INTRODUCTION

> As to paradise in heaven, we heard about it from the priests. But we wanted to see for ourselves what it is like, so we sent our scout there, Yuri Gagarin. He circled the globe and found nothing in outer space—just complete darkness, he said, and no garden at all, nothing that looked like paradise. We thought the matter over and decided to send up another scout. We sent Herman Titov and told him to fly around a bit longer this time and take a good look—Gagarin was only up there for an hour and a half, and he might have missed it. He took off, came back and confirmed Gagarin's conclusion. There's nothing up there, he reported.
>
> Nikita Khrushchev, 1961

The quest for another world beyond this one, a world of spirits immune to death, is as old as recorded civilization, and attested in cultures East and West, North and South. In the paleolithic cave of Lascaux a bird-faced man is depicted falling backward or lying dead in the path of a wounded bison. Some paleoanthropologists and historians of religion have suggested that the man is a shaman of sorts, and that the bird face symbolizes flight to the spirit world.[1] Whether this particular interpretation is justified or not, there is no doubt that belief and interest in life beyond death is attested from the dawn of civilization. Many of the great monuments of early societies, such as the pyramids of Egypt or the mound of Newgrange, testify to the fascination with the world beyond. Shamans, the prototypical otherworldly travelers, are found among Eskimos at the Arctic Circle and among the aborigines of Australia, at the other end of the world, as well as in Central Asia and Siberia. The worldwide distribution of beliefs and practices relating to a spirit world cannot be explained by diffusion from a single source in historical time. If these notions can be traced to a common source it is lost in pre-history, before humanity dispersed to the remotest corners of the globe.

The ultimate way to experience the world of spirits is by death and transformation into a spiritual existence. Unfortunately, most people who make this transition do not come back to tell about it. From antiquity to modern times, however, people have been fascinated by stories of near-death experiences. In the tenth book of his *Republic,* Plato tells the story of Er the Pamphylian, who was slain in battle but revived on the funeral pyre and told what he had seen in the other world. His account was mainly concerned with the judgment of the dead, and the rewards and punishments that awaited them. He also told how all souls eventually choose the lives in which they will be reincarnated and how only those imbued with wisdom will be able to choose wisely. Plato tells the story as a myth, which he bends to his purpose, to underline the importance of the philosophical life. We have no way of verifying whether Er even existed.

In the modern world, however, there have been numerous cases of near-death experiences, ones in which the subjects have been available for examination and interrogation. Raymond Moody claimed to provide evidence of such experiences, "not in darkened rooms in circumstances contrived by witch doctors, but in the bright light of emergency and operating rooms, presided over by physicians."[2] These modern accounts typically involve an experience of being separated from one's own body, an encounter with a being of light, a review of one's life, a strong attraction to the afterlife, and a reluctant return to the body.[3] The significance of these experiences has been very controversial.[4] Despite some extravagant claims, they cannot be taken to prove the reality of life after death; at most they reveal a penultimate stage in the process of death. Neither do they corroborate the elaborate visions of heaven and hell that we find in traditional religions. They do, however, attest to a dimension of experience that is only rarely available for public discussion and that bears a strong resemblance to traditional accounts of the separation of soul from body. As such they suggest that religious beliefs about the flight of the soul have some foothold in human experience, however enigmatic that experience may be.

Excursions into the spirit world are not confined to the moment of death. They are also the stuff of dreams, visions, and ecstatic practices. Otherworldly journeys can take place spontaneously in a dream. So, for example, an Akkadian text from the seventh century B.C.E. tells of a terrifying vision in a night dream in which a visionary named Kummaya goes down to the netherworld and is hauled before Nergal, god of the netherworld.[5] When he wakes in terror, he pledges his devotion to the Nergal and the other gods. It is virtually impossible to tell whether a text such as this reports an actual dream or is a literary fiction. There certainly were literary compositions of this sort. The death dream of Enkidu in the Epic of Gilgamesh is an early example. But the literary convention was presumably modeled on the experience of dreaming.

In some cases we read of dreams and visions that were induced by the visionaries. The shaman has been described as "above all the specialist in ecstasy,"[6] able, at will, to pass out of his body and undertake mystical journeys through all the cosmic regions. As part of his training, the shaman learned the techniques of ecstasy, by which he could contact the spirits of the other world and get their support. One of the most famous otherworldly journeys is that of the Zoroastrian Arda Viraf, who was supposedly elected by the assembly to test the truth of Zoroastrianism. He was reluctant to go, because of the objections of his seven wives. Before his departure he made a will and performed the rites of the dead for himself. Then he drank three cups of a special liquid (wine and henbane) and went to sleep on a couch, watched over by the priests. After seven days he awoke cheerful and joyous, bringing greetings to the assembly from Ahura Mazda, Zarathustra, and the gods of the dead.[7] Moshe Idel has described the techniques by which Jewish mystics attained the ascent of the soul. In the formulation of R. Hai Gaon:

