

# Figures de sages, figures de philosophes dans l'œuvre de Plutarque

Delfim Leão & Olivier Guerrier (eds.)

## A ROAD TO WISDOM: THE CASE OF REVENANTS IN PLUTARCH

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the most enduring topics in ancient Greek religion, as well as in modern culture, is that of death. However, the testimonies of those who claimed to have crossed the threshold of the afterlife and come back are few and far between, despite scholarly efforts to collate them by J.Z. Smith (2005), D.Ø. Endsjø (2009), M. Lacore (2009), and more recently J. Granger Cook (2016). Moreover, information regarding how this experience changed the lives of the revenants is very scarce. In this regard, Plutarch is one of the best authors of the Imperial ages for preserving well known testimonies - like those of Thespesius and Timarchus - and others not so well known, like that of Antyllus. Therefore, the following pages will try to deal with the topic of alleged near-death experiences in Antiquity, firstly by analysing all Plutarch's background and texts on the subject, and secondly by contextualizing Plutarch's sources within other works of his era.

**KEYWORDS:** Plutarch, near-death experiences, revenants

### I. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Near-death experiences have nowadays become like a low-cost journey to the Moon; a somewhat appropriate metaphor when dealing with Plutarch. As early as 1975, Raymond Moody demonstrated that a diverse range of people, independently of culture, race, or age, could, in the “final” moments of their lives - prior to coming back -, experience a curiously similar panorama to that which supposedly waits for all of us in the afterlife<sup>2</sup>. However, it seems that nowadays there is no need for such a trauma as being close to death, at least if we follow the thesis of Rick Strassman, who observes that this ‘travel to the Moon’ is now so cheap to obtain that it only requires a mere taste of the so-called ‘spirit molecule’, Dimethyltryptamine or DMT, to enjoy a lysergic disembodied travel to the other world - with a guaranteed return ticket<sup>3</sup>.

Given the abundance of recompiled data during the last three decades, it is indeed impossible for academia not to have paid attention to the supposed

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my deepest sympathies to François Frazier's relatives and friends. I am very thankful for her generous friendship.

<sup>2</sup> See R.A. MOODY, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> See R. Strassman, *DMT: The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*, Rochester, Vermont, 2001; also *Id.*, *DMT and the Soul of Prophecy: A New Science of Spiritual Revelation in the Hebrew Bible*, Rochester, Vermont, 2014.

testimonies of near-death experiences (NDE) preserved in Greek literature. The Dutch scholar Jan Bremmer was the first to get the ball rolling by dealing with this issue in his chapter “Near-Death Experiences: Ancient, Medieval and Modern”<sup>4</sup>, in which he compared, from a philological point of view, the texts of Plato, Clearchus, Plutarch’s Thespesius, Naumachus of Epirus, and Augustine, with those collected by Raymond Moody<sup>5</sup>. His conclusions, however, found important contradictions and absences in both sources, which, in his opinion, could be easily explained by the literary character of the ancient testimonies, especially the cases of Er and Thespesius<sup>6</sup>. It was only a matter of time before another researcher, Marinus van der Sluijs, cast serious doubt on Bremmer’s conclusions, which he did seven years later by taking into account not only the aforementioned stories, but also that of Timarchus and a wider compilation of modern near-death experiences<sup>7</sup>. His arguments astonish the reader, because he not only attempts to take Bremmer’s thesis apart and convincingly state that both corpora share “criteria<sup>8</sup> sufficient to qualify as credible examples of ancient NDEs,”<sup>9</sup> but he also affirms as follows:

It is hardly conceivable that someone who has not personally gone through an NDE could have conjured up such a strikingly typical account, using fancy, imagination, or literary input alone<sup>10</sup>.

In van der Sluijs’s view, as far as Plato and Plutarch’s texts are concerned, there can be no other explanation for them except that either his authors had themselves experienced a non-documented near-death experience, or someone else had told them of theirs.

In the following pages, however, we do not want to deal again with a comparison of the details offered by both travellers to the Classical afterlife and near-death experiences in the present day, but to analyse this transit, whatever its nature may be, as a road to wisdom that supposedly leaves marks on the individual – so-called “spiritually transformative experiences”<sup>11</sup>. Is there any

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<sup>4</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, pp. 87-102.

