the masts creaking in the rising waters of the flood tide. The sense of disorientation and possession by the otherness of the situation has not yet been completed, and the audience of one at this performance only gradually and haphazardly slides further into the mesmeric influence of the invisible stage-manager and his apprentices.

Overhead another horde of demons seemed to have been let loose.

With the loss of ordinary control over one's equilibrium and wakeful perceptions of the sounds, movements and appearance of the things in the stage that has closed in on itself, as the darkness becomes more and more complete in the figured replica of a phantasmagorical theatre, the candles in the magic-lantern lit and the rays projected through various lens and filters, while all normal sounds are covered by the eerie whine of a glass-harmonica or other musical instrument, the first of the actors emerge costumed and traipsing like phantom demons.

The deck and mast were conductors which magnified every sound and made the tap-tap of every rope's end resemble the blows of a hammer, and the slipping of the halyards against the mast the rattle of a Maxim gun.

The narrator's focal point now zooms back from within the performative illusion outwards to the mechanisms involved in the creation of the phantasmagoria. The whole ship is swayed by the tidal flow and becomes a sound-conducting device to increase and focus the noises into a frightening cacophony, but one which points out of this theatrical performance to the main historical themes and political plot-lines of Childers's *The Riddle of the Sands*. The setting in the shifting sand fields of the Baltic Sea is the site for intrigue between the British protagonists and their elusive German enemies; each nation's government and agents yearn to understand and develop the means to navigate through these shallow waters, so that they can control the sea itself or mount a naval invasion and prevent the other from conquering its industrial and commercial homeland.

The Maxim gun referred to at the end of the last sentence does not disappear merely after serving its purpose of giving metaphorical substance to the kind of sound ropes and spars make as they shake and flap in the wind; it gains magnified allusive power, as a metonym for the whole horror of contemporary warfare, the very thought of which—and Childers and his readers were still too naïve to imagine⁶ the true extent mechanized warfare and total mobilization across many continents that would break forth eleven years ahead—is maddening:

⁶ Their memories would have been most acutely of the American Civil War during the early 1860s and then the Franco-Prussian War at the start of the 1870s, both of which conflicts were extraordinarily violent and took in civil populations as well as armed forces. They may be considered the first full-scale modernist wars in history.

The whole tumult beat time to a rhythmical chorus which became maddening.⁷

The sounds of the ship swaying in the tide also call to mind a grotesque fantasy of artificial thrills evoked in fairgrounds, theatres and early cinematic halls—in phantasmagoria under a variety of names. Then, suddenly, the theatre opens its curtains, if only for a moment, to reveal the horrible reality that lies ahead should either the Germans or the British feel compelled to engage in all-out war for control over these tidal shoals and islands.

Somewhat later, in 1925, one of the great film-makers of all time, Serge Eisenstein, re-did this novelistic development in the memorable images of revolutionary actions on board *Battleship Potomkin*. Before that moment when novelistic insights can merge with cinematic intensity of seeing beyond seeing, we must track modernity's mad descent into grotesque violence and maddening loss of common sense through several further epistemological and psychological changes. We can track out these further developments again by following the appearance explicitly or implicitly of the phantasmagoria.

Jacques Schiffrin Escapes the Penal Colony: Editorial Confusions and Historical Riddles of Exile

Now here is another text. It is a letter written to the novelist André Gide by Jacques Schiffrin⁸ in which the editor and founder of Gallimard Press (Paris) recalls the horrible voyage in 1941 of escape from Nazi occupied France to New York. Again I will divide up the text and insert analysis—translation from the original French is my own.

Nous sommes en pleine fantasmagorie.

(We are right in the middle of a phantasmagoria).

The opening describes his own experience of being tossed about by fate, a passage that sounds like a *cri du cœur* from the French Jew (originally from Bakau, east of European Russia), as though he were living through his experience again, a living and conscious presence in that clunky old-fashioned machinery of illusion, the *fantasmagorie*. Schiffrin puts a name to the anxiety-ridden dangerous and humiliating ordeal of arranging passage

⁷ Erskine Childers, *The Riddle of the Sands* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions 1993 [1903]), pp. 111-112.

