

A Nineteenth Century Explanatory Scheme for The Interpretation of Near-Death Experience: The Transpersonal Model of Death as Presented in Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy

An article by Dr Jean-Louis Siémons

I - PRELIMINARY INFORMATION

1. A Few Words On Theosophy.

This explanatory model of death - to be presented here in its main lines - is part and parcel of a very elaborate world-view formulated in the nineteenth century under the name of *Theosophy*, by Mme H.P. Blavatsky (1831-1891) and her co-worker W.Q. Judge (1851-1896). In their writings, which remain little known in our days, these authors proposed to draw out the esoteric, fundamental aspects of the world's great religions and philosophies and to point to their practical applications in the fields of individual and collective life. Essentially, all the original teachings of Theosophy - among which rank the interesting materials to be discussed in the following - were attributed to Oriental masters, whose disciple and mouthpiece Mme Blavatsky claimed to be.

Up against the increasing materialistic influence of science, and the all-invading current of spiritualism (with its rudimentary theories concerning the soul's survival of death), Theosophy did a lot to throw light on the experience of dying and the *post mortem* states of human consciousness, on the firm basis of a description of man which stood (and remains, even to-day) as a model of *transpersonal psychology*, long before this term was used in the West.

Here, it must be emphasized that the model to be examined in no way reflects the personal speculations of the authors, or any aspect of last century psychology¹ it is given as the result of direct, experimental observations, within the reach of certain trained yogis. Although the identity of the latter was known at the time, it is now of secondary importance, as names quoted would not add a feather's weight to the credibility of the observations reported: obviously, the only thing that matters here is the model's internal logic, and capacity to interpret near-death experience (NDE).

¹ [fn 1: Needless to recall that during the decade 1880-90 (of great development of the theosophical literature) Freud, who became a physician in 1886, was still discovering the use of hypnosis in therapy. As to his future disciple, C. G. Jung, he was born in 1875, precisely when H.P. Blavatsky founded her "Theosophical Society".]:

2. A Generalized Holistic and Transpersonal Approach

Faithful to the *spirit* of Oriental philosophy, Theosophy takes up (and widely develops) the dynamic concept of the universe conceived as a living whole - the theatre of an immense ascending evolution of Consciousness, through all kingdoms of Nature, towards a progressive awakening in human individuals, destined to take in hand their own evolutionary progress. In the infinity of time, worlds follow each other in a regular sequence of periods of activity and rest. And for man, the alternate phases of life, death and rebirth (in the process of reincarnation) afford him all the opportunities to develop - collectively - the unlimited potentialities of humanity, and to return - individually, and with *full* consciousness - to the unique central source of Life, Energy and Consciousness whence the whole cosmos eternally proceeds (the *Atman-Brahman* of the Hindus, the *Alaya* of the Buddhists, the ineffable *Godhead* of Meister Eckhart, etc.).

In this immense living organism of the universe, the causal law of *karma* maintains a dynamic harmony; at the individual level, the same law of causality has an ethical aspect: through its agency, man is continually confronted with the consequences of his former attitudes and behaviour, together with the opportunities to improve himself and correct his own path.

The little that precedes suffices to show that what we commonly call "death" is but one episode in a human being's very long history. Its processes - like everything else in the universe - must answer a definite logic, in the form of natural laws coordinating on both lines - physical and psychical - the sequence of events culminating in the breakdown of all biological functions and the psychological upheaval resulting from the dramatic shift of consciousness from one plane to another quite different. Here Theosophy puts the stress on the *subjective* experiences of the dying rather than on occult phenomena, such as the separation of the astral body, the rupture of the silver cord, etc. in which many authors took delight, a century ago. In fact, the task was far greater for Mme Blavatsky than for spiritualists who satisfied themselves with realistic descriptions of the spirits in their Summerland. In christianized countries, fully imbued with the notion of *personality* - from the strictly personal man to the no less personal God - the difficulty was to bring home the necessity to postulate a *transpersonal* level of self-identity overshadowing the human being during his whole life, and finally manifesting itself to him, at the solemn moment of death.

3. Problems of Terminology

In order to make themselves understood by their public, the theosophical authors used (and sometimes created) quite a vocabulary whose terms should be specified to the modern reader, since their accepted meaning may differ in our days.

The word *personality* (from the Latin *persona* = the actor's mask) is meant to denote the worldly, ephemeral character with which man identifies himself during a lifetime. To denounce its (relatively) illusory nature, it is sometimes called the "false personality."

In the various bibliographical references quoted in the following, various synonyms are also used, such as lower self, or lower ego, personal ego, etc.

Except in very rare cases (*e.g.* of children dying young), this personality, with its complex structure, is bound to disintegrate after death, the quintessence only of its human experience being retained and assimilated by the transpersonal aspect of man, which Theosophy calls - the individuality.

The term *individuality* (from the Latin *individuus* = indivisible) refers to the permanent root of the personality - a kind of total self-overshadowing the partial, earthly self. As it is the real source of our deep feeling of identity (= "I am I") it is generally called, in the theosophical literature, the *higher Ego*. Equivalent words: the spiritual Ego, the Ego-Self - or simply: *The Ego*, which means, in the context of Oriental metaphysics, an individualized and self-conscious focus of the great Universal Consciousness, active in an immortal entity, beyond space-time limitations.²

Being too vague, the term *soul* may lead to confusion: in the West, the "soul" but too often refers to a kind of permanent *personality* in man. The word Self, or higher Self, in this philosophical system, should be reserved to the original *Atman* of the Hindus, which transcends by far the transpersonal Ego (or *jivatman*).

Theosophy insists on the fact that the Ego "is ever conscious" (even in deep sleep), "never dies", etc. Obviously, the word Ego does not necessarily imply ego-ism, separateness, self-identification with a passing human form, etc. It suggests a living focus of perception of a deep-seated identity.³

4. From The Personal to The Transpersonal

A dream, narrated by C.G. Jung, throws light on the relationship between the personal self and the Ego-Self. In his experience, the dreamer discovered in a sumptuously flowered (symbolic) chapel a yogi in meditation whose very face was that of Dr Jung. This vision he interpreted as a parable:

"... my Self goes into meditation, like a yogi as it were, and meditates on my earthly form. One could also say: he takes the human form to enter this three-dimensional existence, like someone dressed in a diving suit to plunge into the sea ... he can have worldly experiences and thus, with an enhanced consciousness, progress towards its own realization".⁴

According to Theosophy, the higher Ego has, integrated to itself, the rich quintessence of *all* the conscious experiences of the numerous terrestrial personalities it inspired or

² [fn 2: Modern readers must take care not to confound this transpersonal Ego (with a capital E) with the terrestrial self, which is generally referred to as the "ego", in our days.]

³ [fn 3: For a further clarification of the difference between "personality" and "individuality" see the explanations given by Mme Blavatsky, in the *Appendix* (p. 25).]

⁴ [fn 4: Re-translated from the French: *Ma Vie*, Gallimard, Paris 1973.]

"meditated", all through its reincarnations. And while it "appears", somewhat like an actor, in one of his successive roles on the stage, it has a clear consciousness of the situation.

The *inner*, or real man, who personates those characters, knows the whole time that he is Hamlet for the brief space of a few acts, which represent, however, on the plane of human illusion the whole life of Hamlet. And he knows that he was, the night before, King Lear, the transformation in his turn of the Othello of a still earlier preceding night; but the *outer*, visible character is supposed to be ignorant of the fact. In actual life that ignorance is, unfortunately, but too real. Nevertheless, the *permanent* individuality is fully aware of the fact, though, through the atrophy of the "spiritual" eye in the physical body, that knowledge is unable to impress itself on the consciousness of the false personality.⁵

Thus, this Ego which holds a focal position in what is called the "unconscious" today, is only unconscious with regard to the "atrophied" consciousness of our physical brain. However, it manifests itself to its personality in various ways (*e.g.* through the inner "still small voice", or intuitive flashes, dreams, premonitions, etc.) - generally whenever the buzzing noise of sensory or mental activity comes to a (relative) standstill, and the despotism of the separate self, sustained by the vital energies of the body, momentarily loses its sway.

This is the reason why the approach of death brings about the ideal conditions for the presence of this powerful focus of consciousness to become clearly perceptible to earthly man - unfortunately somewhat *late* for the majority of the dying.

