After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell and Purgatory, by John Casey

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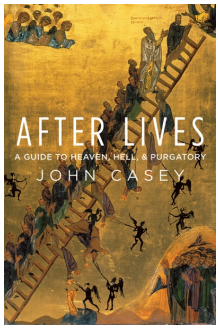

Delayed in my task of reading Cambridge scholar John Casey's *After Lives*, I must confess that I was not very pleased about bringing it on a recent Australian conference-cum-summer holiday. After all, summer holidays are for celebrating life, while the subject of this book dwells on what comes after our earthly celebrations expire. Packing my shorts and sandals, I was also somewhat disconcerted by the commanding size of the hardcover edition; checking in at just over 450 pages, *After Lives* considerably cut into my precious carry-on limit. Nevertheless, my apprehensions about the book and its subject were dispelled once I dug into Casey's stylishly written, highly erudite and engaging tome. In fact, slipping into a routine in Australia, I found

myself eager to sit down with *After Lives* over a coffee and croissant after an invigorating morning swim at the beach. This is an obvious credit to Casey's talent for seamlessly blending serious classical scholarship with potent irony and humour on what tends to be a rather grave subject.

You'll notice I began with a personal anecdote. Some people don't like this approach for reasons usually related to the question, "who cares about you?" Regardless of where you stand on this issue, you should know that, throughout the book, Casey sprinkles personal reflections on his own engagement in the subject at hand, which was shaped early in his life by his education with "the Irish Christian Brothers in an austere, puritanical, Augustinian version of Catholicism" (2). Considering this fact, as I made my way through the seventeen thematically and roughly chronologically arranged chapters, Casey's own biography and personal interests indeed appear to play a significant part in guiding this "guide." This is not only demonstrated by his heavy focus on early Christianity, Augustine and Calvin, but also by Casey's taste for high literature, especially Joyce and Dante (both manage to make their way into nearly every chapter). In fact, the book opens with a prologue entitled "Stephen Dedalus's Hell" and concludes with an epilogue further discussing Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as Young Man*. Given Casey's penchant for Joyce and Dante, along with his own strict Irish Catholic education, his choice and emphasis of material and his own biography do not appear mere coincidence.

The reader should also know that *After Lives* is more a work of literary scholarship than social science. Casey makes this point explicitly in the opening chapter when he states, "I shall be keeping my distance from religious anthropology"—his reason being that he is "concerned only with those beliefs in post-mortem existence that be thought to have something to say to each other, that can enter into a debate, be seen as part of a tradition" (19). Taking a genealogical approach, Casey sets his sights on "ideas of afterlife in cultures that have produced works of art, literature, and religious speculation, works that resonate both one with another and with later literary or philosophical traditions" (19). Casey sums up the subjects covered in the seventeen chapters, which are divided into three sections (Hell, Purgatory, Heaven), as including:

> the Egyptian pyramid and Coffin texts and the *Book of the Dead*, the epic of *Gilgamesh*, the book of Job and other texts from the Hebrew Bible, Greek and Latin texts, including those of Plato

> and the mystery (Orphic) religions, the Christian scriptures, the apocryphal New Testament, the writings of the fathers, such as Tertullian, Lactantius, Origen, Augustine, Irenaeus; Dante, as well as some classic Christian writers on the afterlife in the Catholic and Protestant traditions; doubters, heretics, spiritualists, moderns. (19)

While the chapters flow essentially in this order, in places there is substantial jumping back and forth between epochs and thinkers (again, Dante and Joyce pop up everywhere). Asserting that "in thinking about after lives one is free to choose one's narrative" (19), Casey's book sometimes appears as a literary bricolage in which he could not resist inserting certain lengthy quotes from his favourite classical passages (often his own translations) or lines of English verse—whether they are relevant or not. On a single page—page 66 for instance—we encounter T. S. Eliot, Virgil, Plato, the Stoics and Orphics and of course, Dante. Or in a section on Lucretius on page 85, Casey inserts a ten-line stanza from Spinoza, followed shortly by five lines of verse from Thomas Gray. We are not four lines into Horace when Casey cites two English poets and seven lines from a poem by Herrick (a poet you may or may not know; I didn't) called "Corinna's going a-Maying." Call me old-fashioned, but shouldn't a section on Horace begin with Horace? While much of Casey's vast corpora of literary quotes are interesting, somewhat connected and/or beautiful in their own right, I sometimes found them to be unnecessary detours that disrupted the book's narrative thrust.

