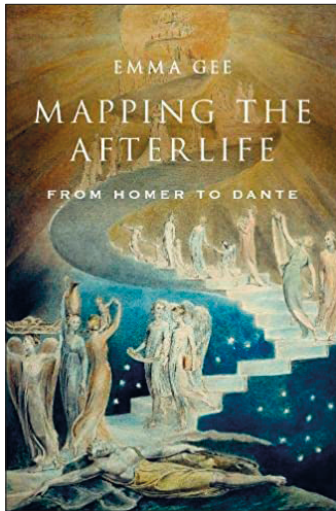


MAPPING THE AFTERLIFE



GEE, EMMA (2020). *Mapping the Afterlife. From Homer to Dante*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 348 pp., 80 € [ISBN: 978-0-1906-7048-1].

MARK F. McCLAY
HILLSDALE COLLEGE
mmclay@hillsdalle.edu

LANDSCAPES OF THE UNDERWORLD, THOUGH IMAGINARY, also stand in definite relation to the real world of the living. This principle – simple in itself, complex in its manifestations – lies at the heart of Emma Gee’s fascinating and imaginative *Mapping the Afterlife. From Homer to Dante*, handsomely produced by Oxford University Press. The book’s title understates its scope and ambition. This is not a conventional study in Classical reception, nor is it exclusively or even primarily focused on poetic tradition. Instead, Gee’s argument traces interactions in ancient thought between portrayals of the afterlife and changing models of the cosmos and natural world (what Gee terms “science”, always in inverted commas).

This interrelation involves a tension between “journey” and “vision”, between the soul’s postmortem itinerary on the one hand and the panoramic overview of the world on the other. In afterlife narratives, the soul’s journey is usually described by means of traditional eschatological images, while the overall vision is accommodated to a “scientific” understanding of the world. Underlying this tension between journey and vision is the imperative to bring the soul into alignment with the cosmos – what Gee, borrowing Jungian psychoanalytic vocabulary, calls “psychic harmonization”. Homer and Dante mark the book’s chronological limits, but its argument incorporates geographers, mapmakers, philosophical writers, and musical theorists as prominently as poets. The collocation of sources not usually studied together repeatedly yields unexpected insights and is one of the book’s signal strengths.

The first set of chapters (1-3) explore the journey-vision paradigm in several ancient sources. Gee begins with Herakles in the Homeric underworld (Chapter 1): in Gee’s argument, the hero’s bilocation as an image (*eidolon*) in Hades and a self (*autos*) among the gods reflects an incorporation of individual afterlife into a multi-tiered vision of the cosmos.¹ Here, as elsewhere, Gee is rightly skeptical of *Quellenforschung* as a means of resolving inconsistencies in ancient afterlife representations. The next chapter (2) discusses underworld space as portrayed in Vergil’s *Aeneid*, Polygnotus’ painting at Delphi (known via Pausanias), and Apulian vases: as Gee demonstrates, these imaginary landscapes use forms of spatial organization similar to those found in geographical writers (Strabo, Pomponius Mela) and even maps (notably the medieval *Tabula Peutingeriana*). Chapter 3 examines the shift from a Homeric model of the cosmos, which imagined the world as a multi-layered disc surrounded by the river of Ocean, to the spherical Earth, which was divided into zones. These cosmic models have implications for afterlife imagery, and different authors and mapmakers seek to locate Hades in the spherical world. Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae* interestingly combines features from both the stratified (poetic) and spherical (scientific) models.

The next two chapters (4-5) explore eschatological applications of two different cosmic models. The fourth chapter stands as the intellectual core of the book. Here Gee undertakes to cut a Gordian knot of scholarly debate relating to the afterlife in *Aeneid* 6. In a final synoptic overview of the underworld, the Vergilian narrator describes it as a “wide plains of air” (*aeris in campis latis*): this line has prompted many explanations, including Eduard Norden’s conjecture of “Orphic” influence (1926). Gee instead posits the creation of the human soul by the Demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus*, in which souls have a celestial origin, as a previously unrecognized background ele-

1. *Od.* XI 601-604.

ment for this and other passages in *Aeneid* 6. This move, which at first seems only to replace one *Quellenforschung* argument with another, assigns the *Timaeus* a key role in several ancient and medieval afterlife portrayals, including their cosmological aspects. The dialogue will reappear like an *idée fixe* in subsequent chapters. As Gee also shows, Dante's *Paradiso* adapts the Platonic descent-from-the-stars theme: within a Christian cosmology, however, the poet must stress that this is a metaphor rather than literal truth.² (Gee shows a healthy skepticism in this chapter toward constructions of "Orphism" that have long informed discussions of ancient eschatology: one wishes similar caution had been applied in other areas of her argument, especially in Chapters 1 and 7).

Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis* takes center stage in Chapter 5. Here again Gee observes ways in which the afterlife scheme of Plato's *Republic* has been accommodated to fit two cosmological ideas: the multi-zone spherical earth and the harmony of the spheres. On both these points, Gee observes that Cicero's departures from Plato reflect a different "scientific" understanding of the cosmos. Gee argues that the harmony of the spheres in the Platonic Myth of Er are understood as producing a chord-like blend of pitches rather than degrees of a scale (a contrarian claim carried further in Chapter 6).

The halfway point is marked by a chapter titled "Intermezzo" (The book is suffused with charming musical allusions, of which this section's title is the most prominent). Here Gee considers the tendency of ancient and medieval "scientific" models of the cosmos toward expansion, both temporal and spatial, in search of new principles of order. Thus models of the sun, stars, and planets begin with reckoning time by the solar year (the sun's movement between the tropics), then turn to the lunisolar year (the return of sun and moon together to the same position) and the "Great Year" (the time taken for all planets to return to their same positions), in which the "irregular" movements of the planets are reinterpreted as a principle of regularity. Then comes the precessional year, prompted by Hipparchus's discovery of the "fixed" stars' gradual rotation (about one degree per century). Dante, finally, imagines both a ninth sphere of the Prime Mover beyond the fixed stars (which he attributes to Ptolemy) and a tenth unmoving sphere of the Empyrean Heaven beyond that.³ Across all these developments, an "outer skin of order" (p. 186) is imposed on each new "scientific" understanding of the cosmos. Such developments also expand the territory available to the soul in afterlife imagery.

2. *Aen.* VI 887; *Tim.* 41d8-42b5. Cf. Dante, *Par.* IV 49-63.

3. *Convivio* II 3, 7-8.

The final sections are devoted to Plato's afterlife myths (Chapters 6-8) and the incorporation of the afterlife into astronomical models (Chapters 9-10). Chapter 6 turns again to the *Timaeus*, this time conjecturing that its musical construction of the world soul alludes to the harmonic overtone series, or the acoustic property of vibrating bodies to produce a sequence of pitches above their base tone at intervals corresponding to whole-number ratios of 1:2, 2:3, etc. The phenomenon of overtones, first scientifically understood in modern times, was likely known in some form to ancient musicians.⁴ Gee's speculative reading of the *Timaeus* provides basis for a further reinterpretation of the *Republic's* afterlife myth as a cosmic model for the right ordering of the soul (This interpretation, it should be noted, assumes that the pitch intervals in the *Timaeus* are calculated from the bottom up, as in Western music, rather than the usual Greek habit of reckoning from the highest pitch downward).

The analyses of afterlife myths in Plato's *Phaedrus* (Chapter 7) and *Phaedo* (Chapter 8) count, respectively, as possibly its weakest and strongest chapters. While Gee rightly observes that the eschatological myth of the *Phaedrus* presupposes a spherical and cyclical cosmos, her overall reading of the dialogue is unconvincing on several counts. The interpretation of the narrative frame (Socrates and Phaedrus meeting outside the Athenian city walls) as a *katabasis* or underworld descent is tenuous at best, and much of her argument rests on superficial and unpersuasive parallels with the Orphic-Bacchic gold tablets. Gee's explication of the *Phaedo*, however, ranks among the most compelling in the book. The True Earth is a perfect synthesis of a "scientific" spherical cosmos with traditional eschatology: Plato situates the "ideal" Earth on an upper layer far above the terrestrial surfaces inhabited by mortals; meanwhile Tartarus is relocated to a cavity of the spherical world and the underworld rivers are reimagined as channels through the Earth's interior.⁵ Gee also focuses on the variegated coloring of the True Earth. Though the dialogue uses Anaxagoras as its explicit foil for Socratic/Platonic philosophy, here Gee finds the fingerprints of a different Presocratic: Empedocles, especially his description of a painter mixing colors. Empedocles uses this metaphor to illustrate the mixture of the four elements; for Socrates, the same image serves as an analogy for the wholeness of the True Earth, in which a variety of colors are blended into a unity. The True Earth also has bodily properties, including respiration: on this point Gee again detects Empedoclean influence.⁶

4. *Tim.* 35b-36b; see Arist., *Prob.* XI 6, 899a; XIX 8, 918a; *de Aud.* 803b-804a.