⁸ Alban Cerusier, ed., *Correspondance, 1922-1950 d'André Gide et Jacques Schiffrin* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

out of France to safety in the New World and the voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. If anything, what is described seems more like a Kafkaesque vision of Austro-Hungarian bureaucracy gone mad than a complex entertainment set up to drive post-Revolutionary the audience of the 1790s out of their senses for the sheer joy of it. It is in this sense, too, that fifty years earlier than Schiffren's letter to Gide, Alfred Dreyfus wrote to his young wife Lucie about what the experiences of being charged with treason and espionage, arrested summarily, tried unfairly, and sent off to lifelong solitary confinement on Devil's Island: a phantasmagoria of frustrations, humiliation and a testing of his faith in the justice of the French Republic, the honour and dignity of the army, the strength of his character to endure until such time as matters be put straight, and above all to maintain his sanity.

Il a y cinq jours, nous avons reçu, à Saint-Tropez, une dépêche nous disant que nous pouvions partir aux Etats-Unis par les Antilles avec le bateau qui quitte Marseille le 15 mai.

(Five days ago, at Saint-Tropez we received a dispatch telling us that we could depart for the United States via the West Indies on a ship that leaves Marseilles on 15 May).

Schiffren speaks in the present voice of the recent past—actually many months after the events themselves, a time when, though safe in New York City, he still feels the sting and disappointment of what happened to him in Paris and the nightmarish complex of actions that unrolled in Marseilles as he tried to arrange for himself, his wife, and his little boy André to disentangle themselves from the web of machinations of the Nazi regime in the north and its colluding Vichy partner to the south. The situation seemed on the surface to be normal: a ship is waiting and Schiffren must bring his family to Marseilles to get aboard.

Et qu'il fallait pour cela venir à Marseille immédiatement.

(And that it was therefore necessary to come to Marseilles immediately).

But the command to travel to Marseilles at once puts an ominous tone to the description. As Childers' heroic pair discover in their charting of the waters around the Faroese Islands, there are hidden tides and currents, strange and shifting channels to pass through, hidden intrigue everywhere. It would seem that everything has been arranged by Schiffren's friends and their allies to facilitate the escape to America. But it is a precarious situation, in which any small misstep can prove fatal.

Nous avons donc passé la nuit à faire nos bagages définitivement.

(We therefore spent the night definitively packing our bags).

Not only is time of the essence, with certain specific tasks to be accomplished, but time is in short supply. Then parenthetically the tone of warning comes in with an accent on the irrationality of what needs to be done.

(le télégramme qui nous appelait nous était arrivé à sept heures du soir!)

[the telegram that informed us arrived at seven in the evening!]

The warning has not been sent in good order. It comes at the last moment, almost too late to leave any lee-way for contingencies or accidents, even simple chores like preparing the luggage. Nothing is simple any more or ordinary. Nothing means what it once did. Nothing yields to common sense or logic. Schiffrin's mind is on edge, he is nervous, the whole family depends on him. It is this anxiety and the paucity of time that sets up the performance of what he describes as a phantasmagoria.

Vous pouvez vous imaginer ce qu'est...

(You can imagine for yourself what that meant...)

Thus instead of plunging into an account of what things needed to be done, in what order, and where they would be acted upon, Schiffrin leaves up to Gide's novelistic imagination. It is not in the recounting of facts or deeds that the madness consists but something beyond normality and commonsense, somewhere where only the imagination of a great novelist and critic can make any sense. From now on, what the writer of the letter will do is to provide impressionistic details that he hopes Gide can process through his own mind.

Depuis que nous sommes à Marseille, nous sommes soumis à une sorte de torture genre nouveau, les choses se font, puis se défont plusieurs de fois dans la même journée, c'est-à-dire: lorsqu'une démarche a réussi, et qu'on a une chance d'avoir tout ce qui est nécessaire (visas, billets, passeports, etc.) pour prendre le bateau, la chose suivante raté et tout est perdu! d'accomplir des prodiges d'énergies, d'imagination, je ne sais quoi, pour essayer de sauver ce qui semble définitivement perdue ou impossible; je me traîne dans les rues dans l'espoir de rencontrer quelqu'un qui connaisse quelqu'un, etc.

