

“The Stolen Body”: Or the Case of the Fraudulent Medium

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H.G. Wells’s short story “The Stolen Body”, published in *Strand Magazine* in 1898, displays the anatomy of a psychical deception. The inclusion of a deliberate chronological contradiction in Wells’s story mimics the somewhat dubious and self-contradictory nature of the narratives of paranormal phenomena proffered by the psychical researchers of the late nineteenth century. The extraordinary story, by careful analysis of the narrative, can often be shown to have a prosaic, every-day explanation, sometimes involving a simple error of memory, a deception, or sometimes an illusion, dream, or hallucination. Wells’s story replicates some of these qualities in order to satirise the psychical ‘science’ of his day.

In 1894 Wells wrote a review, published in *Nature*, of Frank Podmore’s *Apparitions and Thought Transference*, a book that presents the results of the ‘Census of Hallucinations’ conducted in the early 1890s by Henry Sidgwick in England and William James in America under the auspices of the Society for Psychical Research.

In his review, “Peculiarities of Psychical Research”, Wells criticises psychical research as being unscientific, partly because the results obtained cannot be reproduced under experimental conditions (1894: 121). The accounts of apparitions adduced by Podmore rely largely on the word of those involved, as conveyed directly or indirectly to Podmore, Sidgwick, and associates. Wells complains that the reader is “repeatedly asked to form opinions on the hearsay of Mr. Podmore and his fellow investigators” and is asked to accept “second-hand guarantees of character” (Wells 1894: 121). Furthermore, notes Wells, “anonymous statements are accepted, and not only anonymous but self-contradictory ones” (1894: 121-22). Notwithstanding Podmore’s ‘special grounds of caution’, Wells regrets the tendency for psychical researchers to “accept as evidence what is really not evidence at all” and bemoans their “lack of critical capacity” (1894: 122). The use of eye-witness testimony may be acceptable historical research, Wells argues, but “scientific men have never attached much importance to unverifiable statements, however eminent the source” (1894: 121). On the contrary, the scientific man occupies a position of great responsibility,

“because of his reputation for sceptical caution” (1894: 122).

Reading Podmore’s book, one can understand Wells’s rejection of the psychical researchers’ bid for scientific respectability. Podmore devotes a chapter to a “General Criticism of the Evidence for Spontaneous Thought-Transference” in which he details the possible sources of error in the accounts of apparitions seen. These include “Errors of Narration” and “Errors of Memory”. The former occur because of the tendency for the raconteur of a good story to embellish it, “to exaggerate the coincidences, adjust the dates, elaborate the details, or otherwise improve the too bare facts of an actual experience” (Podmore 1894: 150). The latter are common because “there is a natural and almost inevitable tendency to dramatic unity and completeness which leads to the unconscious suppression of some details, and the insertion of others” (Podmore 1894: 152). Precautions against error include preferring first-hand rather than second-hand accounts, obtaining corroborative testimony, and seeking documentary supporting evidence, such as notes, letters, and diaries (Podmore 1894: 156-59).

Despite these precautions, the unreliability of personal testimony as a source of scientific fact pervades and undermines Podmore’s accounts, for as Wells notes, many involve anonymous percipients or witnesses, and contain contradictions of fact. One example, particularly relevant to Wells’s short story “The Stolen Body”, concerns an experiment conducted by the psychical researcher Dr. Von Schrenk-Notzing of Munich, in the winter of 1886-87. Unknown to a female friend (the percipient), he stood outside her window at 11.30 p.m. one night, and attempted to mentally project an image of himself on her mind. The woman, Fraulein ———, reported seeing the face of Baron Schrenk-Notzing in her room while fully awake, and described her vision to a friend, Fraulein Preiger, who was also in the room.

The accounts of all three are quoted in full by Podmore (1894: 240-41). None of the three, however, agree as to the date, nor even the month, of the incident: the Baron thinks it was in February 1887; the percipient gives March 1887 as the time (or April, “I am not sure of the date”); and the witness places the event “shortly after Christmas”. Moreover, the two women disagree as to when the witness, Fraulein Preiger, was told of the apparition—at the time of its occurrence, or the following morning.

While these chronological contradictions are not fatal, this account—and many others similarly flawed—demonstrate

the extraordinary latitude in veracity that psychical researchers were prepared to allow. Little wonder that Wells, schooled in the biological laboratories of the unbending T. H. Huxley, considered Podmore's book to be full of "extremely dubious material" (Wells 1894: 121).

Wells's review provoked a flurry of acrid correspondence between Edward T. Dixon, Oliver Lodge (1895: 247), and Karl Pearson. Dixon (1894: 200) argues that the efforts of psychical researchers are worth the labour "if only as affording a measure of the value of testimony to the miraculous." Pearson (1894: 200), twisting the knife that Wells had sunk in, concludes: "I do suggest that no better exercise could be found for a strictly logical mind with plenty of leisure than a criticism of the products of the chief psychical researchers."

