

Chapter 8

Dissolving Subjects in Medieval Reliquaries and Twentieth-Century Mass Graves



Miriam Edlich-Muth

We sense the dead have a vital force still.

Mantel (2017)

8.1 Introduction

Those now living can be confronted with the physical remnants of those now dead in many different ways, ranging from seeing, touching or smelling human remains to encounters in which it is not the remains themselves but the idea of those remains that exert the most power. One of the premises of this essay is that such encounters have the potential to shape the inner lives and identities of those engaging with these artifacts in different ways.

This essay will examine accounts of medieval reliquaries and twenty-first century excavations of mass graves in order to consider the very different ways in which human remains can be encountered and contextualized and the extent to which such encounters are mediated through the senses or the imagination. I will first draw on approaches from thing theory and medieval conceptions of sight in order to explore the sensory and affective experience of encountering the ‘things’ that are the human remains contained in medieval reliquaries. I will then consider how these dynamics compare with modern encounters with the ‘things’ that are human remains found in mass graves. Finally, I will explore the interplay of faith and sensory experience shaping these medieval and modern encounters and discuss how this dynamic is influenced by the possibility of doubt and misunderstanding that attaches to engaging with objects from the past whose story is not available at first hand.

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E. Weiss-Krejci et al. (eds.), *Interdisciplinary Explorations of Postmortem Interaction*, Bioarchaeology and Social Theory,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-03956-0_8

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The objects at the heart of this discussion are ‘human remains’—in particular the bones and related human remains that were circulated in reliquaries in the later medieval period and the human remains contained in various examples of mass graves that continue to be excavated today. The manner in which these two forms of human remains have been framed varies widely—representing potential extremes of how differently the living might deal with the remains of the dead.

Medieval reliquaries, such as the thirteenth-century French reliquary shown in Fig. 8.1, which may have originated in Meaux, offer a well-worn example of how carefully human remains can be ‘set in scene’. In this arm reliquary, the relic itself is hard to see, but its value is intimated by the precious metals the reliquary is made of, which recreate an idealized arm shape. The reliquary is made of silver, which has been gilded in parts and studded with glass gems, while the core is made of wood. The decoration and the material invested in the reliquary imply that the relic it contains is of a value so great that it must be protected from prying eyes and fingers, contributing to what Cynthia Hahn has termed “the visual rhetoric of sanctity” (Hahn, 1997, p. 1079). Indeed, the fact that the precious metals are deployed for the outside of the reliquary while the core is made of wood, emphasizes the performative aspects of the reliquary. The primary aim of the reliquary is therefore not to physically embed the relic itself with precious materials nobody can see, but to illustrate the value of the relic to the outside, even as the relic itself remains hidden.

Like many other reliquaries, this arm reliquary does not conceal the relic entirely, but offers a selective view of the human remains it contains. Here, the central aperture at the front provides a visual extract of the skeletal arm that was once inside—seen dimly through rock crystal, a medieval alternative to glass. This experience of the relic recalls the promise in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians:

For now we **see through a glass, darkly**; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. (1. Corinthians 13:12, *King James Version*)¹

Paul’s promise, which was widely cited in late medieval theological homilies and treatises, encapsulates one of the fundamental principles of eschatology, which is that what can be seen on earth is only an inferior reflection of the greater glories of heaven.² In light of this teaching the presentation of the relic ‘at one remove’ in this reliquary has a particular significance for medieval encounters with relics such as this one, as it can be read as an echo of the promise inherent in relics: Although the body of the saint contained in the reliquary is only ‘one part’ of the whole body, it stands, metonymically, for the presence of the saint’s body as a whole. At the same time, the beauty of the reliquary and the relic ‘seen through glass’ can only offer a dim shadow of the glory and power of heaven, to which the saint has access.

Reading the word ‘glass’ from a medieval perspective also adds a further nuance to the process of observing relics behind glass and glass-like materials such as rock

¹“videmus nunc per speculum in enigmate tunc autem facie ad faciem nunc cognosco ex parte tunc autem cognoscam sicut et cognitus sum” (1. Corinthians 13:12, *Vulgate Bible*).

²See, for example, Matthew Levering’s analysis of how this passage from the 1. Corinthians was deployed in Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae* (Levering, 2014, pp. 236–266).



Fig. 8.1 Arm reliquary of Saint Fiacre, from France, thirteenth century with fifteenth-century additions. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Creative Commons license CC0 1.0 Universal, Public Domain Dedication)

crystal and mica. Thus, throughout the late medieval period the word ‘glass’ was also regularly used for ‘mirror’.³ This semantic ambiguity neatly captures the dual effect of the glass apertures on reliquaries in both allowing a view of the relic and reflecting the image of the viewer back onto themselves. The effect of refraction and

³See Sara J. Schechner’s discussion of the terminology and use of reflective glass and mirrors in the late medieval and Renaissance periods (Schechner, 2005).

visual distortion caused by the glass draws the viewer's attention to the glass as a 'thing'. This process recalls in very literal terms the 'dirty window' that is one of the central metaphors in Bill Brown's article on 'Thing Theory'. Brown draws on A. S. Byatt's description of a 'dirty window' as an example of how those things that we objectify by instrumentalizing them—which is to say using them for our own purposes—can assert their otherness and the ways in which they exceed their 'function' by simply 'not working'. A window that can only partially be seen through is only in part 'an instrument'. Brown suggests that this is a moment in which the subjugation inherent in 'subject-object' relationships is disrupted (Brown, 2001, pp. 4 and 8).

