

## The Technological Case of Charles Dexter Ward

The *Case of Charles Dexter Ward* is a novella that is preoccupied with knowledge and its retention. H.P. Lovecraft's story explains the relationship between knowledge and technology in several ways: how human knowledge is transmitted through generations; how knowledge may be filtered selectively, discarding the unwholesome bits while retaining the rest; and how technology may immortalize knowledge. This last aspect of knowledge, namely its entrainment into an eternal current, causes much concern for Lovecraft, for he claims that certain aspects of human thought need, as a necessary condition for humanity, be erased from history. In this way, Modernity presents a difficult challenge for humanity because it threatens to nullify what is succinctly beautiful, natural, and unique about the impermanence of human life, knowledge, and experience.

The inability of science to illuminate the unknowable questions in life, such as the location of the soul in the human body, is a large thematic concern of the novella. In the search to answer existential questions, Lovecraft includes modern objects, such as the photostatic copier, the electric fireplace, and the electric torch, as important participants in the narrative. If one may classify these then-recent technological objects as the representations of modern science, then one primary driver of Lovecraft's story is the preoccupation with Modernity as it pertains to knowledge. Describing the transport of Curwen's portrait to the Ward home, Lovecraft notes that "... provisions were made for [the painting's] thorough restoration and installation with electric or mock-fireplace in Charles's third-floor study library" (52). In this image, both the portrait and the electric fireplace are artificial representations of real things. The face in a portrait is a static, two-dimensional representation of an entire person. The electric fire, likewise, is only a flat representation of a fire, lacking in aspects such as heat, smell, and residual ashes, that an otherwise real fire would be expected to possess. Indeed, Lovecraft makes this point particularly clear later in the story: "Willett appeared in the hall, haggard

and ghastly, and demanding wood for the real fireplace on the south wall of the room. The furnace was not enough, he said; and the electric log had little practical use.... a man brought some stout pine logs..." (120). Curwen now metonymically associated with the portrait, is compared to an artificial fire, a product of an arcane technology, black magic. The reincarnation of Curwen in the hands of Charles is a result of an arcane sort of representational technology. In the 20th Century Curwen is merely an image of a human being, a vessel for the idea of the old Curwen. His lack of Modernity is manifested by his language; his lack of human emotion is represented by his ill will; and his lack of life is evidenced by his ghastly countenance. Curwen's peculiarities all verify the observation that he is not fully human, but he is rather a shadow of a human. The fire from the electric log is also not fully a fire, but the shadow of something found in nature. This representational duality, similar to Plato's Allegory of the Cave, explains Modernity as a force that is "cleverly realistic", yet fully unnatural and unreal (52). For this reason, the fire is "not enough" as a means of dealing with Curwen's supernatural Materia.

Representation and illumination can be further examined by analyzing a related discovery of the modern age: The electric torch. When Dr. Willett descends into Curwen's subterranean complex, he brings with him one such source of light, a fairly high-tech toy in the 1920s. Lovecraft writes that Willett reached "...a large carved altar on a base of three steps in the centre; and so curious were the carvings on that altar that he approached to study them with his electric light. But when he saw what they were he shrank away shuddering, and did not stop to investigate the dark stains..." (100). Evidently, the electric torch is not effective in illuminating the cosmic underpinnings of Curwen's dark works. Despite casting rays of light, there is something selective about the kind of light emitted from the electric torch: The flashlight only casts a modernist light. In this sense, the light of science may very well be sufficient to illuminate other works of science, the illumination of arcane secrets

only reveals horrifying visions that no modern viewer can behold. Accordingly, science, as represented by the electric torch, is a self-contained and self-perpetuating invention, unable to illuminate any reality outside its realm of axioms and methodologies. Science begets science, so to speak. Despite the apparent illumination of the stains, Willett cannot stop to investigate Curwen's secrets in the crypt.

