

BOOK REVIEW

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Near-Death Experiences in Antiquity, by Jenó Platthy. Santa Claus, IN: Federation of International Poetry Associations of UNESCO, 1992. 159 pp, \$28.00 pb.

Jenó Platthy, the Executive Director of the Federation of International Poetry Associations of UNESCO, he has written 27 poetry volumes and 22 prose nonfiction works, six of them in Japanese. Their content ranges from the effect of the 1956 Hungarian uprising on Asian nations to critical biographies of Plato, Ch'u Yuan, and Béla Bartók. In *Near-Death Experiences in Antiquity*, this prolific and multifaceted author provides his own English translations of individual passages from ancient authors describing the phenomena we now call near-death experiences (NDEs), as well as references highlighting the role of the soul in ancient thought and the definition and use of that term in ancient NDE accounts.

Platthy includes in this book mythological parallels and literary accounts as well as historical cases. He argues that neither modern near-death research nor medieval accounts of otherworld journeys as researched by Carol Zaleski (1987) are understandable without the perspective of this earlier literature. The soul's torture after death, for example, a common theme of medieval Christian apologists, was presaged by Pythagoras's account of his own visit to Hades.

Platthy retells the stories of 25 mythological visitors to the Underworld, in most cases summarizing and integrating several divergent accounts of each myth. Some of these stores are quite familiar to most Westerners through various dramatic recountings over the

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past 2000 years; he devotes, for example, 18 pages to the story of Orpheus's journey to Hades. Many of these stories, however, are virtually unknown accounts drawn from obscure sources.

Platthy devotes 6 pages to a retelling of Plato's mythological account of Er and another 18 pages to a commentary on this famous NDE, which Raymond Moody (1975) included in the first book on NDEs. In fact, it was Platthy's encounter with the story of Er, while he was researching his biography of Plato, that sparked his interest in classical near-death visions. Platthy's intriguing commentary traces Oriental influences on Plato's account of Er, particularly the Zoroastrian parallels. He devotes another 10 pages to Plutarch's account, thought to be historical rather than mythological, of the near-death visions of Thespesius and of Timarchus.

Some of these ancient NDE accounts are quite remarkable. Platthy relates the case, recorded by Proclus, of Cleonymus of Athens, who in his NDE encountered Lysias of Syracuse, also having an NDE. After their recovery, Lysias happened to visit Athens, whereupon Cleonymus recognized him from their shared near-death vision. Platthy includes another case, recorded by Aristotle, of a Greek king who returned from his NDE making many accurate predictions about an earthquake, a flood, and the lifespans of his acquaintances.

Platthy also relates two striking accounts recorded by Pliny. In the first on these, Hermotimus of Clazomenae repeatedly left his body to roam abroad and upon returning accurately described events occurring in distant lands. In the second, Corfidius had a veridical "Peak in Darien" vision in his NDE: Corfidius not only encountered in his NDE his deceased brother *before anyone knew that his brother had passed away*, but also returned with accurate information as to where that brother had secretly buried some gold. One culture-bound feature characteristic of these ancient Greek accounts, rarely seen in contemporary NDEs, is that experiencers were usually "selected to undergo" the experience and return to the living as "messengers."

Platthy tells us that Plutarch, himself a priest at Delphi, saw the Eleusinian mystery as a death rehearsal, a theme echoed by Kenneth Ring (1984, 1987) and Michael Grosso (1984). Platthy's description of the afterlife journey—or of the Eleusinian rite—parallels the bardic sequence of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Evans-Wentz, 1957): "loitering" and aimless wandering; traversing the darkness; facing terrors, amazed by fright; then encountering a marvelous light and meadows; followed by initiation and conversation with pure wise men. Platthy himself describes the purpose of the Greek mystery

rites as cleansing the soul of its accretions, which needs to be done periodically, much as one needs to change the oil in one's car from time to time.

Platthy's discussion of these ancient Greek NDEs explores both later Western parallels and Eastern influences from China, India, and Egypt. He provides an extensive exegesis of the "daimon" that serves as a guide to the individual soul on its otherworld journey. In a final section on skeptics, he summarizes science's problem with the concept of the soul: he notes that scientists expect to exert control over whatever they study, and consequently are apt to deny the existence of things like souls over which they can't exercise control. He alludes to modern scientific studies of weight loss at the point of death, but argues ultimately that the NDE and its aftereffects are in themselves *prima facie* evidence of survival.

Many of Platthy's conclusions will be congenial to NDErs: for example, that it is easy to slip back to life from death once the secret is known, and that that secret is love; and that reality is much wider and infinitely more complex than experiences on earth would lead us to believe. He notes that we can have no rational proof of the immortality of the soul because the door to the otherworld does not open through logic or rational senses, but rather through parables, mythical tales, and visions, which, while they may be enlightening, cannot provide rational evidence of anything. Platthy notes that the older texts support postmortem survival not of the individual personality, but only of the soul that partakes in, and becomes identical with, divinity.

Platthy argues that modern near-death research is not fully understandable without comprehension of its classical roots. For those interested in pursuing those roots—and Platthy argues that that should include all of us—this book is a definitive encyclopedic resource. This is an extremely impressive collection of NDEs from the ancient literature, and Platthy has comprehensively documented various primary sources and secondary annotations and interpretations. The text is laden not only with classical references, but also with scholarly etymological asides that form the basis of many of Platthy's conclusions and speculations.

This is not an easy book to read, however; I found many of the references abstruse and some of Platthy's arguments quite intricate, often assuming the considerable familiarity with classical sources. Furthermore, English not being Platthy's native tongue, he occasionally uses the wrong word (for example, *deduct* when he means *de-*

duce), and his syntax is at times unnecessarily convoluted, as illustrated in his explanation of the relationship of the soul to its individual daimon (p. 117):

The finite number of souls (*Rep.* X 611 A, *Laws* X 904 AB), especially each soul with the daimon, that is a finite number of souls with a finite number of daimons in comparison with forms or 'ideas,' that is classes of things, related to the daimons in a way, posed the problem of participation (*methexis*) which, in Aristotle's words, only changed the name of the Pythagorean representation of numbers by which things exist, into participation (*Arist. Metaph.* VI 987b 9 sqq.).

Classical scholars, however, will find this a treasure trove of near-death references. In addition to the ancient sources referenced in the text and tabulated in a 7-page index, Platthy includes a bibliography of 91 more recent texts, almost all of which will be new to most readers of this Journal.

References

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