Equally, (spiritual) meditation - which is a way to analogically follow the inner processes of death - is a classical means offered in the Orient to die to the transitory and attain the transpersonal sphere, eventually to reach up to the One Higher Self.

5. Further Information On the Transpersonal Ego

At this level, to paraphrase St Paul, there is "neither Jew nor Greek", "neither male nor female"⁶ no thinking akin to brain-mind speculation. The Ego is said to be "*almost omniscient* in its immortal nature".⁷

It is completely beyond space-time limitations:

... besides the attribute of divine omniscience in its own nature and sphere of action, there exists in Eternity for the individual immortal Ego neither Past nor Future, but only one everlasting PRESENT.⁸

⁵ [fn 5: *The Secret Doctrine*, ii, 306]

⁶ [fn 6: *Galatians* III, 28. Indeed, in this Ego lies the potentiality of the future *androgyné*]

⁷ [fn 7: H.P. Blavatsky, article: "Memory in the Dying".]

⁸ [fn 8: H.P. B., article: "An Astral Prophet".]

In consequence,

Now, once this doctrine is admitted, or simply postulated, it becomes only natural that the whole life, from birth to death, of the Personality which that Ego informs, should be as plainly visible to the Higher Ego as it is invisible to, and concealed from, the limited vision of its temporary and mortal Form.⁹

That quasi omniscience, and unlimited power of vision, is the origin of all prophecies.

What we would call the "memory of the soul" is in fact the manifestation of the Ego's permanent awareness:

Thus while the records of even important events are often obliterated from our memory, not the most trifling action of our lives can disappear from the "soul's" memory, because it is no MEMORY for it, but an ever present reality on the plane which lies outside our conceptions of space and time.¹⁰

It must be pointed out that this clear perception covers as well experiences in which the earthly personality retained no memory of what was happening, *e.g.* in a somnambulant state. Thus, in the case of a sleep-walker who, in a NDE, remembered a theft committed years before, without her being aware of it, H.P. Blavatsky gave the following comment:

Taking the facts as stated, would they not induce one to believe that the somnambulant personage possesses an intelligence and memory of its own apart from the physical memory of the waking lower self [?].¹¹

Now, although the "language" of the Ego bears no relation to that of the physical man¹², certain dreams may be clearly interpreted as messages from this deep Self to the personality. In this case, the Ego's ideas have to be translated to the brain-consciousness through the instrumentality of the psychic machinery, with the risk of many distortions. In fact, an "instantaneous" perception on the plane of the Ego will be deciphered as a "dream", including a complex sequence of events memorized at the moment of awakening.

⁹ [fn 9: H.P.B., article: "An Astral Prophet".]

¹⁰ [fn 10: H.P.B., article: Memory in the Dying."]

¹¹ [fn 11: H.P.B., article: Memory in the Dying."]

¹² [fn 12: Cf. W.Q. Judge's article "*Remembering the experiences of the Ego*": When sleep comes on, the engine and instrument of the lower personality is stopped and can do nothing but what may be called automatic acts. The brain is not in use, and hence no consciousness exists for it until the waking moment returns. The Ego, when thus released from the physical chains, free from its hard daily task of living with and working through the bodily organs, proceeds to enjoy the experiences of the plane of existence which is peculiarly its own. On that plane it uses a method and process, and perceives the ideas appropriate to it through organs different from those of the body [...] The language, so to say, is a foreign one even to the inner language used when awake. So, upon reassuming life in the body, all that is has to tell its lower companion must be spoken in a strange tongue, and for the body that is an obstruction to comprehension..."]

To the question:

We may dream a lifetime in half a second, being conscious of a succession of states of consciousness, events taking place one after the other [?]

Mme Blavatsky answered that "no such consciousness exists" during sleep, but only in the transitional stage between sleep and waking. Then to the question:

May we not compare the recollection of a dream to a person giving the description of a picture, and having to mention all the parts and details because he cannot present the whole before the mind's eye of the listener?¹³

she concluded: "That is a very good analogy".

These remarks should be kept in mind for the discussion of the panoramic vision of existence variously recounted by NDE'ers, *either* as an instant, all-comprehensive vision, *or* as a full sequence of events displayed from the first years of infancy to the last day of life - or the converse way. Most probably, the impression of a *succession* of events is an effect of the psychic interface between the Egoic and the personal levels of consciousness.

6. Of The Usefulness of an "Astral" Body

Very few systems advocating the existence of a timeless, transpersonal Self, fail to postulate the necessity of intermediary instruments. "subtle bodies", etc., as coherent links with the physical basis of the personality (*Cf* the five Vedantic *koshas*).

Thus, in Theosophy, we find two such bodies, each having its specific functions.

a - A *semi-physical, astral body*, as a focus for vital energies and a model to guide the building of the earthly frame. In embryo genesis, it plays the very role attributed nowadays to the hypothetical "morphogenetic fields" of advanced science. In one of its aspects, this semi-physical model is able to "decorporate", nevertheless without the possibility of travelling very far away, as it remains *anchored* in the body (according to a word of Plutarch¹⁴ The rupture of this anchorage from the physical body would mean death for the latter. Now, from this preliminary stage of decorporation, another process must be brought about (of which the "traveler" is not aware) to allow the extension of the "astral voyage" without limit: the projection of a kind of mental antenna, capable of collecting information at any distance and even (very rarely, in the case of untrained psychics) of performing *physical* actions.

b. An *astral organism*, closely linked to the psychical life of the personality, serving as a functional intermediary between the Ego and the brain. During earthly life, this "astral man" is nearly completely involved in the activity of the senses and the desire-mind, and submitted to the intense play of vital energies.

¹³ [fn: 13 H.P. B., Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge, p.18]
<http://www.theosociety.org/pasadena/sdcommnt/sdc-1.htm>

¹⁴ [fn 14: Cf. the myth of Thespisios, *Moralia (De sera, 564 C.)*]

According to Theosophy, the approach of death progressively modifies the dynamics of these inner bodies.

At the birth of the man, his physical body is normally assigned (by *karma*) a program of biological life, which is managed (in a sense) by the astral model. With time, this potential of vitality runs down little by little, which brings about a progressive decay of the astral counterpart of the physical frame, ultimately ending in death. In the same time, this gradual dissolution of the invisible double tends to release the very strong constraint exerted on the *psychical* astral machinery during life: this allows certain psychical powers, hitherto latent, to manifest themselves. Thus, as the end becomes imminent, even without the person himself knowing it, the direct influence of the Ego on its personality can become tangible, as the "astral man" gets freer, and better attuned to the inner Self. Hence,

. . . the darkness of our human ignorance beginning to be dispelled, there are many things we can see. Among these, things hidden in futurity, the nearest events of which, overshadowing the purified "soul"¹⁵ have become to her as the present. (CW6, 348)

. . . thus also we may see and hear the precise hour of our death striking on the clock of eternity¹⁶

Through our "soul" it is then that we see, clearer and still clearer, as we approach the end; and it is through the throbs of dissolution that horizons of vaster, profounder knowledge are drawn on, bursting upon our mental vision, and becoming with every hour plainer to our inner eye. Otherwise, how account for those bright flashes of memory, or the prophetic insight that comes as often to the enfeebled grandsire, as to the youth who is passing away? The nearer some approach death, the brighter becomes their long lost memory and the more correct the previsions. The unfoldment of the inner faculties increases as life-blood becomes more stagnant.¹⁷

If moreover we add, according to Theosophy, that the Egos of those who love each other are never separated, even by physical death, but remain in communion on their own level, certain so-called "hallucinations" of the dying who believe they are seeing departed relatives at their death-bed become quite plausible.

A sick person, especially just before death, is very likely to see in dream or vision, those whom he loves and is continually thinking of.¹⁸

¹⁵ [fn 15: The purified "soul" = the former personal self now making room for a new kind of self (in which the psyche is in closer communion with the Ego) with the possibility for it to "pass its knowledge to the physical brain".]

¹⁶ [fn 16: For an example of this sort of prediction, see K. Osis & E. Haraldsson, *At the Hour of Death*, p.131.] (CW6, 348)

¹⁷ [fn: 17 H.P. B., article: "Facts and Ideations".] (CW6, 348-9)

¹⁸ [fn 18: H.P.B., Transactions of the Blavatsky Lodge (section: Dreams) p.76]

II - WHAT WAS KNOWN OF NDE'S A CENTURY AGO?