> When one seeks to behold the *Merkavah* and the palaces of the angels on high, he must follow a certain procedure. He must fast a number of days and place his head between his knees and whisper many hymns and songs whose texts are known from tradition. Then he perceives within himself and in the chambers [of his heart] as if he saw the seven palaces with his own eyes, and it is as though he entered one palace after another and saw what is there. . . . For God . . . shows to the righteous, in their interior, the visions of his palaces and the position of his angels.[8]

The fact that a procedure is followed does not lessen the authenticity of the experience. It does, however, underline the cultural specificity of all experience. The Jewish mystic does not encounter Zoroaster, nor does the Persian see the Merkavah. Not only the techniques of ecstasy, but also the content of the ecstatic vision is learned from a specific tradition. Visionaries see what is believed in their culture to be possible.

Consequently, we find considerable variation on the geography of the other world. Khrushchev's assumption that it would suffice to go up in a spaceship and look around was far too simplistic for even the most literalistic believer. The netherworld appears as the destination in otherworldly journeys more often than the heavens. Gilgamesh entered the "other world" through the base of a mountain. For much of antiquity, all the dead were consigned to the netherworld. Only in the Hellenistic period were the blessed dead relocated to the heavens. The elaborate cosmology of late antiquity and the Middle Ages typically had seven heavens, although various other numbers are also attested. This was a more complex world than any imagined by Soviet astronauts. Visionaries have never lacked for spaceships. Jewish and Christian visionaries are typically propelled upward by spirit, wind or clouds. Chinese Taoist immortals are also "carried by the wind in a chariot of clouds." We also hear of more exotic means of heavenly travel. Among the Taoists

> first in order of importance was the crane, white or black, but wild ducks and even tigers would do on occasion, and even special shoes like the cloud-raising shoes made by Sin Pin from fish skin were thought to be efficacious. The famous emperor Chi reached the heavenly immortals by ascending to them on a winged horse, or according to another version on the back of a long-bearded dragon capable of carrying seventy people at once.[9]

Not all otherworldly travel was so picturesque. We have noted already the view of Hai Gaon that the mystic sees within the chambers of his own heart *as if* he were seeing the palaces of heaven. Already in antiquity philosophers such as Plato and Philo saw the ascent of the soul as an allegory for a spiritual journey toward the truth or God. Awareness of the mental character of the otherworldly journey is most acute in Buddhism. The Tibetan Book of the Dead consists of manuals for the intermediate states (*bardos*) through which people pass in their illusory journey through existence. The manuals are recited to the deceased to help them recognize that the lights and the deities they encounter are only projections of the mind. To realize this is to escape from the cycle of becoming and dying.[10]

Modern accounts of near-death experiences are often taken as evidence for the reality of life after death. In traditional societies this is seldom an explicit issue; the reality is assumed. Several other reasons for recounting these experiences come to the fore. Wilhelm Bousset, in the heyday of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule,* argued that the ascent of the soul was an anticipation of its ascent after death.[11] This correspondence is quite clear in several Christian and some Jewish apocalypses, which culminate in the transformation of the visionary into an angelic state, such as he hoped to attain after death.[12] Other accounts serve rather to establish the authority of the figure who makes the ascent. The *mirʿaj* of Muḥammad is an important example. This motif of divine authorization is already evident in the call narratives of the Hebrew prophets, who received their commissions when they stood in the council of the Lord.[13] In other cases the emphasis lies on the message which the visionary brings back to earth. The Myth of Er provides a notable example. Any code of conduct on earth is reinforced if it shown to be the basis of the judgment after death, or if it is received from a deity or an angel in the course of an otherworldly journey.

Nonetheless, ecstasy and otherworldly journeys are most profoundly connected to the ultimate human problem of death. Peter Berger has written that "the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death, or more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it."[14] The most imposing banner by far is one that proclaims that death is not the end, that there is another, spiritual, world where souls can dispense with their bodily garb. The existence of such a world need not be dismissed as a calculated fiction. It is adumbrated, however elusively, by dreams, visions, and near-death experiences. Small wonder, then, that human beings have always tried to glimpse what lies behind the veil, or to extrapolate what lies beyond from the resources and values of religious traditions. The result is the elaborate construction of multilayered heavens or of a netherworld peopled with divinities and monsters. These "other worlds" are not such that they could be verified by an astronaut. They do not tell us about the world "out there" so much as about the fantastic ability of the human mind to construct a world where it can feel secure and where ethical actions remain worthwhile despite the apparent finality of death.

