The Rise And Fall Of The Afterlife
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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2002

Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database

Citation for published version (APA):

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NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES
Ancient, medieval and modern

In 1994 the New York Times bestseller list featured for more than five months a book entitled *Embraced by the Light*, the report of a so-called near-death experience (henceforth: NDE). The popularity of the book attests to a fascination with the afterlife, such as the Western world has not seen since the collapse of spiritualism after its heyday in the period from 1850–70 (Ch. 6.2). The beginning of this modern fascination can be dated to 1975, when Raymond Moody, an American former philosophy professor turned psychiatrist, published a relatively small book, in which he presented a narrative and analysis of reports about experiences of people who had been at the brink of death: 'near-death experiences', as he called them.' The book was an instant success. Since its appearance it has been translated into more than thirty languages, sparked the foundation of societies for near-death studies in most Western countries, and the publication of three journals dedicated to the subject: *Omega*, *Anabiosis* and the *Journal for Near Death Studies*. The term has become well known to the public; the BBC and other television companies have dedicated programmes to the phenomenon; Hollywood has appropriated the theme in its film *Flatliners* (1990, directed by Joel Schumacher) and today we have the inevitable web site.'

In his book Moody constructed the following model of a near-death experience on the basis of 150 reports:

A man is dying and, as he reaches the point of greatest physical distress, he hears himself pronounced dead by his doctor. He begins to hear an uncomfortable noise, a loud ringing or buzzing, and at the same time feels himself moving very rapidly through a long dark tunnel. After this, he suddenly finds himself outside of his own physical body, but still in the immediate physical environment, and he sees his own body from a distance, as though he is a spectator. He watches the resuscitation attempt from this unusual vantage point and is in a state of emotional upheaval.

After a while, he collects himself and becomes more accustomed to his odd condition. He notices that he still has a 'body', but one of a
very different nature and with different powers from the physical body he has left behind. Soon other things begin to happen. Others come to meet and to help him. He glimpses the spirits of relatives and friends who have already died, and a loving warm spirit of a kind lie has never encountered before — a being of light — appears before him. This being asks him a question, nonverbally, to make him evaluate his life and helps him along by showing him a panoramic, instantaneous playback of the major events of his life. At some point he finds himself approaching some sort of barrier or border, apparently representing the limit between earthly life and the next life. Yet, lie finds that lie must go back to the earth, that the time for his death has not yet come. At this point lie resists, for by now lie is taken up with his experiences in the afterlife and does not want to return. He is overwhelmed by intense feelings of joy, love, and peace. Despite his attitude, though, lie somehow reunites with his physical body and lives.

Later lie tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, lie can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so lie stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life.

Subsequent studies have confirmed the basic reliability of Moody's presentation, although not all elements of the experiences are attested to with the same frequency. An American scholar gives the following count on the basis of 61 cases:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The feeling of being dead</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The feeling of calm and peace</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of bodily separation</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations of physical objects</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dark region or a void</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life review</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being(s) of light</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entering into a different world</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encountering others</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Return</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is clear from this count that Moody's model is very much the lowest common denominator of the NDEs. For example, children do not experience a life review or the meeting with relatives and friends, and the tunnel sensation seems to be absent from China and India. Moreover, although Moody depicted the NDEs as positive, more recent research has demonstrated that
NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

they can also be distressing.' Unfortunately, Moody does not have the same interests as a social historian. He, therefore, did not record those particulars about his informants that would have enabled us to locate these experiences in a more specific contexts of age, gender and class. Later investigations, though, have shown that those who have a NDE are normally in their early thirties and that gender does not make a difference. Finally, although NDEs occur to between 9 per cent and 18 per cent of the people who come close to death,' they are also experienced by people who are very much alive from a medical point of view; even a traumatic experience can be enough to cause a NDE. Evidently, the physiological and psychological causes behind the experience are still obscure."

Much of the modern literature uses the stories for what they supposedly can tell us about life after death or, as the blurb of another recent bestseller on the subject states: 'what survivors of near-death experiences can teach us about life.' On the other hand, I am interested in what these accounts can teach us about the history of the representations of afterlife, not so much its realities. Admittedly, one should be slightly suspicious about very recent NDEs after the publicity following in the wake of Moody's book. There is a fair chance that the familiar pattern is now influencing reports of later NDEs. Yet the initial corpus of Moody is rich enough for a preliminary investigation.

Moody limited himself mainly to his contemporary stories, but he did point to the experiences of Er in Plato's Republic. The brief mention is a challenge. Is it possible that these modern reports can be paralleled in periods of the past? Do they perhaps enable us to reconstruct a universal human experience! It seems to me that historians should direct their attention to these visions, since they can tell us something of the ways we have interiorised certain ideas or dropped others. Dreams are a good parallel. In the seventeenth century, religion and politics could play an important role in the dreams of people, but it seems that in modern America at least, these subjects have more or less disappeared from dreams. In other words, the increasing separation of public and private life has led to a development in which increasingly only our private life has become deeply important to us. We could try to assess these visions in a similar way. What do they tell us about the ways many Americans nowadays imagine the afterlife?

