

# THE DESCENT OF ORPHEUS

## Life between Lives Dialogue – Divination, Initiation or Therapy?

Angela Voss

When you are about to die...[The guardians of Hades] will surely ask you...for what reason you seek out the darkness of dank Hades. Say 'I am the child of Earth and of starry Sky, and I am parched with thirst and I am perishing. But give me quickly cold water to drink from the lake of Memory'. And above all, they will announce you to the king under the earth. And above all, they will give you to drink from the lake of Memory. And what is more, when you have drunk, you will travel a road, a sacred road, which other famous *mystai* and *bakchoi* also tread.<sup>1</sup>

### Prelude

The theme of this paper arose through a strange coincidence and a dream, which I will briefly relate. Several months ago a friend introduced me to the work of Michael Newton, and I spent some time with my MA students<sup>2</sup> discussing the question of regression therapy and spiritual encounter in relation to Hermetic texts and the *mundus imaginalis* of Henry Corbin. Shortly after this, I received an email, quite out of the blue, from Michael Newton himself. He was looking for a university department where he could develop his client work into a doctoral

---

<sup>1</sup> Orphic Gold tablet from Hipponion, 5<sup>th</sup> - 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, quoted in Susan G. Cole, 'Landscapes of Dionysos and Elysian Fields', in Michael Cosmopoulos (ed.), *Greek Mysteries: The Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* (London, 2003), p. 200. *Mystai* and *bakchoi* were initiates into the mysteries of Eleusis and Dionysus respectively (see Cole, p. 201).

<sup>2</sup> MA in the Cultural Study of Cosmology and Divination, University of Kent, Canterbury.

thesis, and this initiated a flow of personal communication on the subject of life between lives (LBL) therapy. It was also during this time that I had a dream of particular relevance: I was walking through the medieval streets of Canterbury, which metamorphosed into the skyscrapers of New York. I saw the twin towers of the World Trade Centre on fire, and as I watched, people were jumping from the towers. I focussed in on one young woman who was falling, and noticed with surprise that she was very happy; indeed, when she hit the ground, she did not die, but simply got up, dusted herself down, and went on her way with a smile. I walked back into Canterbury, carrying a precious bundle which was at first a cat, then turned into my son as a young baby. I knew I must not put it down, for it couldn't yet walk, but that I must carry it safely.

I am not going to interpret this dream, but simply let it serve as an introduction, for in relation to the encounter with Michael Newton it indicated to me that it was time to venture into a new area of research – one which would require careful handling, for the territory it maps poses many challenges to both conventional academic methodology and our prevalent materialist view of reality.

### **Life between lives therapy**

Michael Newton uses the term 'spiritual regressionist' to describe his vocation.<sup>3</sup> A doctor of psychology, he has worked in counselling and hypnotherapy for over forty years, during which time he has developed a technique of leading clients to remember not only their previous lives, but an existence purportedly in between lives, where they learn about the mistakes and achievements of their former incarnations and prepare for their next journey to the earth plane. Through assimilating information from thousands of case studies, Newton has compiled a

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael Newton, *Journey of Souls; Case Studies of Life between Lives* (St Paul, Minnesota, 1996), p. 256.

detailed picture (which is remarkably consistent) of the interaction between souls which have left their bodies and the spiritual beings they meet, who guide and advise them and above all reveal to them the nature of the spiritual world.<sup>4</sup> The unanimous realisation of his clients is that this place is their true home, and that their earthly lives are training periods during which they work towards eventual release from the cycle of birth and death. Most importantly, they gain a sense of their soul's immortality and appear to undergo a healing or resolution of karmic issues when they return to 'normal' life.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In Newton, *Journey, and Destiny of Souls: New Case Studies of Life between Lives* (St Paul, Minnesota, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Of course this is not the only contemporary source of such accounts. There is a vast amount of literature on otherworld or shamanic journeys, NDEs and OBEs in the fields of psychical research, parapsychology, history and anthropology which provides a broadly consistent picture (however it may be interpreted) of individuals' revelations in what they understand to be the afterlife, and their sense of wellbeing on return to normality. A selection of such texts includes Theodore Flournoy, *Spiritism and Psychology*, trans. Hereward Carrington (New York, 1911); G. Murphy and R. Ballou (eds.), *William James on Psychical Research* (New York, 1969); Frederick Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival after Death* (London, 1920). More recent enquiries into afterlife experiences include David Fontana, *Is there an Afterlife? A comprehensive overview of the evidence* (Ropley, Hampshire, 2005), *Life beyond Death: what survives?* (London, 2009); Raymond Moody, *Life after Life: the Investigation of a Phenomenon – survival of bodily death* (San Francisco, 2001); Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford, 1987). From a phenomenological perspective, many elements of these accounts are also corroborated by 'channelled' communicators in their descriptions of the topographies of the spiritual world and the nature of the intelligences that inhabit it. Of these, the most striking must be the 'Seth' communications to Jane Roberts in the 1960s and 70s (see <http://www.sethcenter.com/pages/bookstore.htm>), the *Awakening Letters* of Cynthia Sandys and Rosamond Lehmann (vol. 1, Jersey, 1978; vol. 2, Saffron Walden, 1986) and Grant and Jane Soloman, *The Scole Experiment: Scientific Evidence for Life after Death* (London, 1999). It is not the purpose of this paper to critique the 'mechanics' of these experiences, as I believe this would detract from the question of their 'truth' for the participant. I agree with Carole Zaleski, who states that 'there is no sensory, imaginative, or intellectual form capable of fully expressing the transcendent ... such understanding as we do receive of the transcendent comes to us through symbols, and

When I first encountered this work, I was immediately struck by two things: firstly, the thoroughness and detail of Michael Newton's analysis of these 'divinatory dialogues', and secondly the significant parallels between the experiences of his clients and those of the participants in mystery rituals in the ancient world, who were led over the threshold of death whilst fully alive, returning with a knowledge which set them apart from the uninitiated. In this paper I am not setting out to 'prove' an infallible, objective and universal 'truth' regarding the afterlife and the destiny of souls, but I do want to look closely at the phenomenon of spiritual revelation – and the question of initiation – in relation to the 'verity' of the experience for the individuals involved. Can we indeed view Michael Newton's work as a contemporary means of initiation, giving access to the hidden realms of being formerly identified as Hades or Paradise, in the guise of new-age therapy?<sup>6</sup> In our secular age, LBL presents an anomaly. It appears to be a psychological technique, yet induces profoundly religious experiences. It requires no particular belief or ritual practice, yet leads individuals to understand the meaning of

---

it is through symbols that we communicate this understanding to one another.' (Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys* [Oxford, 1987], p. 191).

<sup>6</sup> The association of the terms 'subconscious' and 'superconscious' with the 'underworld' and 'upperworld' realms of Hades and Paradise is easy to make, as is the association of the umbrella term 'unconscious' in the Jungian sense, with the entire visionary realm. I will however avoid a definition of these terms in relation to visionary experience, preferring to regard both Hades and Paradise as expressions of different stages of the soul's development after death (see Fontana, 2009, chaps 6 and 7, on the seven planes of after death existence in the Western esoteric tradition). We could suggest that 'Hades' in ancient literature tends to be echoed in what contemporary researchers call the 'etheric' realm, whilst 'Paradise' corresponds more fully with the less material plane of the 'astral' body and beyond (these terms being founded in the Western esoteric tradition and taken up by the theosophical and anthroposophical schools at the beginning of the last century). But perhaps they could both be more accurately described as 'through-worlds' which lie beyond yet simultaneously within this one.

immortality – whilst sitting calmly in the therapist’s office. It is available to all who are prepared to pay for it, with little or no preparation, and it undoubtedly changes people’s lives profoundly. As one client reports:

I have gained an indescribable sense of joy and freedom from learning my true identity.

The amazing thing is that this knowledge was in my mind all the time. I now have a

knowing rather than a feeling about why I am here and where I am going after death.<sup>7</sup>

These words could easily have been uttered by a new initiate at Eleusis.

Let us now look in some detail at the LBL therapist’s techniques and the visionary experiences described by his or her clients, before we draw comparisons to ancient practices and address the question of initiation. Michael Newton sees his role as Hermetic, with the task of leading souls to another world, although he insists that he is not ‘a religious person’.<sup>8</sup> He says ‘I feel truly blessed to be chosen as one of the messengers for this significant work.’<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that the training for LBL practitioners is extensive – hypnotherapy and counselling training followed by several years of past-life regression experience before they are considered skilled enough to undertake this specialised vocation. Furthermore,

the hypnosis facilitator should be well versed in the field of metaphysics in order to be able to analyze the karmic influences in the client’s existence from both a psychological and historical perspective.<sup>10</sup>

Such a skill would require a spiritual maturity surely beyond the remit of most training programmes in therapeutic techniques, and would seem more akin to that of a spiritual director.

---

<sup>7</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Newton, *Life Between Lives, Hypnotherapy for Spiritual Regression* (St. Paul, Minnesota, 2004), p. xiii.

Under hypnosis, the client is engaged in a dialogue designed to lead them back through their memories in the manner of visualisations, whilst their conscious mind is still alert. Dr Newton describes the process thus:

I use a systematic approach to reach the soul by employing a series of exercises for people in the early stages of hypnotic regression. This procedure is designed to gradually sharpen my subject's memories of their past and prepare them to analyze critically the things they will see in the spirit world.<sup>11</sup>

(Note the phrase 'analyze critically' – to which we will return later). The secret to taking them so far is, he stresses, 'the deepening' of the hypnotic trance from alpha to theta stages.<sup>12</sup> From there, clients report what they see as 'literal observations'.<sup>13</sup> They often undergo a death-experience, which can be disturbing or even traumatic, and then find themselves liberated as

---

<sup>11</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Newton, *Destiny*, p.3; *Life Between Lives*, part 3, 'Beginning the LBL Hypnosis Session'. The alpha state is the state of light trance induced by total physical and mental relaxation. The theta state is recognised as one of deeper tranquillity where images such as daydreams are consciously experienced (normal waking consciousness is the 'beta' state, whereas 'delta' designates deeply unconscious states).