<sup>5</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 90.

<sup>6</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 94.

<sup>7</sup> M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, 226. On the same issue, see K. RING, 1984, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, p. 227.

<sup>9</sup> M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, p. 251.

<sup>10</sup> M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, p. 239.

<sup>11</sup> See J. Miner Holden, 2012, pp. 65-66. M. van der Sluijs, 2009, pp. 237-238, argues roundly that “the drastic changes this experience effected on Thespesius’s life bring to mind the typically life-altering nature of modern NDEs”; similarly, J.N. Bremmer, 2002, p. 102: “As with some medieval reports, there is often a marked change to the previous life. The ‘nearly-dead’ display more concern for others, have a strengthened belief in the afterlife, and regularly become more religious”.

common purpose shared by travellers to the great beyond? What are the vital changes produced by these journeys? And, more importantly, are there similar characteristics that can be traced back to Greek sources? It may be that, after analysing these and further issues, we will be able to decide on whether to adopt Bremmer's or Van der Sluijs's position.

## 2. MEDIEVAL AND MODERN NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES

There is no doubt that an experience such as a journey to the afterlife ought to make indelible changes in the behaviour of the individuals who undertake it. According to the diverse and numerous corpora of near-death experiences – primarily those collated by Noyes & Kletti<sup>12</sup> and Bruce Greyson & Charles P. Flynn<sup>13</sup> – we can observe certain tendencies, such as the patients' difficulties in coming back to their former lives and admissions that they felt alienated<sup>14</sup>, and the necessity of divulging this knowledge to the people<sup>15</sup> despite the inherent ineffability of the message<sup>16</sup>. In my opinion, three main tendencies stand out<sup>17</sup>:

- First, regarding the senses, a good number of near-death experiencers testify to a state of hypersensitivity to the world around them, even including the inner feelings of other people<sup>18</sup>.

- Second, some claim to have acquired “new-found psychic powers”, such as “telepathy, precognitive insights, out-of-body sensations, and *deja vu* episodes”<sup>19</sup>. These marks of the journey, to which Zaleski refers as the motif

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<sup>12</sup> R. NOYES, JR. – R. KLETTI, “Depersonalization in the Face of Life-Threatening Danger: an Interpretation”, *Omega* 7 (2) (1976) 103-114; “Panoramic Memory: a Response to the Threat of Death”, *Omega* 8 (1977) 181-184.

<sup>13</sup> B. GREYSON – CH. P. FLYNN (eds.), *The Near-Death Experience. Problems, Prospects, Perspectives*, Springfield, Ill., 1984.

<sup>14</sup> J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, pp. 67, 70. C. ZALESKI, 1987, pp. 140-2, curiously, quotes the testimony in clear Platonic language of a woman who, forty-seven years after an episode in which she was nearly frozen to death, can still hear “music, not of this world but from unseen stars” at p. 141.

<sup>15</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, pp. 139, 147-8.

<sup>16</sup> M.N. MARSH, 2010, p. 14.

<sup>17</sup> J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, p. 75. At pp. 70-75, the researcher offers a complete classification of the NDEs' after effects under the labels of “biological”, “psychological”, “spiritual”, and “social aftereffects”. B. GREYSON, 2014, pp. 307-308, assimilates near-death and mystical experiences due to their transformative potential in the experienter.

<sup>18</sup> J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, p. 67. C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 142; Helen Nelson admits, for instance, as follows: “I didn't just see the sun shining. I saw the sun actually burning!” other medieval traveller accounts collected by Zaleski follow the same pattern, such as: “Edmund weeps continually, Gottschalk has no taste for food or business affairs, Orm is speechless, Alberic fails to recognize his mother”, at p. 141.

<sup>19</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 141; K. RING, *Precognitive and Prophetic Visions in Near-Death Experiences*, New York, 1982, p. 49. See also, J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, pp. 68, 73.

of the “pilgrim’s badge” in medieval literature, range from the emotional – the individual does not laugh<sup>20</sup>, suffers a temporary blindness, or loses his memory – to others hardly accepted by science, such as immunity to fire, the healing of old injuries or the apparition of new bites and scars, brought back like souvenirs from the beyond<sup>21</sup>.

