

Case Study Review: Arrival Apparitions (“Vardøgr”)

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*Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee!*

- William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Act I, Scene 4)

Often in popular culture, apparitional experiences are depicted as instances in which a person suddenly encounters the discarnate spirit of a certain individual who is known to be deceased, which has somehow persisted in the time following that individual's death. But throughout the annals of psychical research, there have also been a number of documented cases in which people have spontaneously encountered the apparitions of *living* individuals, as well. Among these are cases in which the apparition of a living individual is seen or heard at a certain location prior to that person's actual arrival at that location. Reports of these harbinger-like apparitional experiences seem to come most commonly from the Scandinavian country of Norway, where they have often taken the form of auditory manifestations which seem to mimic the presence of a person who has just arrived. For instance, the rattle of a key in a door lock may be heard, or the sound of shoes falling to the floor, or the rhythmic pattern of familiar footsteps (Editors of Time-Life Books, 1988, p. 100). These experiences have been such a part of Norwegian culture throughout the years that the term *vardøgr* was introduced as a convenient way to refer to them.

While reports of *vardøgr*-type experiences are much fewer in number outside of Norway, some have occasionally surfaced in the parapsychological and psychical research literature. Some of the earliest were described by author Catherine Crowe in her classic 1848 book *The Night Side of Nature*, in which she related accounts of various types of apparitional experiences. Included among the *vardøgr*-type experiences she related was the following one, which she had received from a man who worked as a publisher in Edinburgh, Scotland:

His housekeeper was in the habit of calling him every morning. On one occasion, being perfectly awake, he saw her enter, walk to the window, and go out again without speaking. Being in the habit of fastening his door, he supposed he had omitted to do so; but presently afterwards he heard her knocking to come in, and he found the door was still locked. She assured him she had not been there before. He was in perfectly good health at the time this happened (Crowe, 1848, Vol. I, pp. 284 – 285).

Two *vardøgr*-type experiences were documented by Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers, and Frank Podmore (1886) in their two-volume anthology *Phantasms of the Living*. One of them was the one described by a Mrs. Smith:

My father and mother lived, when young, near St. Albans, in a house separated by three fields from the high road. My father had been staying in Warwickshire, and was returning by the night mail coach. My mother had risen early to be ready for his return, and after seeing that breakfast and a bright fire were ready for his reception, she took her work to the window and sat there awaiting my father's return. She presently looked up and saw him approaching; she watched him

until close to the house, when she went to the door intending to meet him, but he had vanished. Half an hour afterwards he really arrived. My mother was a Quakeress of exceeding truthfulness, and possessing to the full the perfect self-command and self-repression inculcated by her sect. I have often heard her say that she never had seen my father more distinctly than on that occasion (Gurney et al., 1886, Vol. I, p. 516).

At least one vardøgr-type experience is known to have found its way into the vast collection of reported spontaneous psychic experiences that Louisa Rhine had assembled at the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory. That particular case went as follows:

A little old lady came around every Thursday morning selling eggs from door to door and she always stopped at my house. This Thursday I had to go to town and as I was coming up the little road leading to my house I saw the egg lady standing on the porch. I noted that she was wearing a new pink dress and a sort of little bonnet to match. Just as I spied her, she turned to step off the porch and called to her to wait and then she just disappeared.

She never came out my gate, she didn't go anywhere, she just wasn't there. I was not more than 50 feet away when I first saw her and there were no bushes or plants to obstruct my vision. Later in the afternoon a knock sounded on my door and when I responded there stood the little egg lady dressed in pink and with her basket on her arm. I told her I was sorry I was not at home when she called about an hour earlier. She looked very surprised but smiled as she answered, "But this is the first time I have been here today. An hour ago I was just leaving the ranch. I was thinking about you and wondering if you wanted some eggs" (Rhine, 1957, p. 22).

In surveying 850 people about the details of their apparitional experiences, Celia Green and Charles McCreery (1975) had come across a few vardøgr-type experiences, including this one from a woman who had been expecting her husband's arrival:

My late husband had been to the hospital for a check-up, and on his way home he was to call at the local baker's for a plate pie. Around his time for return, and having the lunch just ready, I went to the front door, and saw him walking on the opposite side of the road, with the pie held in his outstretched hand. I went inside and was all prepared for his walking in the back door. Nothing happened. Half an hour elapsed before he came in with the pie, as I had seen it upon his hand. I asked him which side of the road he walked. The same side I always do, and cross over at the Crescent, nearly opposite our house. Exactly the spot I had seen him (pp. 181 – 182).

