

THE CONCEPT OF 'PHANTASMAGORIA' APPLIED TO
SAMUEL BECKETT'S *WAITING FOR GODOT*

During the last two centuries, the concept of "phantasmagoria" has undergone a peculiar changing process from physical reality to mental spectral image. Thus, it would not be a bad idea to start by trying to limit what the concept of phantasmagoria means. We should bear in mind that, at first, what people understood by phantasmagoria was the result obtained through the use of what was called "the magic lantern" in an adequate stage. It basically consisted of projecting a beam of light on a vertical base, interposing a series of elements, in such a way that the portion of luminous rays would give place to a series of lights and shades. These lights and shades started to be known as "spectres". They were optical illusions that represented more or less precise human figures. It may be in early nineteenth-century that all the abstract concept of "the fantastic" would become a literary genre. Scholars started to put aside those mere visual and optical illusions paying attention, now, to the psychologically or interiorly fantastic. This would be developed in the concept of "homo fantasticus", that sort of man who suffers from his own enigma and from his inner contradictions. These contradictions rend him in such a way that this innate duality unceasingly threatens him with turning into split-personality, schizophrenia, madness.

Thus, the concept of phantasmagoria, from an initial connection with something external, objective and above all public (an artificially produced spectral illusion), has now come to refer to something wholly internal or subjective. It becomes something that emerges from our own interior, from our imagination; it becomes what Terry Castle (Autumn, 1988) calls "the phantasmic imagery of the mind". It will be us, who, from this moment would create our own phantoms in an unconscious way.

In that process of interiorization of the concept of phantasmagoria, we see the way the mind turns into a phantasmagoric zone, giving place, at least potentially, to spectral presences, and to constant obsessions similar to the ones we will deal with in the figures represented in *Waiting for Godot* and in their obsession with the wait for somebody unreal who never turns up; and even in their obsession with getting aside, with splitting two figures which as I will explain later, could be considered the "ego" and the "alterego" of the same person.

From the beginning of the play we can observe a series of characteristic elements of the phantasmagoric spectacle, both written and performed. Thus, the bizarre, the claustrophobic surroundings, the mood of Gothic strangeness and terror, the rapid flow of phantasmagoric images, the disorientation and powerlessness of the spectators, and, in short, any meaningful aspect from a symbolic or metaphorical point of view, belonging to or outside reality, may represent an adequate way for the phantasmagoric to come out, to appear, i.e. to manifest. All

these typically phantasmagoric circumstances can also be found in *Waiting for Godot*, and, thus, we find out two “characters” who act as if lost or confused in an adverse atmosphere, in which the only physically determined presence is a low mound, a solitary tree, and a semi-abandoned country road; all these, surrounded by a dark evening that, together with the sometimes irrational and sometimes absurd behaviour of the characters provokes on the audience a sensation of lost and a feeling of powerlessness similar to that of the characters on stage.

An exorbitant long for something or somebody, together with a feeling of fear or terror, are two appropriate circumstances from which phantasmagoria normally comes forth. Again, we can observe those feelings of desire and fear in *Waiting for Godot*. It is a desire for something to appear (a claim for something absent to be present, Godot), and an interrupted desire of death (suicide). This craving is sometimes transformed into impatience and itching; and then, into fear and terror towards that “absence” that in a phantasmagoric way becomes “presence”.

We should ask ourselves how to interpret those phantasmagorias or illusory figures coming from our interior both at a general level and in *Waiting for Godot*, in particular. Is it something real and factual, or simple and bare illusions?

Perhaps, all will depend on the level of abstraction we assume and on the more or less distant position we adopt when dealing with them, i.e., when trying to interpret them. Thus, the less capability of abstraction, the less capability of comprehension and apprehension or personalization, and vice versa. But, this is not the question. It does not matter whether we are able to interpret those phantasmagorias or not, in part because, as Edgar Allan Poe, himself, states in his supernatural tales, the use of the phantasmagoria is a way of destabilizing the ordinary boundaries between inside and outside, mind and world, illusion and reality. All will depend, thus, on the mental disposition we assume at the time of trying to understand the play; from the outside, as mere passive spectators, or from within, as authentic participants in the flux of ideas, sensations and hallucinations of the characters.

We could probably have paid too little attention to this constant phantasmagoric state in which we live, and which I presume as a very appropriate starting point for a better comprehension of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. Most of us feel as if trapped by a series of impulses of different nature which pester us in the same way as Vladimir and Estragon feel hounded on the one side by Godot and the world, and on the other side by themselves (and even Pozzo and Lucky, who seem to need each other to survive).