The issues discussed in this volume were at the center of the scholarly agenda of Ioan Culianu. He published two monographs on the ascent of the soul in western traditions: *Psychanodia I: A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and Its Relevance* (Leiden, 1983) and *Expériences de l'extase: Extase, ascension et récit visionnaire, de l'Hellénisme au Moyen-Age* (Paris, 1984). His last book, *Out of This World: Otherworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein* (Boston, 1991), was an attempt to provide a comprehensive survey of otherworldly journeys in the religions of the world. Inevitably, a survey of this breadth could be little more than an inventory, but it assembled the resources for a far-reaching study.

In May 16–17, 1991, Culianu hosted a conference at the University of Chicago entitled "Other Realms: Death, Ecstasy and Otherworldly Journeys in Recent Scholarship," to mark the publication of *Out of This World.* Most of the articles in this volume originated as papers for that conference. It was expected that they would appear under Culianu's editorship. Unfortunately that was not to be. On May 19, two days after the end of the conference, he was shot to death in Swift Hall where the meetings had taken place. The murder has not been solved, but is widely believed to be related to political turmoil in his native Romania. His sudden and violent death gave added poignancy to the topic of the conference and of much of his life's work. This book is dedicated to his memory.

In keeping with the scope of the original conference, the topics treated below cover a broad historical, cultural and methodological range, from the Epic of Gilgamesh to modern accounts of near-death experiences. Topics are drawn from ancient and medieval Judaism and Christianity, Islam, and Chinese and Japanese religion. Nevertheless, there is a notable thematic coherence to the whole. One will particularly observe the recurrent treatment of the mystical ascent, the cosmological context in which the descent is imagined, the conjunction of mystical experience and death, and the relationship between martyrdom and the spiritual transfiguration of death (through interpretation and its ritual). Overall, diverse types of death-defying behavior emerge; and these often bear on the centrality of salvation in the minds of those involved. Moreover, in line with the dominant metaphor of the journey, one may perceive diverse typologies of place as they relate to death. In some cases, the places of this world are central; in others, places out of this world or in the spiritual spaces of the soul are the goal. The paradox, however, is that journeys or quests in earthly space are quite often inner pilgrimages as well; correspondingly, the ascent or descent of the adept to other realms is ritually grounded in this-worldly acts. Ritual or ritualized space thus serves as a permeable zone for transcendent experiences.

The reader will find in this book, then, an integrated collection of data dealing with death and ecstasy. Their value to the study of religion is enhanced by elegant uses of the comparative method. Some of the studies focus quite intently on comparative evidence within a given culture; others are sharpened by cross-cultural perspectives. The results deepen our understanding of death, ecstasies, and otherworldly journeys. Taken all together, the essays gathered here reveal the power of the religious imagination to transfigure mortal existence and provide materials for imitation and interpretation. Ioan Culianu's fascination with these connections between cultural hermeneutics and the history of religions was an animating aspect of his personality. We hope that these essays will serve as an appropriate memorial.

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NOTES

1. H. Kirschner, "Ein archäologischer Beitrag zur Urgeschichte des Schamanismus," *Anthropos* 47(1952) 244–86; M. Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York, 1964), 147; C. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys: Accounts of Near-Death Experience in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York, 1987), 12–13.

2. R. A. Moody, "Commentary on 'The Reality of Death Experiences: A Personal Perspective' by Ernst Rodin," *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 168(May 1980) 265.

3. R. A. Moody, *Life after Life The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* (Atlanta, 1975) 21–22.

4. See Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys,* 161–83.

5. The text is called "The Vision of the Nether World." See H. Kvanvig, *Roots of Apocalyptic The Mesopotamian Background of the Enoch Figure and of the Son of Man* (WMANT Neukirchen-Vluyn; 1988) 390–91.

6. M. Eliade, "Nostalgia for Paradise," in *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* tr. Philip Mairet (New York, 1960) 61.

7. I. P. Culianu, *Out of This World* (Boston, 1991) 107–13.

8. M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988) 90.

9. Culianu, *Out of This World,* 73.

10. Zaleski, *Otherworld Journeys,* 24–25; Culianu, *Out of This World,* 92–98.

11. W. Bousset, "Die Himmelsreise der Seele," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 4(1901) 136.

12. M. Himmelfarb, "Revelation and Rapture: The Transformation of the Visionary in the Ascent Apocalypses," in J. J. Collins and J. H. Charlesworth, eds., *Mysteries and Revelations: Apocalyptic Studies after the Uppsala Colloquium* (Sheffield, 1991), 89–102; *Ascent to Heaven in Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (New York/Oxford, 1993), 47–71.

13. See G. Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala, 1950).

14. P. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York, 1967) 51.