Unfortunately, on the whole sociologists and historians have kept shy of the subject. Only a historian of religion and two medievalists have compared contemporary NDEs to similar medieval reports. Although the pioneering study by Carol Zaleski is persuasive in its analyses of modern accounts, it is clearly much less successful regarding the Middle Ages." The era is much better served by a somewhat essayistic study of Peter Dinzelbacher, the best contemporary student of medieval visions, which also contains several good observations on modern reports." The second medievalist, Marc Van Uytfanghe, has compared in detail all pre-Carolingian visions (about fifteen in all) by taking the individual elements of modern stories as analysed by Moody and identifying

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them in the medieval visions." This approach has the disadvantage that the individual nature of the visions becomes less visible. In any case, all three studies basically compare only modern NDEs and leave antiquity largely out of the picture. There is thus scope for a few additional observations.

Taking Moody's narrative model as our point of departure and comparing ancient (section 1), medieval (section 2) and modern versions (section 3) we hope to make a small contribution to a better understanding of the development of the Western imagination regarding the afterlife.

1. Antiquity

In antiquity we have five descriptions which could possibly be considered as NDEs:11 Er by Plato, Cleonymus by Aristotle's pupil Clearchus, Thespiesius by Plutarch, Erynius by Naumachius of Epirus and Curma by Augustine.15 We probably could have had more, since in his commentary on Plato's Republic (II.113 Kroll), the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus tells that Democritus wrote a book about people wrongly believed to have died, called On Hades (B 1 DK), but this book has not survived. Admittedly, five cases in a period of about 700 years are not a representative sample, but we can at least look at these examples in order to see whether they conform to Moody's model.

Having discussed the rewards that the just man receives from the gods, Plato ends his Republic with the tale of Er,16 which is clearly meant to be the climax of his work, just as eschatological myths conclude his Gorgias, Phaedo17 and, if less explicitly, the Apology.18 The story contains various, typically Platonic elaborations and was already famous in antiquity. Origen even used it in his attempt to explain the resurrection to his pagan readers.19 Here we are especially interested in Plato's picture of the hereafter.

The account has only a very short introduction. It is the tale of a brave warrior, 'Er son of Armenius, of Pamphylian origin', who had been found undecayed on the battlefield ten days after a battle, and who came back to life only as he lay on the pyre on the twelfth day. The mention of Armenius is of course very seductive and indeed, an Armenologist has dedicated a detailed study to the Armenian etymology of Er.20 The attempt is totally unconvincing, since in Greek onomastics the name would at the very most hint at guest friendships with the Armenia of Er's father; similarly, Cimon would name one of his sons Lakedaimonios in order to stress his ties with Sparta.21 However, the incredible, dramatic details of Er's survival surely should read as a warning to the reader of the fictional character of the account, not as an attempt to provide an eye witness report.

So what did Er have to tell? After his soul had left his body, he journeyed with a great crowd to a mysterious region where anonymous judges referred the just to the right upwards to heaven and the unjust to the left downwards. He himself was charged with telling mankind about his experiences. Subsequently, he saw two chasms through which souls ascended from a kind of
purgatory and the other through which souls descended from heaven. Both groups met one another on a meadow. Some souls, though, could not be purified, such as that of Ardiaeus, a Pamphylian tyrant who had killed his father and brother. Such criminals were hurled into the Tartarus. After a week on the meadow the remaining souls had to journey on, and on the fifth day they reached a shaft of light which was connected with a complicated set of heavens where they heard the music of the spheres. Here, except for the messenger, the souls received lots for new lives from the Moirai: some a good one and others an extremely bad one; some those of humans but others those of animals.

Plato then interrupts the fiction, and the narrator now addresses Glauco with an oration as to how important it is to select the right role model in life. After this ethical lesson, Er resumes his story and relates that many chose a life completely different from their previous one, often the unfortunate a better one and the fortunate a worse one. For example, Orpheus took the life of a swan because he had enough of women after being murdered by them; **Atalanta now became a male athlete. Subsequently, everybody had to drink from the River of Forgetfulness in order to forget their previous life.** Then they fell asleep and in the middle of the night they suddenly were carried to their births, 'like stars'. Er was not allowed to drink and not knowing 'how and in what way he returned into the body' he recovered on the funeral pyre. And that is, so Plato concludes his book, 'how the mythos was saved. And it will save us if we believe it.' In his usual way, then, Plato has used a story, a mythos, to make his point. The report from the Beyond gives extra weight to his own expositions about afterlife, but its narrative framework leaves little doubt about its fictional character.