The basis of Brown's analysis goes further back than the advent of the term 'Thing Theory' in that it is based on Heidegger's extensive interrogation of the relationships between subject and object and the various possible places and roles of 'things' in the world. Thus, Heidegger identifies certain things as *Zeug*—which he describes as "das im Besorgen begegnende Seiende" (Heidegger, 1967, p. 68)—this can be understood as describing those things with which some task is to be undertaken.⁴

The logic of this definition rests on foregrounding the intended function of the 'things', lending them an identity based on the function attributed to them by an outside subject. This logic introduces an added shade of complexity to any potential binary distinction between subject and object as the relationship between the two is now partially defined by the intended use the subject associates with this *Zeug*. Thus, Bill Brown's discussion of instrumentality draws on Heidegger to emphasize the potential shift in power from subject to object. This potential lies in the association between the object and its intended function—the fact that such an object may **not** function makes it possible for the object to disrupt the subject/object binary and the power relationships it implies.

However, in the case of the reliquary, this analysis may be misleading. The most obvious 'purpose' of the reliquary might be to preserve and 'contain' the relic and the window is ostensibly intended to allow the relic to be seen. However, the distortions caused by the light reflecting on the window into the relic in fact draw attention to the reliquary itself and may thereby fulfil a function that is of equal importance. After all, the reliquary shown in Fig. 8.1 is a precious object, in which valuable resources have been invested in order to achieve a particular effect. The partial obfuscation of the relic should therefore be regarded not as exceeding the purpose of the reliquary, but as fulfilling a second, key purpose: that of drawing attention back to the reliquary and thereby reinforcing the 'rhetoric of sanctity' attached to the relic.

In the more particular case of monstrosities, however, the distortion of the glass is only one of the ways in which the glass adds further layers to viewers' encounter with the thing inside the 'box'. Drawing their attention to the glass and the extent to

⁴ *Zeug* can be translated as 'equipment' and "das im Besorgen begegnende Seiende" can be translated as "the existent (beings) that are encountered in the course of taking care of a task."

which they can or cannot see the relic contained behind it also has the potential to heighten their awareness of how the encounter with the relic is being mediated by sensory experience. To encounter this relic in the context of this reliquary is thus an experience that is primarily mediated through sight. In keeping with Aristotle, many medieval thinkers cast ‘sight’ as the primary sense among the five senses (see Woolgar, 2006, p. 23). Indeed, popular medieval models of the brain assumed that processing information involved both outer and inner senses—allowing information from the outside world to ‘penetrate’ into the brain in a fairly literal sense. Avicenna’s *De Anima*, which became available in Latin translation in the 1100’s, elaborates on the different functions of the five ventricles of the brain (Woolgar, 2006, p. 19). This model differentiates between *imaginatio*, a short-term memory and *memorialis*, located at the back of the head, where these *images* are stored. Corinne Saunders describes these *images* as ‘memory-pictures’ that become “imprinted, literally marked on the body through the physiological process triggered by the senses” (Saunders, 2016, p. 413).

The idea of sight as having tangible effects was further supported by the idea that seeing was not a one-sided, purely receptive process. Rather, as Chris Woolgar notes:

In the medieval world, perception was a more open process, where much might pass not only between perceived and perceiver, but also the other way round, from the perceiver to the object or individual who was the focus of perception. This was a two-way process, at the very least. [...] Simply to look upon an object could bring advantage. (Woolgar, 2016)

This extended, reciprocal concept of sight expresses a more fundamental reciprocity between objects and subjects. Such reciprocity lends power to ‘things’ and makes it possible to detect the forms of ‘agency’ that can emanate from things or objects as they enter into relationships with the people and things around them.

This sense of agency is particularly pronounced in our engagement with the remains of the dead. Indeed, recent scholarship on distributed forms and networks of agency has prompted scholars such as Zoë Crossland to investigate the ‘agency of the dead’ in the field of forensic anthropology and conclude that it is necessary

to move away from a view of agency as inhering only in the living and instead to view it as a collaborative semiotic project that is also shaped and constrained by the dead. (Crossland, 2017, p. 183)

As Crossland’s conclusions imply, the ‘things’ that are left behind when life departs from a body must be regarded as liminal objects in that they inevitably dissolve the subject/object boundary. Thus, as time goes by the ‘person’ who was buried might become de-subjectivized in the eyes of society. If, years later, the skeleton that person has become is removed from the ground, it would be regarded as an object—‘the remains’—rather than as a subject or person. However, the temporality involved in that process already indicates how subjective and debatable that shift from subject to object is. Opinions and feelings may differ as to when such a shift takes place—one grieving relative may feel very differently about this than another grieving relative, and both will have a response to the decomposing body whose emotional complexity far exceeds that of the graveyard attendant with no

connection to the deceased. At the same time, the gradual process suggests that all of these figures will recognize on some level the different stages a dead body must pass through on the journey from being perceived as a full subject to becoming the ‘remains’ of a subject.

Nor can we feel fully confident that that process is ever complete. Rather, as the renowned historical novelist Hilary Mantel put it in her first BBC Reith lecture on mortality: “We sense the dead have a vital force still” (Mantel, 2017). Her point is not solely that the dead have a vital force, but that we, the living, sense that this is so. As with the relics, it is our senses that prompt us to review the binary distinction between death and vitality. Of the many questions this proposition raises, the two that are most relevant to the following discussion are: Firstly, in what ways is the perceived ‘vitality’ of the dead predicated on relationships with the living? And, secondly, how does reassessing the vitality or even agency that the dead might develop through such relationships affect the broader boundaries between object and subject, and the networks of social identity, that arise out of those relationships?