(Since we arrived in Marseilles we have suffered a new kind of torture, things were done and then undone many times on the same day, that is to say: when one attempt seemed to succeed, and we had a chance to gather everything necessary [visas, tickets, passports, etc.] to board the ship, the next thing failed and all was lost! To perform all these prodigious feats of energy, of imagination, and I don't know what else, to try to salvage that which seems definitively

lost or impossible; I roamed the streets in the hopes of finding someone who knew what to do, etc).

Here suddenly the unreality sets in, and all pretence of ordinary life is pushed aside in favour of this grotesque series of images that are projected through the magic lantern of history as operated in a Nazi country. Life has turned into a machine that tortures those who are squeezed through its gears, in a way that is more extensive than Kafka imagined in the story of the visitor (an explorer) to a tropical country that serves as a penal colony and who learns about the punishment of criminals—anyone who is not the colonial power, and even these officials as well eventually. They are fixed on to a device that inscribes their infractions and punishment with a needle throughout their body until they are dead. However, the situation described by Schiffrin is more like the endless frustrations and mysteries of Joseph K in *The Trial*.

The protagonist in this Kafkaesque narrative, like the writer (who is back in a land of logic, common sense and truth) of the letter to André Gide, discovers that whatever is done to fulfil the requirements for permission to depart on one day is undone the next or even on the same day, and that even a series of successful actions does not guarantee the success of the whole, as one misstep or infraction of the rules obliterates what went before, and the anti-hero must start again. Nothing can be known for sure, what seem like clear directions fall apart into confusion and vagueness. The more he does to find out what he is being tried for and thus to take steps to respond or prepare evidence to the contrary proves futile; nothing is where it should be; no one is to be trusted. If Joseph K wandered through the streets of the city seeking the court itself or its officials but never able to find what is necessary or which is even helpful to accomplishing the goal, Jacques Schiffrin also finds himself a wandering in search of a friend or anyone who can tell him what to do. The world then becomes, as one finds in the short stories and novels of the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, a labyrinth with no way out, a hall of endlessly receding mirrors, a bizarre library filled with books that cannot be opened or understood because written in a secret code or unknown language.

Et nous en sommes là: ce matin à neuf heures nous semblait perdu, il est maintenant onze heures et un coup de téléphone vient de m'apprendre que peut-être un autre coup de téléphone nous apportera une autre solution demain matin.

(And there we are: this morning at nine all seemed lost, and it is now eleven and a telephone call has just come to tell me that perhaps

another telephone call will bring us a different solution tomorrow morning).

When, at long last, some resolution seems to appear, it does so only in the form of another enigma wrapped up in a mystery, and though it seems to offer a way to get aboard the waiting ship to sail eventually towards New York, the route itself is fraught with more twists, turns and uncertainties, as if one were threading film through the wheels on the sprockets of a small old-fashioned projector; and conditions of deep deprivation, the imminence of failure again or at best dark, crowded quarters, condemning individual to lose their sense of order and dignity, individuality and intellectual integrity—until they live: and yet this only appears later in subsequent letters to Gide and others and in Jacques Schiffrin's memoirs—in a close approximation to the scenes depicted in personal witnesses, photographs and film records, and subsequent confessions by survivors and victimizers as that of men and women forced into gas chambers in Auschwitz and other factories of death.

Ainsi, jusqu'au dernier moment, nous ne saurons pas si oui ou non nous aurons tout ce qu'il faut (et il manque des choses que je croyais devoir obtenir selon les promesses formelles) pour partir.

(Thus up to the last moment we didn't know whether we would or would not have everything necessary [and there were things missing which I believed it was necessary to obtain according to the formal promises] to depart).

After this Kafkaesque message that another phoned message may come the next day, his very pleasure or relief that comes from getting into the ship and starting the voyage is utterly dissipated by the exhaustion and disorientation of the last several months, weeks and days, the hours and minutes of torment, the unforgettable moments of humiliation, and the dark nothingness of life without life. So much so, all that Schiffrin can say to his friend is:

C'est simplement abominable.

(It is simply abominable).

What is wrong in this statement is that nothing is simple or certain, not even the abomination. Thus when he seems to shift his focus for a moment, and to speak of his little son André known affectionately as Minouche, all he can say is:

Et Minouche veut tout le temps s'amuser au milieu de tout cela.

(And Minouche in the middle of all this always wants to play).