A detailed analysis of the myth would transcend the bounds of this book, but there is room for a few observations as to which particular sources Plato used in constructing his imaginary afterworld. They seem to have been threefold: traditional, Orphic and Pythagorean. The traditional, poetic representation (Ch. 1.2) has receded into the background in this detailed account, but a few elements, such as the chasms and the Tartarus, have been kept, although in Homer only the Titans are in Tartarus. **

Orphism (Ch. 2.2) is clearly important. So let us start with the judges of the underworld. In Homer and Pindar, the later traditional judges Minos, Aeacus and Rhadamanthys still functioned only as arbitrators in conflicts among the dead or the gods, **but anonymous judges in the afterworld already occurred in Pindar's Second Olympian Ode (59), a poem well known for its Orphic influence. Is it pure chance that not long afterwards Aeschylus spoke of the 'other Zeus' pronouncing 'the last judgements among the dead' in his Suppliants (230–1) and in his Eumenides the chorus says: 'for Hades is a mighty "auditor" of mortals beneath the earth, and supervises everything with his registering mind' (273–5)? **However this may be, named judges are not mentioned before Plato's Apology (41a), **where the addition of Triptolemus
to the above mentioned triad strongly suggests Eleusinian influence. The idea of judges in the underworld, then, originated in Orphism, although eventually it seems to have derived from Egypt, as also did Orphic ideas of a cosmic egg and the 'passports' to the underworld (Ch. 2.1).

This Orphic colouring is strengthened by the reference to the meadow, which is also mentioned by an Orphic Gold Leaf (A 4: Ch. 2.2). The oldest reference to joyful 'meadows with red roses' in the underworld is once again Pindar (fr. 129 Maehler), and meadows recur in fragments of Orphic poetry. It is true that only in Plato does judgement take place on or near a meadow, but in our myth the souls camp on the meadow 'as at a festival', which suggests the joyful atmosphere of the other meadows. Orphic inspiration is probably also behind the River of Forgetfulness which was reached through the Plain of Forgetting, a part of the underworld topography in Aristophanes' Frogs (186). The Orphic Gold Leaves mention a Lake of Memory (B 1 – 2,11), a 'work of Memory' (B 10) and even the 'gift of Memory' (A 5).

Pythagorean influence is visible in the idea of reincarnation (Ch. 2.2), the identification of the road 'upwards' with that 'of the right', the music of the spheres and the astronomical speculations. The distinction between morally just and unjust, which is typical of Plato's eschatological myths, first occurs in Pindar and clearly belongs to the same background, since it is not found in earlier Orphic texts. Evidently, Plato had manipulated existing underworld features into a completely new constellation.

Can this report also count as a NDE? Hardly so. Er tells very little about himself and his role is clearly to be the mouthpiece of Plato. He leaves the body but does not even know how he returned – a detail which presumably was no longer of interest to Plato's purposes. The importance of the account lies elsewhere. For the first time in Greek history a visitor provides on his return a detailed account of the various compartments of the underworld and the fate of its inhabitants, the just and the unjust. Before long, such tours of the underworld would become extremely popular in Jewish religion, and it is hard to think that the Jewish genre of the 'tours of hell' does not owe something to the report about Er the Pamphylian.

Plato had certainly been read by Clearchus of Soli (fr. 8 Wehrli'), who was very interested in the activity of the soul, which featured largely in his On sleep. In this dialogue, one of the participants was a Jew: one of the earliest occurrences of Jews in Greek literature. Pythagoras probably also featured, which is one more testimony to his interest in the soul (Ch. 2.1). Clearchus relates that a certain Cleonymus, an Athenian, pined away on the death of a friend and seemed to have died. But just as his mother embraced him and said farewell for the very last time (an interesting detail from ancient dying customs), she noticed that he was still alive. He revived and related his NDE.

His soul, freed from its corporeal chains, was raised heavenwards and saw on the earth beneath him 'places of different shapes and colours, and rivers invisible to man.' Finally he reached a place sacred to Hestia with many
demons in female shapes, where he met a certain Lysias, a Syracusan. Having been told to remain quiet and to watch what went on, they both saw ‘souls being judged, punished and purified one after the other under the supervision of the Eumenides’. Subsequently, having been ordered to return to earth, they made each other’s acquaintance and promised to search for one another on their return home. And indeed, shortly after, during a visit by Lysias to Athens, ‘Cleonymus had seen him from afar and shouted out that it was Lysias, and Lysias, having equally recognised Cleonymus before he had come to him, had told bystanders that it was Cleonymus’.

We do not know what the aim was of this story, since we have only its summary in Proclus’ Neo-Platonic commentary on Plato’s myth of Er. It seems that the anecdote supplied details about the judgement of the souls in the hereafter, which already included a purification. The origin of Lysias, Syracuse, may well be a pointer to Orphic or Pythagorean traditions (Ch. 2). Some details, such as the view of the earth from afar and the description of the earth, derive from the eschatological myth of Plato’s Phaedo (110b), whereas the sacred place of Hestia comes from the eschatological myth of Plato’s Phaedrus (247a). But from where did Clearchus derive the female demons?"