- Third, almost all researchers have compiled a good number of testimonies and have even analysed the statistical data on patients that, after the experience, feel themselves to have been affected in a subjectively positive manner, with a higher interest in life itself and a lesser interest in the material<sup>22</sup>; as well as self-confidence, humility, independence, solidarity, tolerance and compassion. To sum up, they feel themselves revitalised<sup>23</sup>, in the words of Noyes, by this alloy of emotions: “(1) a reduced fear of death; (2) a sense of relative invulnerability; (3) a feeling of special importance or destiny; (4) a belief in having received the special favour of God or Fate; and (5) a strengthened belief in continued existence”<sup>24</sup>.

This last aspect is that which I consider the most interesting for our purposes, as it is linked in near-death literature with a tendency to conversion, even if on this point there is no prevalence of one religious doctrine over another<sup>25</sup>. Actually, through the allegedly empirical evidence of the hereafter’s existence, the survivors of the journey testify to the acquisition of a sort of practical wisdom, that of not feeling a fear of death<sup>26</sup>. Consequently, they admit to living more

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<sup>20</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 78.

<sup>21</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 78-9. J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, pp. 73-74.

<sup>22</sup> M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, p. 226; *pace* J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 94. Also, C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 77 refers to other experiences like that of Drythelm, who attests: “from now on I must live not according to my old habits, but in a much different manner”. See also K. RING, 1984, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Even some psychologists have often commented on the orienting, reintegrating, or initiatory potential of the passage through mental illness; C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 145, n. 39.

<sup>24</sup> See R. NOYES, “Attitude Change Following Near-Death Experiences”, *Psychiatry*, 43.3 (1980) p. 235; C. ZALESKI, 1987, pp. 143-4. R.A. MOODY, 1975, p. 23, describes these feelings as follows: “Later he tries to tell others, but he has trouble doing so. In the first place, he can find no human words adequate to describe these unearthly episodes. He also finds that others scoff, so he stops telling other people. Still, the experience affects his life profoundly, especially his views about death and its relationship to life”. See also J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, p. 72.

<sup>25</sup> This is one of the primary elements highlighted by M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, p. 227; J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 102; A.F. SEGAL, 2004, p. 245. See also K. RING, 1984, pp. 8 and 14; M.N. MARSH, 2010, p. 20; J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 143, resumes: “having died he knows that death is not painful, and having crossed the threshold he knows ‘beyond a shadow of a doubt’ that life will continue”. K. RING, 1984, pp. 8 and 15. At p. 8 the author quotes the following testimony of one of his patients: “But you’re just engulfed by it and you begin to know a lot of things. I remember I knew that everything, everywhere in the universe was OK, that the plan was perfect”. See also J. MINER HOLDEN, 2012, p. 67.

thoroughly in the present, without guilt or concerns<sup>27</sup>, also making sure that their experiences serve for the good of other human beings<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. CLASSICAL NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCES: PLATO AND PLUTARCH

However, if we now turn our attention to the roots of this motif in Greek literature, in so far as it has been preserved – such as the well-known myth of the Pamphylian Er at the end of Plato’s *The Republic* – it can be observed that in this regard the Athenian philosopher was more interested in making his description an *exemplum* of his theodicy and an “ultimate vindication of justice”<sup>29</sup>, than in giving information about the traveller<sup>30</sup>. Here, with the exception of some details concerning the intact body and its resurrection (ἀνεβίω) at midnight of the eleventh day<sup>31</sup>, Plato does not report on much more: “yet how and in what way he returned to the body he said he did not know, but suddenly recovering his sight he saw himself at dawn lying on the funeral pyre”<sup>32</sup>. Moreover, Er’s account does not specify any conversion or change from a previous state and retains only one of our identified criteria at this stage of the near-death experience, to wit, the will to communicate his experience to people in order to provide a road to salvation (οὕτως... μῦθος ἐσώθη... καὶ ἡμᾶς ἂν σώσειεν)<sup>33</sup>.

Quite the opposite happens in Plutarch’s texts<sup>34</sup>. Certainly the myths of Thespesius and Timarchus allow the Quaeronean to prove survival after death

<sup>27</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, pp. 145-147.