One way of approaching these questions is to consider not just reliquaries, but the relics themselves as objects that have been credited with powers that transcend the barriers between the living and the dead. As Julia H. Smith has noted, these “stones and bones cannot be fitted into a world view which sunders materiality and belief, or enforces a rigid distinction between subject and object” (Smith, 2012, p. 144). In order to explore how these hybrid objects interrogate distinctions between subject and object, I will now consider concrete examples of past and present interactions with the remains of the dead and reflect on the dynamic identities that arise out of these encounters.

8.2 Unearthing the Dead at the Free University Berlin

In the summer of 2014, building works in the grounds of the Free University of Berlin unearthed a cache of human bones, buried in what used to be a garden of the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute.

The findings attracted particular attention because the location of the bones and their proximity to specimen tags of the type used in biological analysis and experimentation suggested that these were the remains of victims of the Holocaust (B.Z. Berlin 2014; *neues deutschland*, 2014). Interest in the finds was compounded by the fact that the scientist known to have been involved in experiments on human bodies at Auschwitz and at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute was the notorious Josef Mengele. Thus the majority of reports on the story mention Mengele and the nearby location of his research institute, while the newspaper *Die Welt* even ran the report under the headline “Did Josef Mengele Dispatch these Grisly Finds?”

(Barthélémy, 2015).⁵ While the bones had not been formally identified, they had the potential to stand as tangible evidence of the horrors of Auschwitz remaining buried in the grounds of the Free University, creating a compelling media narrative.

This narrative gained further traction when it emerged that after the university had sent the human remains to a forensic laboratory, they had then been cremated without further examination. It has not been fully clarified how the cremation came about, whether there had been an intention to eventually cremate the bones or whether there was some more fundamental miscommunication between the laboratory and the university (Krause, 2015; Kühne, 2015a). What is clear, however, is that the cremation of the bones shifted the direction of the media narrative within Germany.

Most notably, voices such as those of the historian Götz Aly, were quick to present themselves as being engaged in the exposure of an institutional cover-up. Writing in the *Berliner Zeitung*, Aly claimed that:

The president of the Free University, Peter-André Alt had important traces of the victims of Josef Mengele surreptitiously destroyed. Now the FU-President Alt, who claims to be aiming for excellence, has ensured that the human remains of these people have ended up in the crematorium after all.⁶ (Aly, 2015)

Aly went on to point out that:

Nonetheless, the FU-President prevented the remains of these people from being analyzed more closely. He let them be cremated on the quiet and when asked about it he explained that ‘unfortunately’ it had not been possible to obtain ‘further details’ ‘due to the bones having lain there for so long’. That was a blatant lie.⁷ (Aly, 2015)

Following the appearance in the *Tagesspiegel* of an article including a vigorous rebuttal from Peter-André Alt—Alt described Aly’s accusations as “grossly misleading and untrue” (Kühne, 2015b)—the *Berliner Zeitung* went on to print a retraction of the claims made by Aly (*Berliner Zeitung*, 2015).

This chain of reactions to the bones found at the Free University is a case in point for how remains like these skeletons can generate narratives that shape the institutional and individual identities of those who engage with them. And yet even as cases like this one lend weight to the idea that the dead can exert a form of agency, that power and potential for agency remains dependent upon the unstable association between the bones as objects and the narratives to which they have become attached, in this case partly through the medical tags that were found lying close by

⁵ „War Josef Mengele Absender des grausigen Fundes?“ (If not stated otherwise, all originally German texts in this chapter were translated by the author.)

⁶ „Der Präsident der Freien Universität, Peter-André Alt hat wichtige Spuren der Opfer von Josef Mengele klammheimlich vernichten lassen. Jetzt hat der vorgeblich auf Exzellenz bedachte FU-Präsident Alt veranlasst, dass die körperlichen Reste dieser Menschen am Ende doch noch ins Krematorium geschoben wurden.“

⁷ „Dennoch verhinderte der FU-Präsident, dass die Reste dieser Menschen näher untersucht wurden. Er ließ sie stillschweigend einäschern und auf Anfrage erklären, ‘weitere Details’ seien ‘aufgrund der langen Liegezeiten der Knochen’ ‘leider’ nicht zu erfahren gewesen. Das ist plump gelogen.“

the bones. In order to explore this interdependency from a cross-period perspective, I will discuss a well-known medieval account of some dubious relics and draw on the work of Sara Ahmed and Gilles Deleuze to anatomize the questions of identity at stake in encounters with objects that have been attached to affective narratives.

8.3 Emotion, Identity, and Encounters with Liminal Objects

Within medieval studies, the so-called ‘affective turn’ of the past two decades has drawn great attention to the dynamics of affect and the consequences of emotion. Scholars such as Barbara Rosenwein have shed light on the role of emotions in regulating relationships and shaping social structures focused on various aspects of the relationship between piety and affect (Rosenwein, 2007). This relationship is particularly interesting in the context of recent considerations of the social agency and function of objects. For example, one of the central assumptions of Ahmed’s theory of ‘sticky affect’ is that the moment in which a subject encounters an object does not represent a moment of ‘infectious affect’ in which the subject absorbs atmospheres, moods or impressions from the ‘outside-in’. Instead, she regards the boundary between object and subject as permeable in both directions, creating a moment of temporary fusion, in which affect is conjoined. She writes:

We are moved by things. And in being moved we make things. An object can be affective by virtue of its own location and the timing of its appearance. To experience an object as being affective or sensational is to be directed not only toward an object, but to ‘whatever’ is around that object, which includes what is behind the object, the conditions of its arrival. (Ahmed, 2010, p. 33)

This concept dovetails with some of the core elements of actor-network theory and, indeed, Deleuze’s theory of relational identity, according to which identity continually arises out of the relationship between one object or subject and another (see Deleuze, 1998, p. xxix). This implies that subject-object relationships form a network that generates transient shared identities. In other words, X does not constitute a pre-formed identity with which to encounter Y, rather the encounter between X and Y results in a fused identity, which is superseded by an encounter between X and Z or Y and Z.