Another vardøgr-type case related by Green and McCreery (1975) was notable because the person having the experience apparently did not know the individual whose apparition was seen during the experience:

A few years ago I was crossing the bridge over the River Idle here, 10 a.m. I saw at the end of a range of buildings fronting the river a young man, seated on a slab of cement. He was dressed in a grey suit, wore a grey cap, had on his knees a drawing board, and was obviously sketching. Seated on the grass behind him was a lady I knew, and with her, her small son. Passing the buildings, and going down the lane behind them, I came to the cement slab, but there wasn't the young man on it. Enquiry to the lady as to where he had gone, brought the reply, 'There hasn't been anyone here since we came, half an hour ago.' Rather puzzled, I didn't pursue the matter. At 4:30 p.m. I crossed the bridge, and there again was the young man. The afternoon was hot, and his coat was on the river bank. When I reached the spot, he was there in the flesh, so I asked him where he had disappeared to in the morning. He assured me he hadn't arrived in Retford until 1:30 p.m. (p. 181)

Two of the most recent vardøgr-type cases were reported by David Leiter (2002), one of which had occurred among his own family in the late 1970s/early 1980s. At the time of the experience, he had been routinely driving home from work:

I came to my normal exit on the turnpike...and drove the half-mile or so final leg of the commute, over local town streets. I parked in my normal spot in the driveway in front of our house, took my briefcase and sports jacket out of the car, and entered through the front doorway, which was always unlocked in the daytime (with two teen-aged children running in and out constantly).

My wife was at her usual spot in the kitchen preparing supper. Up to this point, it was a scenario that had occurred thousands of times before during our marriage of almost 20 years. She heard me come in, came out of the kitchen, and asked, "What are you doing coming in again?" I answered with my own question, something like, "What are you talking about?" She replied, "You came in about 10 minutes ago and just went upstairs." At this point, I began to get somewhat irritated with her seemingly irrational questions and statements, and said basically, "Hon, what are you talking about? I just now shut down the car in the driveway, and came in!"

She responded with mounting confusion and agitation, insisting that I'd come in a little while earlier and had simply gone upstairs. Then to support her contention, she called upstairs to our son, who was in his bedroom with the door closed, and asked, "[Son's nickname], did you hear your father clump up the steps a little while ago?" He responded with a muffled, "Yeah, Mom."

At this point, my wife became visibly upset and insisted that I check all the upstairs rooms for "the intruder," which I did dutifully, if somewhat grudgingly. After a full inspection, including closets and under beds, I reported back to her. There was no one upstairs except our son.

In defense of my wife (and for my own marital well-being), she is one of the most practical, level-headed people I know. I have never known her to imagine things, hallucinate, or behave in an unusual way – *never!* Further, nothing even remotely like this had ever happened to either of us before. The same goes for our son (pp. 623 – 624, italics in original).

In recounting her experience, Leiter's wife stated that the vardøgr-type figure of her husband that she had apparently seen entering the house when she first glanced out the kitchen had looked just like her normal husband. The figure had a neutral expression on its face, and was also carrying a briefcase and sports jacket as it went upstairs. She took particular note of its atypical behavior, in that her husband regularly came into the kitchen to greet her when he arrived home, rather than simply walking upstairs (p. 624).

In addition to his own experience, Leiter (2002) also cites several other vardøgr-type cases in his report that have appeared in the popular and psychical research literature.

What Could Possibly Be Involved Here?

Assuming that all of these vardøgr-type cases had indeed taken place exactly as recounted, and that they were not the product of conventional factors such as sensory cuing, imagination, embellishment, or mistaken identity, then how might we possibly account for them? As the late Karlis Osis (1981) has pointed out, there have been two main theoretical approaches taken toward explaining the apparitional experience. The first approach is one we might call the *psychic projection* theory, in which it is thought that the person who witnesses the apparition is psychically obtaining information about the person whose apparition is seen (who

we'll refer to as the "agent"), whether through telepathy or clairvoyance.¹ Often times in cases of ESP, this information appears to be experienced in the inner "mind's eye" of the witness. But in this instance, it is thought that the information is being psychically projected outward to visually manifest (from the subjective point of view of the witness) as an apparitional form of the agent.

The second approach, which we might call the *external presence* theory, is one that has implications for the possibility of survival after death. It basically posits that the agent's inner consciousness (or personality, soul, spirit, essence, or whatever you wish to call it) is able to externally extend outward from the body and occupy the space where the witness is located, where it is subjectively seen by the witness in apparitional form.

How plausible might these two theoretical approaches be at the present time, in the case of vardøgr-type apparitional experiences? While there currently isn't a lot of data for us to make a definitive case for either approach, perhaps we might be able to form a preliminary basis for logically determining which way the scales would be likely to tip. Let's consider each approach in turn, beginning with the external presence theory:

As mentioned above, the external presence theory posits that the agent's inner consciousness (or personality, soul, spirit, essence, etc.) becomes externalized and occupies the space where the witness is located. Arguably, if this inner part of the agent does indeed have some degree of consciousness (based on the assumption that this is the part of us which is capable of surviving beyond death, and which is capable of manifesting as an apparition), then we might expect that it would be capable of retaining some form of self-awareness while externalized during a vardøgr-type experience.

