



The Vanishing Hitchhiker at Fifty-Five

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The Vanishing Hitchhiker at Fifty-Five

GILLIAN BENNETT

INTRODUCTION

The legend of the Vanishing Hitchhiker hardly needs an introduction. The core story concerns a traveller who offers a ride to a vulnerable-looking pedestrian, only to find his passenger has disappeared without trace. Later investigations reveal that the passenger was a supernatural entity, not a living human being at all.

The very first issue of this journal (then *California Folklore Quarterly*) carried an article on this story written by two young anthropologists (Beardsley and Hankey 1942). It was followed in the next volume by a second study which continued the discussion and updated some of the ideas (Beardsley and Hankey 1943). The papers attracted the immediate notice of one of the leading folklorists of the day (Jones 1944a), and, of late, the legend has received considerable attention which has resulted in many useful insights (see, for example: Luomala 1972; Wilson 1975; Fish 1976; Mitchell 1976; Langlois 1978; Bennett 1984; Goss 1984; Shenhar 1985; Glazer 1987; Dumerchat 1990; Nicolaisen 1990). Indeed, the Vanishing Hitchhiker has become perhaps the most frequently collected and widely discussed modern story. Nevertheless, Beardsley and Hankey's original work, as well as being one of the first full-length studies of any contemporary legend, remains perhaps the most complete folkloric examination of the Vanishing Hitchhiker.¹ The present essay reviews the original articles in the light of current information about the legend, and suggests modern readings of a common variant.

VANISHING HITCHHIKER STUDIES

The California Folklore Quarterly Articles

Beardsley and Hankey's studies were based on a corpus of 79 Vanishing Hitchhiker stories collected from 60 different locations in the United

States. The authors' initial aim was to link the legend with a real-life incident. When that failed, they tried to discover the "original" story. As they could find no obvious analogue in older traditions, they concluded that it was completely new, a product of the previous twenty years or so: "a story that is in no sense a survival from an outdated culture, but stands as a fully-fledged representative of the contemporary tale" (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:16). Though they were not able to collect versions from outside the US, they confessed that they "would not be surprised to find the story in any part of the so-called civilized world" (*ibid.*, 17). However, as most versions they had collected "had been heard by narrators before 1939" and the incidents were supposed to have happened some time ago, they judged that the story was dying out: "Though still told occasionally, it is no longer a vital, living tale" (*ibid.*, 22).

By analysing their corpus of stories they discovered four variants they thought were quite distinct. In stories of the Version A pattern (49 examples), the ghost is offered a ride by a motorist, gives an address and disappears. The motorist calls at the address he has been given, only to be told his passenger has been dead a number of years. In Version B stories (9 examples) the travellers(s) offer a ride to an old woman who issues a warning or prophecy before disappearing from the vehicle. The traveller(s) later receive information that she has been dead some time. In Version C (11 examples), a young man meets a girl at a dance and offers her a ride home; she asks to be put down at a cemetery and disappears; he later finds she is dead and this is confirmed by some personal possession being left on her grave. In Version D (6 examples) a mysterious old lady carrying a basket is offered a ride and disappears; later the traveller(s) discover that they have given a ride to the Hawaiian Goddess Pelee (see Beardsley and Hankey 1942). As well as these 75 classifiable texts, they had a number of mixed types.

They judged that Version A stories were probably "the closest to the original story" (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:25). Version B texts seemed to be limited to the Mid-West and dated to a very specific time (1933, the year of the Chicago Centennial Fair), so they concluded they might be "a block apart from the standard hitchhiker" (Beardsley and Hankey 1942:312). Version C had the most widely scattered distribution but was "the most divergent" in that, in the most recent stories, the girl was, they said, more of a "pickup" than a hitchhiker. They wondered whether this might be "a completely different story which is converging in details to resemble the Vanishing Hitchhiker" (*ibid.*, 311), and speculated that the hitchhiker's return to the grave was "the typical action of a vampire" (*ibid.*, 324).

They discovered a short story of 1824 which treated the same theme, but did not give it much weight (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:15). There were also five “divergent” stories in which the hitchhiker was picked up at a cemetery, rather than being set down there (Beardsley and Hankey 1942:311). Version D was only found in Hawaii.

