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## 4 Mystic Initiation and the Near-Death Experience

The Near-Death Experience (NDE) has been the object of much modern research. The first scholar to argue for its relevance to ancient Greek texts was – so far as I know – Jan Bremmer (2002), who considered “five descriptions which could be possibly be considered as NDEs”, but without mentioning mystic initiation. Mystic initiation was an ancient ritual that can best be described as a rehearsal for death that was meant to overcome the fear of actual death. Its elimination by Christianity left a large gap in the western religious imagination.

In two papers (2005 and 2010) I suggested the (direct or indirect) influence of NDEs on further ancient texts and on the ritual of mystic initiation by which the texts were influenced. Recently Yulia Ustinova (2013) has produced what is now the best, the most detailed, and the most comprehensive account of the topic. What I propose here is to (1) reproduce two important ancient texts, and briefly reiterate my argument of 2010, (2) situate these two texts in their context, (3) add two substantial points to my earlier argument, and (4) indicate the difficulties confronting modern psychology in its attempt to understand NDEs. The overall aim is to bring not only NDEs to the attention of those studying the ancient world but also ancient texts to the attention of those studying NDEs.

(1) I reproduce below the two texts most important to my argument of 2010. The fragment of Plutarch is perhaps our most important account of the *experience* of being initiated into the mysteries. Significantly, it compares this experience to the experience of dying. The other text is one of the numerous passages of Euripides’ *Bacchae* that reflects the ritual of mystic initiation.<sup>1</sup> The underlinings in both passages make it clear that there are significant similarities between mystic initiation and the (otherwise inexplicably odd) experience of Pentheus. It is because the passage of *Bacchae* reflects and evokes initiation, rather than because of some inexplicable delusion or psychosis, that Pentheus acts in the way he does.

It is true that Plutarch seems to refer to the Eleusinian mysteries, whereas *Bacchae* concerns the mysteries of Dionysos. But Dionysos was present (as

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<sup>1</sup> Seaford (1996).

Iakchos) in the Eleusinian mysteries, and both Aristophanes' *Frogs* and Plato's *Phaedrus* conflate Eleusinian with Dionysiac mysteries.<sup>2</sup> I must also note that at *Bacchae* 630 the editors have universally and erroneously replaced the manuscript *lectio difficilior* φῶς (light) with the conjecture φάσμι' (apparition), because none of them had any inkling of the considerations that I present in this paper and in my commentary on the play (1996).

### *Plutarch fragment 178*

In this world the soul is ignorant, except when it is already in the teleutan [to end or die]. Then it has an experience like that of those being initiated into the great mysteries. And so teleutan and teleisthai [to be initiated] are similar as verbs and in the actions they denote. At first wanderings and tiring runnings around, and anxious uncompleted journeys, then before the completion itself all the terrors, shuddering and trembling and sweat and awe. But after this a wonderful light met (the initiand) and pure places and meadows received him, with voices and choral dances and solemnities of sacred sounds and holy visions. Among these now he – made complete and initiated and free – moves around at large, crowned, celebrating the rituals, and is with holy and pure men, looking on the uninitiated and impure mob of the living trampled by itself [i.e. on the ground] in much mud and mist, in fear of death clinging to sufferings through not believing in the blessings there [in the hereafter].

### *Euripides Bacchae 604–635*

Dionysos: ... Have you astounded by fear fallen to the ground? ... But raise up your bodies and take courage, putting trembling from your flesh.

Chorus: O greatest light for us of the joyful-crying bacchanal, how gladly I looked on you in my isolated desolation.

Dionysos: Did you come to faintheartedness when I was being sent in, thinking that I would fall into the dark enclosures of Pentheus?

Chorus: How could I not? ... But how were you freed, having fallen in with an impure man?

Dionysos: ... [Pentheus tied up a bull], panting out his wrath, dripping sweat from his body, biting his lips. But I calmly sat close by and watched. During this time Bakchos came and shook up the house and on the tomb of his mother ignited fire. And Pentheus when he saw it, thinking that the house was on fire, rushed this way and then that way, telling the servants to bring water; and every slave was hard at work, toiling in vain. And having abandoned this toil, on the assumption that I had fled, he rushes, having seized a sword, inside the dark<sup>3</sup> house. And then Bromios – I say what seemed to me – made a light in the court-

<sup>2</sup> Riedweg (1987) 30–69.

<sup>3</sup> This translates the tiny emendation κελαινῶν (Verrall) for ms. κελαινὸν for argument see Seaford (1996) 201–202.

yard. And Pentheus charging against it rushed and stabbed at the shining < > as if slaughtering me ... through exhaustion he dropped the sword and collapsed.

The modern literature on the NDE is immense.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it here to say that generally agreed features of the ‘core experience’ are departing from the body, entry into darkness (often in a tunnel); movement towards a light, which is also somehow a person (the Being of Light); a beautiful place, such as a meadow; a feeling of peace and well-being; life review; seeing (deceased) relatives and friends; receiving knowledge about the nature of the universe; a sense of ineffable reality and of unity; permanent removal of the fear of death.