<sup>13</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 4. One should be suspicious of the term 'literal' here. The client is reporting an 'inner' visionary journey that is taking place in a reality removed from ordinary sense-perception. It is perhaps akin to the *mundus imaginalis* described by Henry Corbin, a place of revelatory vision and and theophany, perceived through the active imagination (see Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis* [Ipswich, 1976]). To be communicable, in LBL such experiences are expressed through a common language and familiar conceptual framework which appear to have a literal or 'objective' dimension. However, although such discourse informs the reader, it is of a different order from the symbolic power of music, poetry or art to directly evoke a realm beyond rational apprehension. Carole Zaleski suggests that the desire to establish objective accuracy in terms of afterlife experiences is misplaced, and that 'it might ... be more fruitful for theologians to consider near-death visions as works of religious imagination, whose function is to communicate meaning through symbolic forms rather than to copy external facts.' (Zaleski, p. 187).

disembodied souls, able to see clearly into both the earthly realm they have just left and the spiritual one they are about to enter.

Central to both the mystery rites and the LBL experience is the vision of and/or communication with spiritual beings, in a place which is beyond the earth yet which shares some of its characteristics. In both cases it is described in terms of an enhanced reality, full of light, beauty and tranquillity. Topographically, clients describe the spirit world as a huge tier of shaded sections or layers, ‘they curve away from me as I float through them’ says one.<sup>14</sup> Some see light and dark coloured sections, some hear sounds akin to wind chimes, vibrations, bells or strings, or humming or buzzing sounds.<sup>15</sup> They may use the imagery of radio frequencies or vibrations, but common to all is the sense that successions of astral planes are experienced as diminishing in density the further the soul moves away from the earth, until they merge with the immateriality of spiritual planes. Subjects describe travelling through the arms of a ‘galactic cloud’ to a place of pure thought, carried along as if on a current, to the place where they belong, and where they meet their group of kindred souls. One describes being inside a ‘giant bowl’ or upside down sphere. There is never any suggestion that this is place of punishment or even purgatory, but of healing and reunion – although there are places of solitary contemplation for those who have seriously erred.<sup>16</sup> The descriptions certainly recall the

---

<sup>14</sup> Newton, *Journey*, pp. 20-22. Compare for example Plato, *Republic*, 616d .

<sup>15</sup> On the sounds heard by initiates in ancient rituals, see Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, California, 1999), p. 129-33, referring to references in Plutarch, *Moralia*, 590-b-d and Iamblichus, *De mysteriis* 3.2.

<sup>16</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 58. Unlike ancient and medieval after-death accounts, contemporary accounts generally do not refer to hell or severe punishments. No doubt, to a certain extent, individual experiences are coloured by the collective expectations and convictions of the age as well as the context of the vision (see Fontana, pp. 97-102). On medieval return-from-death stories, see Zaleski, chs 3-5.

common motifs in ancient literature of post-mortem journeys up through the planetary spheres to the stars,<sup>17</sup> and of hearing planetary harmonies or whistling sounds.<sup>18</sup> One of the most interesting aspects of the LBL clients' accounts is their common understanding that the spiritual world is strictly hierarchical in the developmental sense, in a similar way to the hypostases of neoplatonic and Gnostic cosmology. The metaphor is given of souls being like threads woven into a fabric, or as passengers on a train, some nearer the front than others, meaning that some are nearer the point of freedom from the wheel of rebirth than others.<sup>19</sup> Spirit guides are differentiated through their levels of experience and expertise, exhibiting differently coloured auras according to their rank and tasks. Michael Newton concludes that 'the entire ladder serves as one unbroken conduit to the source of all intelligent energy.'<sup>20</sup> What this 'source' might be I will consider below. It would also appear that 'the awareness level of the soul determines to some extent the degree of advancement of the guide assigned to them',<sup>21</sup> which evokes the Platonic notion of *sympatheia* between human and divine worlds,

---

<sup>17</sup> For example, *Corpus Hermeticum* Book 1; 'The Myth of Er' in Plato, *Republic* Book X.; Cicero, 'The Dream of Scipio', *De re publica* Book 6. See also *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio by Macrobius*, trans. William Harris Stahl (New York, 1952).

<sup>18</sup> As in Plato, 'Myth of Er', *Republic* 617b. One should also note various accounts by 'communicators' who describe travelling through the etheric solar system and recognizing different planets as powerpoints of cosmic energy, all of which sustain different forms of spiritual life. See for example *Corpus Hermeticum* I (trans. Brian Copenhaver, *Hermetica* [Cambridge, 1992]), pp 1-7; Sandys and Lehmann, *The Awakening Letters* vol.2, pp. 5-8, 45.

<sup>19</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p.167.

<sup>20</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p.120.

<sup>21</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p.107.

and reminds us of Plotinus' seance at the Iseum, where his individual 'genius' was revealed to be a god, and not a common or garden *daimon*.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the 'secular' context, the clients use common religious terminology. They speak of souls, guardian angels, heaven, and use various terms to denote a further source of power which they sense to be the generator of the whole process, such as the Source, the Over-Soul or the Presence. This unknowable essence is beyond perception, yet it is glimpsed in what is the most important episode of most clients' sessions, the meeting with the Council of Elders.<sup>23</sup> Elders are understood to be higher spiritual beings before whom individual souls appear after incarnation and before rebirth – Michael Newton describes them as 'mythological figures who have cosmological functions as mediators'.<sup>24</sup> These functions include that of assessment and review rather than judgment. Before the Elders souls relive the life just left and are pointed towards their faults and wrong choices, as well as praised for their good deeds and the choices which furthered the working out of karmic issues. At this divinatory encounter, the soul is questioned and in turn may question the Elders on matters such as intractable issues in this present life-time, in order to gain advice and encouragement – there seems to be a sense in which the Elders want to ensure that souls understand the consequences of their actions and will not repeat the same mistakes. They are visualised by clients as elderly men (although occasionally there is a woman), bald, white-haired, bearded, in hoods and robes, although more advanced souls may experience them as androgynous, or as bodies of light energy in human shape. Michael Newton points out that in the interpretation of these inner visions, clients can

---

<sup>22</sup> Recounted in Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 10 (trans. A. H. Armstrong, *Plotinus I* [Cambridge, Mass., 1989]) pp. 33-35.

<sup>23</sup> See Newton, *Destiny*, ch. 6.

<sup>24</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 250.

only feedback information through their inbuilt cultural ideas and stereotypes, so here we find the *senex* or Saturnine archetype of the wise old man, revered and venerated, compassionate and wise.

One characteristic of these advanced spirits is that they wear medallions with emblems or signs on them which have particular relevance for the soul they are questioning, usually to instil in them a specific quality such as valour or independence. The showing of this symbol is often the key to the soul's healing process, and the clients usually want to create a similar medallion to remind them of this in everyday life. It is also at this meeting that souls choose their own next incarnation in order to work on unresolved karmic issues, and it has a profound and lasting effect. 'When I leave them, I feel they have absorbed all my self doubt and cleansed me' says one, and another came away with a sense of 'awe, penitence and the need for atonement'.<sup>25</sup> It is also at this point that there is awareness of a higher Source that exists to help the work of the Council, together with a sense (in more advanced subjects) that the purpose of all incarnations is to eventually merge back with it.<sup>26</sup> One client calls it a 'Oneness', composed of 'many who are one'; another, when asked who created her, replied 'the One'.<sup>27</sup> It should be stressed again that these observations remain consistent, without the clients having any former knowledge of or interest in philosophical traditions Platonic or otherwise, or any particular religious affiliation. Interestingly, they never report meeting religious figures such as Jesus or Buddha, unlike ancient mystery visions which depended on specific mythologies for their

---

<sup>25</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, pp. 239 and 253.

<sup>26</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 243.

<sup>27</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 126.

context and drama, in which the spirit apparitions might be identified as Demeter, Persephone or Dionysus.<sup>28</sup>

What about the souls themselves? They are variously described as ‘blobs of energy’,<sup>29</sup> ‘half-formed human shapes’, ‘transparent’, ‘myriads of sharp star lights’,<sup>30</sup> ‘patches of light bobbing around’,<sup>31</sup> or ‘bunches of moving lights’.<sup>32</sup> They ‘buzz around as fireflies’,<sup>33</sup> radiating different colours ranging from bright yellow to dark purple. Souls are allocated to specific groups based on ‘levels of understanding’.<sup>34</sup> It appears that ‘as souls, the density, colour and form of light we radiate is proportional to the power of our knowledge and perception as

---

<sup>28</sup> The question of auto-suggestion on the part of Michael Newton cannot be avoided here. There is no evidence from other channelled accounts of after-death experience that all disembodied souls meet a Council of Elders shortly after death. It would seem that such common factors as life-review, soul-mate encounters and telepathic communication are expressed through a variety of images which may derive in part from the individual’s cultural expectations and in part from the common language established by the particular therapist or guide. Fontana writes ‘we must suppose that there is an objective coherent potential “out there” which is the same for all, but which is in some ways sensitive to the wishes and expectations of the individual who can – within certain limits – create a personal illusory reality within it which others can see and share.’ (David Fontana, *Life Beyond Death: what should we expect* [London, 2009], p. 107).

<sup>29</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 75.