In addition to these four basic types, they drew attention to other legends which, they said, “would be suitable for similar analysis” and which might throw some additional light on Vanishing Hitchhiker stories. These were “The Hitchhiking Thug” (nowadays more usually called “The Hairy-Handed Hitchhiker”) and “The Corpse in the Car” (cf. Bonaparte 1941; nowadays this is usually called “The Double Prophecy,” see Klintberg 1990). They also referred to a story they saw as a cross between the latter and Version B of the Vanishing Hitchhiker, where the hitchhiker issued a warning or prophecy, disappeared and was discovered to be a member of some religious order (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:20-21).

The authors went through all these variants identifying typical characteristics. The hitchhiker was always female, either a beautiful girl or a little old lady. The description of the girl, they said, was “intended to emphasize her attractiveness,” yet “hint at her ghostly nature”: “her dress is never coloured, but may be black or white” so it “resembles a shroud, or actually may be graveclothes.” Alternatively, the description might be intended to add plausibility to the plot by supplying a motive for the driver to offer her a ride (she may perhaps be inappropriately dressed for the weather or time of year). However that may be, “the original hitchhiker” was likely to have been “an attractive, implicitly delicate young girl.” In stories of the Version A type the girl was likely to have met a violent death (28 out of 60 examples), often in a car accident at the spot she haunts (13 examples); in 25 versions, the haunting was an annual event.

Updating the Model

Unsurprisingly, fifty years or more in which interest in contemporary legends has blossomed has led to this basic understanding being adapted in many ways. For a start, very obviously the story has been transmitted much more widely than Beardsley and Hankey suspected. By 1993 Paul Smith and I were able list over almost one hundred and fifty citations for the story in our bibliography of contemporary legend studies (Bennett and Smith 1993, index *s.v.* “Vanishing Hitchhiker”), and the number is growing daily. We also know that stories like this have a much wider distribution than Beardsley and Hankey ever guessed; in fact, it has been collected worldwide and from places as far apart as Algeria, Romania and Pakistan

(Dumerchat 1990:266-67; Brunvand 1986:49-50; Goss 1984:12). Perhaps this is not surprising either, since the stories turn up in a variety of media—literary works, story compilations, folklore journals, *Fate Magazine*, and as topical rumour reported by newspapers and heard in conversation.² Rather than dying out, the story is obviously still a vital part of contemporary folklore and legend telling.

We are also now much more aware of how culturally variable it is, and how easily it may be bent to reflect current events and preoccupations (see, for example: Luomala 1972; Wilson 1975; Mitchell 1976; Glazer 1986, 1987). As a consequence of these factors, Beardsley and Hankey's suggested 4-version typology has not stood the test of time particularly well. It would now be found both too restrictive and too elaborate. They suggested two "ghost" classes (Versions A and C), a "prophecy" category (Version D), and a "prophesying ghost" group (Version B), but nowadays scholars can locate texts in which hitchhikers are identified as aliens, angels, saints, Jesus, and malevolent spirits, among other things.³ Note, too, that Beardsley and Hankey themselves had a text in which the hitchhiker was identified as the Virgin Mary (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:21), and the list will almost certainly get longer as our knowledge of the tale increases. Plainly, the hitchhiker may be any non-human being the transmitting culture offers.

It would be simpler nowadays to see the hitchhikers as tending to fall into just two large overall groupings: that is, supernatural entities or numinous beings. They can then be further subdivided according to the way their real status is discovered. The vast majority of the hitchhikers first betray themselves by exhibiting a non-natural alternation between being there and not-there (the disappearance which has given the stories their title). But this alternation is not enough to establish the status of the hitchhiker beyond doubt (in fact, in very many versions the traveller, convinced the passenger is both living and human, tries to find an alternative explanation for the disappearance). The storyteller therefore needs to supply some secondary proof which the traveller (and the story audience) will accept as conclusive. So, in the most familiar forms (the story as told recently in regions of the western world that have a Protestant Christian religious tradition) numinous beings tend to reveal special powers such as prophecy,⁴ and supernatural beings (in this case invariably ghosts) tend to leave a personal possession on their grave as a token, or to ask to be taken to a specific destination where a train of circumstances will later provide proof that they are in fact dead.⁵ Following these motifs points up connections between familiar versions, variants, and related types, in ways which show

the variability and flexibility of the basic plot.