This approach has significant repercussions on how we can conceive of the emotional power of objects and the ways in which the narratives to which they are attached can generate identity. Medieval relics offer an interesting example of this dynamic in that they are objects that are associated with emotive narratives. And it is worth noting that these narratives, concerning the suffering or miracles of saints, were often ‘attached’ to the relics in a surprisingly literal sense, in the form of tags or labels identifying the putative saint from whom the relic derives. Such tags are reminiscent of the specimen tags found on the buried bones at the Free University,

in that they create a tangible link between the human remains as objects and a particular narrative of past suffering, be it historical, as in the case in Berlin, or of more imaginative origin. In doing so, the tags create a doubled reaction to the object of the relic—or ‘bone-plus-tag’—which may be *temporally* layered. In those cases where relics were not contained within a reliquary, our very first encounter takes place simply with human or animal remains—this is a moment of generic ‘*memento mori*’ which is not associated with any particular story beyond the universal experience of journeying toward death. However, the link between the bones and the tags creates a second more reflective encounter with the bones as objects representing a tangible link to highly emotive past events.

The link established by the tags is fragile and negotiable in that it depends on how well the tag is attached to the object and on the authenticity of the labelling. If we read the relics as objects that constitute a part of the temporary relational identity of the person observing or interacting with them, then the narratives to which they are attached become vital components of a transient identity. However, there is a constant risk of being forced back upon the initial—the first—encounter with the object as the pre-narrativized or de-narrativized object—just a bone!—and this risk is contingent upon the question of authenticity. If the link between the objects and their narrative is undermined, if, for example, the information on the tags is lost, or doubted to be true, then the first encounter with the anonymous human remains reasserts itself, creating an oscillating identity for the observer engaging with the objects.

In the relic catalogues of the twelfth-century cathedral of Sens, this problem becomes most apparent when the monks come across human remains whose tags have been lost and which now appear to be at risk of losing their power as relics. As Julia H. Smith recounts:

Faced with two unidentified relic bundles, a Carolingian cleric at Sens compromised by noting that one contained hairs, and the other a bone ‘of a certain saint’. Another Sens label simply states: ‘here are relics, we do not know what they are.’ (Smith, 2012, p. 152)

The implication of retaining and cataloguing these unnamed relics is that if relics are intrinsically sacred objects that have powers, they must continue to have them even when the narrative to which they are attached is not known. And yet knowing the story of the saint whose relics they are represents a key step in the process of identifying with the saint’s life and experiencing a transfer of affect from their suffering and fortitude. In this context, a relic that cannot be attributed becomes a paradox that reveals the fault lines underlying the desirable cohesion between the human remains as object and the powerfully affective narratives to which they have been attached. Such fault lines erupt out of anxieties surrounding the possibility of a disconnection between object and narrative and the repercussions that would have for the identity of the person engaging with the purported relic. They also grow out of the oscillating temporality that threatens to develop as soon as the authentic connection between object and narrative is thrown into question.

Just such an oscillation can be seen to unfold in an infamous medieval description of relics: the prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*.⁸ In introducing himself to his audience, the Pardoner (Fig. 8.2) first recounts how he arrives in new parishes and establishes his authority by producing bills signed not only by popes in the plural, but by bishops, cardinals, and patriarchs. He tells how, building on this wealth of authorization, he swiftly moves on to other sacred objects: relics.

Thus he produces:

cristal stones,
Ycrammed ful of cloutes and of bones —
Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon. (*The Canterbury Tales* ll. 347–349)⁹

Emphasizing the large number of objects that are then termed relics immediately raises doubts concerning their authenticity. These doubts are confirmed in the following half-line: “Relikes been they, as wenen they echoon” (l. 348), “They are all relics, or so they think.” The Pardoner’s description of these objects as relics has already been undermined before it has been voiced and the claim is then immediately framed as a supposition on behalf of his audience. He continues:

Thanne have I in latoun a sholder-boon
Which that was of an hooly Jewes sheep. (*The Canterbury Tales* ll. 350–351)

In this case, the shoulder bone is literally framed as a relic or holy object by being presented as encased in brass (“in latoun”). Once the object is identified as a relic in the form of a large bone, the following sentence seems set to bear this out by reporting who it belonged to—somebody holy? Somebody Jewish? But no—it’s the holy Jew’s sheep! This delayed revelation functions as the kind of punchline that contributes to the humorous overtones of Chaucer’s style. However, the effect is not simply one of comic deflation. If we conceive of an encounter with objects, even fictional objects, as constituting a transient identity in the observer or reader, then there is much more at stake in Chaucer’s evolving presentation of this particular object. In just these five lines, readers have been presented with an openly dissembling speaker, who presents the objects he carries with him in a persistently misleading light. Accordingly, the reader or listener is forced to switch between engaging with the object as a potential relic and being thrown back upon the fact that this is just a bone that has been attached to a deceptive narrative.

This scene reveals Chaucer’s interest in the instability with which the relic object and its authenticating narrative are linked. Furthermore, the nuances of pacing and syntactical arrangement in this brief extract suggest that Chaucer is aware of the layering of temporality created by the gradual unfolding of the Pardoner’s fraud. Chaucer never makes explicit the full implications of the seeds of doubt planted by

⁸Chaucer’s *The Pardoner’s Tale* is one of the tales in his famous fourteenth-century story collection *The Canterbury Tales* in which a group of pilgrims tell each other stories on their way to Canterbury. In the prologue to his tale, the Pardoner recounts how he swindles people out of their money by selling false relics.