The understanding of the arcane requires a different sort of light—one that is spiritual, not material. Dr. Willett's search in the crypt comes to a halt, in an ironic turn of events, when he drops the electric torch in a pit and crawls blindly in the catacombs. Perhaps it is at this moment of blindness that Willett is truly close to understanding Curwen. Indeed, Lovecraft insists that Willett's “sense of grim purpose was still uppermost, and he was firmly determined to leave no stone unturned his search for the hideous facts behind Charles Ward's bizarre madness” (105). Having investigated the maze, Willett knows about the chemical laboratory, about the trapped souls below, about the jars labeled “Custodes” and “Materia.” Despite his discovery of the underground maze by scientific investigation, Willett's rational knowledge of the crypt, as a physical object that exists in time and space, does not cast a bright enough light for him to find his way around in the dark. His blindness calls into question the legitimacy of his methods. Willett is rendered useless without his light, and is not in control despite his modern means. In fact, When Willett drops the electric light, the action is characterized as reflexive and unconscious: “He dropped the electric torch from a hand drained of muscular power or nervous coördination, nor heeded the sound of crunching teeth which told of its fate at the bottom of the pit. He screamed and screamed and screamed in a voice whose falsetto panic no acquaintance of his would ever have recognised...” (102). Here, Willett is a modern man of science, whose realm of rational expertise is incompatible with the object of his search. The arcane purpose of Curwen is truly elusive to modern science. The Truth of the maze is so much outside of

the rational realm that Willett's basic motor functions and senses start to break down. At this moment of profound horror, Willett demonstrates by abject physicality that Curwen's art is one that “no acquaintance” of this world would ever recognize.

Willett's blindness in the crypt exemplifies the ineptness of physical and scientific light, while it symbolizes the emergence of a spiritual and moral vision in Willett. Summoning Plato's analogy again, Willett may be said to be blinded by the brightness of Curwen's Truth, which he encounters in the darkness of the catacombs. If Willett as a modern man, it is equally important to understand who Charles Dexter Ward is. Indeed, Willett and Charles are very similar in the way they relate to Modernity: Both are diligent researchers, both make use of modern technology, Charles extensively uses photostatic copiers to record the “Curwen data” and Willett uses the electric torch to search the Curwen maze. Both characters employ empirical thinking to reach conclusions. When it comes to investigating the darker and more slippery aspects of reality, however, Willett possesses a moral purpose, a pragmatic and professional drive to help the Ward family, while Charles proves himself a limitless consumer of knowledge, with an academic purpose to restore the “neglected arts of old” (57). While Lovecraft concedes that “[Charles] was never a fiend or even truly a madman, but only an eager, studious, and curious boy whose love of mystery and of the past was his undoing,” he is careful to assert that Charles “stumbled on things no mortal ought ever to know, and reached back through the years as no one ever should reach; and something came out of those years to engulf him” (124). This “stumbling” redefines the case of Charles Dexter Ward as almost a thing of accident. Aided by modern means and techniques, Charles is seduced into reviving his ancestor. Despite exerting some agency in his own destruction, there comes a point in the story, somewhere on the long Curwen timeline, where Charles is no longer in control of the events. In a sense, what happens is Dexter's fault, in that he summons old public archives and uses photostats to piece together the

mystery and solve the cipher. In the arduous process of unearthing historical documents he reawakens Curwen. Charles is a victim of Curwen's mesmerizing trap, yet he is also a victim of his own curiosity and hunger for knowledge. The “something” that destroys Charles is a combination of his Modern tendencies and the horror of the unknowable.

Knowledge in Lovecraft's world is both a destructive temptation and a physical object of beautiful arcane chemistry. *The Case of Charles Dexter Ward* makes the claim that human knowledge is a quantity that can be reduced to salts, and that knowledge resides in the body rather than in the soul. This is a rational assumption. In a Modern scientific world, there exists a temptation to convert a cosmic truth, such as knowledge, into chemistry, into simple salts, into a physical reality that can be manipulated discretely by the tools of science. Lovecraft is critical of this approach. He warns the reader that: “a man can't tamper with Nature beyond certain limits, [for] every horror you have woven will rise up to wipe you out” (126). Lovecraft's apocalyptic disclaimer implies that quantitative and methodical interpretation of certain forces in nature, while these forces really demand a spiritual understanding, is a dangerous human enterprise. The Modern tendency to record all human knowledge and to condense it for storage, whether in a library, in county records, and now digitally on the Internet, is the logical extension of this modernizing business. Without the means to replicate knowledge—the photostatic copier or the xerographic copier, for instance—knowledge such as the “Curwen data” cannot be preserved. Once technology provides the means of perpetual storage, which some argue it already has done, data will always be available to the likes of Charles Dexter Ward, who will be reaching out to arcane and cosmic knowledge that would otherwise have slipped through the cracks of time. Just as reanimation of the dead is an unnatural act that reverses the natural course of life, the preservation of all knowledge also proves an unnatural and abominable act.