

Letters

Landscape Spirits

I'm not sure if I am one of the 'handful of other ghost researchers' referred to by Paul Devereux in "The Ghost Road" [FT153:36-40], but I'm certainly not surprised to find many road ghosts so readily interpreted as archetypal landscape spirits - since I reached this conclusion in a 1997 article ["Hell's Belles", FT104:36-40].

That article focused chiefly on Blue Bell Hill, in Kent, Britain's best known Road Ghost case. I was therefore a little surprised to see 'BBH' omitted from Devereux's treatment (although space is always a consideration); more so to see the 'phantom hitch-hiker' hardly mentioned. This is surely the quintessential Road Ghost - the spectral travelling companion.

The Phantom Hitch-Hiker (PHH), generally derided and dismissed as urban legend can, has a long history, as Devereux indicated - a fact that critics adduce to prove that the legend is well travelled and consistent. Which is true.

However, as my 1994 piece 'Hit & Myth' [FT73:27-31] demonstrated, the vivid and well-attested modern encounters with road ghosts that wait or throw themselves beneath the wheels of passing vehicles (probably their most common habit) share many conventions with the phantom hiker - even to the extent, at BBH in 1992, of an anniversary appearance. This 'script' proved to be so remarkably consistent, both at BBH and many places worldwide, that it was clear the phenomenon was much closer to the archetypal characters of folklore than to any specific tragic event.

Young - often fair-haired - female ghosts in light-coloured clothing, or wizened old women in black, frequently crop up, particularly in European folklore, and often in very close association (where they are patently facets of the same essential character). So does the habit of stopping unwary (and often lone) night-travellers to terrify or mislead them. (Male characters too are often young with light hair, or old and threatening with grey straggly hair and grey coats or mackintoshes).

At BBH, this archetype has a deeper resonance. The trio of characters reported by different witnesses - young girl (11-13 years), young woman ('twenties'), and witch-like hag - reflects the triple-aspected and primordial Mother Goddess. To the Celts, she was the Cailleach; to the Greeks, Persephone-Demeter-Hekate or Selene and Artemis (the Roman Diana). She was Astarte (Syrio-Phoenicia), Cybele (Anatolia), Ishtar (Babylon), Inanna (Sumeria), and Bast (ancient Egypt).

Like Devereux, I have considered the puzzle of these archetypes - their consistency in form and behaviour, their geographical occurrence, and the patterns of sightings - and was drawn to the concept of liminality and the ideas of Jung.

Road Ghost encounters tend to follow the marginal or boundary locations defined by tradition - roads, parish boundaries, coastal areas and bridges, cemeteries, mountains and hilltops, water courses, and crossroads - places where the conscious, rational mind yields, with trepidation, to the unconscious and the unknown. Ghosts occupy the very limits of perception and conception - fleetingly, within the frame of the unconscious mind. Drivers, particularly alone, and at night, know the 'auto-pilot' of unconscious control).

I found a good deal of relevance in Jung's concept of the anima and animus - the individual's unconscious' symbolic (and spontaneous) representation of itself in dreams. The archetype appears mostly in human form, frequently adopting the opposing gender to the dreamer - for a man, his unconscious appears as a female, the anima. Most road ghost encounters involve male drivers and female 'ghosts'. Devereux relates Jung's consideration of archetypes as the confluence of spirit and matter, and explores the current hypothesis of a quantum level mind-matter link - which might help explain the admittedly rare incidents where impact with such a figure results in damage to the motorist's car.

Jung saw archetypes as 'psychopomps' - mediators (messengers) between the conscious and the unconscious. They appeared in dream (the unconscious) to pass on a vital message to the conscious Self. If many ghosts are archetypes, the message is obscure, as after a century of investigation we are still musing over their meaning. However, I feel the anima model for road ghosts can help to explain them.

The anima in classical myth is a nature spirit, an elemental, a guardian of the locality, and road ghosts frequently appear at liminal sites with long traditions of sanctity. BBH has a number of Neolithic formations, plus a Roman temple, and the Pilgrims' Way; other PHH locations are defined by features such as holy wells. Mountain/hill tops had an aura of sanctity, and were often held to be the abode of guardian spirits or deities. Some traditions - such as the female Korean mountain spirits known as the San-sin - maintain that revenge awaits human trespassers.