Very few facts indeed, apart from accounts of people rescued from drowning (and her accidents), which Mme Blavatsky duly mentioned in her earliest book in 1877¹⁹ Also, the panoramic vision of life was known to occur in certain pathological conditions (epileptic aura).²⁰

Obviously, Mme Blavatsky could avail herself of all eschatological myths in order to frame her own model of death. Actually, she did not fail to quote Plato and Plutarch,²¹ but only incidentally. Beyond question, her views on the process of dying were quite original for her epoch.

III - THE PROCESS OF DYING AS VIEWED BY THEOSOPHY

Briefly stated,

- the experience reported by drowning-rescued people is, Theosophy asserts, undergone, in one form or the other, *in all cases* by the dying;
- this, however, *precedes* the real moment of irreversible death: what happens thereafter belongs to a quite different domain of conscious experience;
- dying comprises a whole set of natural processes, in which vital and psychical energies are strained to a point that determines the *reflux* of the *personal* consciousness, through various levels of experience, from the terrestrial up to the Egoic plane;
- this reflux corresponds, in a converse way, to the *influx* that originally brought about the "incarnation" of consciousness in the baby (even before birth) and during the building of the personality;
- whatever may be the episodes lived in the purely psychical zones (*e.g.*, decorporation, visions of parents in a welcoming role, etc.), the core of the experience is reached at the uppermost level of the scale, when the two modes of consciousness (the personal and the transpersonal) join in unison;
- then, a non-temporal panoramic vision gives the dying one both a *retrospective* view of his own journey through terrestrial life (including sometimes several past

¹⁹ [fn 19: *Isis Unveiled* (i, 179): "That flash of memory which is traditionally supposed to show a drowning man every long-forgotten scene of his mortal life - as the landscape is revealed to the traveler by intermittent flashes of lightning - is simply the sudden glimpse which the struggling soul gets into the silent galleries where his history is depicted in imperishable colors."]

²⁰ [fn 20: Cf. Huglilings Jackson, "On A Particular Variety of Epilepsy" (Brain, part XLII, p.179) quoted by Dr Ch. Féré in an article (dated feb.16,1889): "Note pour servir à l'histoire de l'état mental des mourants" (*Mémoires de la Société de Biologie de Paris*, tome 1er, 9e série, 1889). In his article Dr Féré reported two (short) NDE accounts: this gave Mme Blavatsky the opportunity to present her own explanatory views on the subject (in "Memory in the Dying", published the same year - Oct. 1889)]

²¹ [fn 21: *E.g.* the myth of Thespesios, in *Isis* (1877)]

incarnations) and a kind of *prospective* image of the future being that will emerge from all his past (in the next incarnation).

Actually, this exit from life can in no way be interpreted as a sort of hallucination. It is truly a transcendental experience. In the *Key to Theosophy* (p.11 *fn*), published in 1889, we have this conclusive remark:

Death is the ultimate *ecstasis* of life.

Ecstasis (Gr.) A psycho-spiritual state; a physical trance which induces clairvoyance, and a beatific state which brings on visions. ^(Key)

Now to proceed with the main lines of the theosophical model of death:

1. The Apparent End of Life Is but The First Step Towards Death

In W.Q. Judge's words:

. . . we must find out what death is, and whether it is solely what we see going on at the decease of a human being, or more than can be gauged with the eye. A little reflection shows that what is seen and noted by physicians and spectators is but the withdrawal of the soul and energy from the outer envelope called "body". While that is going on, the person may accept rites of the church or profess adherence to any sort of doctrine whatever, even with his last outward sigh speak of heaven with its bliss awaiting him. But that is only the first step. It leaves his visible features calm and happy, perhaps, in expression; his relatives close his eyes, - they call it death. He, however, has only begun to die.²²

Death is never *immediate*. As noted in *Isis Unveiled* (i,257),

Nothing can be abrupt in nature [...] there is nothing sudden - not even violent death.

2. It Is the Starting Point of a Process Undergone by The Dying One, Beyond His Control.

The breath leaves the body and we say the man is dead, but that is only the beginning of death; it proceeds on other planes²³

The soul has yet to pass through other envelopes beyond the ken of friends, beyond even the dying man's present control.²⁴

Here the "soul" refers to the personal consciousness which, according to Judge,

. . . has to pass along the road by which it came [to earthly incarnation].²⁵

²² [fn 22: W.Q. Judge, *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita*, pp. 79-80.]

²³ [fn: 23: W.Q. Judge, *The Ocean of Theosophy*, p. 99.]

²⁴ [fn 24: W.Q. Judge, *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita*. p.80.]

²⁵ [fn 25: W.Q. Judge, *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita*. p.80.]

In this reflux, the "soul's" consciousness passes from one plane, "envelope" or body to the other, from the purely physical, to the astro-psychical, up to the non-temporal spiritual. Thus,

. . . in articulo mortis, the body and physical senses . . . ceasing to function, . . . the intelligence gradually [makes] its final escape through the avenue of psychic and last of all of spiritual consciousness. . . ²⁶

3. The Journey to Death Is a Mapped Out Itinerary

Clearly, dying is not a haphazard adventure. This subjective journey, "through the avenue of psychic and last of all of spiritual consciousness", follows a definite program, an itinerary ascending through a complete scale of levels of experience, that have been known and classified for a long time by certain Oriental schools to which Mme Blavatsky referred.

For instance, when the dying man feels "up there in space", out of his body, he is just setting foot, so to say, on the lower rung of "astral" consciousness. This level, Mme Blavatsky explained, "corresponds in everything to the terrestrial objective" (consciousness) - a fact duly acknowledged by NDE'ers who often reported seeing at this moment all the details of the surroundings, only from a different vantage point.

In most cases, it is from this (lower astral) level that NDE'ers leave all conscious connection with the physical environment, to enter the darkness of a kind of "tunnel" (or black space), through which they feel they are moving, more or less rapidly, to reach a world of Light.

In fact, in this model of death, that part of the journey would correspond to a high speed crossing through a number of intermediary levels in which the (generally untrained) consciousness of the dying man has better not to "loiter on the way", lest he should have dangerous encounters with the tremendous powers lurking in this astral zone, in the form of unchecked energies and alluring, horrific pictures defying all imagination.

From Mme Blavatsky's suggestions concerning the intermediary divisions in this scale of "astral consciousness,"²⁷ one can easily conclude that the most common experience would result in delirium, hallucination, nightmare, etc.

For instance,

The third [division] is of an intensely vivid nature. Extreme delirium carries the patient to this plane. In delirium tremens the sufferer passes to this and to the one above it. Lunatics are often conscious on this plane, where they see terrible visions (CW12, 663)

The fourth division, the worst of the astral plane [...]. Hence come the images that tempt; images of drunkards [...] impelling others to drink; images of all vices

²⁶ [fn 26: H.P.B., "Memory in the Dying".]

²⁷ [fn 27: These were received by her disciples in 1890, a short time before her death, and published thereafter. See, for instance, *The Theosophist*, March 1931]

inoculating men with the desire to commit crimes. Extreme delirium tremens is on this plane. (CW12, 663)

Obviously, these "forbidden" levels would be planes of *hellish experience* which, fortunately, both the dying and modern NDE'ers²⁸ normally *skip over* when they ascend to the inner Light.

With Theosophy, there is good reason to believe that the personality enjoys a natural *protection* from its higher Alter Ego, at the moment of death.

Curiously, a similar explanation has been arrived at by various modern authors. Thus, in an interpretation of unpleasant NDE's, Kenneth Ring states:

Why is this domain so rarely reported compared to the paradisaical realm? One proposal has it that the tunnel phenomenon serves as a shield to protect the individual from an awareness of this domain. It will be recalled that the tunnel effect itself was interpreted as representing a shift in consciousness from one level to another. Functionally, this state of affairs can be compared to a traveller riding a subway underneath the slums of a city: the subway tunnel prevents him ever being directly aware of his surroundings although the slums are there. Instead, like the typical near-death survivor, he begins his trip in darkness and emerges into the light.²⁹

This passage gives an excellent image of the situation, from the theosophical viewpoint.