⁹All Chaucer references are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson (1987, pp. 194–195).

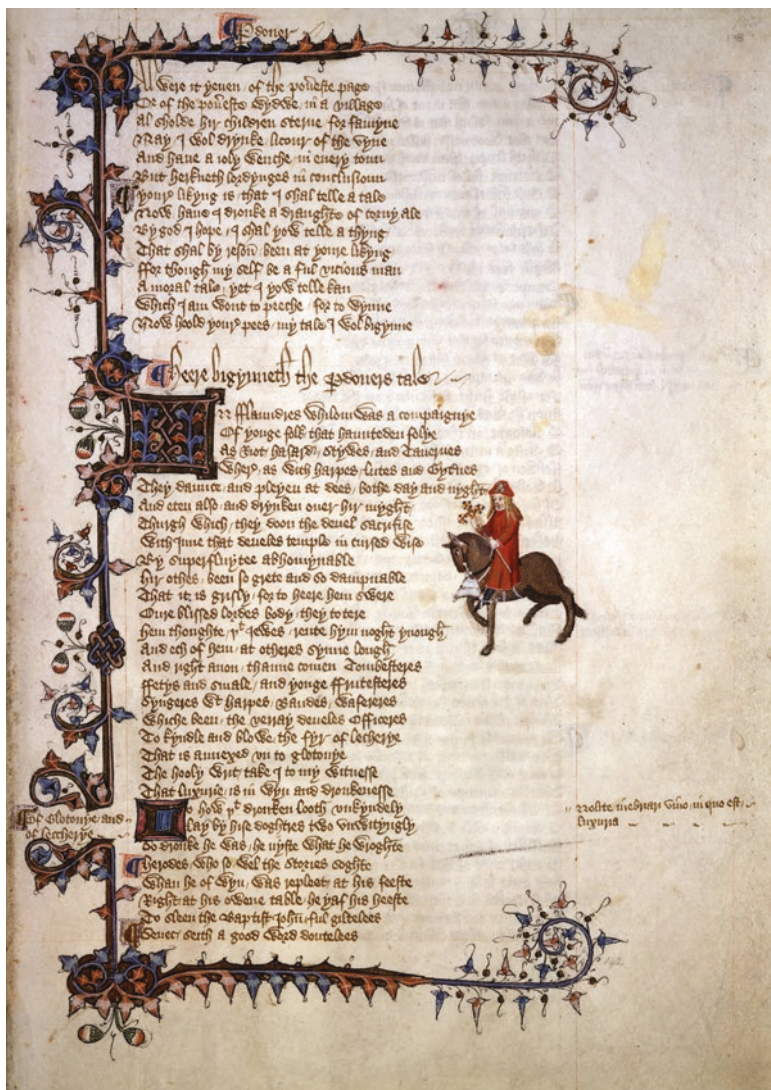


Fig. 8.2 The Pardoner. (*The Canterbury Tales*, Egerton family papers, Ellesmere, f. 138r, mssEL 26 C 9; The Huntington Library, San Marino, California)

the introduction of the Pardoner into his collection of tales. Nonetheless, he leaves room for fundamental religious doubt by not only destabilizing the link between the objects presented as relics and the religious narrative associated with them, but by allowing the Pardoner to openly demonstrate how and why such a link can be fraudulently established for the sake of personal gain. Nor does he stop there. At this point in *The Pardoner's Tale* the fake relics have been extensively contextualized in

terms of the man purveying them. However, the Pardoner goes on to present the relics' power as directly dependent on the moral worth of those seeking access to them:

If any wight be in this chirche now
 That hath doon synne horrible, that he
 Dar nat, for shame, of it yshryven be,
 Or any womman, be she yong or old,
 That hath ymaked hir housbonde cokewold,
 Swich folk shal have no power ne no grace
 To offren to my relikes in this place. (*The Canterbury Tales* ll. 378–384)

On one level this part of the Pardoner's speech further showcases his duplicitous mastery by illustrating how he pressurizes his audience into buying access to his relics and pre-empts complaints from disappointed buyers. However, it is also predicated on the notion that the power of the relics arises out of the relationship between the object, the holy figure to whom the object is linked, and the contemporary subject engaging with the object.

The Pardoner implies that if that relationship is disturbed, for example by the buyer being in a state of sin, the power of the relic will be out of reach. Where readers might expect to be reassured of the power and grace being channeled through the relics and offered to the person encountering the relic, the role is suddenly reversed and the question raised is not what powers the ostensible relic has, but whether the potential customers are morally able to access the relic's power.

However little we might trust the narrator, this model of reading the relationship between relic and subject suggests that the concept of objects such as relics unfolding their agency in relation to the actions of the living was familiar to medieval readers. That, indeed, to return to Sara Ahmed, the relationship between the relic and the faithful can be read as permeable in both directions in terms of the grace that might pass between them (Ahmed, 2010). Based on this premise, the relic might be said to develop a relational agency not just through offering access to saintly power and divine grace, but also through a denial of that power and grace to those who are not fit to access them.

It seems, then, that the fake relics of Chaucer's Pardoner encapsulate some of the ways in which the dead can retain the kind of 'vital force' that we might read as 'agency'. However, the agency involved here is predicated on the networks of relationships that unfold between the remains of the dead and the people or institutions engaging with them. So it is that hybrid objects, like relics or the bones excavated at the Free University invite us to develop a world-view in which the boundaries between subject and object are dissolved in order to encompass the transient, conjoined social identities such objects engender.

