

Interrupting, Talking Back, and Making Tracks Through the Middle: A Feminist Review of *The Last Laugh*

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The Last Laugh: A New Philosophy of Near-Death Experiences, Apparitions, and the Paranormal, by Raymond A. Moody, Jr.
Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads, 1999, 196pp + xvii, \$12.95 pb.

One evening last September an acquaintance, who knew that I was preparing to write a doctoral dissertation about near-death narratives, expressed concern for the future of my project. "Susan," this honest if ill-informed skeptic cautioned with thinly disguised outrage, "don't you know that Raymond Moody just wrote a book debunking the whole *Life After Life* scenario? He admits that it was all a big joke." Suspecting that this person did not have the whole straight story, I nevertheless dashed out and bought that book, which turned out to be *The Last Laugh*, and dived into it. Reading page after page, I confirmed my suspicion that my acquaintance had completely misunderstood its message, but I also saw that the book itself was partly to blame. The "joke" is buried so deeply that this person, an intelligent and broadly educated professional, had missed it; as a reader he never got in on *The Last Laugh*, because for him the punch line was too long in coming.

My acquaintance's reception of *The Last Laugh* serves to illustrate the book's most difficult problem—the author's seeming determination to alienate whatever audiences he may have imagined as readers. From the introduction onward, Moody tosses out oblique references to relatively advanced disciplinary theories without stopping to explain,

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leaving a general reader feeling as if she or he were being made the chump in an inside joke among professionals. For example, Moody's failure to elucidate his linkages between anal fixation, obsessional neurosis, and the snidely scatological allegation that some of his critics are operating from "the Luther-position" suggests that he is targeting an audience with a prior academic background in psychoanalysis (pp. xii–xiii). On the other hand, the philosophical, linguistic, and psychoanalytic arguments are too thinly developed to satisfy the academic reader. Furthermore, Moody's fulminating rancor and condescending tone seem calculated to offend his critics and sympathizers alike. *The Last Laugh* is witty in a stingingly sardonic way, but it is not funny. It took every ounce of readerly determination I possessed to get through this book. I admit that I did throw it against the wall in disgust once or twice, and when I finally finished it I felt as if the light in this particular tunnel had turned out to be the headlight of an oncoming freight train, which had just run me over and left me lying on the tracks staring at the lantern swinging from its retreating caboose as it clattered indifferently on its way.

Having said that, I must also say that I am glad I made the effort. *The Last Laugh* is a valuable addition to the field of near-death studies. It underscores the urgent necessity for some fresh tracks of thinking about death-related visions and what they mean, thinking that plows a furrow through the middle of the tired old true-or-not-true dichotomy, which is all that Moody claims ever to have wanted since the beginning.

When *Life After Life* was first published in 1975, Moody suggested the direction he hoped that future academic research on near-death experiences would take:

What I want to do is find some middle way of interpreting them—a way which neither rejects these experiences on the basis that they do not constitute scientific or logical proof nor sensationalizes them by resorting to vague emotional claims that they "prove" that there is life after death. (p. 182)

However, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross' foreword accurately anticipated a very different shape for the debate that would emerge in the academic community. Kübler-Ross warned that Moody could expect objections from the medical and scientific professions on grounds that his findings were "unscientific" and that the religious establishment would dismiss Moody's work either as an attempt to "sell cheap grace" or an invasion of empirical science into areas that ought to be reserved for faith alone and

left uncontaminated by critical questioning, investigation, and analysis. Her warnings have proven to be prophetic. Surely enough, in the quarter-century since the publication of *Life After Life* scholarly examinations of the near-death experience have largely remained trapped in a dead air space between the competing, often hostile discourses of science and religion, both of which are bound by their own mutually exclusive language and conventions. In *The Last Laugh*, Moody's long-pent-up disappointment and exasperation with this impasse finally, and perhaps inevitably, erupt.