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, the words of J.T. reported by K. RING, 1984, p. 10: “It was then communicated to me that the aim in my life was to bring the Love that Jesus, Buddha, Ramana Maharshi, etc., spoke of, into actuality in my life; to strive for it, to experience it to the best of my ability. That was to be shared – the knowledge and the Love that was gathered – with the peoples of the world”.

<sup>29</sup> A.F. SEGAL, 2004, p. 207; B.S. HALLIWELL, 2006, pp. 445-446. C. ZALESKI, 1987, pp. 19-20. About the sources of beliefs regarding the immortal soul in Pherecydes of Syrus, Pythagoras, and Orphicism, see D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, pp. 107-108.

<sup>30</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, 90, states that “the incredible, dramatic details of Er’s survival surely should read as a warning to the reader of the fictional character of the account, not as an attempt to provide an eye witness report”. At least, his name seems to point to the East; J. ADAM, 2009, 434; B.S. HALLIWELL, 2006, 448, n. 6.

<sup>31</sup> Pl., R. 614b. J. ADAM, 2009, p. 434.

<sup>32</sup> Pl., R. 621b. Trad. by P. SHOREY, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*, VI: *The Republic*, II, Cambridge, Mass., 1987. The ex-consul Aviola and the ex-praetor Lucius Lamia were less lucky, following Plin., *NH* VII 52, who came alive when their pyres were already on fire.

<sup>33</sup> See D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, p. 51. Also Corfidius, and others in Plin., *NH* VII 52. See also M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, p. 232.

<sup>34</sup> It must be highlighted that there was a fruitful mythical tradition of resuscitating mythological figures in Delphi, which presumably Plutarch would have known of. Thence, Pherecydes, *FGrH* 3 F 35b, attests that Asclepius reanimated those who had died in Delphi; Zenobius the sophist and *Suidas* refer to how the Delphians were commanded by the gods to resuscitate Aesop after he was assassinated; Zenobius, *Epit.* 1.47; Ael. Frag. 203 Hercher = Suda A § 1806. See also, J.G. COOK, 2016, pp. 202-203. Likewise, about the Plutarch’s well-known treatment of the myth of Isis and Osiris in his *De Iside*, see J.G. COOK, 2016, pp. 206-207.

and, as a result, his own theodicy: in his words, “It is one and the same argument (...) that establishes both the providence of God and the survival of the human soul”<sup>35</sup>. Nevertheless, Plutarch innovates by adding further information about the background and consequences of the journey. On the one hand, the Quaeronean sketches a framework that, if it cannot be considered historical, at least seems logical in the context of the tractate<sup>36</sup>. On the other hand, the story is used to offer a practical example of Plutarch’s ethical or moral rules of conduct.

In this sense, Thespesius of Soli, after being presented as a friend of one of the interlocutors in another tractate from *Moralia*<sup>37</sup>, is shown to be a knave (πονηρός) looking to retrieve his lost riches, but morally irredeemable: “he accumulated no very considerable fortune, but in a brief space a prodigious reputation for knavery”. However, in this moment the Oracle of Amphilocheus<sup>38</sup> advises him that he will become better after death<sup>39</sup>.

As is known, Thespesius apparently dies by falling from a height and striking his neck. After his resurrection (ἀνήνεγκεν) three days later, Plutarch explains that “soon recovering his strength and senses, he instituted a change in his way of life that could hardly be believed; for the Cilicians knew of no one in those times more honest in his engagements, more pious toward heaven, or more grievous to his enemies and faithful to his friends”<sup>40</sup>. Additionally, Thespesius’s travel to the beyond serves as a guide to his fellows, as does Er’s<sup>41</sup>.

The background of Timarchus does not fit the aforementioned examples, sharing no similarities with either the account of Er, or the conversion story of Thespesius. However there is no lack of pseudo-historical detail and references to the infallibility of oracles. Nonetheless, Plutarch tells through Simmias’s voice the story of a friend of Socrates’s son, Lamprocles, who had enjoyed an extra-corporeal experience<sup>42</sup>. There is no immoral past leading Timarchus to the near-death experience, but only his desire to know the specific nature of Socrates’s

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<sup>35</sup> Plu., *De sera* 560f. Trad. by PH.H. DE LACY -B. EINARSON, *Plutarch. Moralia*, vol. II, Cambridge, Mass., 1959. See also R. GAGNÉ, 2015, p. 315.