Now, according to Mme Blavatsky, the sixth division of the astral consciousness

. . . is the plane from which come all beautiful inspirations of art, poetry and music; high types of dreams, flashes of genius. Here we have glimpses of past incarnations.
(CW12,663, buddhic consciousness of the astral plane)

Finally, at the very top,

WE ARE ON THE SEVENTH PLANE AT THE MOMENT OF DEATH OR IN EXCEPTIONAL VISIONS. THE DROWNING MAN IS HERE WHEN HE REMEMBERS HIS PAST LIFE.
(CW12,663, Auric consciousness)

²⁸ [fn 28: Indeed, a minority of NDE'ers have reported hellish experiences (see for instance Dr Rawling's *Beyond Death's Door*). In some cases too, experiencers have recounted a sequence of *experiences*, from hellish to paradisaical, (always in the same order, *from bad to good*): this strongly suggests that they consciously tasted something of the intermediary levels before reaching the glorious summit of the scale.]

²⁹ [fn 29: K. Ring, *Life at Death*, p.249. With theosophical teachings in hand, I suggested the same kind of explanation in *Mourir pour Renaître*, p.128.]

In this perspective, the core experience at death cannot be attributed to an altered state of consciousness - of the delirium or hallucination-type. Unambiguously, it is a state of super-consciousness³⁰ of *perfect lucidity*.

According to one of H.P. Blavatsky's masters:

No man dies insane or unconscious,³¹ as some physiologist assert. Even a madman or one in a fit of delirium tremens will have his instant of perfect lucidity at the moment of death, though unable to say so to those present.³²

Thus, even if a man, in his last agony, is caught up in the horrible nightmares of the intermediary levels, his personal consciousness ultimately finds access to the complete bliss of the upper stage - "the last *ecstasis* of death".

4. The Last Moment Is Lived in A Communion Between the Personal and The Transpersonal

In the XIXth century, Theosophy emphasized the importance of the panoramic review of life, as a central feature in the process of dying. The following passages insist on the fully detailed, all-comprehensive and extremely rapid character of the vision (in accordance, with many modern NDE accounts):

When the frame is cold and eyes closed all the forces of the body and mind rush through the brain, and by a series of pictures the whole life just ended is imprinted indelibly on the inner man not only in a general outline but down to the smallest detail of even the most minute and fleeting impression.³³

At the last moment, the whole life is reflected in our memory and emerges from all the forgotten nooks and corners, picture after picture, one event after the other³⁴

At the solemn moment of death every man, even when death is sudden, sees the whole of his past life marshalled before him, in its minutest details³⁵

In brief,

A long life, perhaps, lived over again in the space of one short second!³⁶

³⁰ **[fn 30:** Needless to state that this *exceptional* experience, granted by a natural process to any ordinary man, at the *exceptional* moment of his death, is not to be compared with the highest level of *samadi* within the reach of a trained spiritual yogi. Here, with a "normal" person, there remains a feeling of *personality*, however refined and freed from all terrestrial involvement.]

³¹ **[fn 31:** This is also the conclusion of some modern authors, like Dr E. Kübler-Ross. See E. Kemf: E. Kübler-Ross: "There is No Death.]

³² **[fn 32:** Extract from a master's letter to A.P. Sinnett, dated Oct. 1882, Mahatma Letters, p.170.] **cML 93b**

³³ **[fn 33:** W.Q. Judge, *The Ocean of Theosophy*, p.99.]

³⁴ **[fn 34:** Extract from a master's letter to A.P. Sinnett, dated Oct. 1882, Mahatma Letters, p.170.] **cML 93b**

³⁵ **[fn 35:** H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy*, p.162.]

³⁶ **[fn 36:** H.P.B., "*Memory in the Dying*".]

This review, in perfect lucidity, takes place (as seen before) when the personal consciousness has reached the highest level open to it on the ascending scale. Then, at that level,

For one short instant the personal becomes one with the individual and all-knowing Ego³⁷

In a commentary on two NDE accounts reported by Dr Féré,³⁸ in 1889, H.P. Blavatsky observed that such cases, along with others, strongly corroborated her masters' teachings tracing all such remembrances to the thought-power of the *individual* [Ego], instead of to that of the personal (lower) ego.³⁹ She suggested:

... while physical memory in a healthy living man is often obscured, one fact crowding out another weaker one, at the moment of the great change that man calls death, that which we call "memory seems to return to us in all its vigour and freshness.

May this not be due, as just said, simply to the fact that, for a few seconds at least, our two memories (or rather the two states, the highest and the lowest state, of consciousness) blend together, thus forming one, and that the dying being finds himself on a plane wherein there is neither past nor future, but all is one present.⁴⁰

Here we find again the Ego-Self; in fact, what we would call its memory

... is no MEMORY FOR it, but an ever present reality on the plane which lies outside our conceptions of space and time⁴¹

Therefore, it is obvious, with Theosophy, that this central phase of the dying process is the result of the conjunction - or close coexistence - between the personal and transpersonal aspects in man - at a *privileged* moment when the person's consciousness reaches the status of a perfectly lucid and objective witness, in the contemplation of an inner spectacle, which is *imposed* on him, beyond his will-power.

Under this respect, Mme Blavatsky's master noted:

The experience of dying men - by drowning and other accidents - brought back to life, has corroborated our doctrine in almost every case. Such thoughts are involuntary and we have no more control over them than we would over the eye's retina to prevent it perceiving that colour which affects it most.⁴²

³⁷ [fn 37: H.P.B., *The Key*, p.162.]

³⁸ [fn 38: See note 20 p 7.]

³⁹ [fn 39: H.P.B., "Memory in the Dying".]

⁴⁰ [fn: 40 H.P.B., "Memory in the Dying".]

⁴¹ [fn: 41 H.P.B., "Memory in the Dying".]

⁴² [fn: 42 Mahatma Letters, p. 170]

5. "Entering The Light", Or "Encountering The Being of Light" - An Imaged Interpretation by The Personal Self of Its Re-Union with Its Deep-Rooted Source of Self-Consciousness.

No wonder that NDE'ers should feel unable to describe their experience in usual terms of daily life language. Like to the prisoners in the famous cave imagined by Plato in his *Republic* (Book VII), they had been accustomed from birth to the casual spectacle of the world's moving shadows (maya for the Hindus), fettered in their dualistic views (myself, and the others, etc.), and their linear perception of time, flowing between past and future. Then, all of a sudden, the prisoners were set free and drawn out of the cave, to a place enlightened by the sunshine, beyond all familiar limitations. In their ignorance that, at this point, they had returned to their Parent-Self, their psychic machinery interpreted the latter as different from themselves - a welcoming light, or a "being of light" - a *personal* being. In Moody's words,

It has a very definite personality. The love and the warmth which emanate from this being to the dying person are utterly beyond words, and he feels completely surrounded by it and taken up in it, completely at ease and accepted in the presence of this being. He senses an irresistible magnetic attraction to this light. He is ineluctably drawn to it⁴³

Quite often, in their efforts of description, experiencers use different labels to identify this "presence - God, Christ, Angel, Guide, or what not. Obviously, in their complete ignorance of deep (spiritual) psychology, they could hardly find better terms to translate, in an intelligible mode, this unexpected encounter with their own individual Ego-Self, which seems to "know all about them", to bear them "a total love and acceptance" and to have with them a kind of intimate, "personal" exchange. *For very good reasons indeed*- in the light of Theosophy - if we remember that this Ego is not a stranger to its terrestrial personality, but remains closely "interested" in its destiny: from birth to death, the transpersonal individuality broods over (or "meditates") its earthly representative (or emanation), registering the latter's behaviour and inspiring it with its own knowledge and energy, through the unspoken language of intuition, dreams, etc.