While hurling quirky neologisms and bitter vituperations at almost everyone who has dared to write about the near-death experience, Moody directs some of his most scathing invectives toward the rhetorics of parapsychology, scientific skepticism, and religious fundamentalism. What exasperates him the most is that while these three particular discourses remain deadlocked among themselves, unaffiliated "ordinary" people who actually have had near-death experiences or are who are fascinated by them are excluded from the academic discussion altogether and are brutalized when they try to interrupt or talk back to the so-called experts:

So many of those who call themselves experts of the paranormal, or on whom we have bestowed a certain moral or scientific authority in this regard, will not even listen to what those who claim to have had near-death experiences have to say. Too many priests, ministers, and rabbis shush people who have "come back" with such reports. Too many psychologists and psychiatrists take the reports very seriously indeed—as evidence of some deep psychosis, or, at least, the need for some calming medication. And too many skeptics set out with such verbal and emotional brutality to debunk such honestly given reports that the original tellers wish they had never opened their mouths.

This is what happens when everyone insists on taking all this so seriously. (pp. 166–167)

Having apparently abandoned all hope of locating a middle way, Moody proposes to break the three-way deadlock among these professional rhetorics by recruiting what he calls "serious students of the playful" to invent an entirely new discourse of "playful paranormalism" capable of silencing the opponents' arguments once and for all:

Playful paranormalists are of the opinion that the only viable option available to scholars who want to make headway in the study of paranormal phenomena, and break up the logjam around it, is backing away from that entire, rickety old edifice of argumentation, identifying its critical weak points, and then blowing the whole thing apart (p. 48).

In Moody's use of the term "playful," which can be pieced together from descriptive passages sprinkled throughout *The Last Laugh*, one can infer that a playful discourse would have to appreciate the "entertainment value" of the paranormal, not merely tolerate but actually celebrate ambiguity and paradox without forcing resolution, privilege poetry and figurative language over literalness, and possess slippery, flexible, and permeable boundaries. His hypothesis is that entertainment, humor, play, and the paranormal are intimately enmeshed and therefore, that "we are entranced by the paranormal because we are entertained by it" (p. 15):

[W]e, the ordinary people of the world, continue to listen to (and even encourage, for they are vastly entertaining) such reports [of near-death experiences and similar phenomena], for we are titillated, inspired, rejuvenated, encouraged, and deeply enlivened by the possibility that they *might* be true. (p. 167)

Moody proposes that scholars equipped with his new discursive tool of playful paranormalism should be able to demonstrate that the social and cultural phenomena of the paranormal in general, and the near-death experience in particular, are significant both historically and psychologically as major forms of popular entertainment (p. 46).

Despite their entertainment value, however, Moody clearly sees more than mere amusement in these experiences. "It is time for us to entertain the notion," says he, "that what we have been hearing from thousands of people anecdotally might very well be not simply entertaining, but ultimately revealing" (p. 166). Yet Moody himself comes dangerously close to trivializing near-death experiences in suggesting that bad things happen when they are taken too seriously and that they should therefore be studied primarily in terms of their "entertainment" value, a term that he fails to elaborate sufficiently. Taken at face value, his claim that near-death experiences constitute historically and psychologically significant forms of popular entertainment could be made just as forcefully for supermarket tabloids.

Likewise, his insufficient elaboration of the terms "play" and "seriousness" might mislead a reader to believe that he takes these terms to be polar opposites, when, in fact, a close reading reveals beneath Moody's idiosyncratic, nearly opaque language a belief that play can very well include seriousness. The fact that play and seriousness do interpenetrate leads to yet another difficulty with this book; in sparring with his critics Moody plays a very rough game, one that slips out of the margins where play fuses with seriousness and crosses over into *ad*

hominem argumentation, cavalier dismissal, mean-spirited sarcasm, and even outright cruelty.

Moody's metaphorical call to arms and explosives on page 48 suggests that he can see only one way out of the discursive "logjam" surrounding his work: silencing all points of view except his own. "*The Last Laugh* demolishes all three of the standard approaches to the paranormal and erects a better, more comprehensive, and pragmatic system of thinking in their place," he announces in his introduction (p. xvi). Engaging Moody's rhetorical gamesmanship on his terms for just a moment, and at the risk of being labeled a ranting feminist, a charge that I do not deny, I am going to snatch onto that word "erects" to tease out the phallocentric subtext of Moody's language.