This is especially true of the hitchhiker in its “phantom” form. If we consider the range of behavioural possibilities ghosts might be expected to exhibit in a given time or place, we can see it stretching from malevolence, through neutrality, to benevolence. The familiar ghostly hitchhiker is plainly both neutral and harmless; but stories have been told in other times and places involving malevolent or benevolent ghosts who also accompany the living on journeys. Many of these have been treated as part of the Vanishing Hitchhiker complex or, at least, as closely related to it. At the malevolent pole there is “La Muerte,” the apparently beautiful woman who turns out to have a skull for a face. Mark Glazer has examples of “La Muerte” accompanying a pedestrian, mounting behind a horseman, getting a ride with a cart-driver, and hitching a ride with a motorist. He treats the latter as an “urban belief tale” related to the Vanishing Hitchhiker (Glazer 1984). Roger Mitchell has published a study showing how stories about *Taotaomonas*, the malicious Guamanian spirits, began first to acquire motifs borrowed from American stories about roadside ghosts, then to use motifs from the Vanishing Hitchhiker complex (Mitchell 1976). Ruth Ann Musick and Louis C. Jones have stories which feature alarming ghosts that accept rides with travellers (Musick 1977, 147; Jones 1944a:291); Jones treats them as part of the Vanishing Hitchhiker complex. Malevolent ghosts were also a landmark of lonely English lanes in the second half of the nineteenth century. Ghosts such as Shropshire’s “Madame Pigott” (Burne 1883:124-25) were said to jump on the back of a passing horse or wagon and, to the rider’s horror, travel with him until he was able to force it off or crossed running water. Though structurally different, these stories are to some degree thematically related, and in a previous study I treated them as distant ancestors of the Vanishing Hitchhiker (Bennett 1984). There may also be a distant connection between the hitchhiker in its “girl at the dance” form and stories such as “The Devil at the Dance/Disco/Card Party” (Winstanley and Rose 1926:162; Jones 1952; Herrera-Sobek 1988). In these stories, the ghost is picked up on the way to a dance and does not immediately disappear but spends some time in the traveller’s company before its real nature is discovered. Some scholars would not, perhaps, find it too fanciful to suggest “The Devil at the Disco” may be a differently gendered exploration of the same plot: at a risky social gathering someone meets an attractive member of the opposite sex who reveals his/her true nature when it is too late.

At the benevolent pole of ghostly behaviour there is an equal number of stories that connect with, or fade into, the Vanishing Hitchhiker com-

plex. In the legend of "The Ghost in Search of Help for a Dying Man" (Edgerton 1968), for example, a traveller encounters somebody in the street or in a public place and is asked to undertake an errand of mercy (usually to bring a doctor or a priest to a mortally sick person). The traveller complies, arrives in the nick of time, and later discovers that he has undertaken the errand at the behest of a ghost. Though in some of these stories the ghost does not accompany the traveller to the house, in others it does, and then disappears in the usual way. These are quite similar to Vanishing Hitchhiker stories, if not part of the same complex. Louis Jones presented a couple of examples in his response to Beardsley and Hankey (Jones 1944a:287-88), and my previous study of phantom hitchhikers includes a personal example which follows the familiar plot in almost every respect (Bennett 1984:56). Benevolent ghosts also appear in a handful of other stories which have also been collected as examples of Vanishing Hitchhikers. Beardsley and Hankey had one, for instance, in which a hitchhiking ghost saves the traveller from meeting his death at the spot she died several years ago (Beardsley and Hankey 1942:315). A similar story excited the French press in the early 1980s. It told how a girl hitchhiker warned a driver about a dangerous bend in the road and thus saved his life before vanishing. She was, of course, killed on that bend (see Campion-Vincent and Renard 1992:45; Dumerchat 1990:257-59; Dupi 1982). Less similar in its details, but still plainly connected by its theme, there is an English story in which the ghost of a man appears on the footplate of a locomotive and forces the driver to stop the train, thus saving the lives of all the passengers (Baker 1977:89-90). Granted that some scholars may see all these stories as no more than what Beardsley and Hankey in another context called "tenuous analogies" (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:14), they still indicate how the motifs of the classic Vanishing Hitchhiker story fan out in an interconnected network. The result is an unravelling series of stories that are so broadly related by theme that it is difficult to set boundaries between one type and another. As Keith Cunningham memorably said in his own exploration of Vanishing Hitchhiker variants, "storytellers will tell stories as they damn well please" (Cunningham 1979:48).

