

What to Do When the Dead Linger: Response

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The connections between archaeology and haunting – the intrusion of the dead into the world of the living, breaking down the barriers between past and present – are a familiar trope of contemporary culture, firmly established in the fiction of the early twentieth century. Archaeologists and antiquarians delve recklessly in graveyards and abandoned churches and abandoned villages and shuttered rooms, they read forbidden texts and open doors and unseal barriers, and they find more than they bargained for.

This trope is to some extent functional; if the narrative depends on the unleashing of an ancient evil, then the overly-curious archaeologist violating the mummy's tomb is a necessary plot device. But often this thirst for knowledge, and its consequences, are the heart of the story, reflecting the growing public profile of such activities and, more significantly, dramatising the perils of too close an encounter with a past that is never as safely dead as one supposes. "Ah, Count Magnus," muses the English antiquarian in a Swedish church, "how I would like to see you!", and hears a metallic noise that cannot possibly be the sound of one of the padlocks on the sarcophagus falling to the ground [1]. Charles Dexter Ward was "only an eager, studious, and curious boy whose love of mystery and of the past was his undoing. He stumbled on things no mortal ought ever to know, and reached back through the years as no one ever should reach; and something came out of those years to engulf him" [2]. Looking into the past too avidly opens a path back to the present.

Further, the power to bridge the gap between living and dead, past and present, is often shown to be embedded in significant objects: books, coins, the portrait of an ancestor, disturbing carved idols, the whistle that the rationalist Professor Perkins digs up at the site of a ruined Templar preceptory and carelessly blows [3], and perhaps most striking of all the cathedral pew, made from the wood of a tree known as the Hanging Oak, whose carved figures apparently embody the same spirit of vengeance or justice [4]. These objects disrupt the relationship between past, present and future; they make the past less separate, less distanced – and that is what we want them to do. As soon as they read it, more or less every archaeologist secretly wants to visit a place like Greene Knowe, where the ghosts of past inhabitants tell stories about what life there was once like [5].

We are in business of ghost stories, as Rosemary Handon suggests [6]. Actually, at times archaeology is more akin to necromancy, a deliberate attempt at summoning up the dead. Certainly that is suggested by the fiction. Charles Dexter Ward's passion for the past was such that he brought back his own sinister ancestor, having fallen in with a group that literally resurrected the dead in order to interrogate them about their knowledge and experiences. The antiquarian Mr Baxter made a mask from a skull in order to see through a dead man's eyes, and then went one better by constructing a pair of binoculars from boiled corpses, so that he or anyone else could survey the landscape as it once was, to identify long-lost buildings and reconstruct their appearance [7]. Desecrating burials in pursuit of knowledge; archaeologists are simply more decorous and systematic, and less successful. Baxter's glasses are

destroyed by accident – taken into a church, which ruins them, and then dropped – as M.R. James knew as well as anyone that no antiquarian could resist the possibility of seeing exactly what once stood in a landscape, from Roman villas to a monastery church, regardless of how unhallowed the source of knowledge might be.

The possibility of going beyond representations of the past to seize its material reality, to recreate the past as it really existed rather than was merely imagined, is precisely the claim to superiority of archaeology over text-based history. We can behold the face of Agamemnon; the archaeologist digs that the dead may live again [8]. Of course, as Handon notes, contemporary archaeologists disclaim both the ghost stories and the fanaticism - to the same degree as they repudiate the glamorous treasure-hunting of Indiana Jones, i.e. perhaps not as much as they claim or wish to believe. The wish to make dead societies live again, the belief that objects give a more immediate and unmediated connection to past reality, is impossible to disentangle from belief in some immanent property in the objects themselves, that the archaeologist can release through the application of understanding and perseverance. The wonderful array of images in this essay shows how little exaggeration or stylisation is needed to highlight the spiritualist dimensions of archaeological illustration, the belief that the past can be summoned back to life by imagining objects in the hands of their dead users. One might do the same with the familiar reconstructions of buildings and settlements, shown peopled with their lost inhabitants.

If this fascinating and thought-provoking essay has a flaw, it's the focus on a single object, the earring that once belonged to Handon's Great-Aunt Bea. This approach works brilliantly for the multiple visual representations, showing the different ways in which the same object might be presented in order to evoke different haunted qualities, and less well for other aspects. The auto-ethnographic storytelling unavoidably offers us a single experience of a memento of a family member, rather than the more varied experiences of a wider selection of objects, or the possible different subjective experiences of the same object. It's undoubtedly important that this earring is felt by Handon to be haunted; that doesn't preclude the possibility that someone else might feel it to be equally haunted, but in a very different manner.