Rather striking is the attempt at verification which has been incorporated into the story. This is one of the strategies, which we will also encounter in medieval reports of a NDE. Another is the mention of many witnesses, which from a historian’s point of view is more convincing, although in the end often not persuasive, either. None of these details is comparable to modern NDEs – the exception being the feeling of drifting away. But this sensation is hardly extraordinary and may easily have been derived from experiences of gradually falling asleep.

Like Clearchus, Plutarch, too, had read his Phaedo. In his On the Delays of the Divine Vengeance, written after 81 AD, since it alludes to the eruption of the Vesuvius and the death of Emperor Titus, Plutarch gives the following account (563B-568B). An initially nameless man who had ‘died’ from a fall on his neck but revived on the day of his funeral, relates that the thinking part of his soul had ‘fallen’ from his body. He had the impression that he moved upwards, and on his way to the stars he soon noticed other souls, some of his acquaintances, who were crying and lamenting. Above, other souls were joyful but they shunned the tumultuous – a typically Platonic touch:” He vaguely recognised the soul of a relative, who told him that his name now was Thespiesus, no longer Ardiaeus;” and, rather reassuringly, that he was not dead and could recognise the souls of the dead by the absence of their shadows and their unblinking eyes. He also told him that there were various penalties for the souls, although some were ‘past all healing’.

Having gone on at length about the fate of these souls, some of which were being reborn into a body, Thespiesus’ guide took him over an immense distance to an enormous chasm, which looked like a Bacchic grotto:” There were many flowers, fragrant scents (Ch. 5.2), and a happy mood with much
Bacchic revelry. Thespiesius wanted to stay here, but his guide forced him to go on to a place which looked like a big mixing-bowl, but appeared to be another large chasm. Here his guide definitively settled some problems connected with the history of Delphi and here Thespiesius also heard the Sibyl foretelling the time of his own death.

After this somewhat strange interlude, he saw numerous people, even his own father, being punished for a crime that had gone undetected on earth. Given the subject of Plutarch's book, the worst punishments were naturally for those whose punishment liad passed over to their children or descendants. Finally, he was shown how artisans hammered souls into shape for their rebirth. They liad already finished working on the soul of the matricidal Nero by piercing it with red-hot nails, when suddenly a voice came out of the light and told them to give the singing emperor a more merciful fate and to turn him into a 'vocal creature', a frog, since lie liad liberated Greece (AD 67). And then, just when a woman was going to brand Thespiesius with a red-hot rod, another woman interfered and he was suddenly pulled away, 'opening his eyes again almost from his very grave'.

Once again we do not have an authentic report of a NDE, but a composition full of Platonic, Pythagorean and Orphic echoes. Like Plato, Plutarch concludes his book with an account of a visit to the underworld and the name of his protagonist, Ardiaeus, is identical with the Platonic Ardiaeus, but, unlike Plato, Plutarch makes the punishment of the descendants of those whose crimes had gone undetected close to being the climax of the entire account. Both features show already the literary nature of his report. In addition, it is not really likely that a man who is described as a great rogue before his NDE would experience a visit which is full of Platonic and Pythagorean allusions. This lack of authenticity is further confirmed by the details concerning the Delphic oracle, which could hardly have been a concern to an inhabitant of Cilicia; in fact, Ardiaeus is even said to have consulted a local oracle, that of Amphilochos at Mallos (Mor. 434D). On the other hand, Plutarch had been a priest at Delphi, and Delphic problems were of the utmost interest to him, even though we may not quite admire his 'blatant Delphic one-upmanship'... Regarding the typical NDE details, we find only the feeling of drifting upwards and the recognition of some of his former acquaintances. In a way, these details are not very specific and the most striking parallel with modern NDEs is that his experience, according to Plutarch, affected his lifestyle and lie became a totally reformed person. As so often in modern times (section 3), the NDE had resulted in a kind of conversion.

We find a similar kind of conversion in a somewhat later author, Naumachius of Epirus, who relates that a young man, Eurynous, had been buried for fifteen days before reviving. Eurynous reported that below the earth he had seen and heard 'miraculous things', but liad been ordered to keep everything secret (!). He continued to live quite a long time and 'he was seen to be much more just after his resurrection than before'.
In the third century, the Neo-Platonist Cornelis Labeo noted the following story: 'Two men had died on the same day and met at a sort of crossroads [compitum]; then they were ordered to return to their bodies. They made a pact that they would be friends in the future, and so it happened until they died.' The story has been handed down by Augustine, who seems to have considerably abbreviated Labeo's report." Labeo himself took it from Varro, who probably used a Greek source, since the infernal crossroads already occur in Plato's descriptions of the underworld and had become a well known feature of Hades by the time of Labeo's contemporary Porphyry. " The pact between the two men looks suspiciously like the meeting of the Athenian and Syracusan in Clearchus and may somehow derive from it. However, the account is too short to be informative as a possible NDE.