We will see the various points of view we can adopt as well as the multiple phantasmagoric processes we could follow throughout the play - this latter considered as a wide and general phantasmagoria. Thus, I find the play, and in particular its performance as a wide phantasmagoria of the audience, as a general representation of the spectator’s interior world. Therefore, any spectator when attending the performance of the play might become immersed in a world and an atmosphere that could be subjectified and personalized as a phantasmagoria that emerges from our own interior. The events, all that happens in the play (in case something happens), the reflective process, as well as the anguished attitude and the vacillating behaviour of the characters brings about the fact that the spectator gets himself submerged in the

same doubts and the same atmosphere that surrounds both the characters and the performance. And that is precisely the reason why we, spectators¹ or readers, watch ourselves mirrored on the stage, being thus our own mind what from that moment on would immerse us in a quasi oniric state. That new mental disposition would justify (among other things we'll see later), this interpretation of the play as a whole, as a unique and terrific phantasmagoria of the human being. And thus, the human being, in such a state of incertitude (which even tempts him with the idea of committing suicide) who tries to cling himself to a phantasmagoria -Godot, Eternal Salvation, Natural death, ... in order to give a bit of sense to his life.

Within this framework of the play as a wide phantasmagoria, Godot, himself, could be interpreted as a phantasmagoria of the pseudocouple Vladimir / Estragon, and therefore of ourselves. But, who is Godot?, is he real?, does he exist?; Are we talking about the landlord of the country?, about God?; Does he symbolise Hope or simply natural death? Be that as it may, what is certain is that both Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for him. They are constantly alluding to the unbearable necessity of waiting for him; a need that prevents them from doing or giving up doing any other thing.

ESTRAGON: Let's go.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.

ESTRAGON: Ah!

(I p: 14, 48. II p: 60, 63, 71, 78)².

This pattern of dialogue between Vladimir and Estragon as for the wait and Godot, is repeated in each of the pages I quoted. Yet, apart from these, we find twenty three more times in which the dialogue alludes both to Godot and to the act of waiting for him, though following different patterns. Twelve of these allusions are found in the first act and eleven in the second act. This wait seems to be the only thing that gives sense to their existence; an existence that, on the other hand is sometimes threatened by an intermittent desire of committing suicide.

VLADIMIR: What do we do now?

ESTRAGON: Wait.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but while waiting.

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves? (I p: 17).

Following the development of the play from a Christian point of view, Godot would represent a sort of god, even the Christian God. In this case, our couple would be extremely obsessed by God in a phantasmagoric way. Their attitude towards Godot is part fear part hope. Their

¹ When I mention the word "spectator" I allude both to audience and reader. When reading a play, the reader develops the performance of that play in his mind in an unconscious way.

² The referenes to the play correspond to the following edition: Beckett, Samuel. 1965: *Waiting for Godot*. London, Faber and Faber.

ambiguous attitude towards Godot, their mixture of fear and hope, and the dubious tone of the boy's messages, symbolise the state of tension and uncertainty in which every Christian has to live in this world, avoiding presumption and arrogance, as well as desperation. In this same pattern, Godot's messengers would be the phantasmagoria of the Angel. This phantasmagoria that appears to them would function as a sort of link between the human being and God. Risking a little bit too much, the messengers would be described as priests transmitting the Word of the Lord in the earth. Yet, if we understand the messengers as Angels we should notice the fact that the Angel who appears in the first act is different from the Angel who appears in the second act. Could we therefore talk about a Good Angel and a Bad Angel? In any case, multiple allusions to Christ can be found throughout the play. As an example, we follow the dialogue about Gogo's boots towards the end on the first act:

VLADIMIR: But you can't go barefoot!

ESTRAGON: Christ did.

VLADIMIR: Christ! What has Christ got to do with it? You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!

ESTRAGON: All my life I've compared myself to him.

To sum up, we can say that Godot is an obvious phantasmagoria (at least for me). From here we conclude that Godot is and is not God. This lack of balance between reality / unreality is something typically phantasmagoric. Yet, we observe that Godot is and is not God, in the same way that the world shown in the play is and is not real, a both open and closed universe.