The innocent child, hardly aware of what is happening, wishes to play, something that is, on the one hand, utterly inappropriate for the

occasion, a dissonance of meaningfulness and joy in the mist of the horrible irreality of experience, and yet, on the other, a perfectly ironic presentiment of what life will be on the other side of the Atlantic when the family re-establishes itself in the New World, an affirmation of the life and joy the Nazis are in the process of annihilating and thus whose ultimate failure is sounded in this same ironic dissonance of a child's urge to play in the midst of chaos, and thus forms into a grotesque sign of the absurdity of history and life itself for those mature enough to understand what is happening. Syntax twists itself into enigmatic knots and logic lapses into non sequiturs.

... *Nous vivons comme dans un affreux rêve.*

(... We are living as in a terrible dream).

The conclusion brings with it a reiteration of what the original designation of the scenes that follow as phantasmagorical: life is a terrible dream, a nightmare. Thus, too, as the commentators on the legend of the gate-keeper at the end of Kafka's *The Trial* (*Der Prozess*) say:

The right perception of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other.⁹

The problem here is not that of the post-modernists who say that all is a matter of perception and image and there no fact in the world. But that facts and images co-exist and it is not easy ever to tell them apart, not without careful analysis contextualization and immersion in a history of analogues—as well as by tracing the origins, development, and afterlife of the words, images, themes and actions that constitute the conceit.

In the world of Kafka's fiction, the illusions seem more substantial than the facts, and the facts seem manipulated by the illusions. It is as though, when you step through the looking-glass of the phantasmagoria you are never sure—or too sure to feel safe—of which side you are on, or even if you are quite through the lens at all but, rather, stuck between them. This is not as Schrodinger imagined the problems of not being to find out for sure if a cat in the enclosed box is alive or dead until you open it, upon which, of course, you seal the creature's fate, while, in addition, there is no option of a cat that can be both alive and dead at the same time, or even half alive and half dead. The magic-lantern's lenses, its projected imagery, the theatrical preparatory mood-setting music and the disorientating atmospheric perfumes and stench that surround the visitors to the phantasmagoria as they submit to its darkness and unfamiliar sensations, all

⁹ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (London: Secker and Warburg, 1950 [1925]), p. 236.

that asks, if entertainment only, that the visitor submit to the ambiguity and grotesquery; but if the viewers and the teachers who operate the machinery of knowledge in the form of a phantasmagoria, take the uncertainties and frustrations in terms of a new order of epistemology, then the questions of pedagogy at least take over from those of magic. The crisis is necessary for the illusion to become real: to learn who we are in this complicated and confusing world, we have to unlearn all that we thought we knew. The trauma of birth is the birth of tragedy.

Education as Entertainment: From Magic to Pedagogy

For I mean to be exceedingly circumstantial; because, were I not to be so, I should much prefer not to speak of these matters at all—though they are as vividly present to my eyes as I had actually witnessed them. There is nothing strange in this; for every historian (and *I* am a historian) is a species of ghost, telling of things bygone.¹⁰

There is another example of the word *phantasmagoria* used in a way that picks up its meaning of an entertainment *strictu sensu* and then expands it in a surprising way. Salomon Reinach, writing a review of an 1895 edition of the *Mémoires de Comte de Paroy*, reports on the forged Etruscan vases manufactured by the Count which had been confiscated by the French painter Jacques-Louis David on behalf of the Napoleonic government. Reinach then slides away from a discussion on the use of modern reproduction of ancient objects of art towards one that deals with the use of the magic lantern as a pedagogical tool.¹¹

While plaster reproductions of classical statuary and pottery were frequent in the eighteenth and nineteenth century for various legitimate purposes, such as providing models for art students to copy, showing styles and designs of classical schools in museums where no originals were available or where an indicative copy was needed of what exists elsewhere to fill out the collection, it was always felt by museum directors like Reinach that trying to pass off such modern fakes as genuine ancient pieces was a criminal act. He also felt that there could be a small dangerous area of ambiguity when an artist sought to recreate a classical work from within, as

¹⁰ Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffmann, 'The Doge and the Dogressa', *The Serapion Brothers*, Vol. I (London: George Bell and Sons, 1908), p. 206.