It is rather remarkable, then, that pagan antiquity has given us so few literary accounts of a soul visiting the hereafter. This scarcity of descriptions attests to a paucity of interest in the afterlife, and this is perhaps confirmed by the relative lack of epitaphs speaking about the afterworld. In the end, Greek and Roman religion were basically directed to this life, not that of the hereafter. However, whenever they do report on the afterlife, we immediately note the enormous influence of Orphism and Pythagoreanism, even if often in a Platonic mirror.

It is only towards the end of late antiquity that we find the first Christian NDE. In his The Cure to Be Taken for the Dead (12.15), Augustine tells us the following story: Curma, a poor curialis ('member of a city council') and simpliciter rusticanus ('a simple rustic'), who lived not far from Augustine's city of Hippo, fell into a deep coma. After a number of days, he awoke and immediately asked for somebody to go to the house of Curma the smith. On arrival they found out that his namesake had died at the very moment that our Curma had woken up from his coma. When they returned, Curma told bystanders that in the place he had been in he had heard the order not to bring Curma the ruralis but Curma the smith.

After this exciting start, Curma relates that in a kind of hell - 'those places of the dead' (loca illa mortuorum) he says rather vaguely - he saw people treated according to their merits, even some he had known before his coma. It is rather curious that at the same time he also saw people who had not yet died. Among them were some of the clergy of his own parish, a priest who told him to get baptised, and Augustine himself. After these sightings in an unspecified place, he was told that 'he was admitted into Paradise'. Later, when he was dismissed from Paradise, he was told: 'Go, get baptised if you want to be in this place of the blessed' (in isto loco beatorum). When he responded that he already had been baptised, somebody who remains anonymous answered 'Go, get truly baptised.' And that is what Curma did at Easter, without telling his experience to Augustine, by whom he had been earlier baptised.

A few years later Augustine heard Curma's story from a mutual friend. At first he was not quite sure what to make of it, and he interpreted the experience not as an authentic meeting but as a kind of dream. Curma could
not have met the real dead but their images, since Augustine believed that the deceased remained at a place of undisturbed peace where they had no contact with the living whatsoever." Nevertheless, he took Curma’s story very seriously and had Curma relate his whole story to him while in the company of respectable citizens, who assured him that they remembered him telling them exactly the same. The obvious emphasis Augustine puts on the low social status of Curma and the confirmation of Curma’s story by his fellow citizens indicates that lie wanted the reader to believe this strange experience.

Unfortunately, hearing a story twice is not a guarantee of its truth. It is rather puzzling that we find a very similar story in a fragment of Plutarch’s dialogue On the Soul, which is quoted by Eusebius after his treatment of the myth of Er (Praep. Ev. 11.36.). A certain Antyllus told Plutarch and his company that lie had died but been released again, since those who had fetched him had been reproached ’by the master’ (a curiously vague term) that they had returned with the wrong one: it should have been the shoemaker Nicandas. The story evidently got round and finally reached Nicandas himself, who started to feel very uneasy about the whole situation. Rightly so, since he suddenly passed away, whereas Antyllus recovered.56 Once again the company confirms the story. Yet in Lucian’s Lovers of Lies the resemblance is even stronger, since a man in Hades hears Pluto saying: ’let him off but bring the blacksmith (!) Demylus’ (25).57 There can be little doubt, then, that either Augustine or Curma had embellished his story.

If we leave out the beginning, then what is left of Curma’s story? Compared to the wealth of details in the Acta martyrum, such as the Passion of Perpetua (Ch. 5.2), he has strikingly little to say about the hereafter. He describes Paradise and a kind of vestibule for the dead, but he furnishes hardly any interesting details about them. The focus of his story seems to have been the need to be christened, and that may well be the underlying psychological reason for Curma having received this particular vision. As a parallel for modern NDEs it is therefore not very helpful.

2. Middle Ages

Let us now turn our attention to the early Middle Ages, where we find a great number of visions of the hereafter reported by people on the brink of death or after a deep coma.58 I will concentrate on two well-known Anglo-Saxon experiences, those of Dryrthelm as related by the Venerable Bede (673–735) and of the monk of Wenlock as told by Boniface (ca. 675–754). The choice is somewhat arbitrary, but the two visions are sufficiently representative of the genre to justify the procedure; moreover, both accounts remained popular throughout the High Middle Ages and are regularly found combined in manuscripts.59 Naturally, they deserve a much more detailed analysis than I can give here, but in this chapter our interest is limited to the similarities they share with modern NDEs.
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The first Anglo-Saxon experience is told by Bede in his *Ecclesiastical History* (5.12). Bede had learned about the journey to the Beyond from three different sources (a king, a bishop and a hermit), which he carefully enumerates before casually mentioning the name of the visionary, *frater Drythelm*, whom he had never met himself. The event must have taken place before the death of one of his sources, King Aldfrid, who died in 705. Bede completed his history only in 731 and is thus clearly speaking about the past.