Hence, as Robert Champigny (1960) says, there are just two possible alternatives to the wait for Godot. One would be suicide: "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. Unless Godot comes". The second possible alternative would be to wait for night to fall: "We are waiting for Godot to come ... Or for night to fall". He would interpret that night as death (from my point of view natural death) or even as a sort of mystic night. This death would also represent a phantasmagoria emerging from the mind of the characters, from our own mind, from our own self. Risking a bit more, we could even consider that obsessive wait and therefore the "coming of Godot" as a phantasmagoria that would represent the arrival of a sort of "fin de siècle".

What seems to be clear is that Beckett himself did not intend to make Godot seem real, or at least he did not want to define him as such. Thus, Colin Duckworth (London, 1966), after having reviewed the manuscript of *En attendant Godot*, which Mr. Beckett kindly allowed him to read, noticed a series of changes in the published editions. Beckett himself told him that there were several typescript versions between the manuscript and the first edition. Duckworth ratifies that the very fact that Vladimir and Estragon are waiting presupposes that a time was fixed. As Duckworth shows, in the manuscript of the play this arrangement is not just verbal, as in the published text, but written down by Godot himself:

-Tu es sûr que c'était ce soir?

-Quoi?

-Notre rendez-vous.

- Diable! (*Il cherche dans ses poches*). Il l'a écrit.
[He pulls out a number of pieces of paper and hands one over.]
-Qu'est-ce que tu lis?
-"Samedi soir et suivants." Quelle façon de s'exprimer!
-Tu vois!
- (rendant le papier) Mais sommes-nous samedi?

Thus, the omission of details such as the piece of paper, implies that Beckett himself contributed to create such a phantasmagoric atmosphere in a conscious way. For Godot to have written the words himself, he must have a physical reality, and as Duckworth says, this was the obvious consequence that led to the omission of the piece of paper.

After a careful immersion in the play, we could also observe that the characters playing the lead could represent authentic phantasmagoric figures even for us, heedful readers. In this way, we would probably regard them as generalizations of ourselves, as comparable to any of us, with all their doubts and obsessions -patterns of our own insecurities and uncertainties. This is motivated, among other things, by a feeling of timelessness provoked by the tramps, who explore to the limits the misery of a godless universe.

Based on the manuscript as well as on some French versions, we observe that Beckett himself was conscious of the characters' timelessness he described. Perhaps, what he tried to describe were two abstract figures in order to make us reflect about ourselves and about our function and presence in the world. Thus, Vladimir and Estragon would represent the tormented side of our own self. They would be a reflection of our own inner phantasmagorias. Let's see the pattern of dialogue previously studied:

- Let's go.
-We can't.
-Why not?
-We're waiting for Godot.
- (*despairingly*) Ah!

In the manuscript and in various texts in French, reproduced from the first version (also in French), we notice the following variation:

- "Pourquoi?"
-"*On* attend Godot".

We observe that he does not say "nous" but "on". That means that the people who are waiting for Godot are Estragon, Vladimir and the audience, i.e., any of us. French impersonal pronoun "on" makes a clear reference to us, and alludes directly to the concept of "human being" in the most abstract and general sense, in such a way that each of us can observe himself mirrored in those characters. They resemble the phantasmagorias of our own thought. Generally speaking, we are not waiting to do this or that, we just wait, that's all. This "waiting" seems to be the only way of life, the way of living what has to be lived, the genuine meaning

of existence. It is a sort of phantasmagoria which is in our subconscious hounding us. If we are able to get rid of the conventions and the arbitrary bindings imposed by the comfortable life we live, we will find out our own phantasmagorias, the hard truth about human condition. Habits, conventions and society itself limit us. It is society with all its rules and customs what cages us, what oppresses us in the same way that the boot squeezes Estragon's foot -the boot as a symbol of that maladjustment. It is society what prevents us from setting free our own phantasmagoria, the real meaning of our existence.