In another respect Beardsley and Hankey's conclusions remain at least "not proven." They believed that the story they had discovered was "a fully-fledged representative of the contemporary tale," probably about twenty or thirty years old. But we know now that it has to be older than this. Indeed, only three years later, Ernest Baughman was able to find a perfect Version A story which had been told in the 1870s (Baughman 1947). The

basis of Beardsley and Hankey's argument was that the travelling ghost "was not immediately recognized as a spirit" and there was no tale in folklore or literature till the latter half of the nineteenth century where a ghost was mistaken for a living human (Beardsley and Hankey 1943:13-16). Though this is, by and large, true (see Bennett 1987:157-99), the matter is not really as clear-cut as Beardsley and Hankey imagined. For a start, if one were to see the nature and behaviour of the ghosts in the stories as culturally variable, just as—say—the traveller's mode of transport is, then it is possible to find analogues of the Vanishing Hitchhiker in older traditions of more threatening and unmistakable roadside ghosts (cf. Bennett 1984:53-55). Conversely, it must be noted that in a handful of otherwise "classic" stories, the traveller does begin to suspect the hitchhiker's true identity, as the ghost becomes pale or cold or heavy or scares the horses (see, esp. Jones 1944, story no. 418, collected 1942; McMillan 1972:126-27 story collected 1970). In the third place, Beardsley and Hankey's arguments do not necessarily apply to prophesying hitchhikers. Michael Goss, for example, has discovered a recognizable hitchhiker story from the early seventeenth century. It is a Swedish story from the collection of a man who died in 1608 which tells how, in February 1602, two travellers encountered a "nice and lovely" girl on the road who, after doing various magical things, disappeared issuing a prophecy of wars and plagues (Goss 1984:46-47). He has also discovered a clear analogue with a token-leaving ghost in a ballad anthology of 1723-25 (*ibid.*, 45-46). These indicate that, just as there is no clear point at which one can say "this is, or is not, a Vanishing Hitchhiker story," there is also no certainty about the modernity, or otherwise, of the story.

DEATH AND PHANTOMS: THE GHOSTLY HITCHHIKER

Ghosts were the most numerous type of Vanishing Hitchhiker in Beardsley and Hankey's corpus (versions A and C accounted for 60 of the 75 classified texts), and they still appear to be the most popular. By using my and Paul Smith's bibliography, it is possible today to consult between 400 and 500 hundred published texts of the Vanishing Hitchhiker in its "phantom" form, most of which were collected within the last 60 years. This variant, which for clarity's sake I shall call the "Phantom Hitchhiker," will be the focus of the rest of this essay. Not only is it the most popular variant, but it has the added interest of revealing aspects of modern popular conceptions about death and dying. My discussion will be based on a sample of 150 of these texts.⁶

Fifty-five years on the archetypal phantom hitchhiker is still a girl. However, though other types of hitchhikers are not numerous, they do appear. In a handful of stories, the hitchhiker is a young man (Goss 1984:64-67, 96-97; see also Fonda 1977), and one is an old man (Eckerd 1982). There are quite a few elderly women but, unlike the little old ladies in Beardsley and Hankey's corpus, they are not prophets. Nowadays, the way these people died is still not necessarily specified, but where it is, accidental death still tops the list. Most of the accidents are vehicle crashes, but in a number of stories the hitchhiker is a pedestrian killed on the road while walking home from a party or visiting a relative. Some stories mix these two motifs so that a girl (in this case it is always a girl) is said to have died after being thrown out of a car by a repudiated lover and having to walk home, or by freezing to death because she could not hitch a ride. Elsewhere, the hitchhiker has been murdered or is the victim of a horrific or distressful death. A sick girl has died after being involved in a house fire, another has died from carbon monoxide poisoning; a man has been stuffed in a barrel and rolled downhill; an old lady has been cemented into a barn floor; and so on.

From the detail of the stories a picture emerges of the hitchhikers as random, and innocent, victims. In a story taken up by the UK press in 1977, the hitchhiker is a young man whom local people identify in three competing ways; it is said that "Judge Jeffries hanged his victims along this road" so the hitchhiker may be one of the wicked judge's victims; or maybe he is "the spirit of an American serviceman killed in a car crash"; or maybe he is an "innocent man hanged for murder" (Goss 1984:64-67). The hitchhikers' social position is most commonly liminal in some way—for example they might be a new father, a bride-to-be, a promising student, or a girl on the brink of adulthood. Most are also stereotypically "good"—loving husbands, caring mothers and beautiful daughters. In an American story, there are a whole family of hitchhikers, pious pioneers who were killed on the way home from a prayer meeting (Musick 1977:76). Most often, of course, the hitchhiker is that stereotypical innocent victim, a beautiful girl on the brink of adulthood. Whatever the status of the hitchhikers, however, storytellers like to stress how alone and helpless they are: "she seemed so lonely and we knew she needed help," as one puts it (Burrison 1989:216).