Interestingly, this theosophical interpretation finds definite echoes in near-death literature. Thus, with Kenneth Ring, we have these pertinent remarks:

Moody spoke of a "being of light" and though none of our respondents used this phrase some seemed to be aware of a "presence" (or "voice") in association with the light. . . Here we must, I think, make a speculative leap. I submit that this presence voice is actually - oneself! It is not merely a projection of one's personality, however, but one's total self; or what in some traditions is called the higher self. In this view, the individual personality is but a split-off fragment of the total self with which it is reunited at the point of death. During ordinary life, the individual personality functions in a seemingly autonomous way, as though it were a separate

⁴³ [fn 43: R. Moody, *Life after Life*, p.59.]

entity. In fact, however, it is invisibly tied to the larger self structure of which it is apart".⁴⁴

In the *Key to Theosophy* (p.186) a comparison is made between the Spiritual Ego and its personality with the *Vine* and the *branch*, in St John's Gospel (chap.XV). The branch is clearly an offshoot of the vine and it remains tied to it, for the time of its existence. Also, in Ring's words:

An analogy would be that the individual personality is like a child who, when grown up, completely forgets his mother and then fails to recognize her when they later meet⁴⁵

This analogy is also found in the *Key* (p.184). The Ego being compared to a parent, answerable for the transgressions of the child, the question comes:

- Is the child the personality? - It is.

Equally relevant is the following speculation preferred by Kenneth Ring:

What has this to do with the light? The answer is - or so I would say - that this higher self is so awesome, so overwhelming, so loving, and unconditionally accepting (like an all-forgiving mother) and so foreign to one's individualized consciousness that one perceives it as separate from oneself as unmistakably other. It manifests itself as a brilliant golden light, but it is actually oneself, in a higher form, that one is seeing".⁴⁶

To conclude, again in Ring's words - perfectly in line with Theosophy:

The golden light is actually a reflection of one's own inherent divine nature and symbolizes the higher self.⁴⁷

The fact that some persons believe that they had "a conversation with God" makes no difference in this context:

Since most people are used to thinking dualistically of God as somehow "up there" while they remain "down here" they can be expected to interpret their experience with their higher self as a direct encounter with God. The idea of "God" is after all; more familiar to most people than is the notion of a higher self.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ [fn: 44: K. Ring. *Life at Death*, p.240.]

⁴⁵ [fn: 45 K. Ring. *Life at Death*, p 240]

⁴⁶ [fn: 46: K. Ring. *Life at Death*, p 240]

⁴⁷ [fn: 47 K. Ring. *Life at Death*, pp.240-241. In this passage, the term *reflection* is quite correct. At this stage, this golden light perceived by the dying man is only a very limited effect, on the psychic sphere, of the glorious radiance of the divine universal SELF hidden in the hearts of all creatures, according to the *Upanishads*.]

⁴⁸ [fn: 48 K. Ring. *Life at Death*, p. 241.]

6. The Ego's Quasi Omniscience Is a Key to Interpret the Dying Man's Conscious Experience in Its Higher Phase

In contrast with our brain-knowledge, the Ego's vision may well appear as pure omniscience. The latter manifests itself only in very rare occasions,

... when certain abnormal conditions and physiological changes in the body make the Ego free from the trammels of matter.⁴⁹

... as every genuine psychologist of the old, not your modern, school; will tell you, the Spiritual Ego can act only when the personal ego is paralysed. The Spiritual "I" in man is omniscient and has every knowledge innate in it; while the personal self is the creature of its environment and the slave of the physical memory. Could the former manifest itself uninterruptedly, and without impediment, there would be no longer men on earth, but we should all be gods.⁵⁰

Precisely, in the process of dying, all the necessary conditions are met for this amazing power of omniscience to be displayed in various ways.

Essentially, it is manifest in the following items:

a. The Objective, Panoramic Review of Life

In the *Key to Theosophy*, Mme Blavatsky gave a short, but accurate, description of this review, which is so striking in modern NDE accounts.

At the solemn moment of death every man, even when death is sudden, sees the whole of his past life marshalled before him, in its minutest details. For one short instant the *personal* becomes one with the *individual* and all-knowing *Ego*. But this instant is enough to show to him the whole chain of causes which have been at work during his life. He sees and now understands himself as he is, unadorned by flattery or self-deception. He reads his life, remaining as a spectator looking down into the arena he is quitting; he feels and knows the justice of all the suffering that has overtaken him.⁵¹

To the question: "Does this happen to everyone?" the answer given was: "Without exception".

This statement concerns all those persons who *really* die. It is not necessarily invalidated by the fact that only a limited percentage of NDE'ers report such review in their accounts. The reasons - if any - of this apparent limitation should be further investigated. Also this can indicate a difference between a true encounter with death and an unfinished approach.

Now, even though this sudden reminiscence of life at the "last" moment was known in H.P. Blavatsky's time, her brief analysis of it reveals an unquestionable *experimental* knowledge

⁴⁹ [fn: 49 H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy*, p.133.]

⁵⁰ [fn: 50 H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy* p. 131]

⁵¹ [fn 51: H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy* p 162.]

of this strange experience. Comparisons with modern NDE accounts may be made, as follows:

"He reads his life . . . as a spectator. . .

There was a certain detachment as I watched all this. I had the sensation that I was on the outside looking in and it seemed that this reoccurrence [sic] of my life was taking place in front of me and I was viewing it.⁵²

. . . I saw my whole past life take place in many images, as though on a stage as some distance from me.⁵³

". . . as a spectator looking down into the arena he is quitting".

I acted out my life, as though I were an actor on a stage upon which I looked down from practically the highest gallery in the theatre. Both hero and onlooker, I was as though doubled".⁵⁴

This "doubling" is not pathological at this moment, it recalls the enigmatic statement quoted above (**note 39, p.12**):

. . . a few seconds at least, our two memories . . . blend together.

Would it not be that, owing to the exceptional unison between "*the two states, the highest and the lowest state of consciousness*", the memory of the personality's history is re-activated and fully interpreted in the light of the permanent Ego's integral memory, thus giving to the former an unsuspected depth, with the objective outlook of the transpersonal self, which kept surveying all the time the play of its outer manifestation on the earthly stage?

Obviously, this historical reminiscence must be particularly rich with respect to the years of childhood since

Memory, as we all know, is strongest with regard to its early associations, then when the future man is only a child, and more of a soul than of a body.⁵⁵

Actually, those pictures of early life are often quite detailed and vivid in NDE accounts:

. . . the underside of a table seen from all fours, the smell of a pudding, the pinch of elastic on a Halloween mask; the distance from foot to bicycle training pedal the contents of a school gym locker - all spill forth with every sensory detail and accompanying emotion reawakened.⁵⁶

⁵² [fn: 52 R. Noyes & R. Kletti, "Panoramic Memory a Response to the Threat of Death".]

⁵³ [fn: 53 A. Heim, "Notizen über den Tod durch Absturz".]

⁵⁴ [fn: 54: Extract from a letter of Albert Heim to Oskar Pfister (quoted by Carol Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, p 130)]

⁵⁵ [fn: 55 H.P.B., "*Memory in the Dying*".]

⁵⁶ [fn: 56 C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, p.128.]

To come back to our comparison:

"He sees and now understands himself as he is, unadorned by flattery or self-deception." (HPB Key)

It was like I got to see some good things I had done and some mistakes I had made, you know, and try to understand them.⁵⁷

Some people characterize this as an educational effort on the part of the being of light.⁵⁸

The being would ask something like, . . . "What have you done with your life to show me?" What was expected in return was . . . a general self-scrutiny, putting one's whole life in question.⁵⁹

"But this instant is enough to show him the whole chain of causes which have been at work during his life". (HPB Key)

It was like: "Okay, here's why you had the accident. Here's why this happened. Because so and so and so." ... it all had meaning. Definitely.⁶⁰

The revelation of the human being's responsibility in the minutest details of his existence, recognized at his last moment, is strikingly brought to light in the following account of an experiencer, reliving her life as Phyllis:

The reliving included not only the deeds committed by Phyllis since her birth . . . but also a reliving of every thought ever thought and every word ever spoken PLUS the effect of every thought, word and deed upon everyone⁶¹ and anyone who had ever come within her sphere of influence, whether she actually knew them or not PLUS the effect of her every thought, word and deed upon the weather, the air, the soil, plants and animals, the water, everything else within the creation we call Earth and the space Phyllis once occupied. . . I never before realized that we were responsible and accountable for EVERY SINGLE THING WE DID. That was overwhelming!⁶²

⁵⁷ [fn: 57 K. Ring, *Life at Death*, p.73.]

⁵⁸ [fn: 58 R. Moody, *Life after Life*, p.65.]