<sup>32</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 79. On spiritual beings perceived as light entities, see for example Plutarch ‘The Myth of Timarchus’ in *De genio Socratis* 501d, where the *daimones* are likened to darting stars; M.J.B. Allen, ‘Summoning Plotinus: Ficino, Smoke and the Strangled Chickens’ in *Plato’s Third Eye* (Aldershot, 1995), XIV, p. 68 on Marsilio Ficino’s description of *daimones* as spherical lights, like ‘stars of the sphere of air’, and most famously *Paradiso* from Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, where angelic spirits are described as ‘shooting sparks’ (VII, line 8), ‘revolving lights’, ‘sparks in a fire’ (VIII, lines 16, 19) and ‘flashes of living light’ (X, line 64), tr. Mark Musa, (Harmondsworth, 1986).

<sup>33</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 98.

<sup>34</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 105.

represented by increasing concentration of light matter as we develop'.<sup>35</sup> It is also stressed by the observers that when a soul incarnates, part of its spiritual essence remains in the spirit world, so that under hypnosis an individual may meet the soul of a friend or relative, even though that person is still alive. It also means that after death they unite with their own 'higher self' and become whole, re-connecting with their essence and spiritual source, although this may take a considerable amount of further work 'on the other side'.<sup>36</sup> They also meet and merge with loved ones who are true 'soul mates'; souls with whom they work in various ways over many lifetimes. The fact that souls may be in two places at once, dividing and leaving part of their energy behind in the spirit world as an exact duplicate has interesting resonances with Neoplatonic theories of the undescended soul.<sup>37</sup> Some souls have memories of being elements of nature, or mythical beasts, or of visiting other worlds as alien life forms. Earth is certainly not experienced as the only planet – there are myriads of worlds, each with their own lessons for the ongoing development of the soul throughout thousands of incarnations.

When the time comes for reincarnation, souls agree with their spirit advisors not to remember their other lives, in order to start with a clean slate and not inhibit self-discovery. They choose their next one, in consultation with the Elders, and are allowed to watch their future lives unfold as on a movie screen. It is given to understand that each life has an overall plan or blueprint, but that individuals are continually required to take risks and make choices.

---

<sup>35</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 102.

<sup>36</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 212.

<sup>37</sup> See Plotinus, *Ennead* IV.8.8: '... even our soul does not altogether come down, but there is always something of it in the intelligible; but if the part which is in the world of sense-perception gets control, or rather if it is itself brought under control, and thrown into confusion, it prevents us from perceiving the things which the upper part of the soul contemplates.' (trans. A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus* IV [Cambridge, Mass., 1984], p.421).

As one client says, ‘Oh there is destiny all right. The life cycles are in place. It’s just that there are so many alternatives which are unclear.’<sup>38</sup>

I cannot possibly do justice here to the wealth of details presented in Michael Newton’s many case studies, but I hope to have highlighted the most important themes. One can of course find resonances and correlations with aspects of these accounts in the afterlife traditions of mainstream religions, in Platonic and Pythagorean mythology, theosophy and other esoteric movements, in shamanic journeying. They emerge from what seems to be a collective consensus of metaphysical or imaginal reality, glimpses of which are facilitated through many consciousness-expanding practices such as ritual, visionary experience, dreaming, NDEs and OBEs, absorption of entheogens, hypnosis or active imagination techniques.

But any comparative analysis will not touch the quick of the significance of the encounters to those who participate in them – a mystery of which ancient initiates were forbidden to tell. I am more interested in pursuing the implications of the moment of realisation, the meeting of two worlds, in a way which involves travelling on a vertical axis of connection, if you like, between the phenomenon and the human response to it. It seems to me that one should not extricate oneself from the deeply personal implications of these otherworld journeys, for to do so would obscure the possibility of truly understanding their impact on the lives of ordinary people past and present. We will all – even academics – arrive at the point of no return, we all have a vested interest in what might be in store. As Linda Fierz-David has suggested, death itself is the supreme unknowable symbol, ‘forever on the other side of the

---

<sup>38</sup> Newton, *Journey*, p. 212.

boundary which is set for consciousness: it is an eternally impenetrable mystery'.<sup>39</sup> In approaching this mystery through the mythologies and metaphors of those who have encountered it, one avoids the danger of reducing it to the explanations of a material science which attributes spiritual revelation to brain function as its 'ultimate truth'. The *mystai* of the ancient world – and their modern counterparts – stand by the conviction that they are being shown a reality of a totally different order, one which is more suggestive of the narratives of science-fiction than the physical laws of conventional science.<sup>40</sup>

### **Altered states of consciousness**

All initiatory rituals in the ancient world were designed to induce an altered state of awareness. In the early (that is, pre-Platonic) incubation rituals of the Orphics and Pythagoreans, sick people, guided by priests, lay down in underground caves and had dreams of the spirit world which healed them. Peter Kingsley describes this state as 'like sleep but not sleep, not waking, not ordinary dream'; it was beyond time and space, and often induced

---

<sup>39</sup> Linda Fierz-David and Nor Hall, *Dreaming in Red: The Women's Dionysian Initiation Chamber in Pompeii* (Putnam, Connecticut, 2005), p .133.

<sup>40</sup> I cannot explore here the implications of the new physics for the mind/matter debate, which is indeed pushing back the boundaries between mysticism and science (see for example Amit Goswami, *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World* (New York, 1993); Trish Pfeiffer, John E. Mack and Paul Devereux (eds.), *Mind before Matter: Visions of a New Science of Consciousness* (Ropley, Hampshire, 2007). However, the crucial point is that of the appropriate *mode of enquiry* for transpersonal experience: rational/empirical or symbolic//imaginal. Regarding science fiction, our space-exploration narratives could be seen as a way of giving a concrete image to psychic reality for the modern age, a fact that may contribute to their enduring fascination. On this topic, and the prevalence of UFO sightings as a contemporary manifestation of archetypal images, see Patrick Harpur, *Daimonic Reality* (1994, repr. Ravensdale, WA, 2003), ch. 2.

through the hypnotic power of incantations and music.<sup>41</sup> Indeed cultivation of a music which imitated the perfect harmonies of the spiritual world came to be regarded as a powerful means of ascent (or descent) in itself.<sup>42</sup> The shamanic poet/musician Orpheus himself became a cult figure because he journeyed to the underworld, where, in the words of Kingsley, ‘he saw the things to be seen there just as they are’.<sup>43</sup> He knew how to use music and song to invoke a vision of Persephone and to understand the divine nature of the Sun as Apollo,<sup>44</sup> and in one Orphic poem he makes this journey at the site of a dream oracle next to a volcanic crater.<sup>45</sup> The symbolic significance of Orpheus’ attempt to rescue Euridice – who can be seen as the personification of the feminine psyche – from the depths of Hades as is a profound one which I cannot develop here,<sup>46</sup> except to point out that the purpose of all mystery rituals was the

---

<sup>41</sup> Kingsley, *Dark Places*, p. 82; *Reality* (California, 2004), pp. 41-43.

<sup>42</sup> See Cicero, *Somnium Scipionis* (*De re publica*, 6.18): ‘By imitating [the music of the spheres] on their strings and in song, learned men have opened the way for themselves to return to this place (heaven), like others of outstanding gifts who have devoted earthly life to studying the divine’. A theurgic technique originally attributed to Pythagoras, developed by the later Pythagorean neoplatonists and revived in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by Marsilio Ficino in Florence. See Angela Voss, ‘Orpheus Redivivus: The Musical Magic of Marsilio Ficino’ in *Marsilio Ficino: his Theology, his Philosophy, his Legacy*, eds Michael J.B. Allen and Valery Rees (Leiden, 2002), pp. 227-41; ‘Father Time and Orpheus’ in *The Imaginal Cosmos*, ed., with Jean Hinson Lall (Canterbury, 2007), pp. 139-56; Martin West, *The Orphic Poems* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 30-32.

<sup>43</sup> Kingsley, *Dark Places*, p. 89. On Orpheus and the Orphic mysteries see W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion* (London, 1952, repr. Princeton, 1993); Jane Ellen Harrison, *Prolegomena to Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1903, repr. Princeton, 1991), chap. IX; John Warden (ed.), *Orpheus: The Metamorphosis of a Myth* (Toronto, 1985); West, *The Orphic Poems*.

<sup>44</sup> West, pp. 12-13, Kingsley, *Dark Places*; Harrison, pp. 455-60.

<sup>45</sup> West, p.90; this is recalled in Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book VI, where Aeneas’ journey to the Underworld takes place near the Oracle of Cumae, in the volcanic region near Naples.

<sup>46</sup> See Fierz-David and Hall, p. 94.

realisation – or bringing to light – of the divinity hidden within nature. Kingsley has also demonstrated that both Empedocles and Parmenides were shamanic figures whose poetry reveals first-hand knowledge of the underworld; indeed he suggests that Parmenides' poem *The Mares* was designed to shift the parameters of the reader's normal consciousness in the manner of an incantation and lead them 'into another world' as an initiation into spiritual knowledge.<sup>47</sup> 'To go down to the underworld when you're dead is one thing' says Kingsley, 'To go there while you're alive, prepared and knowingly, and then learn from the experience – that's another thing entirely.'<sup>48</sup>

Mystery rituals did not necessarily involve incubation, but at their heart was a direct encounter with spiritual reality. Jeremy Naydler has shown how the origins of such 'death in life' experiences lies in ancient Egypt, where ritual practices facilitated 'a crossing of the threshold of death while still alive in order to stand within the spirit world and to know oneself as a spirit'.<sup>49</sup> He adds, 'The experience of spiritual rebirth required that one consciously

---

<sup>47</sup> Kingsley, *Dark Places*, p. 118, *Reality*, p. 63. Kingsley's *Reality* presents Parmenides' text as an initiatory journey to the Underworld. He argues that the Western philosophical tradition has misinterpreted (or ignored) its true roots in the visionary and incubatory experiences of the ancient *magi*, and he seeks to re-instate the spiritual significance of these roots for the modern reader. On Empedocles, see Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* (Oxford, 1995).