In the case of the reliquaries discussed above and the relics in *The Pardoner's Tale*, those relationships and identities are strongly mediated by the senses and by vision in particular. The act with which the Pardoner produces the fake relics from his bag is arresting because he is allowing the viewer to lay eyes on a purported relic. Yet at the same time, the extent to which the supposed relics are fully available to be accessed by all the senses—they are jumbled up in bags and could conceivably be felt, smelt and heard as well as seen—offends the presumed sanctity of valuable relics, sensory access to which would more usually be controlled by a reliquary.

Where the Pardoner's bag suggests disorder and entanglement, the reliquary speaks of a deliberate *mise-en-scene*, which hides and reveals the relic to a calculated degree and guides the observer's responses by embedding the relic within a visual or verbal narrative. By creating the figure of the Pardoner and placing the fake relics in his bag, Geoffrey Chaucer in turn performs a more literary *mise-en-scene*, which guides the reader to be skeptical of the Pardoner's offerings.

By contrast, first encounters with mass graves are rarely presented as having been set in scene. Rather, even when a mass grave is being described in carefully calibrated audio-visual media reports, the language used is that of surprise and revelation. Such graves are presented as having been 'discovered' or—less frequently—'uncovered'—either following forensic investigations or historical evidence. And, indeed, one of the first moments of dislocation concerning the mass grave must be the moment in which such a grave is uncovered, and its contents are exposed to view. The act of opening a grave has the potential to invoke the shame of grave robbery. Depending on who is encountering the grave and how the grave came about, observers may risk breaking a taboo by uncovering the bodies of the dead and invading what many cultures call 'their peace'. For that reason alone, 'laying bare' a mass grave implies an act of desecration.

The potential shock effect of the mass grave is also influenced by questions of scale—where the single bone that might be contained in a reliquary is shown to be precious, delicate and above all sacred in part because of its rarity, the mass grave presents us with an excess: a pile of bones whose haphazard burial presents a risk of reducing the bones, and by implication the deceased lying in the grave, to an undifferentiated mass. The meaning of a relic, on the other hand, is constructed upon the idea of the extraordinary. The exceptional qualities associated with a relic are emphasized by the reliquary in which it might be encased, and it is given unique meaning by its association with a specific hagiographical narrative. The implication is that engaging with a relic requires some form of acknowledgement of the sanctified biography it results from and places the onus on the person encountering the relic to have the necessary knowledge to respond correctly. In this encounter, the bone itself figures as meaningful through its contextualization and the story associated with it. To come across the same bone without that contextualization would be to 'misunderstand' it and to disturb the link between the object and its sanctity. The human remains in a mass grave evoke very different responses. One of the defining features of bodies in mass graves is that the link between the skeletons and the biographies of the deceased is at risk of being lost or eroded. If a relic is honored as a very specific human remnant, then a mass grave illustrates how human remains can become stripped of their biographical ties.

8.4 Encounters with Mass Graves in Jamlitz, Brandenburg

In order to explore the individual and social responses evoked by such a threatened stripping down of identity, I will turn now to the excavations in the Brandenburg village of Jamlitz. Jamlitz is situated practically on top of the former site of the Nazi

satellite concentration camp Lieberose. Until the end of the German Democratic Republic, the events that had taken place there were known to the State Security Service (Stasi) but had been largely kept quiet. In 1971, the Stasi's first response to discovering a mass grave containing 544¹⁰ of the 1342 previously missing victims of Nazi genocide was to extract and melt down the gold fillings from their teeth, producing just over a kilogram of gold that was dutifully documented and handed over to the department of finance (Kulick, 2008). The rest of the human remains they had uncovered were cremated. However, while these events took place out of the public eye, between 1998 and 2008 the village became the focus of increasing media attention, as local historians and archaeologists planned to have a site near the center of the village excavated (Jähnel, 2009). Their aim was to recover and properly commemorate the missing bodies of the remaining 700 Holocaust victims who had been imprisoned in the concentration camp and were known to have been shot and buried somewhere in the vicinity in February 1945.

Public opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of the excavation. Historians, archaeologists, politicians, administrators, survivor groups, and members of the German Central Counsel of Jews, among others, were unanimous in calling for the bodies thought to be buried there to be identified and properly commemorated (Jähnel, 2009; Schlichtermann, 2009). The central figure who was against an excavation was the absentee owner of the plot of land on which the mass grave was believed to be located, Hans-Jürgen H., who refused to sell his property and successfully denied the archaeological team access to his land for ten years, insisting above all that no memorial should be erected on the land (Berg, 2007). His point of view was supported by locals including his neighbor, Mr. N., who demanded that a line should finally be drawn under the matter in order to achieve closure (Möller, 2008).

A lengthy legal battle followed, in which the interior ministry of Brandenburg took the view that

it is justified that the survivors and descendants should seek certainty concerning the fate of their relatives, to facilitate an appropriate and dignified rest for the dead and an appropriate honoring of their memory.¹¹ (Kulick, 2008)

This point of view was rejected by the regional court, however, which concluded that the mere supposition of a burial ground did not offer a sufficient justification for disowning a private property owner (Kulick, 2008). This ruling was met with widespread criticism, Anetta Kahane, from the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, described the case as illustrating

¹⁰Other reports mention 577 skeletons (e.g. Möller, 2008).

