



Infra Dig: A Response to Gavin Lucas

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“One of the schools of Tlön goes so far as to negate time: it reasons that the present is indefinite, that the future has no reality other than as a present hope, that the past has no reality other than as a present memory. . . . Amongst the doctrines of Tlön, none has merited the scandalous reception accorded to materialism.”

—Jorge Luis Borges, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”¹

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“Base 8 is just like base 10, really. If you’re missing two fingers.”

—Tom Lehrer, “New Math”

Lucas’s compelling critique of archaeology’s words for itself leads me to ask two questions: 1. “Is what makes a word a word the fact that it’s being used as a word or the fact that it’s shaped like a word?”² 2. What’s time to a pig?

The second question is the punch line to a joke: Guy walking down a country road passes a farm. Farmer is standing underneath an apple tree, holding up a large pig; said pig is eating apples from the tree’s branches. Guy asks the farmer what he’s doing. Farmer replies, “My pig likes apples. I’m giving him some help here.” Guy says, “But doesn’t that take a lot of time?” Farmer says, “What’s time to a pig?”

What the farmer means is “My pig has no sense of time. Your question is therefore a silly one.” The joke is a joke because it reorients the subject of the question from the farmer to the pig—we understand time to be of concern to people, rather than farm animals; but the farmer, an egalitarian sort, is there to remind us that while pigs are not people too, they are part of history, and

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122 indeed may be occupying it far more fruitfully, ahem, than bipeds. Further, the fact that to a pig time means nothing is not only the point but, insofar as it is (qua punch line) the trump card, a position to be envied. The ostensible becomes a shell game (pig for farmer), and the ontological gets to kick the epistemological (knowing about time is mocked by time meaning nothing). At a further level, the ontological becomes, as it were, brute fact: this is what the farmer means when he chooses not to say “When’s time to a pig?” The logical absurdity of giving time shape, according it what-ness, is laid bare by virtue of colloquial necessity. Humans can only speak to each other by making such mistakes.

The “discovery’ of prehistory” entailed, Lucas says, “the discovery of a new method of understanding the past: the analysis of material culture” (111). Lucas’s central move thus links prehistory to ontology, which he sees as the fallout of prioritizing “material culture before text” (111). However, this form of privileging material culture (“in the specific context of archaeology, material culture was to have the upper hand” [111]) evinces the same limitations Lucas sees in the privileging of history as narrative. Indeed, to apply Lucas’s canny observation that there is no difference between material culture as an object of scrutiny and as a method (prehistory “blurs the distinction between method and material” [111]), there is no difference between his understanding of an object as a shape or a mark, and as a sign. Another way to put this is to say that Lucas is torn between making plain “the radical project of modernity” as an “attempt to put material culture on an independent basis for understanding the past” (115) on the one hand and “highlight[ing] the close relationship material culture has with textuality, or discursivity” (115) on the other. Lucas does indeed see the relation as close; in fact he confuses them. Proceeding on the assumption that material culture involves a form of interpretation distinct from reading while at the same time failing to distinguish between a mark and a word, he is bound to both schism and conflation.

I take Lucas’s use of the word “understanding” to mean “interpreting”—and interpreting in a manner distinct from reading, because you cannot read what is not language. For prehistory to have its purchase, it is essential that the objects material culture engages be distinct from words, not only in the case of archaeology conceiving prehistory as a time before text, but in the case of prehistory “put[ting] material culture on an independent basis for understanding the past” (115). The archaeologist is able, via material culture, to interpret the object in a manner that does not involve reading it.

But this is not what the archaeologists are doing. In ceasing to see a piece of rock as a thunderbolt and beginning to see it as a tool the archaeologists are giving the objects authors: “These objects were originally interpreted as ‘solidified lightning’ and viewed as natural objects; we now recognize them as stone axes” (110). They are reading the objects, ascribing to those objects intention and, coextensive with that, meaning. It is the archaeologist’s job to understand the difference between a sign and a wonder, to distinguish between words and marks.

Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels have argued that the line between “what a text means and what its author intends it to mean” is nonexistent; the two instances

of meaning are “identical.”³ Their example was a set of marks washed up on a seashore which resembled a Wordsworth stanza. The marks looked like poetry, but as Knapp and Michaels argued, were one to believe that the marks were produced by chance, rather than an author, the marks could mean nothing, because they were not language. This argument rests on their contention that “marks produced by chance are not words at all but only resemble them” (“AT,” 732).

If you assign meaning to a set of marks, you are ascribing to them intention, and with that comes the transformation of marks to language. If you ascribe intention, you are reading a language. The limit case is found in Lucas’s advocacy of archaeology as “an engagement with the unconstituted present” (117), which finds its perfect articulation in garbology. Knowing how to read garbage means laying bare “the frequent incongruity between what people said and thought about their consumption habits and what they actually did” (116), dealing with “contexts in which discursivity is either absent or *intentionally suppressed*” (117; emphasis added). The archaeologist who studies garbage is able to talk trash, to access meaning and intention at a purer—because less pasteurized—level. Archaeologists are doomed to be readers.

Lucas states that were one to be employing material culture as both object of scrutiny and as methodology “there can be no date or time after which we might say that this is no longer archaeology” (115). Inevitably, the issue becomes identity—both in the sense of what archaeology is, and how archaeology continues through time in a consistent enough fashion to be understood as a continuous, however modified, entity. Lucas says that he does not find these questions to be interesting ones: “[S]ome skeptics might question whether such a project is archaeology. Well, actually I do not care. And I am not sure many people care that much about disciplinary purity, which is surely the only reason for engaging in such debate” (116). I intend zero slight to Professor Lucas when I suggest a parallel between his position and the joke’s punch line: no slight is intended because just as the farmer understands the pig to be concerned not with theory but with apples, Lucas is saying that archaeologists are more interested in how they spend their time than in what other people think they are doing with it. This is quite healthy. However, Lucas takes the notion of “disciplinary purity” as continuous with the practice of naming, and this need not be. Happily, it is not the case that in order to call a discipline by its name one must believe that the discipline is homogenous, autonomous, endogamous, monogamous or in any sense pure.

This allows me to say that I have a sneaking feeling that an archaeology concerned with 2004 is something in excess of itself—forensic sociology, anthropological eschatology *avant la lettre*,⁴ or perhaps what Bill Brown will one day call “object relations in an expanded field.”⁵ Like Lucas, this does not trouble me; it fails to trouble me not because I am attempting to demonstrate that there is no such thing as archaeology, but because arguing over the evolution of the word archaeology is proof that it means something, despite (and because of) the fact that people feel more or less comfortable with seeing themselves as informed by, or others as partaking of, its identity. However, I am ready to be chastised by archaeologists. And in order to facilitate this, I will end by pushing Lucas’s argument beyond the logical extreme: why not

124 advocate that archaeology unearth the future? The question of what archaeology is may most convincingly be answered by those who are doing it, but it is only verifiable as such by those who one day will have done something else.

Notes

1. Jorge Luis Borges, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," trans. James E. Irby, in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (New York: New Directions Press, 1964), 10.

2. Walter Benn Michaels, "The Shape of the Signifier," *Critical Inquiry* 27, no. 2 (winter 2001): 272.

3. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels, "Against Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (summer 1982): 731; hereafter abbreviated "AT."

4. "The information makes sleep interdisciplinary . . . and then disciplines unknown or not yet devised: eschatoscopy, synchrodesics, thermodonture" (Martin Amis, *The Information* [New York: Harmony Books, 1995], 340).

5. Such foresightedness I owe less to my archaeological capacities than to the fact that Bill Brown considered this option aloud in my presence. Brown's work on the relation between things and objects is highly relevant to the issues I raise here; see his "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (autumn 2001): 1–16; and *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).