Joy Denied: The Fate of the Address-Giving Ghost

At this point I want to ask a question which Beardsley and Hankey did not address in their analysis—where were the ghosts going when they hitched their ride? The answer is obvious in most full-length collected versions. In stories where the ghosts leave a token in the cemetery (about half

the sample), it is plain they are going back to their graves. The coat, the sweater, and in one case the half-eaten turnip (see Eckerd 1982) they leave there, all show that it is the grave that is their final destination and resting place. Though some of these ghosts are out in broad daylight, I would see these as modern representatives of older traditions in which ghosts were forced to return to their graves before cock-crow (for examples, see Bourne [1725] 1977, Chap. 6). The behaviour of the other phantoms, however, on the face of it is more puzzling. Seemingly, they are haunting the scene of their deaths, unable to find rest and endlessly repeating their final journeys. But why should the spirits of innocent people be condemned to do this? In western tradition, especially in religiously-motivated ghostlore, haunting was a form of punishment for souls who had transgressed in life—like the Ghost of Hamlet's Father, they were: "Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night/And, for the day, confin'd to waste in fires/Till the foul crimes done in [their] days of life/Are burnt and purged away." A virtuous soul would be at rest in Heaven and would only appear, accompanied by sweet smells and celestial music, on a special mission such as to assure their heirs of the reality of salvation; it would certainly not be required to wander the highway on wet nights. Plainly, these "pitiable yet benign" ghosts (Goss 1984:14) are not being punished. Plainly, too, unlike the token-leaving ghosts, they are not going back to their graves, for the destinations they give or imply are either their home or a social gathering.

Clearly, any religiously-motivated scheme is an inappropriate framework for discussing the destination-giving hitchhikers. They are much more easily understood in terms of secular ghost traditions, especially the concept of ghosts that return to continue their lifetime's pursuits. There are a handful of such ghosts in earlier texts, but it is not until the early twentieth century that they become stock characters in the popular ghost lore of Britain and America (cf Giraud 1927; Hankey 1942; Jones 1944; Day 1991). Louis Jones begins his excellent, but neglected, book *Things That Go Bump in the Night*, with a deeply personal example, and there is another, more recent, example in an article by the founder of the Welsh Folk Museum (Jones 1959; Peate 1975). So the destination-giving hitchhikers could be seen as dying with things on their mind that force them to back to the world of the living. However, storytellers seem to be giving this old theme a new twist nowadays by changing the happy ghosts of the past into the desperate ghosts of the present and emphasising the futility of their endeavours. So the hitchhikers plead: "Please help me get home. I miss my wife and baby; I've got to get home" (Fonda 1977:56) or "the story has it that for all eternity he will keep trying to...get to his wife and child, but through all eternity he'll never complete the journey" (Cun-

ningham 1979:48). Read like this, the destination-giving hitchhiker is more than ever a representative victim. Indeed, they are in a worse condition than the token-leaving ones. The token-leaving ghosts return to their graves to rest, but there is no evidence that the destination-giving hitchhikers have ever rested or been in their graves at all. Instead, they are travelling the road in a secular version of Limbo.⁷

An attractive—and chilling—extension of this idea would be to use a “rites of passage” model to suggest that the hitchhikers died while separated from one social sphere and before being incorporated into another. We could then argue that they are caught in the transition zone in some sort of endless loop, trying either to progress forwards or to retreat backwards.