Whether these sites gained their revered status because of some special energetic property or phenomena associated with elemental spirits, or whether it is the deep-seated idea of sanctity that has given rise to their reputations as 'haunted' areas is, in a sense, beside the point. Irreverent disturbance of the locale - by road or house-building, or deforestation - invites disapproval and possible retribution. We see this in a number of road ghost outbreaks, apparently triggered by road-building (Stocksbridge 1987; BBH 1992; Castledawson (NI) 1992; Newbury 1996).

Could road ghosts be the mechanism by which this unconscious regard for nature rebounds with slingshot force - to remind us of our need for oneness and respect for the downtrodden physical and spiritual landscapes alike?

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as submitted:

Liminal Lemures

I'm not sure if I am one of the 'handful of other ghost researchers' referred to in Paul Devereux's article The ghost road [FT153:36-40], but I am certainly one who isn't surprised to find that many road ghosts find so ready interpretation as archetypal landscape spirits - since this was a conclusion I had arrived at some time ago, and subsequently discussed in the second of two articles on the subject for FT [Hell's Belles, FT104:36-40], as well as expound on a website dedicated to the subject (www.roadghosts.com).

That article focused chiefly on Blue Bell Hill, in Kent - certainly Britain's best known Road Ghost case, and arguably now the world's. I was therefore a little surprised to see 'BBH' omitted from Paul's treatment (although, admittedly, space is always a consideration); more so to see the 'phantom hitch-hiker' passed over with barely a mention (a mere paragraph) - surely the quintessential Road Ghost - the spectral travelling companion?

The Phantom Hitch-Hiker (PHH), generally derided and dismissed as nothing more than an urban legend can, as Paul indicated, be traced back into history - a fact that critics will happily point out only proves that the legend is well travelled and consistent. Which is true.

However, as my earlier work [Hit & Myth, FT73:27-31] has demonstrated, the vivid and well-attested modern encounters involving road ghosts that wait or throw themselves beneath the wheels of passing

vehicles (probably the most common road ghost habit) actually share many of the same conventions, with regard to descriptions of the 'ghost' and its incidence and behaviour - even to the extent, at BBH in 1992, of adhering to the anniversary appearance of the ghost popularised by the PHH motif and many traditional ghost stories.

This 'script' proved to be so remarkably consistent, not only at BBH, but in numerous cases worldwide that it became clear to me that the phenomenon showed a much closer affinity to the archetypal characters of folklore (the PHH and its deeper folk roots) than to any specific tragic cause or associated personages.

Young - often fair-haired - female ghosts in light-coloured clothing, or wizened old women in black reported with some regularity in real-life scenarios, crop up time and again, particularly in European folklore), and often in very close association (where they are patently facets of the same essential character). As does the habit of stopping unwary (and often lone) night-travellers with the intention to terrify or mislead. (Male characters too are often young with light hair, or threatening old men with grey straggly hair and grey coats or mackintoshes).

At BBH, this archetypal core extends deeper still. The distinct tri-set of characters reported by different witnesses - young girl (11-13 yrs), young female ('twenties'), and witch-like hag - is precisely reflected in the triple-aspected and primordial Mother Goddess. To the Celtic peoples, she was known as the Cailleach; in Greece, Persephone-Demeter-Hekate (amongst other variations, which include Selene and Artemis (the Roman Diana)); as well as Astarte (Syrio-Phoenicia), Cybele (Anatolia), Ishtar (Babylon), Inanna (Sumeria), and Bast (ancient Egypt). (For a full elucidation, please visit the website, particularly 'Hekate on the Hill' and its attendant notes).

Like Paul, I too have carefully considered the complex puzzle posed by these archetypal forms - their consistency in form and behaviour, their geographical occurrences, and the patterns and mechanics of sightings. And I too was drawn to concept of liminality and to the work of Jung, in exploration of the possible meaning of such events.