¹¹„[e]s sei das berechtigte Anliegen Hinterbliebener, Gewissheit über das Schicksal ihrer Angehörigen zu erlangen, diesen eine würdige Totenruhe und sich selbst ein würdiges Gedenken zu ermöglichen.“

how thin the layer of ice covering the German history of unique crimes is. There are corpses buried just a few centimeters below the surface of our everyday life.¹² (Kulick, 2008)

Moreover, Kahane was eager to point out the historical continuities between the GDR government's hushing up of the existence of the mass graves and the current court ruling hindering the excavation. She pointed out:

The cold-hearted indifference of this course of action, the distortion of history and the silence surrounding the Jewish victims may have been characteristic of the GDR, but has anything really changed?¹³ (Kulick, 2008)

Kahane's response exemplifies the broader implications of this discussion where the court's decision suggests that the property rights of the living, in this case of Hans-Jürgen H., have precedence over the rights of the dead to have their resting place known and honored.

Finally, Hans-Jürgen H. was persuaded to sell the land to the local authority for an undisclosed sum of money, making the excavation possible. Throughout the negotiations, the case was extensively reported on, and a second narrative theme began to emerge alongside the question of where the grave might be found. Increasingly, journalists and others speculated as to why Hans-Jürgen H. and many of his neighbors were so opposed to the excavation, giving rise to the suspicion that not all residents of Jamlitz were sympathetic to the suffering of the Holocaust victims whose grave was being sought (Berg, 2007; Wendler, 2008).

8.5 Encounters with Mass Graves in Bosnia

Over the past two decades, similarly emotional issues concerning national and local history have been raised by the mass graves that have been excavated, in some cases repeatedly in Bosnia. In this context, a 2016 Mosaic Report (Vulliamy, 2016a) which was also featured in the *Guardian* (Vulliamy, 2016b) is illuminating. The article describes the mass graves that are now being exhumed in Bosnia and the genocide and grave-robbing the reassembled bodies bear witness to. "Who were these people?" asks the author, Ed Vulliamy, describing how the clothes and possessions the bodies have been matched with have been laid at the foot of each set of bones (Vulliamy, 2016b). The photograph that accompanies the report is initially jarring: the rows of human skeletons shown seem familiar, but the cheap trestle tables on which they are arranged present an incongruous setting for human remains.

In the picture at the top of the *Guardian* article, the setting has been blacked out so that we see only one disjointed skeleton, lying as if in darkness or inside the earth itself. The result is a widely recognizable image of death—broadly reminiscent of

¹² „wie dünn das Eis über der deutschen Geschichte einzigartiger Verbrechen ist. Nur wenige Zentimeter unter der Oberfläche unseres Alltagslebens liegen die Leichen.“

¹³ „Die kaltherzige Gleichgültigkeit dieses Vorgehens, die Geschichtsverdrehungen und das Verschweigen jüdischer Opfer mag für die DDR charakteristisch gewesen sein. Doch hat sich daran etwas geändert?“

the figures that dance across the foreground in medieval images of the *danse macabre*. The difference is that these are not complete, animated skeletons imagined in some riotous dance. They are not abstract images of death, but the remains of real bodies, whose violent deaths become visible in the incompleteness of the skeletons. And yet, the details of the report show that these assemblages of bones are themselves as much implicated in processes of storytelling as the animated skeletons of the *danse macabre*.

As the article describes, the skeletons that have been recovered in Bosnia were not all found intact, rather, many of them have been reassembled on the basis of DNA evidence (Vulliamy, 2016a). They bear the traces of having been buried in mass graves and then reburied in new mass graves, whose location closer to areas of military conflict was apparently intended to cover up the implication of genocide (Vulliamy, 2016a). It seems that the very location of the bones has been instrumentalized by one group involved in the Bosnian conflict to tell a misleading story about how the people buried in these mass graves met their death. Yet, the implied narrative was not believed, and the bones have been exhumed to allow them to tell another story on the basis of DNA samples and the evidence offered by the possessions found nearby. Clearly the hope for survivors and relatives is that this story will be a more ‘authentic’ one and will identify the bodies of the dead sufficiently to bury them and bring about a sense of closure.

As survivor Zijad Bačić explains:

I never thought I’d come back here, but I couldn’t sleep without knowing [...] what happened? Where were they? I had to find my missing father, all my uncles, and to find where they had buried my mother, younger brother and sister. (Vulliamy, 2016a)

As this case suggests, the ‘voices’ of the dead are particularly loud and contradictory where the official version of the history in which they play a part has not yet been settled to the satisfaction of all the stakeholders still living.

The bodies being exhumed in Bosnia, like the increasing number of relics circulating in thirteenth-century France, have been contextualized in ways that offer cause for doubt or even anxiety to those invested in truly identifying the remains they are confronted with. Thus, a diverse group of medieval stories, ranging from fabliaux to Helgaud’s biography of King Robert II of France (996–1031) include descriptions of the purposeful use of empty reliquaries to swear dishonest oaths, suggesting that contemporary Christians were well aware of the uncertainty attached to honoring unseen relics (Bartlett, 2013, pp. 313–314). In the case of the Yugoslav Wars, the people who reburied the bodies in new mass graves were attempting to rewrite recent history and the part they may have played in it. Meanwhile, later medieval accounts of the affective piety associated with medieval relics suggest that medieval Christians who believed in salvation history also felt that the moral battles in which their saints took part were still unfolding, making them stakeholders with similarly acute anxieties and desires concerning the authenticity of the relics they had access to and the stories with which they were associated (McNamer, 2010, pp. 1–21).