The “girl at the dance” stories are specially suitable for such a reading. Though this is not a particularly common variant—there are perhaps a dozen in my sample—I do not believe that it is in any way “divergent” as Beardsley and Hankey supposed. Indeed, its theme may underlie other stories where the flimsy and inappropriate clothing of the hitchhikers is emphasised: for example, they are often said to be clad in “a pale lavender dress, freshly pressed and sparkling clean” (Colby 1959:11), “an evening gown” (McMillan 1972:125), “a thin white evening dress” (Jones 1959:163), “a light summer dress” (Larson 1953:52), or a “long, sheer, white organdy dress” (Musick 1977:137). Beardsley and Hankey thought that these gowns were suggestive of a shroud and were meant to hint at the hitchhiker’s ghostly nature (Beardsley and Hankey 1942:310),⁸ but I am inclined to think that they are simply evening wear; or, given the girl’s liminality, are meant to suggest virginity. This reading is strengthened by the observation that there are local traditions in the UK about hitchhiking girl ghosts who have died on the eve of their wedding (see Goss 1984:106-109). It would be easy to see these sparkling creatures as having died between youthful virginity and adult sexuality, the dance or the wedding being the transition zone, either symbolic or actual. Their haunting could then be read as a persistent endeavour to break out of their betwixt-and-between situation and find rest, either by being incorporated into the future that should have awaited them, or by being taken back to the pre-separation state of home and family.

A more conservative reading along the same lines could be extended to all the destination-giving hitchhikers (both male and female ghosts, both home-goers and dance-goers). They could be read as dying before they could enjoy some simple human pleasure—a dance, fatherhood, marriage, a family reunion, homecoming, and so on. Their haunting—rather than being the re-enactment of the familiar joys of life (as in older ghost traditions) or the desperate search for an exit from an existential maze as

in the rites of passage model—is the compulsive enactment of pleasures denied. I am particularly attracted to this reading because it reveals one way in which at least this variant of the Vanishing Hitchhiker legend genuinely reflects a contemporary worldview.

It points up the forms that the traditional preoccupation with “bad deaths” takes in the western world today. Ghost stories have always been a useful source of information about what it is to “die badly” because the reasons for the dead being restless have traditionally been sought in the circumstances of the death. Pre-Reformation ghosts came back, for example, to ask for masses to be said for their souls because, without those necessary rites, they could not enter Heaven (Thomas 1971:596-97); post-Reformation ghosts came back to tell their widows where they had hidden their money because, having left their earthly affairs in disarray, they could not rest in peace (see, for example, Grose 1790:5-6); nineteenth-century ghosts came back because they could not or would not shake off the turbulence created by their wicked lives (Bennett 1987:165); twentieth-century ghosts come back because they died violent, sudden deaths by accident, murder or suicide (see, for example, Hankey 1942; Jones 1944b). So we can trace a progression from religiously-defined concepts of a bad death, through socially-defined concepts and morally-defined concepts, to personal and individualistic concepts focusing on the manner, not the consequences, of death.⁹ Phantom Hitchhiker stories fit the latter pattern perfectly. As they represent the ghosts as victims and death as a sort of victimhood, they might indicate the types of death that are most feared in contemporary society. Though they are so blameless, death has selected these people at random; they have had their life ripped from them by injustice, violence, or accident; they have died separated from their homes and families; and, above all, they have died “in the fullness of life,” on the threshold of a new joys yet cheated of life’s promise. Their endless journeys could be seen as attempts to retrieve what they have lost—a quest for life itself.

This brings us to another way in which the most familiar Phantom Hitchhiker variants seem essentially modern. They rely on a very limited number of traditional ghostly motifs: it might even be said that they are most remarkable for what they miss out. In particular, they reflect a ghostlore that is no longer underpinned by concepts of Heaven, Hell and the Afterlife. It would be silly to ask where the destination-giving phantoms have returned from. They are plainly neither in Hell nor in Heaven. Their Heaven was on earth; their Hell, if you like, is that they have been forced precipitately to leave it. Though they are exemplary characters, they are not harnessed to any social rhetoric either: their virtue is just a way of

emphasising the cruelty of death. Phantom hitchhikers therefore confirm that, for a perhaps substantial portion of the population of the western world today, death and dying are conceptualised within a secular and individualistic framework. The underlying assumption of all these stories is that it is bad to die. To that extent, any sort of death is “bad”—hence the ghostly hitchhikers who try to prevent other people’s deaths. Loss of life is just that—loss.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, the legend of the Vanishing Hitchhiker seems a more complex, diffuse and subtle story than it did fifty years ago to its first researchers. There can be no certainty about its age, the search for its origins has long since been abandoned as futile, and it appears to be much more widely distributed and culturally variable than was at first suspected. The result is that it is now best regarded, not as an easily definable type, but as a more diffuse complex of related stories. Even so, its themes and motifs are both so adaptable and so ubiquitous that it is difficult to draw maintainable boundaries between it and other stories about numinous or supernatural beings interacting with living mortals on roads or similar liminal places.