<sup>48</sup> Kingsley, *Dark Places*, p. 101.

<sup>49</sup> Jeremy Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts* (Rochester, Vermont, 2005), p. 48. Herodotus says the doctrine of reincarnation was borrowed by the Greeks from Egypt (*Histories*, 2.123): 'The Egyptians were the first to introduce the doctrine that the soul of man is immortal, but that at the death of the body it enters into one animal after another, as they are born. Then when it has gone the round of all creatures of land or sea or air it enters again into the body of a new-born man. This cycle is accomplished in three thousand years.' (W.K.C. Guthrie, *Orpheus and Greek Religion*, [Princeton, 1993], p.170). See also Arthur Versluis, *The Egyptian Mysteries* (London, 1988), ch. 1.

undergo the experience of dying.<sup>50</sup> For the Egyptians, death was a hidden realm – the *Dwat* – which interpenetrated the world of the living, containing active spiritual powers and energies in the form of gods and daemons as well as the spiritual life energy of the living. ‘In the *Dwat* ... the essential forms of things exist inwardly in a more interior space – a space that is prior to the external space into which they will unfold when they enter the world of physical manifestation.’<sup>51</sup>

It is this interior space that is accessed via the trance state, induced in the Egyptian tradition of temple incubation via rituals of burial and proto-death. This technique is preserved in the texts of the Hermetic corpus, in which the initiate undergoes a transmission or revelation from a teacher whilst in a dream or trance, during which he or she attains a knowledge of immortality and eventual *gnosis* or union with the divine source of being itself.<sup>52</sup> This ‘hidden’ reality is described as an intermediate realm between temporality and complete transcendence. Greek traditions refer to it as Elysium or the Islands of the Blest,<sup>53</sup> and it is interesting to note that LBL clients see the place they go to immediately after physical death manifesting as a ‘heightened reality’ version of earthly buildings or landscapes with which they are familiar, peopled by souls of loved ones and by beings they recognise to be spiritual guardians. They

---

<sup>50</sup> Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, p. 48.

<sup>51</sup> Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, pp. 83-85; see also Versluis, pp. 105-107.

<sup>52</sup> On the Egyptian tradition of temple incubation and consultation of dream oracles informing the *Corpus Hermeticum*, see Kingsley, ‘Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the *Hermetica*’ in *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* no. 56 (1993), pp. 1-24.

<sup>53</sup> See Homer, *Odyssey* 4.561 ff; Plato, *Georgias*, 523b, 526c; *Menexenus*, 235c; *Republic*, 7.519c, 540b; *Symposium*, 179e, a180b; Cole, p.196 on Hesiod’s and Pindar’s references to the Islands of the Blest, which are described in terms of a perfected natural world.

have a sense that there is somewhere ‘beyond’ all this, but it is not accessible at the initial stage of transition between worlds.<sup>54</sup>

At Eleusis, candidates for initiation underwent a nine-day fast and drank a powerful (and alcoholic) brew of barley groats, water and fresh herbs called the *Kykeon* which is likely to also have had hallucinogenic properties.<sup>55</sup> At the sacramental heart of the ceremony, when symbolic objects were shown to the initiates, the Eumolpidae or hierophants sang or recited ‘in solemn and melodious tones’.<sup>56</sup> The *mystai* then received a vision of the goddess Persephone in the sacred fire, and underwent a profound realisation, the nature of which I will consider later. In some Dionysian or Bacchic ceremonies, divine vision was achieved through ecstatic dancing.

---

<sup>54</sup> David Fontana characterises these ‘places beyond’ as the ‘formless planes’ or places of pure consciousness, beyond all image (Fontana, ch. 10).

<sup>55</sup> See Karl Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal image of Mother and Daughter* (Princeton, 1967), pp. 177-80, ‘The Preparation and Effect of the *Kykeon*’. He suggests the herb used may have been a variety of pennyroyal, which is related to the hallucinogenic Mexican plant commonly known as *salvia divinorum*, used by diviners. Walter Burkert in *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Harvard, 1987), pp.108-109, disagrees that drugs were used, suggesting that it would have been impossible to organise for thousands of people, and would require individual supervision under a master. He thinks it more likely that the sense of bliss was produced by communal festivity. Kerényi also suggests that only a few chosen initiates were given the potion, but this is contradicted by Shawn Eyer, ‘Psychedelic Effects and the Eleusinian Mysteries’ in *Alexandria* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, 1993), pp. 64-93 who makes a plausible case for the collective use of hallucinogens. He points out that barley may attract the fungus ergot, which in turn contains the psychoactive alkaloid ergine, the source of LSD (pp. 74-5), and argues that all the textual evidence regarding the state of mind of the initiates – and the reliability of the mass vision – points to an altered state of consciousness such as that resulting from lysergic acid-based drugs (p. 79). He concludes: ‘It is, then, by no means a sacrilege to think that the mysteries of Demeter and Kore might have utilised the naturally-occurring compounds which sporadically appeared on the heads of grain which were sacred to the goddesses.’ (p. 86) See also, R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann and Carl A.P. Ruck, *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (New York, 1978).

<sup>56</sup> West, p. 23.

In both cults, the initiates re-enacted a journey through darkness and fear before they could emerge into the light and ‘see’ – the altered state of awareness had to be carefully prepared through ritual means. Hypnosis has its own ritual – Michael Newton uses candles, music and a carefully modulated tone of voice to unlock clients’ memories – but there is no sense in which the visions depend on any artificial stimulant, or on the cultivation of intense emotional states. There is no required life-style, such as the Pythagorean or Orphic regulations for diet and abstinence, and hence no suggestion that the LBL vision will confer freedom from the wheel of rebirth if the client lives a life of purity.<sup>57</sup> But we can certainly say that, just as at Eleusis, the experience heals the fear of death, and clients return to their lives safe in the knowledge that it is simply a transition to another mode of being.

### **Eleusis**

For among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which your Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than those mysteries. For by their means we have been brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life and educated and refined to a state of civilization; and as the rites are called “initiations”, so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.

Thus wrote Cicero on the Eleusinian mysteries.<sup>58</sup> Celebrated since around 1500 BCE, these mysteries attracted thousands of individuals, of any profession or religious persuasion. So what

---

<sup>57</sup> On Orphic beliefs about living in their final incarnation, see Guthrie, p. 175.

<sup>58</sup> Cicero, *Laws* II, xiv, 36.

happened there? Eleusis means ‘the place of happy arrival’,<sup>59</sup> and the rituals centred on the myth of the rape of Persephone, the grief of her mother Demeter and her eventual rescue from the underworld and restoration to her mother. In the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, the Mother Goddess is the inaugurator of the mysteries, which may not be recounted or altered by human beings. Demeter’s own initiation was the finding of her daughter, and this event became the ineffable, unspeakable secret, the *arrheton*, at the heart of the ceremony – so secret, in fact, that Persephone’s name was considered too dreadful to pronounce and she was generally referred to simply as ‘the goddess’.<sup>60</sup> All other surrounding rituals were *aporrheton*, or subject to the strictest law of silence. We could suggest an analogy here with the stages of hypnosis described earlier (note 12): the initial public sacrifices in the temples could be seen to correspond to the *beta* stage of ‘ordinary’ consciousness, the *aporrheton* (lesser mysteries) to the *alpha* stage, and the *arrheton* (greater mysteries) to the *theta* stage.

Karl Kerényi emphasises the impossibility – for the historian – of penetrating to the inner experience which ‘moves beyond word and image or mythological representation’.<sup>61</sup> All we know is that at a small shrine, the *Anaktoron*, in the central sanctuary or *Telesterion*, the hierophant ‘made things appear’ to a small number of initiates.<sup>62</sup> After undergoing night-time wanderings in imitation of Demeter’s search for her daughter, the initiates gathered around a

---

<sup>59</sup> Kerényi, p. 23. It was at Eleusis that Demeter finally ended her wanderings in search of her daughter, and where a temple was built in her honour. See *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), lines 295 ff; trans. In Helene P. Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary and Interpretative Essays* (Princeton, 1994).

<sup>60</sup> See Cole, p. 196, Kingsley, *Poimandres*.

<sup>61</sup> Kerényi, p. 38.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Hierophant’ means ‘he who makes the holy things appear’ (Kerényi, p. 90. See pp. 88-94 on the proceedings in the *Telesterion*).

central fire where they were taken through a three-fold process of initiation.<sup>63</sup> At the climax, the high priest called for Persephone – and she was seen to rise up out of the fire to the terrifying sound of a huge gong.<sup>64</sup> Now there is no doubt from the accounts that the initiates saw the goddess in a shared experience, taking place in ‘external’ reality, and we should resist rational attempts to explain how this could be. As Otto remarks, ‘the scholar must learn to see that it is absurd to suppose we can understand anything so great by the mere application of a philological method and a little modern psychology.’<sup>65</sup> Later the hierophant showed an ear of grain, and

all who had seen turned, at the sight of this concrete thing, as though turning back from the hereafter into this world ... to those that had seen Kore at Eleusis, this was no mere metaphor proving nothing, but the memento of an encounter in which the goddess of the underworld showed herself in a beatific vision.<sup>66</sup>

I shall consider the significance of the ‘turning’ via the symbolic showing later in this essay. Evidently it had the effect of breaking the hypnotic trance and restoring the initiate to ‘normal’ vision. The word ‘mystery’ derives from *myesis* denoting the closing of the lips or eyes, and this word was used for the first stage of the ritual, or the ‘lesser mysteries’. The *mystes* would then return for the rituals of the ‘greater mysteries’, the *teletai* (literally, ‘rites of fulfillment’) after which they would attain to *epopteia*, or ‘having seen’, the highest level of

---

<sup>63</sup> The *Dromena* (drama), *Legomena* (sayings) and *Deiknymena* (displaying). See Eyer, p. 68.