In terms of geography and the landscape, road ghost encounters do tend to obey the marginal or boundary locations defined by tradition. In addition to the roads, parish boundaries, coastal areas, bridges, and cemeteries mentioned by Paul, we can add mountains and hilltops, water courses, and cross-roads - places where the conscious, rational mind yields - with trepidation - to the Unconscious and its capacity for imagination, mystery and awe, and the unknown.

The same principle of liminality applies to the very mechanism of ghost-seeing: ghosts occupy the very limits of perception and conception - fleetingly, and, again, within the frame of the unconscious mind (motorists in general, but particularly lone, night-drivers will be able to appreciate the 'auto-pilot' aspect of unconscious control).

It seemed to me that when these two conditions come together, there is real potential for a road ghost encounter. And, in agreement with Devereux, I believe the form and behaviour of the 'ghost' will draw on a set of 'blueprint' archetypes deeply rooted in the realm of the (possibly collective) Unconscious. The question is: what dictates its precise form?

To answer this, I found a good deal of relevance in Jung's concept of the anima and animus - the individual's own unconscious' symbolic (and spontaneous) representation of itself in dreams. From our anthropomorphic perspective, it isn't surprising that the archetype should appear dominantly in the form of a human figure. And this personification frequently adopts the opposing gender to the dreamer - for a man, his unconscious appears as a female, the anima.

Now, I find it very interesting that the majority of road ghost encounters involve male drivers and female 'ghosts'.

Paul relates Jung's consideration of archetypes as the confluence of spirit and matter, and briefly explores the current hypothesis of a quantum level mind-matter link - which I'm sure Jung would have found fascinating, and may well help explain certain even more puzzling aspects of a few road ghost

incidents where - unusually, to say the least - physical damage to the motorist's car has resulted from the impact with such a figure.

However, my understanding of Jung's view on archetypes is that he regarded them as 'psychopomps' - mediators (messengers) between the conscious and the unconscious. In other words, their appearance in dream (the unconscious) was to convey a vital message to the conscious Self. They are trying to tell us something. Evidently, if many ghosts are archetypes, the message is not always clear, as after a century of concerted investigation we are still musing over their meaning.

But in the case of the anima model for road ghosts, I feel we can draw a step nearer to understanding the 'why', 'where' and even 'when' of their occurrence.

The first clue is the anima's close sympathy with Nature. As represented in classical mythology, for instance, it literally is a nature spirit, an elemental - an inhabitant and guardian of the environment.

Further suggestive clues are found, ironically, in Paul Devereux's own previous work, specifically with regard to the liminal sites that support long traditions of sanctity. BBH is characterized, like many other locations, by a collection of neolithic formation (plus a Roman temple, and the Pilgrims' Way). Others are defined, as he mentions, by features such as holy wells. Mountain/hill tops had a natural aura of sanctity, and were often held to be the abode of guardian spirits or deities. Some traditions - such as the Korean case of the female mountain spirits known as the San-sin - hold that revenge awaits humans who would violate their domain.

Whether these sites gained their revered status and traditions out of our forebears' recognition of some special energetic property and/or phenomena they associated with elemental spirits, or whether it is the deep-seated and persistent idea of sanctity that itself has given rise to their reputations as 'haunted' areas is, in a sense, irrelevant. Irreverent disturbance of the locale - whether to build a road, housing, or deforestation - is to invite disapproval and possible retribution.

Which is exactly what we see in a number of road ghost outbreaks, which appear to have been triggered by road construction schemes (Stocksbridge 1987; BBH 1992; Castledawson (NI) 1992; Newbury 1996), and may be a factor in other sites whose sanctity is recalled in our collective psyche, even if there is no longer any visible evidence for it.

Could those road ghosts incidents in which their actions could be interpreted as an attack - or very certainly a highly effective attention-grabbing device - on the motorist, be the mechanism by which this unconscious regard for nature rebounds with slingshot force - to remind the consciously and materialistically motivated modern mind of its need for oneness and respect for the downtrodden physical and spiritual landscapes alike?