⁵⁹ [fn 59: C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys*, p.128.]

⁶⁰ [fn 60: K. Ring, *Life at Death*, p.73.]

⁶¹ [fn 61: It happens that in a dream a man is warned of a friend's death, at the very moment it occurs. Among various possible interpretations in the theosophical perspective, a suggestion was uttered that, in a precise case reported, "the dream was doubtless caused by the events of the man's life passing rapidly through his dying mind, and when he came to his relations with X.[= the dreamer], the recollection vibrated in connection with him and caused his dream, reaching him all the more rapidly because his physical nature was at the moment quiescent in sleep. (The Path., II. p.378).]

⁶² [fn 62: P.M.H. Atwater, *I died Three Times in 1977*. Quoted by C. Zaleski (*Otherworld Journeys*, p. 131)]

b. The Review of Previous Lifetimes

In her comments, H.P. Blavatsky added:

Very good and holy men see, we are taught, not only the life they are leaving, but even several preceding lives in which were produced the causes that made them what they were in the life just closing. They recognize the law of Karma in all its majesty and justice⁶³

This particular point had not emerged in the early NDE literature but more recently the confirmation came of past incarnations being reviewed in certain instances.

This strongly recalls the panoramic vision of "the chain of lifetimes", recounted by certain experiencers in another context, far from the stress of death. One of the accounts reads:

Pearls on a string, that's what they were like . . . As I looked at it, I got a distinct feeling from each one of them. It was like looking at photographs from each year of your life. You could see how you had grown in each one⁶⁴

c. The Experience of "Total Knowledge"

The theosophical model of death perfectly accounts for this extraordinary flash of enlightenment "in which the subject seemed to have complete knowledge".

In Moody's words:

Several people have told me that during their encounters with "death they got brief glimpses of an entire separate realm of existence in which all knowledge - whether of past, present, or future - seemed to co-exist in a sort of timeless state. . . The experience has been compared, in various accounts to a flash of universal insight.⁶⁵

One woman reported:

This seems to have taken place after I had seen my life pass before me. It seemed that all of a sudden, all knowledge - of all that had started from the very beginning, that would go on without end - that for a second I knew all the secrets of all ages, all the meaning of the universe, the stars, the moon - of everything.⁶⁶

Another informant confirmed:

. . . there followed a panoramic vision, impossible to describe, showing everything "from the beginning of time to the end of time."⁶⁷

⁶³ [fn 63: H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy*, p.162.]

⁶⁴ [fn 64: Cf. F. Lenz, *Lifetimes*, p.68.]

⁶⁵ [fn 65: R. Moody, *Reflections on Life after Life*, pp.10-11.]

⁶⁶ [fn 66: R. Moody, *Reflections on Life after Life*, p 11]

⁶⁷ [fn 67: K. Ring, *Heading toward Omega*, p.199.]

An interesting point made by one of Ring's respondents concerning this state of total knowledge was that he did not acquire it at the moment: "he *remembered* it . . . he was, in effect, all knowledge".⁶⁸ This really denotes a rare peak experience in which all sense of dualism seems to vanish, the personal consciousness being, for a flashing moment, in complete union with the Egoic consciousness, merged in the light of the HIGHER SELF (the One root of all conscious beings) "which alone is [permanently] and completely omniscient."⁶⁹

Now considering that our personal consciousness is ordinarily blind to this "total knowledge", on account of *the atrophy of the "spiritual" eye in the physical body* (**cf. fn 5, p.3**) a logical inference would be that, at the crowning instant of his life, man has the last privilege to see through this spiritual eye, triggered to function in response to the powerful reflux of vital and psychic energies rushing through the dying one's brain.⁷⁰

In the case of NDE's, however,

. . . all agree that this feeling of complete knowledge did not persist after their return; that they did not bring back any sort of omniscience.⁷¹

This is not surprising, because, according to Theosophy, the memory of such exceptional visions cannot be impressed upon the physical brain - except through a special training in the line of spiritual yoga.

d. Flashforwards Disclosing the Earthly Man's Future

It often happens that people rescued from death enjoy a kind of knowledge of what is in store for them in the months, or years, to come. This point already appeared in Plutarch's eschatological myths.

As stated before, the Ego has a clear vision of both past and future. Also, in the particular case of *rebirth* (after the interlude between death and reincarnation) it has a general view of what awaits it, in its fresh earthly role:

⁶⁸ [fn 68: Ibid p. 199]

⁶⁹ [fn 69: H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy*, p.132. The individual Ego is said to be *potentially* omniscient, and to manifest a *quasi* omniscience when the conditions permit; it becomes *de facto* omniscient, exclusively in *nirvana*, when merged in the Universal Soul (*Key*, p.133). During one lifetime, when it "meditates" its personality, from its own level (beyond space and time), it is practically omniscient as regards its own earth-related evolution.]

⁷⁰ [fn 70:Cf. W.Q. Judge, *The Ocean of Theosophy*, p.99. Also, this opening of the third eye would be possible at that moment because of the complete isolation from all terrestrial influence. In the deepest spiritual samadhi, the yogi's body is said to be practically in a state of *catalepsy* (*Isis Unveiled*).]

⁷¹ [fn 71: R. Moody, *Reflections on Life after Life*, p.10.]

As the man at the moment of death has a retrospective insight into the life he has led, so, at the moment it is reborn on to earth, the Ego . . . has a prospective vision of the life which awaits it, [it] realizes all the causes that have led to it . . . and sees futurity.⁷²

Clearly, at this moment, there is not yet anything like a structured personality, that could interpret the details of the vision. On the contrary, it is precisely the case in an NDE.

In all probability, an experiencer *may* obtain (from his Ego) a detailed perception of the incidents awaiting him after his return (if his NDE goes deep enough), but as a rule his cerebral memory will retain but stray images.

In an article⁷³ (written in 1890) H.P. Blavatsky analyzed a curious case of detailed prevision of all the important events (with their accurate dates) to be lived by a man during the rest of his existence. Her explanations may be duly adapted to interpret "flashforwards" in NDE's.

This man was none other than General Yermoloff (a famous Russian hero) who, after a hard day of work at his desk, had fallen into a kind of reverie, to . . . write with his own hand all that was to happen to him during his whole life, concluding with the date and hour of his death. Back to his normal consciousness, he was persuaded that he had written under the dictation of a stranger - a pauper-looking man - who had mysteriously entered the room, and suddenly vanished after the completion of his odd mission.

The theosophical interpretation of this phenomenon involves the contributions of both the inner Ego - "almost omniscient in its immortal nature - and the personality's psycho-physical machinery, passing for a moment, *like an automaton*, under the power of the Ego. In Blavatsky's words:

Now that reverie was most likely a sudden doze, brought on by fatigue and overwork; during which a mechanical action of purely somnambolic character took place. The personality becoming suddenly alive to the presence of its higher [Ego-] Self the human sleeping automaton fell under the sway of the individuality, and forthwith the hand that had been occupied with writing for several hours before resumed mechanically its task. Upon awakening the personality thought that the document before him had been written at the dictation of a visitor whose voice he had heard, whereas, in truth, he had been simply recording the innermost thoughts - or shall we say knowledge - of his own divine "Ego"; a prophetic, because all-knowing Spirit. The "Voice" of the latter was simply the translation by the physical memory, at the instant of awakening, of the mental knowledge concerning the life of the mortal man reflected on the lower by the higher consciousness. (CW12, 229)

⁷² [fn 72: H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy*, p. 162]

⁷³ [fn 73: H.P.B. articles, "*An Astral Prophet*"]

All the other details of the phenomenon were amenable to the same kind of explanation.

Thus, the stranger clothed in the raiments [*clothing, garments*] of a poor little tradesman or laborer, who was speaking to him outside of himself, belongs, as well as the "voice" to that class of well-known phenomena familiar to us as the association of ideas and reminiscences in our dreams. The pictures and scenes we see in sleep, the events we live through for hours, days, sometimes for years in our dreams, all this takes less time, in reality, than is occupied by a flash of lightning during the instant of awakening and the return to full consciousness.

This again points to the difference between the timeless vision at the Ego's level and its translation into a sequence of events, as perceived by the brain-mind. As to the particular form of the visitor:

General Yermoloff had passed several days previously holding an inquest in a small town, in which official business he had probably examined dozens of men of the poorer classes; and this explains his fancy - vivid as reality itself - suggesting to his imagination the vision of a small tradesman.