<sup>64</sup> Kerényi, p. 84.

<sup>65</sup> Walter F. Otto, ‘The Meaning of the Eleusinian Mysteries’ in *The Mysteries: Papers from the Eranos Yearbooks*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Bollingen, 1955, repr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 14-31.

<sup>66</sup> Kerényi, p. 94.

vision, implying that their eyes had been opened to a new kind of sight.<sup>67</sup> Kerényi states that ‘there is undeniable evidence’ that the *epopteia* conveyed happiness, hope and anticipation, suggesting that the vision was not an objective ‘outer’ event such as a theatrical performance or displaying of a carved statue, but arose through the kindled imaginations of the participants, whose minds had been made empty and receptive. Otto remarks that the overwhelming effects of the vision could not have been achieved if it were merely a dramatic re-enactment: ‘the truth’ he says ‘must have been something absolutely new, astonishing, inaccessible to rational cognition’.<sup>68</sup> Indeed we learn from Aristotle that the initiate was put into a passive condition in which he or she did not ‘learn’ but ‘experienced’ and underwent a ‘change of mind’.<sup>69</sup> Kerényi suggests that ‘in psychological terms, there must have been an experience of the “other” in a change of consciousness, moving far beyond what could be found in everyday life’,<sup>70</sup> adding ‘who can tell what the experience is like without having undergone days and days of fasting, purifications, exhaustion, apprehension and excitement?’<sup>71</sup>

According to Plutarch, the acting out of the initiatory rituals was a direct imitation of the moment of death, when

the soul suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate the great initiations ...

Wanderings astray in the beginning, tiresome walkings in circles, some frightening paths

---

<sup>67</sup> On the stages of initiation, see Kevin Clinton, ‘Stages of Initiation in the Eleusian and Samothracian Mysteries’ in *Greek Mysteries: the Archaeology and Ritual of Ancient Greek Secret Cults* ed. Michael Cosmopoulos (London, 2003), pp. 50-78; Cole, p. 193.

<sup>68</sup> Otto, p. 24.

<sup>69</sup> Aristotle, fragment 15; W. Burkert, *Ancient Mystery Cults* (Harvard, 1987), p. 89; also see Kerényi, p. 90.

<sup>70</sup> Kerényi, p. 90.

<sup>71</sup> Kerényi, p. 91.

in darkness that lead nowhere, then immediately before the end all the terrible things, panic and shivering and sweat, and amazement. And then some wonderful light comes to meet you, pure regions and meadows are there to greet you, with sounds and dances and solemn, sacred words and holy views, and there the initiate, perfect by now, set free and loose from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath ...'<sup>72</sup>

A description not dissimilar to those of LBL clients re-living a death-experience from a past life, who describe the terror of dying followed by release from the body and a sensation of travelling through a tunnel to a place of light, where they feel surrounded by benevolence.<sup>73</sup> Similar too, the impact of the vision. To quote a few ancient authorities: Aristotle, 'all who use these rites experience relief mixed with joy',<sup>74</sup> Cicero, at Eleusis it is shown 'how to live in joy, and how to die with better hopes',<sup>75</sup> and on the epitaph of a Hierophant, that he has shown in the mysteries 'that death is not only not an evil, but good'.<sup>76</sup> One of the very few accounts of the event itself comes from Apuleius, who describes his initiation in the mysteries of Isis:

Then the High Priest ordered all uninitiated persons to depart, invested me in a new linen garment and led me by the hand into the inner recesses of the sanctuary itself ... I approached the very gates of death and set one foot on Persephone's threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon, I entered the presence of the gods of the Underworld and of the Upperworld, stood near and worshipped them.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Plutarch, fragment 168, quoted in Kerényi, pp. 91-92; see Burkert, p. 162.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Newton, *Journey*, pp. 10, 17-19.

<sup>74</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1242a.

<sup>75</sup> Cicero, *De legibus*, 2.36.

<sup>76</sup> From 200 AD, quoted in Burkert, p. 21.

<sup>77</sup> Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves, (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 285-86.

Those who underwent initiation were blessed, and could expect a better lot in the afterlife than those who did not. They certainly no longer feared death, but looked forward to it as the beginning of a new life<sup>78</sup> - they also seemed to gain a sense of the purposeful unfolding of many lives, judging from a remark by Isokrates: ‘Those who take part in [the Eleusinian rites] possess better hopes in regard to the end of life and in regard to the whole *aion*.’<sup>79</sup>

### **Orphism**

We find the same sentiments in texts associated with the Dionysian mystery rituals celebrated by Orphic cults in Italy from the fifth century BCE onwards. The role of Orpheus as initiator of the Dionysian rites has been thoroughly explored by Jane Harrison,<sup>80</sup> so suffice it to say here that they are rites of redemption, of entering the underworld to reclaim the divinity of the soul through encounter with the god. The myth of the dismembering of Dionysus in Greek tradition provided an explanation for the conflict human beings experience between their Titanic human nature and the divine part of their soul.<sup>81</sup> As Linda Fierz-David puts it, ‘The Orphic mystery cult seeks to atone for the Titan guilt and to free humans from their conflict, as they

---

<sup>78</sup> See Burkert, p. 289; Cole, p. 197; Kerényi, pp.13-16.

<sup>79</sup> Isokrates, *Panegyric on Athens*, IV 28, quoted in Kerényi, p. 15.

<sup>80</sup> Harrison, ch. X..

<sup>81</sup> ‘According to Orphic tradition, [Dionysus] is the son of the chthonic Zeus in the form of a snake and of Persephone, and as such is called Dionysus-Zagreus. Jealous Hera incites the Titans against the young huntsman, and it is said that during the flight from them he takes on the forms of animals: he becomes a kid, a deer, and a bull. The Titans nevertheless overtake him, tear him apart, and eat the pieces. Only his heart is saved by Pallas Athene, she brings it to Father Zeus. Zeus shatters the guilty Titans with his lightning-bolt, and they burn to ashes. From these ashes, however ... human beings originate; and this is the Orphic teaching – that human beings have thereby inherited the nature of the Titans and their guilt.’ (Fierz-David and Hall, p. 28).

ceremonially relive the fate of the god. If the humans die in the mystery ceremonial, as the god did, their divine spark is freed and unites itself with the god.’<sup>82</sup>

Small gold tablets have been found in graves, with engraved texts, evidently designed to protect the soul after death. The texts on the tablets give specific instructions for souls to identify themselves to the gods or beings they meet in the underworld (as for example the introductory quotation to this paper).<sup>83</sup> Some imply that rebirth will follow, others give passwords and ritual responses for the soul as it reaches the gates of Hades.<sup>84</sup> Some report dialogues between the soul and the gods, others give pronouncements such as ‘blessed and most happy you will be god instead of mortal’, or a common metaphor for the finding of spiritual nourishment, ‘A kid, you fell into the milk’.<sup>85</sup> Several of the texts describe the newly-arrived soul as thirsty, needing to drink from the cool springs of the ‘waters of memory’ in order to become fully conscious of its divinity.<sup>86</sup> Susan Cole, in her analysis of these tablets, suggests that they were generated by ceremonies which were ‘privately organized, performed in obscurity, and under no official control’.<sup>87</sup> An example of such a ceremony may be found in the frescoes of the Initiation Chamber of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, which reveals

---

<sup>82</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p. 28.

<sup>83</sup> See Guthrie, pp. 171-82; Cole pp. 200-13; Harrison, pp. 572-74; Radcliffe G. Edmonds III, *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes and the Orphic Gold Tablets* (Cambridge, 2004), ch..2; Fritz Graf and Sarah Iles Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (New York, 2007), or detailed discussions of the texts on the gold plates.

<sup>84</sup> See Cole, pp. 201-209.

<sup>85</sup> Cole, p. 207; see Guthrie, pp. 178-89 for a further analysis of this metaphor, also Fierz-David and Hall, pp. 63-65 on the symbolism of the kid as representative of the initiate’s animal nature which must be fully experienced before redemption.

<sup>86</sup> Guthrie, p. 177 ; Harrison, pp. 575-82.

<sup>87</sup> Cole, p. 206.

the stages of a Roman woman's initiation into the mysteries of Dionysus. Fierz-David has interpreted the images through the metaphor of the Jungian journey towards individuation, concluding that the value of the transformatory and painful awakening to one's inner divinity offered by these rituals lies in the memory one takes back to everyday life:

In the dramatic course of the initiation, [the woman] has come to know how human life passes to death and over beyond death as a way between height and depth, danger and help – a way which can be trodden according to divine pattern toward a divine goal. The human being who can remember is no longer given over to blind fate. She has, indeed, seen the eternal symbols which in all conditions of life mediate the right demeanor and lend meaning to all events.<sup>88</sup>

Fierz-David implies here that the soul's memory of the deeper spiritual patterns governing its earthly existence opened up an awareness for individuals of an underlying responsibility for their own life-events, and concludes that that same is true for modern people, for 'in the course of inner development, once the world of archetypal images has arisen in a dramatic, moving inner drama, individuals need never again lose connection with it if they do not forget their most valuable experiences and, with that, themselves.'<sup>89</sup> There is no doubt that LBL invokes such a world, but unlike the *Dionysia*, it does not require the suffering of the *katabasis*, the wandering 'through a darkness full of terror' before it can be glimpsed.<sup>90</sup> Such

---

<sup>88</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p. 146.

<sup>89</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p. 147.

