

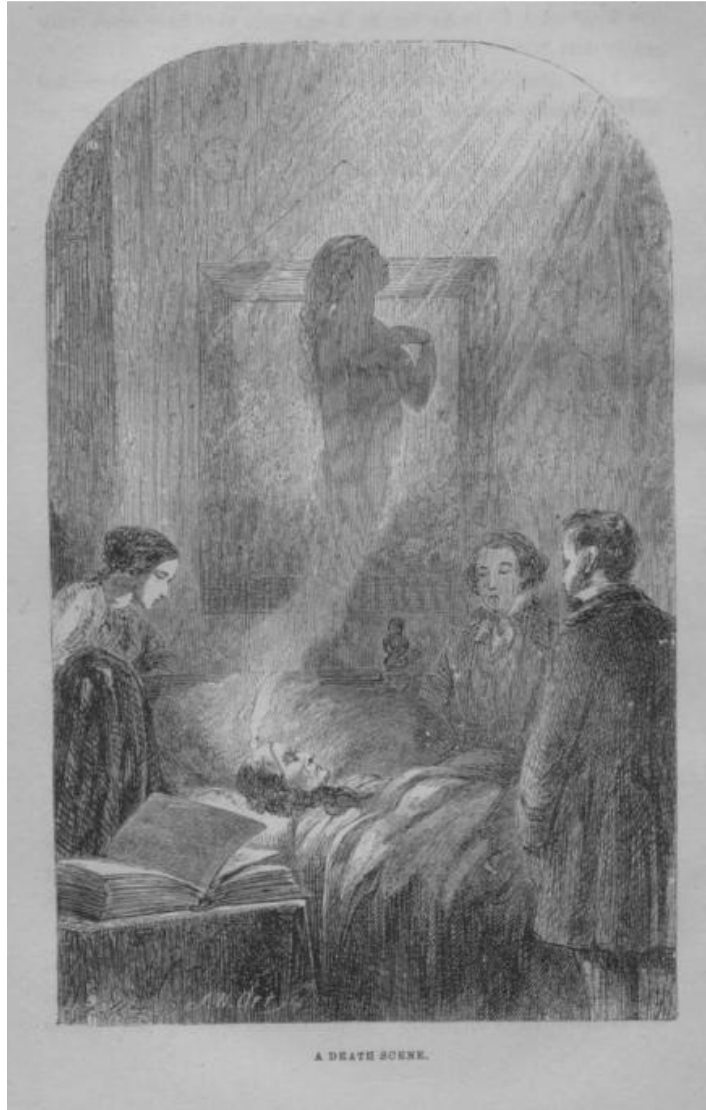
HISTORICAL NOTES ON DOUBLES AND TRAVELLING SPIRITS: VII.: VISIONS OF DEATH

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THE OLD IDEA THAT death is the permanent separation of the spirit and the physical body is the first thing that comes to mind when we hear about those cases referred to by William Barrett as “Visions of the Spirit of a Dying Person Leaving the Body” (Barrett, 1926, Chapter 6). These are instances in which death-bed witnesses see something—lights, mist, or a spirit body—coming out of the body of a dying person.

Cases of this sort were published during the nineteenth-century (e.g., Moses, 1887/1904), as can be seen in the excerpts presented below. One such observation was recorded in Sarah Cartwright’s *Magnetism Clairvoyantly Discerned* (1884), whose “spiritual sight” perceived the separation of the spirit of an eighteen year old young woman: “Death came to her through the delirium of fever ... and as the separation gradually progressed from the extremities I saw the spirit body contract, withdrawing from the flesh leaving the feet cold, the hands, arms, limbs until life centered around the heart and base of the brain, and the spinal cord, which gradually loosened its hold .. . The spirit body of the young girl, when withdrawn from the larger development of the physical, was less than two-thirds in size” (p. 118-119).

Some cases of this type have been reported during the twentieth century. These include the luminous emanations described by Tweedale (1921) and Monk (1922), and the observations of spirit bodies presented by Snell (1918; see also *Hallucinations*, 1908). More recently there



have been reports of vague emanations, as seen in McAdams (1984) paper, and in the short descriptions presented by Wills-Brandon (2000).

The purpose of the current paper is to reprint some descriptions of this phenomenon published in the nineteenth-century. I present accounts written by Sophia De Morgan and Andrew Jackson Davis.

¹ The topic has been discussed by many authors, among them Becker (1993), Bozzano (1934/1937), Crookall (1967) and Rogo (1973). See also my papers (Alvarado, 1987, 2005, 2006).

Sophia de Morgan

Several examples of these death visions were recorded by Sophia de Morgan (1809-1892), who was involved with mesmerism, spiritualism and women's rights. Both Sophia, and her husband, mathematician Augustus De Morgan (1806-1871), explored spiritualism and accepted the reality of its phenomena.²

The observations presented here appeared in Sophia De Morgan's book *From Matter to Spirit* (1863), a book devoted to spiritualism. The book included several chapters about mediumistic phenomena (e.g., writing, visions), apparitions, and the topic of this article. The latter, the ninth chapter of the book, was entitled "Process of Death and Formation of the Spiritual Body".