Variants in which prophesying numinous beings are out on the road seem to have been told for nearly four centuries. Again, the motifs used in stories about “token-leaving” phantoms have roots in older traditions and storytellers often use them in ways that have remained substantially unchanged in a hundred years. Stories about destination-giving phantom hitchhikers as told in Protestant regions of the western world today, however, eschew some of the more traditional motifs, thereby confirming the extent to which ideas about death and dying have become secularized and individualized. Modern anxiety about “bad ways to go” fixes primarily on the manner of dying, not the consequences of being dead. The hitchhikers in the stories have died “undeserved” and “meaningless” deaths by accident or violence, separated from home and family, their life curtailed just at the moment when it held most promise. The phantom hitchhikers walk because death is deprivation, and they refuse to submit to it.

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Notes

- ¹ For a book-length examination from a Fortean angle, see Goss 1984.
- ² For *Fate*, see Toews 1977; for a literary redaction, see Flanagan and Hudson 1958:99-101 and Murail nd; for story compilations, see Brunvand 1981, 1984 and 1986; for topical rumour in the press see Barritt 1987 and Goss 1984 *passim*; for an oral version, see Bennett 1984.
- ³ For aliens see Roberts 1987; Toews 1977; for angels Knierim 1985:241; Campion-Vincent and Renard 1992:51-52; see also Brunvand 1986:51; for saints Wilson 1975; Cunningham 1979:47; Dumerchat 1990:264; for vampires Goss 1986: 1707; for Jesus Inglis 1972; Fish 1976; Klintberg 1976; Cunningham 1979:46; for nuns Dodson 1943; Cunningham 1979:46; for malevolent spirits Mitchell 1976; Dumerchat 1990:266-67.
- ⁴ Beardsley and Hankey's Version B, the prophesying ghost, is an exception and seems very strange to me. In general, prophesying hitchhikers tend to be numinous beings—gods, saints, angels and, by extension, nuns—not supernatural entities. Indeed, I have not been able to find any prophesying ghosts outside Beardsley and Hankey's corpus of tales.
- ⁵ In passing, it should be noted that Beardsley and Hankey's suggestions that Version A stories always end with a relative's testimony and Version C stories with the ghost leaving a token at the grave is not borne out in my sample of texts either. This pattern is by no means so invariable in the sample of texts I have access to. Girls encountered at a dance (or, in my sample, more usually on the way to or from a dance) do not necessarily leave tokens but may give destinations (their home or the dance), and people encountered on the road and taken to or near their home sometimes leave tokens. Some stories have both motifs. It seems really to depend on the storyteller's fancy.
- ⁶ As well as the texts in Beardsley and Hankey, and others mentioned in the text of this essay, I have used texts taken from the following books and articles: Boase 1976; Browne 1976; Campion-Vincent 1988; Carmer 1958; Caskey 1977; Glazer 1986; Goss 1986; Hind 1979; Hurley 1952; Klintberg 1989, 1990; Kvide-land and Sehmsdorf 1988; Lewes 1911; Limón 1983; Miller 1946, 1947; Miller 1973; Montalbán 1986; Montell 1987; Randolph 1952; Screeton 1980; Smith 1941; Smith 1982; W.W.P. 1941; White 1990.
- ⁷ My thanks to Julia Bishop for this insight.
- ⁸ Because, in at least one literary version the traveller and the ghost make love and the traveller subsequently goes mad, this variant has also sometimes been regarded as a modern update of older legends about vampires (Beardsley and Hankey 1942:234; see also Goss 1984:46), but personally I think this is unduly literary. One should not make too much of the "going mad" ending either, for this motif is often used as a coda in urban legends, a rhetorical device designed to double the shock of the dénouement.
- ⁹ That all these themes are echoed in folk stories about ghosts can be easily confirmed by glancing at Stith Thompson's Motif Index (Thompson 1955-1958). For example, numbers E 410-420, "The unquiet grave," include the following

motifs: "Dead cannot rest because of sin," "Unconfessed person cannot rest in grave," and "Dead cannot rest until money debts are paid." Preceding this is a list of types of the restless dead: dominant themes here are haunting because of injustice, injury, tragic love, death in war or by accident or violence.

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