In "The Stolen Body" (1952 [1898])¹ Wells provides a fictitious version of such a product—a second-hand account of an apparition seen during a thought transference experiment and containing a chronological contradiction—upon which to exercise our strictly logical minds. And since we have the leisure, dear reader, we shall pursue the case, appropriately enough, into Baker Street.

The story tells of the psychical experiments of George Bessel, senior partner in the firm of Bessel, Hart, and Brown, and "well known among those interested in psychical research as a liberal-minded and conscientious investigator" (963). While under self-hypnosis one evening Bessel succeeds in projecting an impression of himself over a two-mile interval to the mind of his associate, Mr. Vincey. Going to Bessel's hotel to report the success, Vincey finds Bessel missing and his room disordered. In the early hours of the following morning, however, Bessel is seen by Vincey and others running like a madman through the streets of London, striking those in his path and shouting "Life! Life!" All attempts to arrest Bessel fail, and he is last seen at a quarter to two heading towards Baker Street, wreaking havoc. Later that morning Vincey begins a search for Bessel, but "all that day Mr. Bessel's whereabouts eluded an unceasingly active inquiry, and all that night" (969).

The next day, Sunday, Vincey seeks the help of Mrs. Bullock, the medium, "who was then attracting attention for the

¹ All references to "The Stolen Body" are to the Ernest Benn edition of *The Short Stories of H. G. Wells* (1927, reset 1948, reprinted 1952), pp. 963-79. Page numbers only are given henceforth.

first time in London” (970). On hearing Vincey’s story, Mrs. Bullock and her colleague, Dr. Wilson Paget, produce a slate on which is written: “George Bessel . . . trial excav” . . . Baker Street . . . help . . . starvation”, in shaky handwriting that Vincey recognises as Bessel’s (970). Of the message, Paget remarks, “We got it last night,” (970) and proceeds to tell Vincey how Mrs. Bullock, while in a trance, received the message towards the end of her séance held on the previous night (Saturday night). At this point, the third-person narrator states:

Curiously enough, neither Doctor Paget nor the two other inquirers who were present had heard of the disappearance of Mr. Bessel—the news of it appeared only in the evening papers of Saturday—and they had put the message aside with many others of a vague and enigmatical sort that Mrs. Bullock has from time to time delivered. (970-71)

Acting on the message, Paget and Vincey locate the missing Bessel lying at the foot of an excavation near Baker Street station. Having an arm, a leg, and two ribs broken, he is taken to the rooms of Dr. Hatton in Upper Baker Street where he is sedated, and where “anything that might recall the violent crisis through which he had passed was carefully avoided” (971).

The rest of the narrative details Bessel’s experiences, as told to the narrator, of being dispossessed of his body by an evil spirit during the experiment, of his attempt to contact Mrs. Bullock from the spirit world to convey the whereabouts of his stolen body, and of his eventual return to his abandoned body as it lay at the bottom of the Baker Street shaft.

A noteworthy feature of this story is that it is second-hand. The narrator, who is also in a sense the editor of the account, assures us that “Mr. Bessel has several times repeated this statement—to myself among other people—varying the details as the narrator of real experiences always does, but never contradicting himself in any particular” (971).

Despite these guarantees of veracity, the account contains a blatant chronological contradiction. The statement that the psychical inquirers had not heard of Bessel’s disappearance because it was reported only in Saturday evening’s papers does not stand up, since the séance at which the message was received is stated (twice) as having taken place on Saturday night (970). The dishonest implication in the psychical inquirers’ story opens up two possibilities, both of which point to fraud: either that prior to her séance Mrs. Bullock had learned of Bessel’s disappearance from the papers; or what is more likely, that the message was not

received at the séance, and Bullock, Bessel, Paget, Hart, Hatton, and possibly Vincey, are conspirators in a fraud. And what better way for Mrs. Bullock to publicise her London debut as a medium than solving the mystery of Bessel's disappearance?

In light of Wells's remark concerning the "extremely dubious material" put forward by Podmore, and the lack of critical capacity of psychical researchers, the crucial point in the story is *the narrator's failure to perceive the chronological discrepancy*. Like the pedlars of dubious psychical goods, the narrator offers a perfectly sincere account of a psychical experiment, but with a chronological hole large enough to drive a hansom through. Wells's narrative is structured to mimic the "unscientific" accounts that he deplored in Podmore's book.

"The Stolen Body" is best read not literally, as a story genuinely engaging with the spirit and substance of psychical research, but satirically, as a *facsimile* of psychical literature. The full force of the satire was realised by the story's publication in *Strand Magazine*, and the subsequent failure of readers to perceive the chronological contradiction, which completes the circle of erroneous testimony. Indeed, as if to vindicate Wells's thesis, the publication of the story had a rather bizarre dénouement. In a letter to the editor of *Strand Magazine*, Wells (1998 [1898]) apologised to the physiological psychologist R. H. Vincent, who had complained of being bothered by members of the public wanting to know if there was "anything in it". For this reason, Wells was obliged to change the name of Bessel's associate in the story from the original "Vincent" to "Vincey" in later printings of the story.

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