[Author's aside: I interrupt myself here to revisit momentarily the point I was trying to make in paragraph two about what I think Moody does with language by playing a similar game with my own. I can claim that the term "phallocentric" is meant to be understood in the strict Lacanian sense as a gender-neutral symbol for power and that the term "tease out" is a commonplace in literary analysis, and both claims would be true, but how is an intelligent reader apt to decode these terms if I do not explain them, given their connotations outside of the academic discourses of psychoanalysis and literary criticism? And what right would I, the writer, have to complain if that same intelligent reader misinterpreted my words to mean something lascivious, particularly when I invoke the term "erects" in the context that I do? This is one of the kinds of language games in which Moody entraps his readers by failing to define terms; do you see how treacherous this game can be when only one player knows the rules? Now, to return.]

Only someone operating from a position of male privilege—I dare say a *phallocentric* position—could really believe that one can effectively resist ideological imperialism by reproducing it in kind. Moody's plan to annihilate what he calls the "rhetorics of dysbelief" with his own alternative theory of the paranormal is quixotic, and his outrage at the treatment his work has received suggests that he is not accustomed to more powerful "others" having their way with his intellectual productions.

By contrast, women and people of color, who historically have occupied less-than-privileged positions in culture, have had extensive experience in handling such treatment. I suggest that Kübler-Ross, the interrupting, back-talking foremother of near-death studies, was able to predict the reception that awaited *Life After Life* because of all that she had endured as a woman scientist championing her own unpopular cause—bringing the needs and concerns of dying patients to the attention of the medical establishment and the general public.

Realizing the futility of trying to silence discourses more powerful and firmly entrenched than their own, women and minorities have had to learn how to interrupt and talk back to power, intervene in master discourses while simultaneously resisting their colonizing forces, and walk a precarious middle path between abject silence and rebellious alienation (Reynolds, 1998, p. 60). If Moody's original plea for a middle path of scholarship is to be answered, the answer will come from such rhetorical tactics as these, not from silencing opposing voices and *certainly* not from taking the momentary gratification that comes from what amounts to throwing a hissy fit in print.

The first lesson in interrupting and talking back to master discourses is one that Moody fails even in his bid to teach it: one should try not to take oneself too seriously. Toward the end of *The Last Laugh*, Moody introduces his concerns regarding the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS), the interdisciplinary organization devoted to the study of the near-death experience that he helped to establish. He laments what he sees as the organization's tendency to solidify an ideology of the near-death experience, conventionalizing both its boundaries and language, limiting as sternly as orthodox science and religion the kinds of research that can be done and the questions that can be asked, and possessing the power to exclude those who do not conform to its norms. In Moody's words, "They are too touchy about someone going outside the bounds of what they think they already know about the subject" (p. 169). Moody claims to have felt the sting of IANDS' reproach after speaking at a 1989 conference, "the last time they asked me to speak to their convention," about his experiments with mirror-gazing as a means of establishing after-death communications. However, Moody's claim to have been "persona non grata with the group since 1989" is troubling (p. 169), given that on November 1, 1997, he delivered the keynote address at the IANDS Conference in San Antonio. His name was on the program well beforehand, so it seems reasonable to assume that he did not just invite himself despite his alleged "persona non grata" status, but rather that someone on the program committee actively solicited his presence and that the organization probably paid him a fee for his appearance.

He quibbles about IANDS' adoption and promulgation of a common language of near-death studies without his approval. He complains about their use of the "ugly-sounding" terms NDE, which in IANDS jargon stands for near-death experience, and "experienter," which represents a person who has had one, and the exclusion of his preferred term, "experient" (p. 169). The terms to which he objects, however, seem

to have found their way into common usage for reasonable cause. The abbreviation “NDE” (which Moody himself coined in *Life After Life*) takes up far less space on the printed page than “near-death experience,” a fact that editors of journals and newsletters must always bear in mind when page space is at a premium. Furthermore, the terms “experient” and “experience,” while clearly distinguishable from each other on the printed page, become troublesome and confusing in speech, particularly when the singular noun or verb form “experience” is positioned near the plural form of the noun “experients.” That Moody seems to have overlooked the homophonous relationship between “experience” and “experients” is almost beside the point; the more salient question for me is why he finds the terminology adopted by IANDS so grating on his nerves. Despite Moody’s explicit repudiation of the role of the expert and his self-identification with “ordinary” people and their talk about their experiences, and despite my hopeful attempt to accept both of these claimed positions at face value, I find myself drawn again into his phallogocentric subtext of domination and control. Moody’s dismissal of IANDS as a “special interest hobby club” has a familiar ring to my feminist sensibilities; it reverberates to the patriarchal voices of male literary critics and commercial publishers repudiating and dismissing female and ethnic voices for refusing to play what they think of as their game by their rules. It has the texture and taste of sour grapes. To paraphrase Moody’s own words, this is what happens when one begins to take oneself too seriously.