<sup>36</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, 94.

<sup>37</sup> Protogenes of Tarsus, cf. Plu., *Amat.* 750a and *Quaest. Conviv.* 698d.

<sup>38</sup> See also Plu., *Def. orac.* 434d.

<sup>39</sup> Plu., *De sera* 563d.

<sup>40</sup> Plu., *De sera* 563d-e. Plutarch seems more explicit at the beginning than at the end of the story, which ends laconically as follows: “he was... cast in a strong and violent gust of wind upon his body, opening his eyes again almost from his very grave” at 568. See also M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, pp. 237-238; J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 94. Interestingly, R. GAGNÉ, 2015, p. 322, defines Thespesius’s story of conversion as a “paradigme de la παιδεία”. Another typical story of conversion is that of Drythelm, documented as early as the Middle Ages, by Bede. See also J.N. BREMMER, 2002, pp. 97-99.

<sup>41</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 91.

<sup>42</sup> R. AGUILAR, 1978, p. 243 n. 72, following PH.H. DE LACY-B. EINARSON, 459 n. c., points out that, according to the official story of Socrates, his sons were still alive when the Athenian took the hemlock.

demon<sup>43</sup>. To reach the demon, Timarchus goes to the crypt of Trophonius in Lebadeia, where, after performing the rituals of the oracle<sup>44</sup>, he suffers a stroke that allows his soul to ascend and make his journey to the hereafter during two nights and a day. Unlike the other travellers, Timarchus does not wake up in front of his own pyre, but “with a radiant countenance” (μάλα φαίδρòς) despite a headache, thankful to the gods and willing to share his knowledge with people, or at least to Cebes and Simmias<sup>45</sup>.

His destiny, however, is much worse than Thespesius’s, because, as the last voice prophesies to him, he dies two months later in Athens, which prevents Socrates from learning more about this curious experience<sup>46</sup>.

On a lighter, possibly satirical<sup>47</sup> note, the third near-death experience relayed by Plutarch is transmitted by the fragment 176 (Sandbach) found after the discussion of Er in Eusebius of Caesarea’s work<sup>48</sup>. The preserved fragment oddly expounds the context of the traveller’s background almost entirely without details of the journey itself.

Here, the Quaeronean introduces as witnesses two characters that also appear in his tractates, Sositeles and Heracleon, to recount the apparent death of Antyllus. Regarding Antyllus’s past, Plutarch highlights the incurable illness from which he suffers, which will ultimately be the cause of his near-death experience. In this brief journey the protagonist discovers that a shoemaker called Nicandas had bribed the officers of the Other World, in his own words, “to run away from his fate” – which surprises the reader, as it implies a failure in the well-constructed administration’s system in the Plutarch’s conception of the hereafter<sup>49</sup>. The return from the beyond, however, is meaningful, firstly because the Quaeronean attests the reliability of Antyllus’s story by confirming that until his last day he did not say or do anything insane after that. Secondly, Antyllus is an example of those travellers that bring back something tangible as a souvenir from the beyond, in this case the healing of his terrible illness and the confidence that he will not die by it. This could be an example of the “pilgrim’s badge” motif, so frequent in medieval and modern accounts of near-death experiences. Thirdly, the story ends in an ironic manner when the briber perishes by fever, whereas Antyllus is “restored to good health and (becomes) the kindest host to his friends”.

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<sup>43</sup> Plu., *De genio* 590a.

<sup>44</sup> Pausanias IX, 39, 5-14. About the relationship between ritual initiations and out-of-body experiences, see K. RING, 1984, pp. 18-19.

<sup>45</sup> Plu., *De genio* 590b.

<sup>46</sup> Plu., *De genio* 592e-f.

<sup>47</sup> Due to the similarities with the story of Lucian; see below.

<sup>48</sup> Fr. 176 Sandbach = Eus., *Praep. Ev.* XI 36,1. J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> This kind of mistake appears also in the story of the two Curmas; Augustine, *Taken for the Dead*, 12, 15. J.N. BREMMER, 2002, pp. 95-96.