Drythelm was a layman from the Cunningham district in Northumbria, who fell ill and 'died in the early hours of the night'. In the morning he suddenly recovered, got up from his bed, thus terrifying all the mourners, except his wife. Having told her that he had decided to change his life, he divided his earthly goods and withdrew from the world to become a hermit. It is only now that Bede allows him to begin his account of the Beyond, heightening the credibility of his narrative by having him tell it in the first person. Drythelm started his journey straight away, guided by a being dressed in brilliant clothes: clearly an angel. Going towards the rising sun during the summer solstice, the north-east, they first reached a large valley. Here souls were being tortured in two rivers, one full of fire and the other filled with ice, but Drythelm was told that this was not hell. Van Uytfanghe compares this valley with the tunnel often mentioned in modern NDEs, but such a comparison is hardly persuasive, since the tunnel and comparable spaces, such as caves and sewers, function as a conduit for the escaping soul, which is clearly not the case in this instance. It is typical of Drythelm's NDE that he sees people (a tonsured person, a layman, a woman), but does not mention any particular names. This lack of personal details seems to point to the oral tradition of his experience, during which the names of once familiar persons were probably dropped.

Drythelm and his guide next entered a darkness, such that Drythelm saw only the light of his silent guide. Having travelled *sola sub nocte per umbras*, a quote from the *Aeneid* (6.268), they arrived at a pit with great balls of fire. At this point his guide left him. Not only was it incredibly smelly there, but also full of the sounds of lamentations and sardonic laughter (cachinnium crepitantem). Devilish spirits were hurling people into the pit and even threatened himself, but he was rescued by his guide who suddenly reappeared and now took him along a road in the direction of sunrise at the winter solstice, the south-east. Here they found a plain full of spring flowers with a marvellous odour and brilliant light (Ch. 5.2) where groups of happy people were walking round, dressed in white, the normal colour of clothes in both the ancient and early medieval heavens. As was the case in the visions of Perpetua (Ch. 5.2), the place was full of people, yet it is remarkable that Drythelm did not specify whom he saw, whereas other visionaries mention saints, martyrs and virgins: in short, all the categories that played an important role in early Christianity. Having been told that this was not heaven, they passed through this place and arrived at another which only differed from the previous one

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in having soft singing, an even more intense light and an even sweeter fragrance.

However, Drythelm was not allowed to stay here and they returned to the previous place, where his guide explained to him what he had seen. The valley was a purgatory avant la lettre. The souls here acquired the Kingdom of Heaven only at the Last Judgement, but prayers, fastings and celebrations of masses, especially, could liberate them before that day. The pit was the actual entry into Gelienna (Ch. 1.3), and the first heaven, so to speak, was meant for the souls who had performed many good deeds but were just not good enough to enter straight into God's Kingdom: they would see Christ at the Last Judgement.

After this exposition Drythelm was told that he had to return to his body, but if he would lead a simple life according to the rules of the Church, he would receive a place among the blessed. Drythelm did not really want to return, but did not dare to object. His guide did not give him a specific mission, but Drythelm decided to become a hermit. One of his exercises was to stay in the river Tweed as long as possible while singing Psalms. When he emerged during winter, covered with ice, and passers-by admired his endurance of the cold, he would answer: 'I have seen it a lot colder!' And so he lived until his death.

Our second vision, that of the monk of Wenlock, as heard by Boniface from Hildelida, the abbess of Barking (Essex), had recently taken place in the monastery of Abbess Milburga in Wenlock (Shropshire). Fortunately, Boniface could meet the visionary in person, who recounted his experience in the company of three 'pious and highly venerable brothers'. All of them signed the letter to Eadbega, abbess of the Beata Dei Genetrix Maria Monastery on Thanet in Kent, to whom, on her request, Boniface wrote the account. As the death of King Ceolred of Mercia (709–16) is reported in the vision, it must have been written after 716.