One way to basically test this argument would be to see whether the agent exhibits any form of awareness either during or after the experience. For instance, perhaps the agent might be able to perceive and accurately describe some of the details regarding the location and the actions of the witness at the time of the experience. Or at the very least, perhaps the agent might exhibit some minimal form of awareness that he or she was externalized at the time of the experience.²

The number of apparitional cases in which the agent seems to exhibit this kind of awareness appears to be quite small. One case which seems to come rather close is the one described by G. N. M. Tyrrell in his book *Apparitions* (1953/1961, pp. 116 – 119). In that case, a man traveling aboard a ship sees an apparition of his wife in his cabin, on a stormy night when he is still miles away from her at sea. When he arrives home, his wife asks him whether he received a visit from her, as she felt worried about him and was apparently intent on seeking him out. She was able to describe the general structural layout of his ship cabin and clearly state the actions she performed when she saw him, which were consistent with those that he had witnessed her spectral figure perform in the cabin. Although this might seem to indicate that she was aware of being there where her husband was, Tyrrell also points out that we can't rule out the possibility of reciprocal telepathy occurring between them in this instance.

We might also consider the cases in which individuals had made quasi-experimental attempts to make themselves appear in spectral form to other unsuspecting people who were

¹ Or maybe even retrocognition (i.e., psychic perception of the past), in the case of haunting apparitions.

² The Oxford philosopher H. H. Price (1960) touched upon a similar kind of issue when generally discussing apparitional experiences in which the apparition seems to exhibit some degree of "consciousness" (pp. 124 – 125).

located some distance away at the time (i.e., these individuals were willfully trying to make an apparition of themselves appear to someone else they knew – someone who was not aware that they were making this attempt). These cases are also relatively few in number, with accounts of them appearing in the classic anthology *Phantasms of the Living* by Gurney et al. (1886, Vol. I, pp. 104 – 106) and in Frederic Myers' book *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903, Vol. I, pp. 688 – 690).³ It seems that with only one or two exceptions at most⁴, there generally doesn't seem to be any clear indications that the agents in these cases were aware that they had been successful in externalizing themselves and appearing to the intended person in spectral form. Nor does it seem that they themselves were able to perceive the intended person and their surroundings to any degree. Similarly, in most of the vardøgr-type cases described above, we might note that there also seems to be no clear indication that the supposed agent was aware that he or she had been seen by the witness in spectral form. One might argue that this lack of awareness on the part of the agent could be considered a point against the external presence theory.

With regards to the psychic projection theory, one might perhaps look at vardøgr-type cases as being the apparitional analogue of precognition, in which the witness has a premonition-like experience regarding the supposed agent that manifests in apparitional form (rather akin to the vivid sensory-like veridical hallucinations that some witnesses have reported during spontaneous experiences of ESP; e.g., see Case #20 in Gurney et al., 1886, Vol. I, p. 194). Alternatively, if there is some indication that the supposed agent was thinking about the witness around the time of the vardøgr experience (as the old lady stated she was in the vardøgr-type case from the Rhine collection, described above), then perhaps the experience was mediated through telepathy.

Of course, a question which may naturally arise at this point is, "how would the transition be made from a psychic component (obtained through ESP) to apparitional form?" At the moment, the answer remains purely in the realm of speculation, but perhaps some basic guesses can be made: Perhaps the apparitional experience that the witness has is an illusory form of psychic perception, in which a psychic component is essentially "laid over" their ordinary sensory field, to where it merely appears that the psychic component is manifesting in the external space around the witness (Case #20 in Gurney et al., 1886 would seem to reflect this kind of extrasensory "overlay").

Or, perhaps in literal reference to the concept of psychic projection, the psychic component is somehow "projected" outward from the witness' mind (possibly through the use of psychokinesis) to create an apparitional form, in a manner analogous to the concept of a "thought form" (Roll, 1994). This possibility was considered in a case where haunt-type apparitions were reportedly seen in a Japanese restaurant by the restaurant's manager and his staff (Roll, Maher, & Brown, 1992). When examined closely, the two apparitions did not seem to represent the spirits of people who were known to be dead. Instead, the apparent actions and personalities of the apparitions seemed to symbolically reflect the manager's own repressed

³ See also my supplemental article, "Case Study Review: Experimenting with Apparitions of the Living?", for a summary and further discussion of these cases.

⁴ In at least one of these exceptions (described in Myers, 1903, Vol. I, 688 – 690), the awareness seemed to manifest in the form of a dream that the agent had, and although the agent reported seeing the witness in the dream, it was not in the actual place that the witness was located.

inner needs for mentorship and casual downtime to divert his mind away from his demanding managerial duties. The manager was also found to exhibit personality characteristics consistent with PK, somewhat akin to that of an RSPK (or “poltergeist”) agent. On this basis, it was suggested that perhaps the two apparitions seen in the restaurant were examples of PK-based “thought forms” which reflected the manager’s own needs. Later on, it was reported that when the manager eventually chose to leave the restaurant, these two apparitions were never seen again.

Considering all the above, and barring any further evidence to clearly support the external presence theory, I would currently say that the psychic projection theory tends to have a slight tip of the scale in its favor in possibly accounting for vardøgr-type experiences. But again, it is important to emphasize that the issues and ideas discussed in this section remain unresolved and are still largely conjectural, so it is quite likely that they could change based on additional incoming evidence regarding apparitional experiences. We have yet to see “what lies beyond,” so to speak... 😊

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