There is a certain – undoubtedly inadvertent – tendency to imply that *this* object is special in its possession of a secret materiality, whereas most are entirely reducible to their weight, heft, function etc. Is this true? I think it is more likely the case that every object may seem to some extent haunted to at least some people; even the dullest potsherd can excite thoughts of the real people who once employed the original object in real life. I look at the early 20th century glass milk bottle on my 'recovered objects' shelf, and I see dead people; I don't need to have known them.

And so, while Handon ably identifies the range of ways in which objects may be haunted, they don't all come equally to life. Because she writes as herself, there are only dry, academic hints of the experience of an object imbued with celebrity aura (with all the possible echoes of the late antique and medieval cult of relics), or genuinely believed to be haunted, or the broader object fetishism of archaeology. The possible connections to ethical questions of how to treat objects that others believe to contain power and spirit – most obviously in relation to the treatment of actual human remains, but this theme can be broadened – are only suggested [9].

Taking things out of their proper place because of over-confidence in scientific reason and academic process is, of course, a hallmark of so many stories...

I am conscious that my response to this essay is tending to flatten out a complex, visual and personal piece that I absolutely loved, turning it all into academic argument, because that is what we do to emphasise that we don't really believe in ghosts. My initial reaction was a bit more creative - and the foregoing discussion might be seen as mere prolegomenon (or professional veneer) for what I really want to offer as a response: another ghost story about a haunted object, somewhat in the spirit of British hauntology...[10]

Audio recording: The Fountain Pen. [11]

[1] M.R. James, 'Count Magnus', in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (Edward Arnold, 1904).

[2] H.P. Lovecraft, *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* (written 1927; published in abridged form in *Weird Tales* in 1941 and in full in *Beyond the Wall of Sleep and Other Stories* (Arkham House, 1943)).

[3] M.R. James, 'The stalls of Barchester Cathedral', in *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary* (Edward Arnold, 1911).

[4] M.R. James, 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad', in *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*.

[5] Lucy M. Boston, *The Children of Green Knowe* (Faber & Faber, 1954) and sequels.

[6] I am probably pushing the 'we', here, as someone who more commonly works with texts. But I understand the impulse, honestly, and I could have written this response around my feelings about the various objects I've recovered from my garden over the years, archaeologically trivial but precisely summoning up ideas of the lives that were once lived here – including the ghost of old Mr Dyer, who died of emphysema in what is now our bathroom.

[7] M.R. James, 'A View from a Hill', in *A Warning to the Curious* (Edward Arnold, 1925).

[8] Heinrich Schliemann, of course, and Geoffrey Bibby. I don't think it would be hard to find a lot more quotes offering similar sentiments.

[9] See e.g. C. Fforde, J. Hubert & P. Turnbull, eds., *The Dead and their Possessions: repatriation in principle, policy and practice* (Routledge, 2002), and I imagine most readers are more up to date on this than I am.

[10] "Eerie electronics fixated on ideas of decaying memory and lost futures", as Simon Reynolds put it in 2017. See generally Jamie Sexton, 'Weird Britain in exile: Ghost Box, hauntology and alternative heritage'. *Popular Music and Society* 35.4 (2012): 561-84. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2011.608905>

[11] *Voices*: Elodie Magg, Freya Morley, Neville Morley, Jamie Sinclair, Daisy Smith. Script, music and sound editing by Neville Morley. The exact model of pen used by H.P. Lovecraft is not in fact confirmed, but a 552½ fits the date and description given

in Frank Belknap Long, *Howard Phillips Lovecraft: dreamer on the nightside* (Arkham House, 1975): 76-7: "It also had to be a black Waterman... He liked small objects of great beauty, symmetrical in design and superbly crafted, and by the same token larger objects that exhibited a similar kind of artistic perfection. And the raven-black Waterman he finally selected was both somber and non-ornate, with not even a small gold band encircling it." Reference originally found courtesy of Ross E. Lockhart, 'Countdown to Cthulhu: H.P. Lovecraft's pen is?', 6 July 2011, <https://lossrockhart.livejournal.com/556162.html> (visited 13 December 2021).