The following excerpts include several accounts, starting with an experience by the author:

I was myself once standing with a person who had sometimes the gift of spiritual vision, beside a bed on which lay one whose life was departing. The breathing was ceasing slowly when I noticed a thin white mist which seemed to rise two or three inches above the bed. My companion appeared also to be looking at something. Her eyes, which always had a strange glitter when they encountered any object unseen by others, were raised gradually from the recumbent form to the top of the bed; then, returning, seemed to rest halfway between, gazing, as far as I could see, on vacancy. This earnest gaze lasted more than a minute. I looked at her enquiringly, but she did not speak. She told me a few minutes after what she had seen, thus:

"I was looking at a mist which seemed to be rising from the bed, and which I have noticed some time, when my attention was drawn upwards, and I saw a pillar of light, between sunshine and moonlight, rising three or four feet. Within this was a still brighter light, becoming more brilliant at the centre; and from the centre to the circumference, from within outwards, it was all working together with intense rapidity. I saw it once again, but slightly afterwards, just as the last breath was drawn. It seemed then to pass off by the top of the bed."

The seer has been a trusted friend of my own for many years; her character for truthfulness is quite above suspicion [p. 128].

On giving an account of this appearance to a friend, he told me that a similar statement had

been made by a girl in whose character for truth he had entire confidence ... The young woman had nursed her mother, who was confined to her bed by long and wasting illness. The poor invalid died gradually; the feet first, then the legs, becoming numb and powerless. At length life seemed to be confined to the head and upper part of the body. One night, or rather towards morning, the poor girl awoke suddenly and saw a strong light rising to some height above the sick woman, from whom it seemed to emanate. It passed away in an upward direction, and disappeared. The girl in great terror called out to her mother, but received no answer. She then ran to a friend (a confidential servant of my informant), and told her what she had seen. Her friend returned to the cottage, where they found the mother quite dead.

The late Miss W----, well known at one time in the mesmerising world, told me that she once nursed an uncle through his last illness. As he died, a very small bright cloud, appearing to come from the nostrils, passed away, and rising while she watched it, disappeared by the ceiling. This is another instance of a difference in the *power* of vision [p. 129].

My readers who are old enough to remember some of the early observations on magnetised girls, may recall the assertion made by one of the Okeys,³ who, being taken by her mesmeriser into one of the hospital wards, declared that she always saw a cloudy figure, to which she gave some slang name, rising from the beds of certain patients. It was asserted by her mesmeriser, that in all those cases where she had represented the form as *tall*, the patient died; but there was a chance of recovery for those from whom it only seemed to emanate to a lesser height ... The shorter figure was probably an efflux of the most external spiritual fluid of the sick person [p. 130].

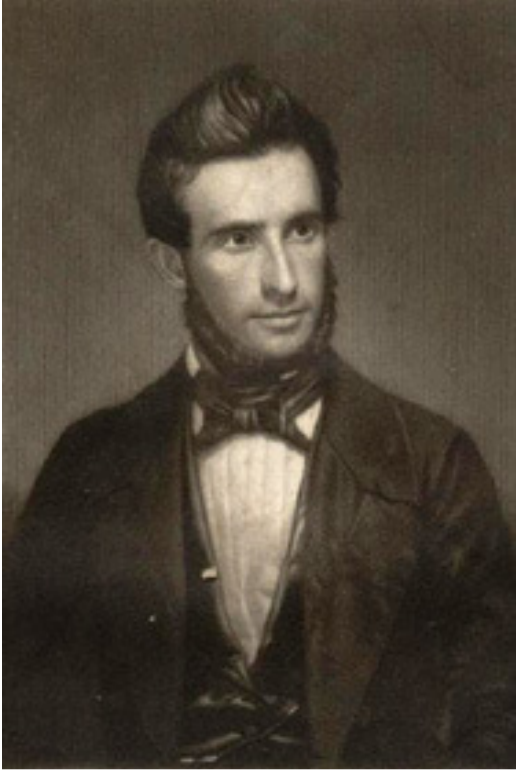
Andrew Jackson Davis

Clairvoyant and visionary Andrew Jackson Davis (1826-1910) was well known for his numerous visions and descriptions of the other world.⁴ Davis (1866) stated: "I have had the peri-scopic and clairvoyant ability to see through man's iron coating [the physical body] for the past fifteen years ..." (p. 14), an ability

² On Augustus and Sophia De Morgan and spiritualism see Smith (2002, Chapter 3).

³ This is a reference to Elizabeth and Jane Okey, studied by John Elliotson (see Gauld, 1992, pp. 201-203).

⁴ See, for example, his descriptions of spiritual spheres and spirit communities (Davis, 1868). Davis has been discussed by Delp (1967) and De Salvo (2005).