One day, when the monk was struck by a serious illness, it suddenly seemed as if a veil had been lifted from his eyes: he could now see the whole world (countries, peoples and seas). It is noticeable that, as in the case of Drythelm (above), his own soul is not explicitly mentioned, but, like Paul, he was extra corpus snum raptus (2 Corinthians 12.3). Brilliant angels carried him aloft singing, as they do in most visions, including those of the early Christian church (Ch. 5.2). In fact, the angels were so full of shining light that the monk's eyes started to burn until an angel laid his hands upon them. From on high he saw a multitude of souls ascending, with both angels and demons trying to take hold of them. Similar battles also occur in the early visions of Fursey (an Irish abbot who died about 648 AD) and Barontus (a Frankish hermit who died about 700 AD). Our author certainly knew Fursey's vision, but he was probably also inspired by Prudentius' Psychomachia, since he had manifestly read (or heard) his Hamartigenia (867–930), where a long passage is dedicated to the eyes of the soul which can see everywhere and everything. The
monk of *Wenlock* was also tormented by these struggles and his own sins were loudly accusing him. Such auditory moments occur much more frequently in medieval visions than in modern NDEs and may well be a sign of the oral character of medieval society.⁷⁷ All his evil deeds manifested themselves, even those which he himself had considered to be rather innocent. Van Uytfanghe suggests that this scene comes very close to the modern life review, but the resemblance is only superficial as we will see in the final section of this chapter.⁷⁸

In the mean time, the monk noticed various pits with horrible flames. Although in the Old Testament pits are typical of Gehenna (Ch. 1.3), this place was not yet hell, since some of the souls he saw would be saved at the Last Judgement; on the other hand, the souls whose terrifying screams he also heard were those whom God would not pardon and who would burn forever. Subsequently, he saw Paradise with a multitude of people, as in the *Passion of Perpetua* (Ch. 5.2), while an incredibly sweet odour constituted the food of the blessed. Paradise was adjacent to a river of fire which souls tried to cross over a narrow bridge.⁷⁹ Although many fell off, in the end they all managed to arrive in Paradise, as their sins had been only light. The monk was also able to see enormously long and high walls, which separated Paradise from the Heavenly Jerusalem,⁸⁰ but those walls, and the souls that were hastening towards them, were too luminous to be looked at. We also find this element of a border in the vision of Drythelm (above) also, but it is relatively rare.

At this moment in his vision, the monk of *Wenlock* tells various events that occurred to another monk, a young female thief, and an abbot who is defended by angels, as all good persons are on earth he hastens to add. He also saw the aforementioned King Ceolred, who is temporarily shielded by angels with a large book, presumably the Gospels, but who are unable to continue protecting him when they hear of all his crimes and sins. Nevertheless, the king was still alive when the monk left him. Subsequently, the monk is ordered to return and to recount his experiences to all who would be genuinely interested in his story, in particular to a certain priest Beggan, but not to those who would make fun of him. Moreover, he had to tell a certain woman that she could still reconcile herself with God, if she was truly penitent. The monk did not want to return to his horrible body, but had no choice. Resistance to returning is very normal in our visions,⁸¹ but unlike modern accounts it quite often goes together with a certain horror of the body – an element which seems to fit the more ascetic times of our visions. After his return, the monk remained blind for a week and his eyes often dripped blood; his memory, too, was no longer as good as it had been. According to Boniface, the truth of the vision was confirmed by the death of King Ceolred soon afterwards.

Both these reports display some aspects of both classical and modern NDEs, that is, conversion and verification. Drythelm completely changes the course of his life, and both reports clearly try to look as authentic as possible by invoking the testimony of sources and witnesses. Yet, most of the modern
elements, such as the feeling of peace, the tunnel, the hovering above the body, the life review, and meetings with deceased relatives, or even brethren, are generally missing. The absence of the last element is especially puzzling. Does it suggest that relationships in early medieval monasteries were rather cold?

A comparison limited only to modern elements, however, would prevent us from noticing a vast difference between classical and medieval visions. No reader can fail to notice the extremely detailed descriptions of the hereafter and the stress on even the smallest sins. Both aspects cannot be separated, and they are illustrative of a major change in the attitude towards sins that developed in the last century of the Roman Empire. In the Roman Empire, Christians modelled their ideas of penance on the power of mercy of the emperor and his governors. Consequently, it was possible for Christians to believe that God could wipe clean a slate filled with human sins with one stroke. Since Augustine and his struggle against the Pelagians, sins had come to play a much more important role in the life of the Christians. For Augustine it was clear that all sins, even the smallest ones, had to be duly purged in this life or in the next. Penitence thus became for him the centre of spirituality that must guide all Christians through their daily lives. Regarding God's mercy, Christians in Ireland and Anglo-Saxon England had no late antique models of penance at their disposal. They lived in a world in which all debts had to be paid and all wrongs atoned. Consequently, when their penitential practice became highly influential in the Western Christian world through their missionaries, a redefinition of penance took place, as we can see in the visions of Drythelm and the monk of Wenlock. After death, sins would now pursue the deceased, and their journey to heaven would become a perilous one.

The corollary of this development was an elaboration of the afterlife. The rewards of the saved and the punishments of the damned had now to be painted vividly in order to deter the faithful from their sins. That is why these visions are so clearly didactical in purpose. At the same time, we also notice that there is not yet a full tripartition in the other world. Purgatory is still a sub-division, so to speak, of either hell or heaven. It would still be some centuries before it would develop into a fully 'independent' place called purgatorium (Ch. 5.3).