We could also consider the pseudocouple Vladimir / Estragon as a sort of phantasmagoria emerging from the splitting of our personality. Although in the play they are portrayed as two different persons or characters, we could interpret them as a single person talking to his alter-ego. It would be a monologue transformed into a dialogue. It would be a dialogue between an ego and an alterego. Both are tied to the same point, they share the same aim, they have the same purpose: the wait. And, although they do not want to recognize it, they are certain about two things: On the one hand, they know they will have the same end, and, on the other hand, they know they can not follow different paths. Fate joins them because each person has a unique and singular fate. It is a single voice trying to develop a dialogue. This dialogue is normally established when a solitary person has to face a neverending wait. It consists of what Duckworth calls "the exploration of the depths of one central solipsistic character". Duckworth thinks it is too simple to call one of the two tramps "the Mind" and the other "the Body", and prefers to consider them as a pseudocouple. Yet, John J. Sheedy states that several critics have called attention to Vladimir's "mental" disposition and Estragon's "physical" disposition. It is what another scholar, Rudy Cohn, calls "mental versus physical man". Sheedy (New York, 1966) points out that it is Estragon who tends to dominate Act I: "At the opening Estragon is seated on the low mound, trying to take off his boot. At the close of the act, both tramps assume Estragon's characteristic position and are seated on the low mound. Although Vladimir initially assumes a proprietary air as Estragon's protector in this first act, it is Estragon who dominates, forcing Vladimir into suffering at the uncertainty of the time and place, or probability of the appointment with Godot". It is a phantasmagoria that I find out from the mingling of two characters who get to convince us that they live a single life.

The phantasmagoric atmosphere that surrounds the play contributes in a decisive way to this interpretation of the play as a universal phantasmagoria. This atmosphere can be analyzed from two different points of views. From a physical or geographic point of view we find a simple but meaningful setting. From a psychological point of view, we observe a series of symptoms of mental derangement. As for the former, the two first stage directions show us that it is evening, night is falling, and the basic elements present on the stage are a country road and a solitary bear tree immersed in a nocturnal atmosphere. This night-time pattern will be repeated in the second Act. The only difference is that in Act II we find a leafy tree:

"A country road. A tree. Evening". (I p: 7)

"Next day. Same time. Same Place". (II p: 55)

VLADIMIR: Charming evening we're having.

ESTRAGON: Unforgettable.

VLADIMIR: And it's not over.

ESTRAGON: Apparently not.

VLADIMIR: It's only beginning.

ESTRAGON: It's awful.

VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime. (I p: 35)

We do not even know the day of the week, which also contributes to that feeling of timelessness typically phantasmagoric.

ESTRAGON: (*very insidious*) But what Saturday? And is Saturday? Is it not rather Sunday? (*pause*) Or Monday? (*pause*) Or Friday?

VLADIMIR: (*looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape*) It's not possible!

ESTRAGON: Or Thursday? (I p: 15)

It is an inhospitable place, a timeless spot, an unknown setting in which Man meets his self.

ESTRAGON: Nothing happens, nobody goes, it's awful! (I p: 41)

As the performance develops and concretely after the apparition of the messengers both in the first and the second act, this nocturnal atmosphere is intensified:

The light suddenly fails. In a moment it is night. The moon rises at back, mounts in the sky, stands still, shedding a pale light on the scene. (I p: 52; II p: 92 [the only difference is that in Act II the moon is present: *The Moon rises at back*].

The concept of phantasmagoria can also be studied from a psychological point of view: a series of psychological factors would provoke different phantasmagoric processes. Based on symptoms such as disturbances in personality and behaviour, the characters of the play could be regarded as psychotic. Severe personality disorders may result from environmental stress and adverse atmospheres (conf. the phantasmagoric atmosphere we have already analyzed); bodily disease or physical suffering (remember the boot that squeezes Estragon's feet); chemical or toxic factors (they are supposed to be tramps and therefore in contact with dirt); under nourishment (they just eat carrots, radishes and turnips, i.e., they do not practise a balanced diet); or any number of experiential influences such as quarrels, feelings of solitude, etc. The effect may be disorientation in time and in space (they do not know whether it is Saturday or Sunday, nor what they did the previous day); or in personal identity (*We always find something ... to give us the impression we exist ... perhaps we just human beings ...*).

Some other symptoms observed among the psychotics and therefore in our characters are bizarre hallucinatory activities such as those reflected in vivid visual or auditory experiences such as hearing "voices" (remember the previously analyzed ego-alterego dialogue) perceived by the individual as coming from the environment; delusions; false beliefs that dominate

thinking, such as notions of being persecuted (by death, by the idea of committing suicide, etc.) or of having a special mission (as of being appointed to wait for Godot); repetitive actions (Estragon and his boot, Vladimir introducing his hand in his hat, etc.). When their thinking seems grossly disturbed and their speech becomes odd, fragmented and difficult to follow rationally, these characters are likely to be identified as schizophrenics. All these psychological factors together with the physical ones and the different points of view we have previously assumed when dealing with the play would justify the application of the concept of "phantasmagoria" to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

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