However, as the excavations in Bosnia show, what stands at the center of the social effects unfolding out of the excavation of mass graves is not the graves themselves, but their potential to change the self-perception or self-presentation of those engaging with them. This potential can take unexpected forms, as responses to mass graves are surprisingly varied, ranging from shock and outrage to curiosity and amusement. This, for example, is how the urbanism magazine *CityMetric* reported on the discovery of a mass burial of early modern plague victims in London in 2015:

The 1665–6 plague outbreak in London, called the Great Plague, killed an estimated 100,000 people, around a quarter of the city's population. If the Crossrail skeletons do turn out to be from that time, the dig could end up being a groundbreaking one, both for historians, and for virologists working on the virus today. (Boland, 2015)

The caption on the picture accompanying the report brings in an element of black humor, writing “Well, doctor, I’ve felt better.” Another picture from the same report is captioned “I see dead people” (Boland, 2015). In this instance, the emphasis is not on shame, but on scientific and archaeological curiosity, leavened by a more distanced, historicizing perspective on the plague. Clearly, the immense difference between a mass grave containing the long-dead victims of disease and a mass grave containing somewhat more recent victims of murder or genocide is significant in shaping any public response. Indeed, the shock of discovering mass burial of murder victims, such as those discussed in Jamlitz already represents a response not to human remains in themselves, but to the historical events that they bear witness to. What appears to be an immediate and unmediated response to the ‘thing’ that is a remnant of humanity, is in fact already a response to an implied narrative, within which the thing has become an object.

At this point it is illuminating to consider Ahmed’s discussion of ‘happy objects’—objects that become attached to a happy affect or emotion. She describes the association between object and affect, in this case happiness, as arising out of and being shaped by the intent of the subject encountering that object. She writes:

Orientations register the proximity of objects, as well as shape what is proximate to the body. Happiness can thus be described as intentional in the phenomenological sense (directed toward objects), as well as being affective (contact with objects). (Ahmed, 2010, p. 32)

This implies that a thing that is not associated with affect on our first encounter with it can become a ‘happy object’ through proximity to happiness. It follows that some form of temporality plays a role in how objects that become associated with affect are experienced, as our first encounter with them will involve attributing affect to an object that is at first sight neutral. This raises the question of how one might engage with such dualism. Is it perhaps like a brainteaser picture, where you can see either the two heads in profile or the vase but never both at the same time?

Such an oscillating, temporally layered effect has vital consequences for encounters with objects that evoke strong emotional responses. In the case of a relic, experiencing the ‘thing’ as a ‘thing’—for example a piece of bone—rather than an ‘object’ attached to a narrative calls into question not only the presence of the saint,

but the entire apparatus of religious symbolism that bridges the chasm between the faithful and heaven itself. More worryingly, perhaps, it disrupts the chain of signification that justifies the value of the reliquary and the acts of faith associated with it. Similarly, every encounter with a fully enclosed relic raises on some level the possibilities that the relic itself is not real, that a real relic might not have the powers ascribed to it, or, perhaps even, that the reliquary is empty and contains no relic at all. As we have seen above, these possibilities are a key factor in shaping encounters with things that have become attached to affective narratives.

The same is true of mass graves, which evoke very different responses depending on the form and context in which they are encountered and the events that led up to the mass-burial. The moment of laying open these graves can be followed by very different reactions. These depend on the pre- and postmortem biographies implied by the context that the location and contents of each grave offer. Thus, how the living engage with the ‘things’ that are human remains is already shaped by a biographical lens that turns those things into affective objects. That lens might be, for example, either the scientific curiosity associated with the plague pit, or the sense of tragedy associated with the mass graves of Holocaust victims.

If we adopt Gilles Deleuze’s model of identity as consisting of a series of transient states generated by shifting and overlapping networks of relationships to people and things, then these objects and the affect associated with them can be regarded as generating a transient identity in conjunction with the observer (Deleuze, 1998; Producers, 2013). As with medieval relics, modern observers of mass graves enter into a triangulated relationship with powerfully affective objects and the narratives that they are attached to, which provide ample room for positive and negative identification.

The suffering embodied by mass graves that testify to mass murder echoes in part the narratives of suffering in saints’ lives, many of which depict innocent victims of extreme injustice and inhuman cruelty. Engaging with objects that have been at the ‘living center’ of these events allows people from later eras to position themselves within these narratives of intense human suffering, while remaining on the right side of history. It follows therefore, that for those engaging with the remains of the dead in reliquaries and mass graves such as the one discussed at Jamnitz, the stakes in terms of identity are very high. The difference between experiencing yourself as the owner of a precious relic that can offer you saintly protection and experiencing yourself as someone who has been duped into a buying a fake or empty reliquary is immense. In Jamnitz, where the events of 1945 have been closely documented, the question is not what happened, but where the remains of those murdered can be found. Nonetheless, this question too has the potential to shape the relationships and identities of the people engaging with the land and landowners in question.

Famously, the dead tell no stories—so the transient identities and powerful emotions engendered by engaging with the human remains are at constant risk of becoming dislocated through a disruption of supposed links between the remains, their location, and the biographies with which they are associated. The historical

stories in which onlookers and participants believe themselves to be involved are therefore at risk of becoming intangible or unexpectedly changing course. This is what occurred in April 2009, when the excavations in the disputed area of Jamlitz commenced, accompanied by a furore of media attention and in the presence of political and religious representatives, only to find that there was no second mass grave at that site. In this respect, the discussion surrounding that particular piece of land resembles the many medieval reliquaries that we now know to have remained empty. In both cases the belief that they contained human remains associated with powerfully affective past events was sufficient to generate intense effects on contemporary observers, testifying to the great power exerted not only by human remains but by the very idea of their physical presence or proximity (Bartlett, 2013, pp. 313–314).

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