3. Modern NDEs

Let us conclude our survey of the NDEs with a closer look at the individual elements of the modern NDEs. There are a number that are still unexplained, such as the element of peace and great calm, which is curiously missing in Moody's model; people who nearly drowned have told me of the same experience. After this moment of peace there comes the separation of the 'I' from the body, when the 'I' often watches the body from a spectator position, sometimes from a corner high up in the room, and hears what the bystanders are saying. Verification seems to be one function of this position, since it
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enables those with a NDE to report what they observed. The position also indicates that the near-death feel that they are moving upwards. This experience seems to suggest that we are still conditioned very much by the image of heaven as a place somewhere up high, despite the many discoveries of astronomy and the space industry. These discoveries may well take a long time to enter the subconscious and to force us to rethink our metaphysical concepts.

Concerning the separation, the normal experience seems to be a feeling of being separated from the body by passing through a dark place, often explained as a tunnel. We could think of this element as the necessary period of liminality between being in the body and leaving it. The description, though, seems typically modern. How many people in earlier periods would have known of a tunnel? Is it pure chance that in India and China the tunnel is absent from NDEs? Does this experience say something about the way we experience deep down the passing through a tunnel and the feeling of relief when we, literally, see the light at the end?

Considering our interest in the soul in these chapters, we cannot fail to notice that in the primary sources, the nearly-dead usually speak of their experiences as, 'I left the body' and not, 'my soul left the body', although the soul is sometimes mentioned in secondary analyses. This suggests that most people do not use the category of the soul when thinking about themselves, although, on an intellectual level, they know of its existence. One may even wonder to what extent the mention of the soul in monastic stories of the earlier periods is not primarily a construct of the educated classes.

Unlike classical and medieval visions, the meeting with relatives or close friends is experienced by about half of the nearly-dead. This surely is a reflection of the disappearance of the separate worlds of man and women and the emergence of the nuclear family as the centre of our affection in the course of the last two centuries. In some American experiences Vietnam War comrades are introduced – a reflection of the very close ties that can be formed through shared periods of great stress. Once again, it makes us wonder about the nature of the personal relationships of the Middle Ages. Another person who is regularly met is a being of light, who is often not identified. Whereas earlier generations were immediately certain that they had met angels, modern people lack this certainty, unless they are brought up strongly religiously. Significantly, they only meet the being of light, but are not guided by him: modern man travels by himself and no longer needs supernatural help. Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, in her ‘Reading’ Greek Death (Ch. 1.2) has persuasively argued that the need for Hermes as a guide arose only when the afterworld was perceived as farther away. Might this mean that 'heaven' is perceived by modern man as something 'round the corner'?

At this moment the experiencer often sees his life pass by in a moment. This so-called 'life review' or 'life film' was already noted before modern NDEs. Scientific interest started in 1892 when Albert Heim, a Swiss geologist who had an NDE while mountain-climbing in 1871, published an article on
similar experiences of mountain climbers." It is important to note that these reviews are non-judgemental. Just like hell, frightening demons or a kind of Last Judgement are generally absent from the NDEs: one more testimony to the disappearance of hell from the modern imagination and deeply felt beliefs (Ch. 6.3). Can it be that the relatively late appearance of reports of the life film have something to do with the development of the diorama and its reinforcement by the train in the nineteenth century, which enabled people to see a fast succession of scenes as they had never been able to do before? 

In their stay in the afterworld the NDEs often describe a feeling of immense love and protection. The visionaries also often see a kind of heavenly city, but it is striking that in this city God is often no longer mentioned nor are there any angels. This seems to me to be an important step towards, if not the ultimate expression of, modern secularisation. Evidently, we still believe in a kind of 'life everlasting', but for many of us in the Western world the other world is no longer filled with traditional Christian images.

The period in this world of love and protection – the reverse image of our modern chaotic, unsafe world – cannot last for ever and there has to be a return, albeit usually involuntary. The 'I' returns to the body and wakes up. As with some medieval reports, there is often a marked change to the previous life. The 'nearly-dead' display more concern for others, have a strengthened belief in the afterlife, and regularly become more religious. 

But it is a religiosity of a different kind than before. They no longer need the mediation of the Church, since they already had direct contact with the other world. In these stories there is a strong aspect of 'conversion', albeit not in a religious way, but in a modern personal manner: the NDE makes people a better person.

It is time to conclude. What do the modern NDEs tell us about the afterlife? In opposition to what has often been suggested, they do not seem to prove the existence of the 'life everlasting', but testify to the continuing decline of the afterlife. Heaven is still made of gold and marble, but it is rather empty, except for a few relatives, and even God is no longer there. It has now become a means for psychological improvement, not our final destination: salvation is not outside but within us. As such, it is a clear reflection of the modern world, where the development of the individual more and more becomes the main goal of life. Evidently, every age gets the afterlife it deserves.