Initially, Casey's encyclopaedic approach appears to presuppose a great deal of background knowledge on the reader's part, who, if they are anything like me, has ashamedly only browsed Dante and been twice defeated by *Ulysses*. Despite his eclecticism and propensity for diversion, however, Casey is a masterful writer with a remarkable ability to lucidly synthesize vast portions of western literature, all of which are turned into a lively and ultimately pleasurable read. Moreover, in its grand scope, *After Lives* delves into much more than just the title suggests. In the course of reading, we receive a refresher course in the moral philosophies and virtues which grounded the ancient civilizations of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece, as well the Catholic Reformation, the Renaissance and the development of western spiritualism. From Aristotle's civic ethics to Egyptian celebrations of life and Dante's writings on the three realms, death comes to be viewed in a dialectical relationship with life. Casey shows how a culture's conception of the afterlife and attitude

towards death sheds much light on its relationship to and affirmation of life. For example, he describes how the Greeks possessed a "heroic culture" which celebrated life and hated death. Unlike many early cultures that feared death (mainly out of the threat of vengeful ancestral spirits), for the Greeks, death was not so much a scary affair as a boring one in which all earthly pleasures would be deprived (70). Egyptians and Mesopotamians were similarly life-affirming cultures who also shared a dim, but not necessarily fearful, view of the afterlife. Transitioning from these ancient civilizations, chapters five through nine on early Christian conceptions of hell, predestination and purgatory are particularly illuminating in that we see the development of very different ideas concerning life and death in the West.

In surveying various conceptions of what lies beyond life, Casey also considers the rhetoric behind them. For instance, we hear Socrates put forth, "If it is unconsciousness like a sleep in which the sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain" (15). My personal favourite came from the later Epicurean philosopher, Lucretius, who offers a simple yet profound moral and psychological argument against the fear of dying: "Why be horrified at the infinity of time ahead of us when we will not exist, when we have no horror at the eons before we came into existence?" (83). *After Lives* is peppered with many such small but profound pieces of wisdom from the philosophers and poets, which will speak differently to different readers.

Again, let me restate that Casey sticks strictly to the classics and we hear little to nothing about folk beliefs and practices. A great strength of the book is Casey's capacity for clearly showing the contingency and evolution of beliefs surrounding the afterlife. Comparing Dante and Virgil, he writes, "Dante's damned souls … their grief and rage are very different from the melancholy sadness with which the shades of the pagan underworld recognize their fate"; and further, "The essential difference is that the sadness of Virgil's shades is directed at the universal human lot" (68). Casey then connects both Dante and Virgil to their Greek roots in Homer's Odyssey, specifically to the passage in which Odysseus visits the gates of the underworld (*nekuia*). This genealogical approach indeed serves in guiding the reader through the foundations and evolution of Greco-Roman thought on death and the afterlife and how they influenced western conceptions over the centuries.

Certain sections of *After Lives* may appeal to different readers based on their particular interests and areas of expertise. That said, because Casey intends to guide us through a historical discourse of ideas regarding post-mortem existence, it is beneficial to read the book in the order it is laid out

(though one could still learn a great deal from dabbling). *After Lives* does an impressive job of situating conceptions of the afterlife in the context of western intellectual history. Here I must emphasize the almost exclusively Western and heavily Christian focus of the book. While Casey includes sections on Egypt, Mesopotamia and Islam, these are quite minor and appear somewhat disjointed. For these reasons, *After Lives* is definitely *a* guide—and a good one at that—but is probably not *the* guide to the afterlife. Recommended for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students and lecturers from across the humanities and social sciences or the general reader.

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