These passages account, at least in part, for the complex information-transfer mechanisms from the level where an all-embracing vision may be perceived, down to the brain-consciousness that will record in its memory a more or less distorted picture - which, later on, experiencers will attempt to describe.

e. Supernatural Rescues

The preceding explanations are still valid in cases when people are rescued from a fatal danger by a providential help, in the form of an inner *light* guiding them to the only safe exit from a dark place, or of a *voice* calling out their name to stop them in the fog on the edge of a cliff, or commanding to move in the only possible direction of escape.⁷⁴

In the theosophical view, these are in no way cases of supernatural interposition of God, or Christ, but (rare) examples of situations in which the Ego has the opportunity to take command over its personality in a moment of great emergency, when the latter loses all control (or even is unaware of its impending death).

Then, it happens that the human *automaton* executes, with an incredible precision, the only movements or gestures that could draw the man safe and sound out of the jaws of death.

f. The Apparent Choice to Come Back

Many informants have declared that they unwillingly reintegrated their bodies, so complete was the bliss they were merged in. Other ones insisted that a kind of choice was left to them, either to trespass the border of life, or to return in order to fulfill an earthly mission. They were "authorized", they felt, not to die, as a result of their will to come back.

⁷⁴ [fn 74: Cf. R. Moody, *Reflections on Life after Life*, pp.23-28.]

It is easy to argue that their hour had not yet come: resuscitated beyond their control, they could later on invent moral reasons, attributing their return to a generous decision on their part. This argument, however, may not dovetail with all facts.⁷⁵

With Theosophy, one cannot overlook the possibility of a surge of *will* at the last moment, with the effect of displacing an equilibrium of opposite forces in the sense of restoring life, as long as there remains a chance for such a return.

After all, the panoramic vision of existence, bringing to a vivid light all the links with other people - and particularly the loved ones - may well generate in the dying person an all-powerful desire to come back to those loved ones, *for a real service of them*. This essentially altruistic motive, which is in perfect harmony with the higher Ego's deep nature, could be strong enough, at the critical instant, to force a resuscitation process, *with the help of the Ego*, at unison with its terrestrial personality's aspiration.

Postulating as it does *free-will* in every man, Theosophy would not refuse it a last opportunity to change the line of a destiny.

7. Death Only Comes After the Reintegration of the Personal to The Transpersonal Consciousness: It Strikes the Last Chord of the Ending Life.

As seen before, during the whole process of dying

... though every indication leads the physician to pronounce for death and though to all intents and purposes the person is dead to this life, the real man is busy in the brain, and not until his work there is ended is the person gone.⁷⁶

This gathering of all the psychic energies of existence, lived in the communion between the two poles of man's consciousness, culminates according to Theosophy in the perception of the quintessence of the ending life - something like the last chord of a symphony.

It is more perfectly illustrated by considering life as a grand musical movement that is brought to a close by using at once all the tones sounded throughout the whole preceding portion. The result will be a combined sound, expressing neither the highest nor lowest notes, or the sweetest or less sweet, but the resultant of all. And this last sound is the fixed vibration that governs the entity, sounding all through him, and throwing him into the state to which it corresponds or of which it is the key.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ [fn 75: There is an interesting example in R. Moody's *Life after Life* (pp. 101-107): during a kind of OBE, a patient was first warned of his impending death by the being of light. Accepting his fate at first, with serenity, the man became worried, the day before his appointed end in a surgical operation, because great troubles were in store for his wife, on account of an adopted nephew. He wrote some instructions to his wife and ... broke out in tears. At that moment again, the "presence" made itself felt, imprinting these thoughts in the patient's mind: "Jack, why are you crying? ... since you are asking for someone else and thinking of others - not Jack - I will grant you, what you want. You will live until you see your nephew become a man".]

⁷⁶ [fn 76: W.Q. Judge, *The Ocean of Theosophy*, p.99.]

⁷⁷ [fn 77: W.Q. Judge, Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita, p.81.]

Here, it must be noted, we are *beyond* the range of reported NDE's. Then only, life quits the body, with no possible return.

When this solemn work is over, the astral body detaches itself from the physical and, life energy having departed, the remaining [principles of man enter post mortem life.]⁷⁸

What happens thereafter is not within ordinary men's knowledge. However, all that precedes seems to amply justify this optimistic conclusion:

Death comes to our spiritual selves ever as a deliverer and friend.⁷⁹

This is another way to translate the following statement (in *Isis Unveiled*⁸⁰) which, admittedly, could sound very mysterious in 1877:

After the separation between the life-principle (astral spirit) and the body takes place, the liberated soul- Monad, exultingly rejoins the mother- and father-spirit, the radiant Augoeides.⁸¹

CONCLUSIONS

In an attempt to interpret human experiences on the border of life, modern thinkers come up with a variety of models which, however radically different, never completely exclude each other. According to one's discipline, explanations are found in

- pathology - Freudian psychoanalysis - depth, Jungian (or transpersonal) psychology - quantum physics - philosophy, metaphysics - theology, etc.

The theosophical model of death is not reducible to one rigid frame, as it takes into account elements that are acknowledged as essential in the main disciplines, although, taken alone, they prove unable to explain *all*.

As an example: even through pathology can trace the genesis of certain nervous phenomena (*e.g.* temporal auras), it is at a loss to explain why *certain* images appear (as a life-review) in the patient's consciousness, and how a physiological event is *accompanied* by such ecstatic experiences as described by a Dostoyevsky, in an epileptic crisis:

⁷⁸ [fn 78: W.Q. Judge, *The Ocean of Theosophy*, p.100.]

⁷⁹ [fn 79: H.P.B., *The Key to Theosophy*, p.161.]

⁸⁰ [fn 80: Vol, I.p. 303]

⁸¹ [fn 81: The Greek term *augoeides* (= brightly shining) is taken from Proclus who used it (together with *astroeides* = star like) to qualify the luminous body of the spiritual soul, once rid of its (physical and psychical) vestures, or bodies.]

There are moments, not exceeding five or six seconds, when the presence of eternal harmony is felt. . . : terrific is the glaring brightness with which it manifests itself and the ecstasy it fills you with. Should such a state last more than five seconds, the soul could never bear it - it would disappear. During these five seconds, I live a whole human existence, and for such moments as these, I would gladly give my life, without thinking it would be too high a price to pay.⁸²

Modern researchers have come to understand that an interpretation of NDE's requires much more than a clinical investigation of the physical processes involved in the phenomena, or an analysis of the psychological changes undergone by the patients - or the claimed intervention of God's power and mercy.

However incomplete in the present state of our knowledge, this theosophical model should receive better recognition in our modern world, as it points to very important facets which have to be included in a comprehensive picture aiming at a thorough interpretation of NDE's.

Moreover, apart from its intrinsic explanatory value,

- existing as it does in printed form since a century, it is not a latter-day invention to meet the needs of our epoch's growing interest for death and dying;
- it belongs to a comprehensive world-view which takes into account both life and death, in an evolutionary perspective replacing man in a coherent universe;
- its range of interpretation encompasses abnormal experiences of consciousness far from the stress of death;⁸³
- it preserves man's dignity, still enhancing the respect and consideration for his hidden greatness - and undreamt of potentialities;
- finally, it may bring a fresh inspiration to those desiring to help the dying and the bereaved.

⁸² [fn 82: This passage (retranslated from the French) is quoted by Oliver Sacks in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*.]

⁸³ [fn 83: Taking for granted, with Theosophy, that the dying man retains some connection with his physical brain, and that the full scale of abnormal states on the various levels of psychical (= astral) consciousness are accessible to him through an *ad hoc* coordination between the cerebral machinery and the psychical (= astral) interface (*both being in a cooperative relationship during earthly life*), it stands to reason that such a particular coordination may be equally obtained through the use of psychedelic drugs (or other ones), as well as through voluntary stimulations effected by spiritual techniques (meditation, etc.) - and finally, even by involuntary, spontaneous inductions, in rather rare cases (*cf. Lenz's Lifetimes*).]

