

# The Phantasm: From Narrative to Poetic Experience.

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“Where have my toys gone  
those with the string broken by the rain?  
Are they living  
at the bottom of the sea like shipwrecks?  
at the bottom of the sky  
like stars of glass  
at the bottom of the river like green crabs  
at the bottom of the fire  
like ashes of horror?  
Or at the bottom of me  
like phantasms?”<sup>[1]</sup>

Victor Rodríguez Núñez

In *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, Freud makes a conceptual remark of great importance in regards to phantasy: “The opposite of play is not what is serious but what is real”. By stating this, Freud grants play a status of seriousness and depth which eventually develops into creative activity in adult life. Just like the child who takes his play very seriously, the adult finds in phantasy a way of protecting his mental health. Freud says: “Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or rather, rearranges the things of his world in a new way, in a way which pleases him?” (Freud, 1907). When Freud refers to phantasy in this essay, he refers to what the psyche allows for in the form of a conscious daydream, something which follows the paths of imagination, giving rise to play and later on to literary creation. The German word *phantasieren*—in the essay we are discussing— designates in a broad sense, all that is connected with imaginary activity. In fact, Freud frequently uses the word *Tagtraum* in this essay, the exact translation of which is *daydream*. In *The Interpretation Of Dreams* however—a book which was written prior to this essay—the creator of psychoanalysis speaks of other phantasies, unconscious phantasies which reveal themselves in disguised form, in dream images (Freud, 1900). Phantasy becomes, together with forgotten infantile memories, a return of the repressed, a sign of something else we don’t see, the presence of an absence, an artistic or literary metaphor (“at the bottom of the sea like shipwrecks”, as the poet Victor Rodriguez Nunez would say).

As for Melanie Klein, she grants unconscious phantasies a prominent place and explains them as psychical representatives of primal instincts (Klein, 1928). The Kleinians distinguish with a consonant the conscious *fantasy* (elaborated) from the unconscious *phantasy*, formed with raw, archaic and often terrifying images (“at the bottom of the fire, like ashes of terror”).

Winnicott’s view of phantasy is of the order of the milieu, with attributes which are not only visual but also auditory, tactile, olfactive, gustative and synesthetic. He understands phantasy as “transitional space”, as the “the third part of the life of a human being, a part that we cannot ignore, is an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute. It is an area that is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a

resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated. [...] I am therefore studying the substance of illusion [...]” (Winnicott, 1971). In this perspective, phantasy becomes a sort of environmental reserve where the gazelles of the drives have enough space to run and the flamingoes of imagination can fly freely. Phantasies, and with them, play and art, acquire in Winnicott’s view the quality of a world which is habitable, of a shelter for the wandering mind. Experienced in this manner, phantasy is the embodiment of the poetic experience, of the intimate encounter of unity and diversity.

Let us now look at the word *phantasm*<sup>[2]</sup>. The translation of the French word *fantasme* into Spanish has modified the word *phantasy* into the word *phantasm*. In many of the Spanish translations of books by French psychoanalytic authors, this word acquires, whether one likes it or not, a sinister or at least, a mysterious connotation. In Spanish, a phantasm is an entity without a body, a manifestation which surprises and terrifies. Such is the quality of the phantasms described by Abraham and Torok as those trans-generational figures which make their appearance in the present experience of any life and alter both conscious discourse and destiny (“at the bottom of the river, like green crabs”).

*Phantasm* is a literary term. In Lacanian theory, the term “fundamental phantasm” takes on the characteristics, not of a figure, but of a literary script describing a scene where the subject comes to occupy a place determined by the desire of the other; it is an unconscious plot which we carry like a pocket-libretto and which gives us the same enjoyment as an amulet to ward off bad luck (“Or at the bottom of me, like phantasms?” asks the poet).

Beyond these reflexions on language and the pleasure they provided, what any psychoanalyst is interested in, is the question of how to bring these ideas into practice, how to apply them when it comes to the psyche of our patients. When asking this, we are echoing the question formulated by the poet Octavio Paz in the introduction to his book *The Bow and the Lyre*: “wouldn’t it be better to transform life into poetry than to make poetry out of life?” (Paz, O., 1956). Freud’s approach of the concept of phantasy as daydream gives human beings a ticket of access to a world which is other, a world created for him and for the satisfaction of his desires, provided that it is consciousness which operates the journey (later, he will assign this function to the ego). From this view point, whether what is at stake is the infantile construction of a parallel world, the quotidian daydream without any esthetic claims, or an exquisite literary elaboration, phantasy makes it possible for the human being to expand his inner world and to transform it, but in a manner which is both inadequate and temporary, like someone who goes to see a movie and then returns to the difficulties of reality. At this point, we are referring, in literary terms, to a linear narrative.

In Freud’s conceptualization of unconscious phantasy, which was picked up later by Klein in a both substantial and essential manner, new paths open up to understand the depths of the human soul. Psychoanalytic work becomes surrealistic and mad in the best sense of the word and its narrative nourishes itself from the enigmatic sources of representation; only in a second stage, is it transferred to the secondary thought process. This way of thinking about the psyche, together with such important concepts as transference, is what brings about the possibility of the talking cure. The narrative and the poetry become intertwined, get fused and merge. Winnicott’s conceptual proposition of transitional space, later enhanced by Bion’s idea of *rêverie*, offers the analyst tools for efficient and deep transformation. We enter fully into the poetic experience.

When Lacan proposes that, in order to free ourselves from the Oedipal curse, we leave behind the realm of the imaginary and enter the realm of the symbolic, he also proposes, in literary

terms, that we leave behind the narrative and enter the poetic experience. The Lacanian notion of “fundamental phantasm” makes us enter the universal myth, which is collective poetry. For Lacan however, what is at stake is a collective poetry that is internalized as own’s own, that is subjectivized even in the unconscious, that bestows a position as well as an enjoyment. From this view point, Lacan’s invitation to “cross the phantasm” is a liberation from the subjection of the subject to the infantile myth. As Oscar A. Paulucci says, referring to the patient: “Only a modification of the subjective position within the phantasm can allow [the patient] to experience other forms of satisfaction through a certain boundedness of the enjoyment and an opening towards other stagings of reality.” (Paulucci, 2005). It is very important to underline the use Lacan makes of the grammatical subject, the one who executes the action, that first person which the patient will get to claim, through his encounter with the psychoanalyst. In the history of psychoanalysis, the path from the narrative to the poetic experience, whether in the form of a vital poem or of a new myth, seeks and leads to this encounter even for an instant, the encounter of the subject with his own life, the humble and ephemeral freedom we all yearn for.

Translated by Annie Muir

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[\[2\]](#) Sp.: fantasma