¹¹ Salomon Reinach, 'Les Vases du Comte de Paroy', *Revue Archéologique*, 4^{me} ser., 18 (1911), pp. 188-189.

it were, the very process of its conception and skilful working—that in a Romantic notion of creativity what the student did was enter into a timeless moment of true beauty and yet that moment was sullied by pretence. No matter how accurate the facsimile, it was never real, and the more perfect it seemed the more it was a dangerous trick.

When he talks about the educational use of images of ancient and classical works of art projected by and through the *camera obscura* (or *la chambre noire*), Salomon Reinach remarks on how Paroy's name is also associated with another ambiguous enterprise, the technical and theatrical development of the magic lantern into what would become the full-blown phantasmagoria. The pedagogical problem seems to have begun with the Queen of the Savoyards, Marie-Antoinette's suggestion for a way to use the magic lantern as an educational tool for her son, the Dauphin. She spoke with Paroy and asked if he could create a large repertoire of painted glass plates to illustrate the boy's lessons and enhance his understanding. It would, in the first instance be designed for her son, the Dauphin, and collection of painted glass plates made for showing by a magic lantern could be used for a wider audience of both children and the general public.

The pictures painted on glass and projected through the lens of the lantern on to a screen would have changed the magic lantern from a parlour trick and a children's game into a way of catching the attention of young children—bored, distracted or, as we might today recognize, born with some form of autism. It could also have acted to awaken interests of an artistic or intellectual kind among the uneducated adults left behind by the inequities and injustices of the old regime who craved knowledge about culture. Unfortunately, it was not only the young Dauphin's boredom with his lessons that prevented his proper education,¹² but rather the turn of revolutionary events: mother and son were imprisoned before the new educational programme could literally be set in motion.

Of this pedagogical use of the magic lantern in its development towards the phantasmagoria, Thomas Hankins and Robert Silverman comment:

It is surprising that during a century so interested in education there were not more efforts to sue the lantern for instruction Benjamin Martin argued in 1781 that the magic lantern should be used for education as well as entertainment, but with little success. The comte

¹² That the young prince may have suffered some intellectual deficiency or mental illness was not taken into account.

de Paroy... persuaded Marie Antoinette to educate the dauphin with the magic lantern ... in fact he saw a great future for the magic lantern in educating the entire world.¹³

Paroy was invited to use his painterly skills in copying to help produce this encyclopaedic teaching aid by adding plates on biblical topics and French history, a range, he felt, that would prove as entertaining as it is instructive. The count wrote in his memoirs how he had himself subsequently made a number of related suggestions to Étienne-Gaspard Robert, also known as Robertson, the inventor of the phantasmagoria; after which Reinach adds his own concluding statement.

Je possède encore ... plusieurs sujets que j'ai sauvés de naufrage révolutionnaire. Cela ressemble à une fantasmagorie ambulants, car c'est moi qui donnai l'idée à M. Robertson d'exécuter sa lanterne magique qui eut un si grand succès et qui fit sa fortune'— L'enseignement de notre science est trop redevable à la lanterne magique perfectionnée pour que l'initiative de comte de Parois continue à être outillée des archéologues.¹⁴

(I have in my possession many other subjects which I saved from the shipwreck of the Revolution. They look like a movable phantasmagoria, for it was I myself who gave the idea to Mr Robertson to construct the magic lantern that had so large a success and that made his fortune—The teaching of our science is far too indebted to the magic lantern perfected in this way for the Count de Paroy's initiative to be forgotten).

A hundred years later, inspired by the re-publication of the Comte de Paroy's memoirs, Reinach says he had an idea on how to transfer engraved images to glass in an inexpensive (*à un prix modique*) and efficient way and this would make the subject matter more sophisticated and more readily available for general distribution: "*On pourrait présenter ainsi tous les sujets de l'histoire naturelle et même les mathématiques*"¹⁵ (One could thus make available all the subjects of Natural History and even Mathematics). In other words, this would be a kind of illustrated repertoire drawn on a large number of slides, the forerunner of a computer generated lecture plan. Reinach would also supply teaching booklets and other guide materials for schools, something already tried out in Canada and China.

¹³ Thomas L. Hankins and Robert J. Silverman, *Instruments and the Imagination* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 64.

¹⁴ Reinach, 'Les vases du comte de Parois', p. 189.

¹⁵ Reinach, 'Les vases du comte de Parois', p. 189.