There is for ancient mystic initiation (and in texts that reflect it) evidence for all these features (except perhaps life review and seeing dead relatives). I refer readers to Ustinova (2013). In my two earlier papers I focused especially on the Being of Light, and cited – besides the two passages above – a large number of ancient Greek passages that are associated with mystic initiation and identify a deity with a light. It is also worth recalling here the influence (direct or indirect) of the initiatory role of light on divine epiphanies in the Acts of the Apostles.<sup>5</sup>

(2) The Plutarch fragment combines phraseology influenced by a famous passage of Plato’s *Phaedrus* (248–250) with elements derived from Eleusinian initiation ritual.<sup>6</sup> The *Phaedrus* passage is a description of a heavenly vision that Plato describes as a mystic initiation.<sup>7</sup> Plato, who was a contemporary of Euripides, in various works evokes or alludes to mystic initiation,<sup>8</sup> and had surely been himself initiated. Plutarch’s account of Eleusinian initiation is a synthesis of his own experience (for he too had very likely been initiated) with Plato’s sublimated version.

As for the *Bacchae* passage, it is one of numerous passages in the play that reflect and evoke the ritual of mystic initiation. The strange (and otherwise inexplicable) experiences of Pentheus – not only his behaviour in the passage quoted but also, for instance, his ‘fluttering anxiety’ (*ptoēsis*), and seeing two suns and two cities of Thebes – can be related to the experience of the mystic initiand. The theme of the play was the introduction of Dionysiac mystic initiation to Thebes (20–25, 39–40). That is to say, the play dramatized an aetiological myth of mystic

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<sup>4</sup> For a recent survey, see Greyson (2014a).

<sup>5</sup> Seaford (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Riedweg (1987) 65–66; Graf (1974) 132–138. Graf underestimates what could be enacted (or evoked) in the Eleusinian ritual.

<sup>7</sup> 248b1–5, 249c7, 250b–c; Riedweg (1987) 30–69.

<sup>8</sup> e.g. *Symp.* 210a1, *Phaedo* 108a, *Republic* 560e, *Cratylus* 400, *Meno* 81a–b.

initiation, and so – like other aetiological myths of ritual (e.g. the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*) – prefigured details of the ritual to be established. I have argued all this in detail in my Commentary on the play (1996).

Nor is the *Bacchae* the only Athenian tragedy that evokes ritual. A number of rituals – notably mystic initiation, the wedding, the funeral, the procession, animal sacrifice, and supplication – were more central to the life of society, and more familiar to people in general, than is any religious ritual of our era. And because these rituals were also both dramatic and highly emotional, they were frequently evoked by tragedy for emotional effect, in a manner and to an extent that have been unfamiliar to European theatre audiences ever since.<sup>9</sup>

(3) In this section I add two points to my earlier argument.

(a) Evidence has been presented by Kevin Clinton for the presence during Eleusinian initiation of statues illuminated from within. It consists of a number of ancient texts<sup>10</sup> together with a votive plaque from the sanctuary showing Demeter with rays of light emerging from her head.<sup>11</sup> To this evidence I would add the numerous passages identifying deities with light in a mystic context: for instance, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which is in various respects aetiological of the Eleusinian mysteries, ‘a light shone far out from the immortal skin of the goddess ... the compact house was filled with radiance like lightning’ (278–280). The creation of statues illuminated from within shows how concretely the NDE (specifically the Being of Light) might be represented in mystic ritual.

(b) In the *Bacchae* passage the chorus – after anxiety, individual isolation, and falling to the ground – welcome the epiphany of Dionysos, whom they call “greatest light”. This represents the mystic transition – attested e.g. in the Plutarch passage – from isolated anxiety to communal joy (a transition with profound political potential),<sup>12</sup> a transition effected by light in the darkness. Pentheus too undergoes the preliminary phase of isolated anxiety (again, for detail compare Plutarch), but when the light appears to him in the darkness and he recognizes it as Dionysos (just as the chorus have called Dionysos in his epiphany “greatest light”), he *attacks* it. The myth of Pentheus represents the *persistence* of the phase of anxious resistance, what Plutarch calls “clinging to sufferings”, that in the ritual is eventually abandoned. Pentheus

<sup>9</sup> From the copious scholarship, see e.g. Foley (1985); Seaford (1994).

<sup>10</sup> Notably Plato, *Phaedrus* 249e–250c, 254b. With the latter passage I suggest we compare *Bacchae* 647 (and my commentary *ad loc.*).

<sup>11</sup> IG II<sup>2</sup> 4639.

<sup>12</sup> For this political potential, see Seaford (2012) 274–278 and (2013).

too is, much later in the drama, eventually made to abandon it by Dionysos, but only so as to be sent to Hades (in contrast to the imagined Hades temporarily inhabited by the initiates). Myth can express as a reality what in the ritual is merely imagined, and the mystic transition will not be effective unless the uninitiated are made fearful (by the myth as well as by the ritual).