Andrew Jackson Davis

he used at death-beds. The following excerpt is taken from Davis' *The Great Harmonia* (1850), and refers to his observations of a dying woman:

Now the head of the body became suddenly enveloped in a fine—soft—mellow—luminous atmosphere; and, as instantly, I saw the cerebrum and the cerebellum expand their most interior portions; I saw them discontinue their appropriate galvanic functions; and then I saw that they became highly charged with the vital electricity and vital magnetism which permeate subordinate systems and structures ... This phenomenon invariably precedes physical dissolution.

Now the process of dying, or of the spirit's departure from the body, was fully commenced ... The head became intensely brilliant; and I particularly remarked that just in the same proportion as the extremities of the organism grew dark, and cold, the brain appeared light and glowing.

Now I saw, in the mellow, spiritual atmosphere, which [p. 165] emanated from, and encircled, her head, the indistinct outlines of the *formation* of another head! ... This new head unfolded more and more distinctly; and so indescribably compact and intensely brilliant did it become, that I could neither see through it, nor gaze upon it as steadily as I desired. While this

spiritual head was being eliminated and organized from out of, and above, the material head, I saw that the surrounding aroal atmosphere which had emanated from the material head was in great commotion; but, as the new head became more distinct and perfect, this brilliant atmosphere gradually disappeared. ...

With inexpressible wonder, and with a heavenly and utterable reverence, I gazed upon the holy and harmonious processes that were going on before me. In the identical manner in which the spiritual head was eliminated and unchangeably organized, I saw, unfolding in their natural, progressive order, the harmonious development of the neck, the shoulders, the breast, and the entire spiritual organization [p. 166] ... The defects and deformities of her physical body, were, in the spiritual body which I saw thus developed, almost completely removed ... her spiritual constitution, being elevated above those obstructions, was enabled to unfold and perfect itself .

The spirit arose at right angles over the head or brain of the deserted body. But immediately previous to the final dissolution of the relationship which had for so many years subsisted between the two spiritual and material bodies, I saw—playing energetically between the feet of the elevated spiritual body and the head of the prostrate physical body—a bright stream or current of vital electricity. This taught me, that what is customarily termed *Death* is but a *Birth* of the spirit from a lower into a higher state; that an inferior body and mode of existence are exchanged for a superior body and corresponding endowments and capabilities [p. 167] of happiness. I learned that the correspondence between the birth of a child into this world, and the birth of the spirit from the material body into a higher world, is absolute and complete—even to the *umbilical cord*, which was represented by the thread, of vital electricity, which, for a few minutes, subsisted between, and connected the two organisms together. And here I perceived, what I had never before obtained a knowledge of, that a small portion of this vital electrical element returned to the deserted body, immediately subsequent to the separation of the umbilical thread; and that that portion of this element which passed back into the earthly organism, instantly diffused itself through the entire structure, and thus prevented immediate decomposition [p. 168].

...

As soon as the spirit, whose departing hour I thus watched, was wholly disengaged from the tenacious physical body, I directed my attention to the movements and emotions of the former; and I saw her begin to breathe the most interior or spiritual portions of the surrounding terrestrial atmosphere ... At first it seemed with difficulty that she could breathe the new medium; but, in a

few seconds, she inhaled and exhaled the spiritual elements of nature, with the greatest possible ease and delight. And now I saw that she was in the possession of exterior and physical proportions, which were identical, in every possible particular—improved and beautified—with those proportions which characterized her earthly organization. That is to say, she possessed a heart, a stomach, a liver, lungs, &c., &c., just as her natural body did previous to (not her, but) *its* death [p. 169]. ...

The period required to accomplish the entire *change*, which I saw, was not far from two hours and a half ... Without changing my position, or spiritual perceptions, I continued to observe the movements of her new-born spirit. As soon as she became accustomed to the new elements which surrounded her, she descended from her elevated position, which was immediately over the body, by an effort of the will-power, and directly passed out of the door of the bedroom, in which she had lain [p. 171] (in the material form) prostrated with disease for several weeks. It being in a summer month, the doors were all open, and her egress from the house was attended with no obstructions. I saw her pass through the adjoining room, out of the door, and step from the house into the atmosphere! ... She walked in the atmosphere as easily, and in the same manner, as we tread the earth, and ascend an eminence. Immediately upon her emergence from the house, *she was joined by two friendly spirits from the spiritual country*; and, after tenderly recognising and communing with each other, the three, in the most graceful manner, began ascending obliquely through the ethereal envelopment of our globe. They walked so naturally and fraternally together, that I could scarcely realize the fact that they trod the air—they seemed to be walking upon the side of a glorious but familiar mountain! I continued to gaze upon them until the distance shut them from my view; whereupon I returned to my external and ordinary condition [p. 172].

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Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the Society for Psychical Research for a grant that allowed me to prepare this series of papers. Nancy L. Zingrone

THE PARANORMAL REVIEW

offered useful editorial suggestions for the improvement of this article.

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