<sup>90</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p. 93.

psychological torment can be likened to the alchemical *nigredo*,<sup>91</sup> and involved facing the peril of annihilation before the divine spark could be freed from its material imprisonment and union with the god achieved. Fierz-David suggests that the drama of the *katabasis* can now be contained within the ‘private, methodical activity’ of inner dialogue with a guide-image in the Jungian practice of active imagination – a means of confronting the shadow aspects of the personality without literally acting them out.<sup>92</sup> Certainly LBL clients are presented with difficult and challenging insights into their own patterns of behaviour by the Elders, but there is no sense of terror, fear or torture – only compassion.<sup>93</sup>

### **Plato**

There were many variations in cult expressions of Dionysian mythology, but the gold tablets certainly confirm the fundamental convictions of the Orphics that the soul is immortal, that life on earth is a punishment and trial from which it is eventually purified, and that it undergoes reincarnation with the possibility of ultimate escape from the cycle of births.

They (i.e. Orphics) say that the soul of man is immortal, and that at one time it comes to its end (which they like the rest of men call dying), and at another it is reborn, but is never finally exterminated. For these reasons it is necessary to live a life as sinless as

---

<sup>91</sup> The first stage of the alchemical process, the blackening, before the separation of the elements and their purification has taken place. For an overview of alchemical procedure and a selection of texts, see Stanton J. Linden, *The Alchemy Reader, from Hermes Trismegistus to Isaac Newton* (New York and Cambridge, 1993).

<sup>92</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p.115. See also *Jung on Active Imagination* ed. Joan Chodorow (London, 1987), which contains key readings from Jung on the purpose and techniques of active imagination.

<sup>93</sup> The Pompeii fresco depicts the distraught initiate being whipped by the ‘angel of darkness’ before her final revelation.

possible ... The soul then, being immortal and often reborn, and having seen all things, both things here and in Hades, has learned everything that there is.<sup>94</sup>

We find all these ideas recounted fully by Plato, who presents us with Socrates as hierophant of the mysteries of philosophy.<sup>95</sup> For Socrates, it is through the contemplation of Beauty that the inner realization of the soul's immortality may be achieved, and the path of love becomes the soul's *katabasis*, another way of entering the underworld of the trapped soul and learning how to free it. The states of mystery initiation become a metaphor, in the *Phaedrus*, for the purification of the soul through the yearnings of erotic love and its final realization of divinity.<sup>96</sup> The pain and difficulty of the immortal soul trapped in a mortal body and forced to shed its wings is one of Plato's most graphic and enduring images, and he describes the initiation process as the re-growth of the wings which enables the soul to fly back to its true home 'beyond the heavens' where true being dwells.<sup>97</sup> This higher sphere is the abode of the stars, and in the *Timaeus* Plato speaks of each soul being assigned to a star, furthermore 'the one who lived his appointed time well would travel again to dwell in his proper star, and live a blessed life according to his true nature.'<sup>98</sup> We may recall that the etymology of the word 'desire' (*de-sidere*) is 'from the star', and desire for union with Beauty is the underlying force propelling Plato's philosophical lover towards the Good.

---

<sup>94</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 80e.

<sup>95</sup> On Socrates as hierophant of the philosophic mysteries, see Gregory Shaw, 'Living Light: An Exploration of Divine Embodiment' in *Seeing with Different Eyes: Essays in Astrology and Divination*, eds Patrick Curry and Angela Voss (Newcastle, 2007), pp. 59-87.

<sup>96</sup> Plato, 'Myth of the Charioteer', in *Phaedrus*, 250d-256e.

<sup>97</sup> *Phaedrus*, 247 c-d.

<sup>98</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, 31d, see Guthrie, pp.180-81.

In the *Phaedrus* also we find a detailed explanation of reincarnation and the laws of karma, for souls will, according to Plato, reincarnate into different kinds of lives depending on how righteously they have lived, and how much they have remembered spiritual truth through ‘following in the train of a god’.<sup>99</sup> He specifies that souls must spend ten thousand years between incarnations, unless they are philosophers in which case the whole process becomes speeded up, for the philosopher alone is able to recover his wings and ‘approach the full vision of the perfect mysteries’:<sup>100</sup>

Beauty it was ours to see in all its brightness in those days when, amidst that happy company, we beheld with our eyes that blessed vision ... then were we all initiated into that mystery which is rightly accounted blessed beyond all others; whole and unblemished were we that did celebrate it, untouched by the evils that awaited us in days to come; whole and unblemished likewise, free from all alloy, steadfast and blissful were the spectacles on which we gazed in the moment of final revelation ...<sup>101</sup>

Souls take full responsibility for choosing their next life, which may well be that of a beast if they have not ‘beheld truth’ through the pursuit of philosophy, which Plato defines as ‘passing from a plurality of perceptions to a unity gathered together by reasoning’, a ‘recollection of those things which our souls beheld aforetime as they journeyed with their god.’<sup>102</sup>

It is, I hope, very obvious that these ideas have sprung, fully formed, into the twenty-first century LBL consulting room. Even more startling are the correlations between the after-

---

<sup>99</sup> *Phaedrus*, 248 c-e.

<sup>100</sup> *Phaedrus* 249 c-d.

<sup>92</sup> *Phaedrus*, 250 b.

<sup>102</sup> *Phaedrus*, 249b-c.

death journey of Er in the *Republic* and his modern counterpart.<sup>103</sup> Er was a warrior who was slain in battle, but he was evidently not clinically dead for his body did not decay, and on his funeral pyre he revived and told of his vision of the afterlife. He speaks of spiritual beings or judges who tell him to be a messenger to mankind, and to recount truths of the other world; he observes a dialogue between newly arrived souls and souls already there, greeting each other as old acquaintances; he learns the laws of karma, and he is taken to a place called the ‘meadow’ where he sees a beam of light like a pillar extending from heaven to earth ‘most nearly resembling a rainbow, but brighter and purer’.<sup>104</sup> From the extremities of the light stretched the spindle of Necessity, through which all the orbits of the planets turned. The whorl of the spindle, as a metaphor for the topography of the ‘intermediate’ spirit world, is remarkably similar to the curved layers described by several LBL clients:

Its shape was that of those in our world ... but we must conceive it to be as if in one great whorl, hollow and scooped out, there lay enclosed, right through, another like it but smaller, fitting into it as boxes that fit into one another, and in like manner another, a third, and a fourth, and four others, four there were eight of the whorls in all, lying within one another, showing their rims as circles from above and forming the continuous back of a single whorl about the shaft.’<sup>105</sup>

On the rims of the whorls stand the Sirens, singing notes which combine into a perfect harmony. Er speaks of choosing lots for his next incarnation, again stressing the responsibility of humans to choose wisely in accordance with the deeds of their previous life. Socrates comments here that this choice should be ‘our main concern’ in this lifetime, and that humans

---

<sup>103</sup> *Republic*, 614b-621d.

<sup>104</sup> *Republic*, 616b.

<sup>105</sup> *Republic*, 616c-e.

should study everything that enables them to ‘distinguish the life that is good from that which is bad’ to prepare for this crucial moment in which their next life is determined. Er tells of souls being sent their individual genius or guardian spirit, and of being allotted their destiny for their next life, which is made irreversible.<sup>106</sup> They are then required to drink of the River of Forgetfulness and they waft their way towards their birth ‘like shooting stars’.<sup>107</sup> Er, however, is not allowed to drink the water, and he wakes up on the funeral pyre. This tale, says Socrates, ‘will save us if we believe it’.<sup>108</sup>

Here we find the notion that the salvation of the soul lies in its power of memory and imagination, and crucially, that *faith* in the ‘truth’ offered by such revelations (rather than their provability) is the key to fully realizing them oneself in the afterlife. That there may be a soteriological dimension to LBL work is not considered by Michael Newton who is more concerned with its healing effects in this life, but Socrates’ comment deserves our attention. It implies that the power of symbolic narrative, if entered into on its own terms, has far-reaching implications for the karmic journey of each individual.

### **Initiation**

Let us now look more closely at the meaning of the term ‘initiation’. We have seen that it involves a death-experience, and how at the apex of the mystery vision an immediate knowledge of immortality was conferred upon the initiate through the visible presence of the deities. Fierz-David calls it ‘a call to awakening’,<sup>109</sup> and Eliade gives one characteristic of such initiation as a

---

<sup>106</sup> *Republic*, 621a..

<sup>107</sup> *Republic*., 621b.

<sup>108</sup> *Republic*., 621c.

<sup>109</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p. 85.

transcendence of the human condition, the attaining of a super-human or divine state.<sup>110</sup> But how can this come about through a vision, or even through a divinatory encounter? One key may be that the ‘seeing’ is, simultaneously, a knowing, achieved through the power of the symbolic representation to bring together in a flash of insight material form and its immaterial significance. Through visual image, what Jung would term unconscious contents and Plato the lost memories of the soul are revived and re-membered as the soul is infused with a knowledge of its own hidden potential to transcend its embodied condition. Fierz-David describes this as consciousness ‘accepting’ the unconscious, just as Apollo as lord of the Delphic oracle acknowledges the opposing power of Dionysus.<sup>111</sup> The coming together of the conscious and unconscious, light and dark, waking and dream life, male and female, soul and body constitutes the work of integration symbolized by the dramatic narratives underlying all ancient initiations.

Eliade argues that this is a perennial and universal experience, the mysteries being capable of being ‘indefinitely re-animated and enriched with new values’ according to the context and society in which they are enacted.<sup>112</sup> He describes the Hellenistic mysteries as ‘a ritually guided experience of the regeneration of the soul’<sup>113</sup> and suggests that in modern man ‘the unconscious is religious’, and that our present-day initiations are undergone in psychological contexts. Fierz-David sees the ancient way of initiation as ‘a close parallel to the way of individuation for

---

<sup>110</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York, 1958), p. 112.

<sup>111</sup> See Fierz-David and Hall, pp. 74-77; at Delphi Dionysus was revered as the ‘winter sun’ and Apollo as the ‘summer sun’.

<sup>112</sup> Eliade, pp. 113-4.