There is one line of development that goes from the earliest projections of imagery through the magic lantern for entertainment and then with the Count of Paroy's adding of a large collection of painted lens through to the suggestion he made to Robertson of mounting, not only a full-scale entertainment programme based on the illusion of magic, ghosts and mystical experiences, but a pedagogical display of great events in secular and religious history. This would transform the thrill-inducing projection of images of famous people, places and events to accompany entertaining stories into something qualitatively different: a way of dramatizing those narratives so that history could come alive within displays of the *son et lumière* show.

Conclusion

But these kinds of inspiration Lydgate regarded as rather vulgar and vinous compared with the imagination that reveals subtle actions inaccessible by any sort of lens, but tracked in that outer darkness through long pathways of necessary sequence by the inward light which is the last refinement of Energy, capable of bathing even the ethereal atoms in its ideally illuminated space.

He for his part had tossed away all cheap inventions where ignorance finds itself able and at ease; he was enamoured of that arduous invention which is the every eye of research, provisionally framing its object and correcting it to more and more exactness of relation; he wanted to pierce the obscurity of those minute processes which prepare human misery and joy, those invisible thoroughfares which are the first lurking-places of anguish, mania, and crime, that delicate poise and tradition which determine the growth of happy or unhappy consciousness.¹⁶

Just as George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch* of 1871-1872 gives to its character Dr Lydgate an idealism that grapples with the problematic convergence of critical examination of the epistemological crises that beset the nineteenth century and above all in the transitional years between the nineteenth and the twentieth century, its questioning of the very positivistic sciences and rationalistic philosophies that made possible the break from pre-modernity into modernity, so too the several texts we have taken to midrash—a process of phantasmagoric complexity and awkwardness,

¹⁶ George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (West Hartfordshire: Wordsworth Classics, 2000), p. 137.

necessitating returns, repetitions, and self-correction—to force each into repeating itself through diverse lenses and discursive voices.

The actual route taken by the machinery of the *fantasmagorie* to modern cinematic intensity and inwardness, however, did not run smoothly, progressively or logically from Robert's elaborate theatricality to pedagogically controlled educational slide-shows and into documentary television programmes; but rather went by way of Georges Méliès' farcical and magical comedies through exotic travel stories and voyages of exploration, short and frantic comedy routines and sombre reproduction of political events, and then to silent operatic performances where gesture replaced singing and to science fiction adventures and criminal investigations based on animation and trick photography. Thus, the palette of techniques expanded to include more than split screens, superimposed double-images and slow-motion lingering over highly emotional scenes in a drama: to close-up images of facial gestures, tracking frames through hallways and mirrored rooms and shifts of focus from speakers to listeners at climactic moments.

There is, however, another line of development which goes outside of and beyond the reproduction of realistic, stylized and symbolic images for entertainment and pedagogy. This other, picking up developments in photography—enlargements, reductions, slow-motion and speeded-up images, microscopic and telescopic perspectives, and even x-rays—has an epistemological purpose. Beyond what Reinach can imagine or intuit when he envisages a system of educational shows on the history of art and culture. Like the theoretical accompaniment in the whole Impressionistic and post-Impressionistic schools of painting, this other functioning in the refinement of technology and skill with the phantasmagoria both changes how we view reality, interpret our memories and speculate upon on our dreams and aspirations. In other words, this subtle play of the phantasmagoria both transforms how we perceive and how we understand the processes of knowledge— affective, cognitive and oneiric or hallucinogenic, if not totally transform the quintessence of what we mean by knowledge itself. But like the midrash, which is process more than product, when it expands what we can know by teasing apart how knowledge has come to us and offering new ways of beginning again and again, like the images, sounds and actions cast through a lens in a magic lantern on to a cloud of smoke or a series of still photographed pictures through a movie projector that creates the illusion of motion. Each time we pass from astonishment, dread and disappointment, we start anew, let the winds of history dissipate the illusion, rewind the roll

of film when the jittery and noisy machinery fails to convince, to try something else that seems so close to reality we forget it is an artificial and fragmentary illusion—which then at a moment of epistemological crisis also exposes its pretentiousness, makes us realize with relief that there is a different reality to reproduce. Yet while we can never return to the moments of naïveté from which we first began to question our perceptions and our memories, we know we have learned something about ourselves and about the world that we could never have known before.