#### 4. OTHER TESTIMONIES

If we now extrapolate these essential facts regarding the supposed near-death experiences in Plutarch's works and move on to other testimonies among the ancient Greek authors, the lack of uniformity emerges alongside some general tendencies between one description and another.

To begin with, as can be seen in the cases of Plutarch and Plato, it seems that the previous condition of the traveller is not deemed to be essential. The characters come from a diverse range of backgrounds and temperaments, such as warriors, quarrellers, young philosophers, sages, etc.<sup>50</sup>.

Regarding the cause of out-of-body experience, while Plutarch and Plato make a streak or illness an explicit requirement, other testimonies do not follow this rule. Thus, for instance, Proclus's *Commentary to the Republic of Plato* assures us that Clearchus convinced Aristotle that it was possible to get the same result "by striking the lad with a wand"<sup>51</sup>. Cleonymus of Athens enjoyed a near-death experience "as a consequence of a terrible fright" and unusually in his three-day journey in a typical Platonic model, he met one "heavenly comrade", Lysias of Syracuse, who visited Cleonymus in Athens when both their souls returned to their bodies; a similar story is recounted by the Platonist Cornelis Labeo<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, Pliny attests that Hermotimus of Clazomenae, Aristeas of Proconnesus and Epimenides of Cnossus could separate soul and body at will, as could the grandmother of Timon, who used to hibernate with no signs of life for two months every year in Cilicia, according to Aristotle's witness's testimony preserved by Plutarch<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>50</sup> J.N. BREMMER, 2002, pp. 88-9.

<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, this conversation supposedly inspired the Philosopher's tractate on *Sleep*; Proclus, *In Pl. R. Comm.* II, 122.22. Al-Kindy, *Codex Taimuriyye Falsafa*, 55 attributes to Aristotle to refer the story of a Greek king who also had this ability, as well as being capable of predicting the future. J.G. COOK, 2016, pp. 212-213, considers that these stories "are neither ghost stories nor death experiences", but "cases in which remains of a person's life/soul remained hidden in their bodies". See also M. VAN DER SLUIJS, 2009, pp. 244-245.

<sup>52</sup> Proclus, *In Pl. R. Comm.* II, 114.3. J.N. BREMMER, 2002, pp. 92-3. About the Neo-Platonist Cornelis Labeo, J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 95, explains that "two men had died on the same day and met at a sort of crossroads; then they were ordered to return to their bodies. They made a pact that they would be friends in the future, and so it happened until they died". It is also supposed that Aristotle was convinced by Cleonymus of Athens that the separation between body and soul could happen during sleep; Proclus, *In Pl. R. Comm.* II, 122.22. About this motif, previously found in Homer, see M. LACORE, 2010, pp. 205-227, esp. 213. It is likewise a motif in the Greek novel so-called "ἐγχειρομένης ἐξ ὕπνου", Chariton, 1,8.2. See J.G. COOK, 2016, pp. 211-2. It has been well-traced back from Plutarch and the Greek epigraphy by M. GONZÁLEZ GONZÁLEZ, "Hypnos y Thánatos: la muerte como sueño en *Consolatio ad Apollonium*", in S. AMENDOLA, G. PACE and P. VOLPE CACCIATORE (eds.), *Immagini letterarie e iconografia nelle opera di Plutarco*, Madrid, 2017, 171-178.

<sup>53</sup> Plin., *NH* VII 52, who explains also that the women used to suffer this "by the distortion of the womb". See also A.F. SEGAL, 2004, pp. 205-206. About Origen's reaction against these

Furthermore, the duration of travel also does not seem to be a common element in these supposed near-death experiences; it oscillates from several days in most cases, to the six months that Philinion passed in a state of apparent death, or even the ninth months that Polycritus spent in Proclus' work<sup>54</sup>.