<sup>113</sup> Eliade, p. 114.

modern people, who through it are also always presented with fundamental moral problems'.<sup>114</sup> These problems are existential ones, springing from 'the original ground of the soul itself', and in that sense, I would suggest, can only be addressed through freeing the understanding from its normal limited parameters of judgement and leading it to a place where a greater, deeper and more universal perspective may be attained.

As I have pointed out, the goal of all ancient mystery cults is union of human and divinity through the *realization* of that unity within the individual, whilst fully embodied. This would also appear to be the key to LBL's aim to heal psychic wounds through bringing a spiritual perspective to bear on human problems. But we certainly do not find the same emphasis on the secrets of sexuality at the heart of the revelation. The significance of the erect phallus for the Dionysian initiate *was* part of the 'ineffable secret', the secret that in the sexual act matter and spirit are united.<sup>115</sup> In the Pompeii fresco, suggests, Fierz-David, the initiate is warned of the dangers of becoming pure soul and forgetting to return to the body – an inevitable temptation, when in the cold light of day the 'mystery' is no longer accessible or comprehensible. It was kept secret precisely because it could not be translated into worldly terms without gross misrepresentation or even ridicule. In LBL, one of the most powerful and ecstatic experiences related by clients is that of merging with a loved one's soul without the encumbrance of the body, or of all the emotional 'baggage' of an earthly relationship. It is then very difficult for the individual to return to their life where the loved one may well be inaccessible or estranged. It is as if they must taste unity and then allow this knowledge to inform the hard and slow everyday work of 'divinizing' the mundane. There is no 'divine madness' of being taken by a god, nor

---

<sup>114</sup> Fierz-David and Hall, p. 120.

<sup>115</sup> See Fierz-David and Hall, p. 105.

instantaneous granting of freedom from the wheel of rebirth. But there is something very important that both ancient and modern practices have in common, and that is the *mode of revelation* that effects such a dramatic and shattering change in consciousness.

This depends, I suggest, on the turning point between allegorical representation and symbolic perception. Something happened in the mysteries, and something happens in the LBL consulting room, when individuals grasp a ‘truth’ through visionary experience which involves seeing through the veil that separates conscious awareness from unconscious memory. In differing ways, this involves both manifestation of spiritual life-forces and the showing of objects, and in the case of LBL, it is revealed through a two-way dialogue between client and spirit, and client and therapist. In both cases, the ‘truth’ would seem to derive from the convergence of literal and spiritual realities, and in both cases, initiates have been led deep into a state of altered awareness, through ritual incantation or hypnosis. At Eleusis they have been led to the central fire by the hierophant who invokes Persephone and Demeter (and many other deities along the way),<sup>116</sup> in Orphic rituals they have been taken into the underworld to awake their Dionysian spark of divinity, and in LBL they have been led by the therapist into the spirit world, and by spiritual guides to the Council of Elders – in all cases, they come to know with unshaking conviction that they are immortal.

### **Symbols**

Particularly intriguing is the function of the symbolic objects in both processes, for it would seem that they perform a central role in the ‘seeing’. To ponder this role leads us to neoplatonic theurgy and the symbol or *synthema* as a ‘bait’ for focussing the attention of the celebrant and

---

<sup>116</sup> Kerényi, p. 28, mentions that in the *aporrheta* they encountered ‘even more deities’, whereas in the *arrheton* only ‘the two deities’ of Demeter and her daughter were revealed.

leading them to apprehend the sacred dimension to which the symbol points (and indeed in which it participates).<sup>117</sup> This involves making the transition, as I remarked earlier, from an allegorical understanding of significance to an inner grasp of unitive meaning, eloquently expressed by the romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

Now an allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses ... On the other hand a Symbol... is characterised by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Eternal through and in the Temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that Unity, of which it is the representative.<sup>118</sup>

At Eleusis, certain objects were contained within a large basket and were ceremoniously revealed at the height of the ritual. These apparently included a womb, a phallus, a snake and a pomegranate, although their identity was never revealed to the non-initiated.<sup>119</sup> In some ceremonies, the initiates themselves handled the objects and transferred them from one basket to another. Of more public knowledge was the displaying of the ear of grain (*epoptikon*), which from an outsider's perspective might seem to be of minor importance, or even 'crude and

---

<sup>117</sup> On the neoplatonic symbol, see Peter T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol* (Princeton, 2004), chs 6 and 7; on theurgic ritual, see Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: the Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Pennsylvania, 1995).

<sup>118</sup> In Coleridge, 'The Statesman's Manual' in *Lay Sermons* ed. R. J. White, vol. 6 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton, 1972), p. 30. On symbol and the numinous, see also J. Robert Barth, 'Symbol as Sacrament' in *The Symbolic Imagination: Coleridge and the Romantic Tradition* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 3-21; Paul Tillich, 'Religious Symbols and Knowledge of God', *The Christian Scholar*, vol. 38, no. 3, (1955), pp. 189-97 and S. Wasserstrom, 'On Symbols and Symbolising' in *Religion after Religion: Gershom Sholem, Mircea Eliade and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton, 1999), pp. 85-99. On the etymology of 'symbol' see Pietro Negri, 'Knowledge of the Symbol' in Julius Evola (ed.), *Introduction to Magic* (Rochester, Vermont, 2001), pp. 83-96.

<sup>119</sup> Kerenyi, pp. 75, 106 and note 6; Eyer, p. 69.

meaningless.<sup>120</sup> But Kerényi points out that ‘nothing about the Eleusinian mysteries was so striking as the initiates’ awe of Demeter’s gift, the grain, and their hope of life after death.<sup>121</sup> To the celebrants, having just beheld the secret of secrets, the grain symbolized the knowledge they had just gained, knowledge that for life to flourish anew there must be death.<sup>122</sup> The humble ear of grain, the ‘concrete thing’, enabled the initiates to connect material and immaterial reality in one stroke, to come back into their bodies and their awareness of the natural processes of Demeter, whilst also understanding the transcendent aspect of the feminine in the resurrection of Persephone. In the same way as the initiates experienced the finding of Persephone, so they understood that eternal life is never extinguished and is fully present as a secret within the world of generation. A similar message may have presented itself, as I have mentioned, in the revealing of the phallus in the Dionysian mysteries.<sup>123</sup>

In the case of LBL, the most conspicuous objects observed by subjects are the medallions worn by the Council of Elders.<sup>124</sup> These mysterious pendants are described in great detail.<sup>125</sup> They consist of gold discs inscribed with images or emblems, with mysterious indecipherable writing around the rim. The images and emblems are understood as ‘messages of inspiration’ to the soul which are far more powerful than verbal communication, and enable them to feel they

---

<sup>120</sup> Eduard Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. IV, p. 215, quoted in Kerényi, p. 205.

<sup>121</sup> Kerényi, p. 106.

<sup>122</sup> See Kerényi, pp. 106-107 for relevant parables from Christian and Jewish traditions.

<sup>123</sup> See Fierz-David and Hall, p. 76; a winnowing basket was filled with fruits, under which Dionysus was believed to be hidden in the form of a phallus: ‘it is a symbol that, if it does *not* remain hidden, has a grotesque and obscene character’. (p. 104).

<sup>124</sup> See Newton, (2006), pp. 224-43.

<sup>125</sup> From Newton, (2006), pp. 230-31.

are an 'active participant' in the questioning of the Council. For example, one young woman is shown an image of a fleeing gazelle with a human carrying a torch on its back, which she interprets as a reminder 'to have the courage and strength to continue on with my life with a greater sense of purpose. The gazelle also represents freedom to conquer fear and have faith in myself.'<sup>126</sup> Or, an Elder may use an image to correct an unhelpful pattern of behaviour: 'like the oracles of old, the Elders may show a sign as a warning of impending trouble if what we strive for in life is set aside.' This is undoubtedly the divinatory heart of the encounter, giving the client a specific task to bring back to their life: 'The impact of viewing these signs and symbols under hypnosis is so compelling with some clients that after their sessions they have ordered duplicates on personal jewelry to remind them of their karmic path'.<sup>127</sup> Again we have the notion of a physical object, the item of jewelry, containing a talismanic function of bearing a message from another dimension which is relevant to material existence. Like the concrete realization of a dream, such objects facilitate a journey between worlds, being simultaneously here and there.

J. Robert Barth has pointed towards the sacramental nature of the symbol, suggesting that an act of faith is required to perceive the unity of outer image and inner meaning. This act he describes as a 'commitment of self' to the revelation. As in traditional religious sacraments, symbols can be seen as ways in which divine power is shared with human beings, a 'making present' of that which they represent.<sup>128</sup> Barth also stresses the notion of 'encounter', that sacraments are the mode in which humans encounter God, or divinities, in the same way that symbols convey a dynamic, timeless and *active* property that demands constant relationship in

---

<sup>126</sup> Newton, (2006), p. 236.

<sup>127</sup> Newton, (2006), p. 243.

<sup>128</sup> Barth, pp. 13-14.

order to stay alive and ‘work’ on the consciousness of the perceiver. Indeed the quality of revelation will be inextricably related to the commitment and belief of the individual.