5. *Phd.* 111e-112a (Tartarus); 112e-113c (rivers).

6. *Phd.* 110b-111a (coloring); 112b-c (respiration); cf. Empedocles fr. 31 B23.1-8; 31 B100 DK.

The final section (Chapters 9-10) turns to Platonic afterlife images as developed in Plutarch and Dante. Chapter 9 brilliantly interprets Plutarch's *On the Face in the Moon* as a transposition of Plato's True Earth into a different three-tiered cosmic model. In Plutarch's adaptation, the ideal version of Earth is relocated on the Moon; Earth becomes Tartarus; Hades is the region between Earth and Moon. The parts of the cosmos also become identified with aspects of the human self: body (Earth), soul (Moon), and mind (Sun). Plutarch offers perhaps the most explicit case of "psychic harmonization" among the ancient sources discussed in the book. The final chapter (10) turns to Dante's *Paradiso* and its engagement with Platonic tradition (adumbrated in Chapter 4). Gee focuses on the senses, especially sight and sound: in the vision of paradise, the senses are blended and frequently fail to grasp the true nature of the created order. This failure is most dramatic when Dante flips the classical cosmos and its concentric spheres inside out: this is an extra-sensory image, impossible to visualize, and accessible only in abstraction. As in Plato, the senses point to a reality that is ultimately beyond sensory perception; in Dante's cosmos, however, this Platonist tendency toward the ideal is tempered by Christian theological considerations, as "transhuman" transcendence of sensation is impossible.⁷

The book's cross-disciplinary scope is a great asset, and it will offer readers an invaluable orientation to unfamiliar texts and questions. This same breadth is also the volume's greatest liability, as it will be difficult to please academic specialists across such a range of subject areas. Noticeable to this reviewer is Gee's uneven engagement with recent debates about "Orphism" – important to any treatment of ancient eschatology – which weakens her argument at several points (noted above). The book's overall framing also hangs somewhat askew. As a foil to her argument, Gee places excessive weight on the venerable but outdated work of Erwin Rohde while giving less than full attention to current narrative-focused approaches to afterlife traditions.⁸ While an exhaustive bibliography should not be expected in a study of such breadth, certain omissions are surprising. The book's final chapter, describing the afterlife's multi-sensory character in Plato and Dante, oddly asserts that there is "no language that can express the intersection of the senses – for that we'd have to invent a whole new set of sensory terminology" (p. 315): this overlooks research in ancient aesthetics on precisely this question.⁹

7. *Par.* XXVII 46-51; cf. *Par.* I 70-1.

8. Rohde, 1890-1894. For an instance of the narrative approach, see Edmonds, 2004, which Gee only cursorily acknowledges on p. 9.

9. See esp. Porter, 2010 and Butler & Purves, 2013.

Such blemishes, however, should not eclipse the work's larger merits. It is an intellectual achievement of a high order, developing important and original arguments that will merit serious attention across several subfields of Classics, Religious Studies, and the History of Science. Though the book assumes familiarity with some ancient sources (especially Plato's *Republic* and *Phaedo*), most primary texts are quoted at length, making the book accessible to a wide readership. Even if one is reluctant to accept the claim that harmonization is a cross-cultural "psychological constant" (p. 5), this interpretive lens proves insightful for analysis of ancient (or medieval, or modern) eschatology. The book itself, whether by design or not, seems to instantiate its own journey-vision paradigm. The reader is brought in linear fashion through successive *tableaux* of the imaginary world beyond death: but what gradually comes into focus is a synoptic vision of the relation between soul and cosmos. For those who attempt the underworld journey, Gee is a worthy successor to the Sibyl. At each station, her guidance is sure to illumine, provoke, and invite us to seek further.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Butler, Shane & Purves, Alex (eds.) (2013). *Synaesthesia and the Ancient Senses*. Abingdon & New York: Routledge.
- Edmonds, Radcliffe (2004). *Myths of the Underworld Journey. Plato, Aristophanes, and the "Orphic" Gold Tablets*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Norden, Eduard (1926). *P. Vergilius Maro, Aeneis Buch VI*. Leipzig: Teubner (3rd ed.).
- Porter, James (2010). *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece. Matter, Sensation, and Experience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Rohde, Erwin (1890-1894). *Psyche. Seelencult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*. Freiburg: J.C.B. Mohr.