Meanwhile, it is very frequent in the reported stories to mention details of prophecies about the future, from which we observe clear similarities with other beings who are connected with the Other World such as deities, demons, and ghosts. In addition to the aforementioned examples by Plutarch, there is the clear example of the Aetolian leader Polycritus – transmitted by Naumachius of Epirus and Hieron of Ephesus through Proclus's commentary – who learned during his stay in the beyond what measures the General Assembly would take for winning the war; identically, Gabienus brought to Pompeius a message from the infernal deities confirming his battle plan<sup>55</sup>. Cicero, again supposedly referencing Aristotle, talks about the near-death experience of the Cyprian Eudemus<sup>56</sup>, who allegedly predicted the death of the tyrant Alexander. Also Lucian, in a report very close to that of Plutarch's Antyllus, in an openly satirical tone, makes reference to how Cleodemus, due to a fever, travelled to the hereafter where he acquired knowledge of the near death of his neighbour Demilus, and came back healed<sup>57</sup>.

Likewise, it does not seem necessary for the experiencer to reveal the learned message. As well as the example of Timarchus, who tells his story only to Simmias and Ceres, Eurynous, following Proclus, was ordered "to keep quiet" about the marvellous things that he saw in the beyond, and Protesilaus of Philostratus's *Heroicus* admitted to be "(hiding) some secret of the Fates"<sup>58</sup>. Other accounts do not share this detail, including the example of Rufus, the priest of the Thessalonians, who was resuscitated on the third day in order to perform some sacred ceremonies, dying soon after<sup>59</sup>; as well as Philinion, who

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stories, especially that of Aristeas, see D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, p. 103; B.S. HALLIWELL, 2006, p. 449. Moreover, it is almost a literary motif in the Corpus of Nag-Hammadi, the so-called *psychanodia*, where we can also trace some similarities with near death experiences. As well as Thespesius, Zostrianos (II-III CE), for instance, in a kind of intellectual crisis decides "to deliver himself to the wild beasts of the desert for a violent death", but the angel of knowledge appears to give him the desired answers to his questions; Zostrianos (NHC VIII, 1, 1-132, 9) 1-5. Also in *Poimandres* (CH) 1,1; 26-27.

<sup>54</sup> J.G. COOK, 2016, pp. 212-3.

<sup>55</sup> Plin., *NH* VII 52. For other examples in the context of war and politics, such as Bouplagus, see D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, pp. 51-52.

<sup>56</sup> Cic., *De div.* I.25,53.

<sup>57</sup> Luc., *Philops.* 25; two other stories collected by Lucian with clear similarities in 11 and 26. See G. COOK, 2016, p. 211.

<sup>58</sup> Philostr., *Her.* 58.2. J.G. COOK, 2016, p. 214. J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 94. D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, p. 51.

<sup>59</sup> Proclus, *In Pl. R. Comm.* II, 115.24.

came back to life in order to satisfy her desire to be with her lover Machates, “acting according to the will of the terrestrial daimons”<sup>60</sup>.

Finally, regarding changes of conduct, the texts do not so frequently make these explicit, unless they are changes towards a more moral behaviour. As an example of this, in addition to the case of Thespesius, Proclus mentions the near-death experience of Eurynous, who was revived after fifteen days and from then on “his conduct of life was more just after his revival than before”<sup>61</sup>.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, it seems safe to say that, according to the hypothesis of Ian Bremmer, all the texts taken into account as alleged testimonies of near-death experiences in the Greco-Roman antiquity are literary products, deeply worked, presenting important similarities, contradictions, and absences from one to the other<sup>62</sup>. In order to argue this, in addition to the evident literary value of the texts, it must be highlighted that the authors consider these stories as myths and not testimonies with evident moral purposes to the reader<sup>63</sup>, which could additionally explain the inserted chronological inconsistencies.

Taking all the stories into account, it can be observed that the tradition that was initiated by the myth of Er – as far as we know<sup>64</sup> –, was enriched during the Hellenistic age, with Aristotle as a possible link between Plato and Plutarch as evidenced by the numerous references to his alleged interest on this subject by subsequent sources.

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<sup>60</sup> Proclus, *In Pl. R. Comm.* II, 116.2. D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, pp. 51-52. In the case of Gnostic literature, however, predicating is almost the *leitmotif* of the *psychanodia*. See, for example, Zostrianos (VIII, 1, 1-132,9) 130-132.