A second lesson to be learned from the experiences of women and minorities who intervene in master discourses is that aligning oneself with the power structures of those discourses, that is, “sleeping with the enemy,” is sometimes unavoidable, sometimes prudent, and sometimes profitable, but never innocent. Better to accept this as a fact and own up to it than to offer flimsy excuses that generally do not sit well, particularly when handsome profits are involved. As much as Moody might like to distance himself from the emergence of “NDEntertainers” and “NDEntrepreneurs” who cash in on their own experiences or those of others by publishing books, selling tapes, and traveling the lecture and talk show circuits, he is, willingly or not, complicitous in the emergence of these commodified amusements. He reveals his complicity himself in *The Last Laugh*, telling how *Life After Life* came to be published without a lengthy appendix that explained in detail why the evidence presented in the book could not be taken as scientific proof of an afterlife (Moody, 1999, pp. 170–171). Moody blames his publisher, who thought that the appendix was too obscure and difficult for popular

audiences, and offers the specious explanation that he did not fight the publisher's mutilation of his work because he did not foresee the book's overwhelming success (p. 7).

Indeed, fights with publishers have long been commonplace in the lives of authors. In a market economy a writer's truth-telling is very likely to conflict with a publisher's need to sell large quantities of books, and for that matter, the writer's own altruistic motives might conflict with her or his need for an income. The extent to which the profit motive determines what is publishable commercially cannot be ignored, but Moody's complaining about the bowdlerized appendix to *Life After Life* is belated and his demand that his first book be read only in conjunction with *The Last Laugh* is unreasonable.

The third and final lesson in the art of interrupting and talking back is that one cannot control the reception of one's discourse. Authors may fantasize that they have inalienable rights to prescribe the uses made of their words and ideas, but the truth is that with publication their once-private intellectual property becomes cultural property and takes on a life of its own, a life shaped both by cultural forces and the hopes, anxieties, and purposes of individual readers. Moody's abdication of responsibility for *Life After Life* except in the context of *The Last Laugh* comes too late; the earlier book has been cultural property for 25 years and, for good or ill, cannot be called back. He can bid to rejoin the conversation by placing this latest book (or one still to be written) on the table, but as long as the First Amendment to the Constitution stands he has no right to demand adoption of *The Last Laugh* or restrict the use of his earlier work.

As a college teacher who frequently uses *Life After Life* in my first-year composition classes, I am not about to insist that my students spend money for two books when one will serve my pedagogical purposes. Despite the hyperbolic claims on the covers of mass market paperback editions of *Life After Life*, my first-year students have always been able, with guidance and practice, to tease out of the text itself a solid position on the differences between testimony, evidence, and proof. I fear, however, that if my college graduate acquaintance could miss the point of *The Last Laugh*, and that if I could experience an encounter with it as something like a train wreck, then even the most intelligent and curious undergraduates' efforts to engage with it would be likely to end in frustration, disillusionment, and confusion. The book destined to make tracks through the middle for beginning college students and general readers in the popular market has yet to be written.

I have no more right to dictate to Moody what his next writing project ought to be than has he to dictate to me what I may or may not teach in my own classroom. I can, however, engage in a bit of wishful thinking. With all my heart I hope that *The Last Laugh* is not destined to stand as Moody's last word. My most hopeful fantasy is this: now that Moody has disgorged his pent-up frustration and gotten it out of his way, he will find again that gentle teacherly and thoroughly analytical voice that speaks in *Life After Life*, revise both that text and *The Last Laugh* into a truly integrated representation of what he perceives his work to be, and publish something that I can give to my first-year writing students or recommend to friends and fellow travelers from all walks of life. Moody himself, his readers, and the community of scholars who care deeply about near-death experiences deserve nothing less.

References

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