TO SUM UP, BEING ESSENTIALLY TRANSPERSONAL IN ITS PSYCHOLOGY H.P. BLAVATSKY'S THEOSOPHY POSTULATES THE FOLLOWING POINTS, GENERALLY APPLICABLE TO NDE'S:

- a. In the very wide scale of modified states of consciousness (remaining *very* little known in the West), a definite range of experience opens up for man's earthly personality when the stress of death disconnects it from its usual space-time relationships.
- b. At the uppermost level that can be reached by the dying one (in proportion to the *spiritual* realization he has gained in this life⁸⁴), a close communion is brought about between the personal man and his transpersonal Alter Ego, whose sphere of being knows no space-time limitations.
- c. In the peculiar conditions of this unison is revealed the quasi omniscience of the deep Ego-Self.
- d. This omniscience accounts for the amazing cognitive aspects of the dying one's experience (life-review - extending to past incarnations - flashforwards, prophetic visions, universal insight, etc.).
- e. The process of dying follows a definite programme and finally serves an essential purpose; at the ultimate moment the personality's character is unveiled to it in full light, with all its interactions with the collectivity; also all its *memories* are gathered, with the *psychical* energies associated to each: this considerable wealth of dynamic images will henceforward become the basis of the *post mortem* conscious experiences to follow, in general conformity with the overall **resultant** of this congeries of vibratory forces - the "last chord of life".
- f. While living these *ante mortem* subjective states, the link with the body, and the brain, is never severed (even though electrical brain-waves are no longer to be detected). When death finally supervenes, this link being ruptured, the activity of the *personal* consciousness comes to an end - "as suddenly as the flame leaves the wick"⁸⁵ - at least for a time, under the shock of death. Obviously this temporary mental coma is never reached by modern NDE'ers who remain in *life* all the while.
- g. It must be again remarked that this model has in view the *actual*, normal process of dying, which may not be entirely, and accurately, reflected in the accounts of present-day experiencers. It must be borne in mind that some distortion is inevitable between their ineffable approach to death and its awkward verbal translation, through the more or less biased instrumentality of their psyche.

⁸⁴ [fn 84: Obviously, the dying experience of an enlightened sage must be very different from what we learn through the accounts of ordinary death - rescued persons. At least, such is the teaching of Theosophy.]

⁸⁵ [fn 85: *Mahatma Letters*, p. 128]

To conclude, it must be again emphasized that this model does not rest on intellectual speculations - least of all on common-place accounts of seers and mediums. It has been offered to the reflection of Western people as the result of trained yogis' direct experience.

One of them wrote to an English correspondent:

We tell you what we know, for we are made to learn it through personal experience.
You know what I mean and I CAN SAY NO MORE!⁸⁶

This may be taken as a veiled reference to some secrets of initiation, recalling at this point to our memory these significant words of Apuleius, stating that "the very act of initiation represents a voluntary death":

I approached the limits of death; I trod on Proserpine's threshold and I returned, borne through all the elements; in full night, I saw the sun shining with a blazing light...⁸⁷

Paris, May 8, 1989

⁸⁶ [fn 86: *Mahatma Letters*, p. 131.]

⁸⁷ [fn 87: Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* (Book XI)]

APPENDIX

On the difference between *personality* and transpersonal *individuality*, (and their respective place in man's evolution)

In order to clarify this essential distinction to the unprepared Western mind. H.P. Blavatsky devoted many pages of her writings. The following passages are taken from *The Key to Theosophy*, a book in form of a dialogue between "Theosophist" and "Enquirer".

1. **Evanescent** personality versus **permanent** individuality, or Ego.

THEO. - . . . like so many others, you confuse personality with individuality. Your Western psychologists do not seem to have established any clear distinction between the two. Yet it is precisely that difference which gives the key-note to the understanding of Eastern philosophy.

ENQ. - But what is the distinction between this "true individuality" and the "I" or "Ego" of which we are all conscious?

THEO. - Before I can answer you. we must argue upon what you mean by "I" or "Ego". We distinguish between the simple fact of self-consciousness, the simple feeling that "I am I" and the complex thought that "I am Mr. Smith" or "Mrs. Brown". Believing as we do in a series of births for the same Ego, or re-incarnation, this distinction is the fundamental pivot of the whole idea. You see "Mr. Smith" really means a long series of daily experiences strung together by the thread of memory, and forming what Mr. Smith calls "himself. But none of these "experiences" are really the "I" or the Ego, nor do they give "Mr. Smith" the feeling that he is himself for he forgets the greater part of his daily experiences, and they produce the feeling of Egoity in him only while they last. We Theosophists, therefore, distinguish between this bundle of "experiences "; which we call the false (because so finite and evanescent) personality, and that element in man to which the feeling of "I am I" is due. It is this "I am I" which we call the true individuality; and we say that this "Ego" or individuality plays, like an actor, many parts on the stage of life.

2. The actor and his roles.

Let us call every new life on earth of the same Ego a night on the stage of a theatre. One night the actor, or "Ego"; appears as "Macbeth", the next as "Shylock" the third as "Romeo", the fourth as "Hamlet" or "King Lear"; and so on, until he has run through the whole cycle of incarnations. The Ego begins his life-pilgrimage as a sprite, an "Ariel", or a "Puck"; he plays the part of a super, is a soldier, a servant, one of the chorus; rises then to "speaking parts", plays leading roles interspersed with insignificant parts, till he finally retires from the stage as "Prospero", the magician.

[In the meanwhile] will you call these parts or their costumes the individuality of the actor himself?

3. His permanent memory.

The personality [...] is ever changing with every new birth. It is, as said before, only the part played by the actor (the true ego) for one night. This is why we preserve no memory on the physical plane of our past lives, though the real "Ego" has lived them over and knows them all.

4. The individual Ego is the *real* man, responsible for his personalities' behaviour.

It is this Ego which [...] made of that human-like form a real man. It is that Ego, [...] which overshadows every personality Karma forces it to incarnate into; and this Ego which is held responsible for all the sins committed through, and in, every new body or personality - the evanescent masks which hide the true Individual through the long series of rebirths.

5. Its evolutionary pilgrimage, through life and death.

The spiritual Ego of man moves in eternity like a pendulum between the hours of birth and death. But if these hours, marking the periods of life terrestrial and life spiritual, are limited in their duration, . . . the spiritual pilgrim is eternal . . . Such intervals, their limitation notwithstanding, do not prevent the Ego, while ever perfecting itself from following undeviatingly, though gradually and slowly, the path to its last transformation, when that Ego, having reached its goal; becomes a divine being. These intervals and stages help towards this final result instead of hindering it; and without such limited intervals the divine Ego could never reach its ultimate goal.

6. The Ego retains the spiritual "aroma" of each incarnation;

Something of each personality unless the latter was an absolute materialist with not even a chink in his nature for a spiritual ray to pass through, must survive, as it leaves its eternal impress on the incarnating permanent Self or Spiritual Ego.⁸⁸

Your spiritual "I" is immortal; but from your present self it can carry away into eternity that only which has become worthy of immortality, namely, the aroma alone of the flower that has been mown by death.

7. Individual evolution culminates in man's alchemical metamorphosis into a god.

As tire bee collects its honey from every flower, leaving the rest as food for the earthly worms, so does our spiritual individuality [...]. Collecting from every terrestrial personality, into which Karma forces it to incarnate, the nectar alone of the spiritual qualities and self-consciousness, it unites all these into one whole and emerges from

⁸⁸ [fn 88: Or the Spiritual, in contradistinction to the personal Self. The student must not confuse this Spiritual Ego with the "HIGHER SELF" which is Ātma, the God within Us, and insuperable from the Universal Spirit [HPB].]

its chrysalis as the glorified Dhyan Chohan [= a god-like being]. So much the worse for those terrestrial personalities from which it could collect nothing. Such personalities cannot assuredly outlive consciously their terrestrial existence.

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Dr Jean-Louis Siémons

Ingénieur E N S C P, docteur-ingénieur, docteur ès-sciences physiques

is an active lecturer in the fields of death and dying, reincarnation, oriental philosophy and Theosophy.

He is the author of several books on these subjects.

Professionally, he teaches biophysics at the

INSTITUT NATIONAL AGRONOMIQUE

16 rue Claude Bernard, 75005 Paris (France)

(All correspondence may be sent to this address).