<sup>61</sup> Procl., *In Pl. R. Comm.* II, 115.16. G. COOK, 2016, pp. 212-213. Zostrianos and Paul, as good examples in gnostic literature, not only feel themselves stronger emotionally, but also in their bodies; Zostrianos (VIII, 1, 1-132,9) 130: “Because it was ignorant (*scil.* my image), I strengthened it”. See also D. ØISTEIN ENDSJØ, 2009, p. 187.

<sup>62</sup> B.S. HALLIWELL, 2006, p. 447, calls it a “reinvented myth”, with clear antecedents in the Pre-Socratic philosophers. In the case of Plutarch, see A. PÉREZ JIMÉNEZ, 1993, p. 104. M.N. MARSH, 2010, p. 17, argues regarding the NDE’s phenomena: “It is impossible to accept these multiple illusions as a credible realization of the hereafter. The images seem to be totally dependent on the usual precepts available from current forms of iconography of ecclesial or secular portrayals”.

<sup>63</sup> Pl., *R.* 618B-D, 621B-D. Of interest here are the following words of Cephalus at 330D-E, that Socrates is going to emend in some way: “The tales that are told (*λεγόμενοι μῦθοι*) of the world below and how the men who have done wrong here must pay the penalty there, though he may have laughed them down hitherto, then begin to torture his soul with the doubt that there may be some truth in them”. See also B.S. HALLIWELL, 2006, pp. 452-455. J. LEAR, 2006, 39-42 argues: “Virtually all of the rhetorical power of the *Republic* – the allegories and myths, and the arguments and images – is designed to cure the reader of the temptation to think this is a real possibility”.

<sup>64</sup> There are, indeed, older short references to stories of the soul’s journey after death, such as the famous verses of Pi., *O.* 68-80.

Plutarch, who is undoubtedly aware of this tradition, offers something new by enhancing the stories with his own ethical values, adding a higher logical level to the context of his tractates and, in the end, illustrating in a practical way his own philosophical and religious beliefs – by highlighting, for instance, the infallibility of oracles and prophecies.

Together with Plutarch, Greek and Latin authors both pagan and Christian<sup>65</sup> abound on this issue, even if it must be accepted that there are important disparities in structure and basic details, especially in Proclus's texts.

However, Van der Sluijs was also right to defend the similarities between the myths of Plato and Plutarch, and modern near-death experiences; but his arguments mislead. On the one hand, by using a higher number of compilations of modern near-death experiences, the opportunities of finding similarities to the Greek accounts increase exponentially; on the other, by restricting his interest only to those three Classical testimonies of Plato and Plutarch and neglecting the rest of them, as well as by basing his analysis on his sixteen criteria and avoiding the important contradictions in the cosmological, theological, epistemological and ethical spheres, he obtains nothing other than a self-fulfilling outcome.

With all this, instead of Van der Sluijs's hypothesis based on the undocumented near-death experiences of both Plato and Plutarch, I think it is more plausible that, as Campbell says in *The Masks of God*, "the work of art strikes some very deep chord!"<sup>66</sup>. Therefore, in my view, Plato and Plutarch created or recreated powerful archetypes for the conception of the soul, rooted in a syncretic alloy from the Orphic-Pythagorean vein<sup>67</sup>, but with additional close similarities to Persian dualism, Babylonian astrology, Jewish apocalyptic, and Christian or pre-Christian soteriology<sup>68</sup>. It is from just this background that the archetype of travel to the hereafter as a road to wisdom survives in the testimonies of modern near-death experiences, although it must be accepted as a *caveat* that the criteria for what constitutes a current "near-death experience" would not have been the same for the ancients and, consequently, the use of contemporary parameters for analysing Antiquity is always a risky sport.

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<sup>65</sup> About Origen's use of the myth of Er, see J.N. BREMMER, 2002, p. 90.

<sup>66</sup> J. CAMPBELL, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, New York, Viking, 1959, p. 31 ; W.L. GUERIN *et al.*, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, New York – Oxford, 2005, p. 182.

<sup>67</sup> C. ZALESKI, 1987, p. 20 ; J.N. BREMMER, 2002, 91-92, 94 ; B.S. HALLIWELL, 2006, 456, 458R. GAGNÉ, 2015, p. 317-8.

<sup>68</sup> R. Gagné, 2015, 314, 320.

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