In general, the NDE passes from a phase of anxious isolated resistance to a phase of profound well-being that is often associated with the Being of Light. But there are cases (a minority) that resemble the normal NDE except that the dying person *rejects* his new environment, feels *isolated*, and has to struggle for his continued existence: the transition to well-being does not occur. These may be called Negative Near-Death Experiences (NNDEs). A study<sup>13</sup> based on over 100 interviews with NNDE experiencers found that the same kind of experience can be viewed positively in a normal NDE but negatively in a NNDE. For instance, ‘a Being composed entirely of light can seem to be a trick of the devil or a punishment of some kind’. It has been suggested that the unpleasantness of some NDEs derives “from the resistance to the experience, not from the experience itself”.<sup>14</sup> What might have become a NNDE can turn pleasant “once the person relaxes into the experience”. I suggest that the NNDE is a source for Pentheus’ persistently anxious resistance, his isolated clinging to sufferings, and specifically for his hostility to the light that he recognizes as a person (Being of Light) but nevertheless attacks.

The *Bacchae* passage is not the only ancient Greek text that was probably influenced by the NNDE. Plato in the *Phaedo* (108) infers from certain rituals (surely mystic rituals) that the way to the underworld has many forks and windings, and then contrasts the *pure* soul, which finds gods as companions and guides to the underworld, with the *impure* soul, which resists, suffers, and is dragged to the underworld where it is shunned by all and *wanders around bewildered and alone*. For Plato this distinction had implications for how we should lead our lives. And so the question should be raised of whether Euripides too represents Pentheus as the *kind of person* who, like the impure soul described by Plato, is imagined as likely to experience death entirely negatively. That is to say, does Pentheus have characteristics – over and above his mere rejection of Dionysos – that make him that kind of person? This then leads to a further question: do modern NNDE experiencers tend to

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13 Atwater (1992).

14 Greyson (2014b).

be a certain kind of person? The current answer to this last question seems to be no (see below), but research in this area may still have a long way to go.

(4) How do we explain the NDE *physiologically* and *psychologically*? A useful recent survey of this issue, with extensive bibliography, is by Greyson (2014a). I conclude by indicating two problems for explanations hitherto proposed, and a suggestion for future, interdisciplinary progress.

A common kind of psychological explanation is provided by the expectancy model: the NDE, it is sometimes claimed, is a fantasy constructed – as a defense mechanism – out of personal and cultural expectations. The problem is that NDEs apparently often conflict with such expectations. My impression from looking at some of the numerous studies is that the typicality of the NDE generally prevails over pre-existing variations in the NDE experiencers – variations in religion, in knowledge or ignorance of NDEs, in culture, and in psychological make-up. An instance of this prevailing is provided by the representation – in a very different culture of two and half millennia ago, ancient Greece – of what we can merely from modern experience clearly identify as the NDE.

The other problem is this. Besides various physiological processes, there are also various anomalous or abnormal states that have been adduced to explain the NDE, such as hallucination, dissociation, depersonalization, and derealization. But the NDE generally enters a phase that is lucid, ordered, pleasant, peaceful, and typical. A sense of personal identity is not lost (but may be detached from bodily sensation, and may combine with a sense of unity with others). And a sense of reality is not lost: in fact the experience may seem especially real, albeit ineffable. This remarkable combination of features was – I suggest – a factor in the Greek desire to enact in their rehearsal for death (mystic ritual) the reports of NDE experiencers. But the combination also seems very different from the anomalous or abnormal psychological states that have been adduced to explain the NDE. This objection also presents a problem for the physiological explanations, for which moreover we still lack the necessary experimental data. Indeed it is significant that in his survey, Greyson finds serious problems with each of the explanations for the NDE that have been proposed (psychological, physiological, or the separation of mind from body), and concludes with a far-reaching aporia: “Controversy persists over whether that invariance [of NDEs through the centuries and around the globe] is a reflection of universal psychological defenses, neurophysiological processes, or actual experience of a transcendent or mystic domain”.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Greyson (2014) 358.

Modern researchers study the NDE as an entirely *individual* experience. Perhaps therefore there is a lesson for them from the ancient manifestations of the NDE. On the one hand the ancient NDE is strikingly similar to ours. On the other hand there is a world of difference between the *location* of the NDE in the individual consciousness then and now. In the ancient material that we have examined the NDE is represented in the communal enactment of myth (in drama) and of ritual, enactment that might even have political significance. But the modern NDE remains an experience of discrete individuals. Moreover, fifty years ago (at least in the West) nobody, or almost nobody, spoke of NDEs (let alone considering them worthy of study). The phenomenon had to be gradually extracted by researchers from the privacy of certain individuals.

And so the NDE can be communally present on the one hand or on the other hand intensely private and generally unknown. The question then arises of *why* the NDE was communally present in Greek antiquity, and yet generally unknown – or internally repressed? – in (say) the first half of the twentieth century. This important question has never been asked. An answer would probably require the introduction of anthropological and socio-historical factors, which accordingly cannot ultimately be excluded from our current attempts to understand the relation of the NDE to the individual mind.