Can we call the spirit world itself a ‘symbolic’ reality, then? It is certainly not literal (in the sense of material), nor allegorical, nor purely mystical (in the sense of being without image), but it does use familiar forms to convey the presence of a dimension of experience normally inaccessible. The Council of Elders, the meetings with ancient deities, could be described as all taking place in what Henry Corbin termed the *mundus imaginalis*, the imaginal space where divine essence takes on form in order to be present to human vision.<sup>129</sup> Paradoxically this place is experienced as more ‘real’ than the ordinary world; it is, in the words of Tom Cheetham, like a ‘world turned inside out’.<sup>130</sup> This is the place where the soul encounters its angel or spiritual counterpart, or a mode of vision in which the human and divine eyes are drawn into single focus. The Islamic sages who inspired Corbin were able to live fully in both worlds, ‘dreaming with open eyes’. I think we could suggest that what LBL clients ‘see’ exists in this imaginal place, and they certainly encounter their angel there; but where are the fastings or fires, drugs or gongs, frenzied dancing or sacrifices, burial rites or philosophical training? Michael Newton asks why this easy method of visionary travel should be available now to anyone without any ritual or religious context, and concludes ‘I believe the spiritual door has been opened to our immortality because to deny us this knowledge has proven to be counterproductive ... The benefits of amnesia may no longer outweigh the drawbacks of lives existing within a vacuum of chemically-induced

---

<sup>129</sup> See Corbin, *Mundus imaginalis* (see note 13).

<sup>130</sup> Tom Cheetham, *The World Turned Inside Out: Henry Corbin and Islamic Mysticism* (Woodstock, Conn., 2003). The experience of the ontological ‘super-reality’ of the spiritual world is confirmed by many communicators. See Fontana, ch. .9.

apathy.’<sup>131</sup> Unlike the *mystes* of old, these modern day travelers to the other world may speak freely of their experiences – and the very communicability of these experiences has led Michael Newton for one to believe that he is tapping into the ‘objective’, universal reality that will await us all.

### **Postscript: Rudolf Steiner**

One cannot address the question of initiation in the modern age without acknowledging, at least, the spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner in which he advocates a method for human beings to develop and extend their powers of perception to the higher realms of spirit.<sup>132</sup> Following Plato, initiation for Steiner is a path of knowledge that will enable people to bring an Apollonian clarity of thought to bear on worlds normally inaccessible to the consciousness. In this he is an heir of Swedenborg<sup>133</sup> and embodies the enlightenment ideal of the attainment of truth through objective observation – indeed he insists that this is the most appropriate mode of knowledge for our time.<sup>134</sup> In his lecture ‘Knowledge and Initiation’ of 1922,<sup>135</sup> he points out that all initiatory

---

<sup>131</sup> Newton, *Destiny*, p. 397.

<sup>132</sup> Rudolf Steiner, 1861-1925, esoteric teacher, founder of the anthroposophical movement. Of his many writings *Occult Science: An Outline* (1925, repr. London, 1963) gives a comprehensive exposition of the aims of spiritual science and the path of ‘thinking’ as a spiritual discipline.

<sup>133</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, 1688-1772, protestant visionary whose angelic communications gave rise to a detailed taxonomy of the spiritual realm and the condition of the human soul after death. For an introduction to his works see Michael Stanley (ed.), *Emanuel Swedenborg* (Western Esoteric Masters Series, Berkeley, 2003).

<sup>134</sup> See R. Steiner, *Knowledge and Initiation*, Lecture, April 1922, at Rudolf Steiner Archive: <http://wn.rsarchive.org/Lectures/GA/GA0211/19220414p01.html>: ‘Anthroposophy ... seeks to develop a knowledge and perception of the spiritual worlds which is no less exact, no less conscientious in the sense of exact science, than is the best tendency and striving of our natural scientific age’ (p. 1).

<sup>135</sup> As above. All following quotations are from this lecture

sciences are peculiar to their age, and their purpose is 'to investigate and understand what is eternal in the human being and the universe'. The aim is to develop a process of 'imaginative', 'inspirational' and finally 'intuitive' thinking through intensive meditative exercises which empty the consciousness of all interfering thoughts, so that an awareness of what he calls 'super-sensible reality' can emerge. This is not like ordinary memory, reflection or conception, but requires a shift in consciousness, a 're-visiting' the realm of spirit through cultivating 'the forces of the soul'. In this way, 'we are led to what is essentially the soul and spiritual being of man that lived in the spiritual worlds before it united with the physical substance of heredity ... We come to know our own eternal being, our life of soul and spirit in the spiritual worlds before birth.'

Exactly the claims of LBL, with remarkably similar techniques of consciously 'going backwards' in memory until one passes through birth, and through the moment of death 'in full consciousness'. Steiner stresses that this vision is not a hallucination, and that the subject retains full presence of mind, full control, and 'firm and sound judgement'. He claims that ancient mystery forms of initiation such as those at Eleusis had 'vision without knowledge', and that participants in this kind of ritual were completely identified with their 'visions and hallucinations' and thus unable to maintain full independence of mind. It is the task, he believes, of modern man to gain a higher knowledge of spiritual soul-being in the universe whilst holding together the opposites of critical thinking (and I refer back here to Michael Newton's comment that clients should be able to 'analyze critically' the things they see) and observation of spiritual phenomena. Through developing faculties of imagination and inspiration, one may arrive finally at the intuitive knowledge where 'we pass in conscious experience out through the gate of death

and experience our immortality'.<sup>136</sup> Steiner makes a clear distinction between 'faith or belief' and 'clear knowledge', and is distrustful of 'vague kinds of mysticism' which cannot give rise to 'exact knowledge'. In fact he states that 'imagination, inspiration and intuition' are 'the very opposite' of 'visionary, hallucinatory, or mystical experiences' and he would therefore no doubt be distrustful of 'knowledge' obtained under hypnosis, if the individual did not maintain a fully conscious awareness at all times.

It is difficult to judge whether the visions obtained through LBL would be regarded as hallucinations by Steiner, and indeed the question of how authentically imaginal vision can be relayed as 'objective knowledge' in this world is a post-Cartesian dilemma.<sup>137</sup> However, I would suggest that Steiner's model has deep resonances in LBL therapy, indeed it is the model that informs most psychical research today. It would seem that the spiritual world is making itself known to Western men and women through models of consciousness-expansion, psychological therapy and technology.<sup>138</sup> Yet the archetypal roles of the players in the game remain the same: hierophant or therapist, client or *mystes*, spirit guide or *daimon*, Source or God. At the heart of the LBL experience lies the divinatory encounter, as the messages of the gods are revealed and communicated in a ritual of dialogue. Ancient mystery rituals may not involve interaction and encounter in the same way, but whether formally asked or not, the implicit question 'am I

---

<sup>136</sup> Michael Newton also mentions that his method involves a consideration of 'the I signs of the soul: insight, imagination and intuition' (*Life between Lives*, p. 9) but he makes no acknowledgement of Steiner's similar three-fold scheme.

<sup>137</sup> It would be absurd to any ancient initiate to differentiate between 'objective' and 'subjective' truth. See Gerhard Wehr, *Jung and Steiner* (Great Barrington, MA, 1990), particularly Appendix 3, 'Depth Psychology and Anthroposophy'. Wehr suggests that Jungian 'active imagination' would be akin to the first stage of anthroposophical knowledge, the 'imaginative', and would be preparatory to the higher levels of inspiration and intuition (p. 305).

<sup>138</sup> See note 142.

immortal?’ is answered in no uncertain terms in both cases. There may no longer be a secret that cannot be told on pain of death (although the question of *how* to speak of it still remains), but the knowledge that is given to the modern *mystes* who parts with a large sum of money to spend several hours under hypnosis would appear to be every bit as life-changing as the *visio beatifica* in the *Telesterion* at Eleusis.<sup>139</sup>

My conclusion in this brief overview is that we cannot dismiss the possibility that life between lives therapy is of comparable significance, in terms of extending the capacities of human perception to the dimension we call ‘spiritual’, to the rituals of antiquity. But is it truly initiatory? Are techniques such as LBL merely comforting illusions, ‘quick fixes’ that may remove certain existential anxieties, but will never lead the individual to a true *catharsis* in this life? What is the ‘real’ message of the dialogue with the ‘other’ that is opened up here, for contemporary men and women? And perhaps most importantly of all, how can *any* transcendent experience be adequately articulated through forms which are necessarily limited by the constraints of sense-perception on the one hand, or the conceptual mind on the other? We can only glimpse the place ‘beyond’ in the terms of this one, and since we live in an age of literalization, of academic, scientific and religious fundamentalism which has no room for imaginal modes of knowledge, spiritual entities are now required to present themselves ‘literally’ to be believed, to be photographed, videoed and recorded to ‘prove’ their existence.<sup>140</sup> They are

---

<sup>139</sup> Kerenyi uses this term to denote the supreme vision of the deity, as in Christian mysticism (p. 95).

<sup>140</sup> See for example Grant and Jane Solomon (eds), *The Scole Experiment: Scientific Evidence for Life after Death* (London, 1999).

even speaking through computers and radios.<sup>141</sup> Psychic consumerism abounds; guardian angels can be conversed with under the guise of therapy or neo-shamanic workshops, mediums are two a penny. Access to the spiritual realm has been removed from the domain of sacred ritual and made available on internet sites and phone lines, and as a result the gulf grows ever wider between 'new age' and orthodox religious mentalities. Finally, I remain in agreement with Carol Zaleski, who pleads for an approach to contemporary otherworld vision which is based on a pragmatic attention to individuals' experience and a re-location of such experience within an imaginal framework, so that, like the ancient mysteries, its healing and transformatory potential rather than the mechanics of its operation (the 'why' rather than the 'how') becomes the primary focus of research:

If we fully recognized the symbolic nature of near-death testimony (and accept the limits that imposes on us), then in the end we will be able to accord it a value and a validity that would not otherwise be possible; this in turn will yield further insight into the visionary, imaginative, and therapeutic aspects of religious thought in general.<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>141</sup> This phenomenon is called 'instrumental transcommunication'. See D. Gulia, 'Computer-based analyses of supposed paranormal voices' in A. Cardoso and D. Fontana (eds), *Proceedings of the First International Conference of Current Research into Survival of Physical Death, with Special Reference to Instrumental Transcommunication* (Vigo, 2004).

<sup>142</sup> Zaleski, p. 192.

