

P E T E R   L A N G

# Traveling to Other Worlds



LECTURES ON TRANSPERSONAL  
EXPRESSION IN LITERATURE  
AND THE ARTS

BRUCE ROSS

The lectures collected for this book focus on transpersonal expression—heightened states of feeling, emotion, and deeper regions of the psyche, from the Paleolithic (so-called rock art), to the medieval (Solomon Ibn Gabirol), to the modern (Rilke), and postmodern (Haruki Murakami). This study suggests the psyche is hard wired for spiritual experience, for aesthetic and ethical expression, and that transpersonal expression in literature and the arts is a universal human exploration of perhaps a fundamental ground of being. The focus of the chapters provide evidence for these suggestions: mysticism in Gabirol, Rumi, and Rilke; reckoning with suffering in Murakami's postmodern fables; spiritual failure and grace in the triptychs of Bosch, Beckman, and Bacon; epiphany in Basho, Suthorn Pho, and contemporary world travel haibun; altered states in Romantic ballet; metaphysical space in Ra'anana Levy's painting; epiphany and social communion in Paul Theroux's travel writing; sustaining the world in modern Aboriginal art; the nature of "big mind" consciousness as internal space; visitation to the heavens in world petroglyphs and pictographs; "absolute metaphor" in traditional American haiku; and spiritual spaciousness as a key element in haiku.

"Bruce Ross has collected for this book of lectures on literature and art a unique purview of human consciousness and its expression in heightened states, often coinciding with the inner dimensions of established spiritual traditions."

*Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, President of The World Phenomenology Institute;  
Editor of Phenomenological Inquiry and Analecta Husserliana*

"*Traveling to Other Worlds* is a book of stunning breadth and insight. It is not only a journey across a wide range of cultures but also a quest into the deep north of the interior landscape. The reader's mind is expanded and vivified by these explorations into the source and forms of transpersonal creativity."

*David Landiss Barnhill, Director of Environmental Studies and Professor of English,  
University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh; Editor and Translator of Basho's Haiku:  
Selected Poems and Basho's Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Basho*

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PETER LANG

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To Astrid





# *Table of Contents*

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	1
<i>Chapter 1. A Poetry of Mysticism: Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi, and Rainer Maria Rilke</i>	7
<i>Chapter 2. Words Turn into Stone: Haruki Murakami's after the quake</i>	33
<i>Chapter 3. The Triptych between Heaven and Hell: The Case of Bosch, Beckmann, and Bacon</i>	41
<i>Chapter 4. Matsuo Basho, Suthorn Pho, and Contemporary World Travel Haibun</i>	61
<i>Chapter 5. Altered States: The Artistic Quest in The Stone Flower and La Sylphide</i>	73
<i>Chapter 6. Ra'anana Levy's Metaphysical Space</i>	81
<i>Chapter 7. The Kindness of Strangers: Epiphany and Social Communion in Paul Theroux's Travel Writing</i>	89
<i>Chapter 8. The Songlines: Dreaming the Ancestors and Sustaining the World in Aboriginal Art</i>	101
<i>Chapter 9. Big Mind: The Nature of Consciousness as Internal Space in Transpersonal Experience</i>	109
<i>Chapter 10. Traveling to other Worlds: Visitation to the Heavens as Transpersonal Experience in Rock Art</i>	119

<i>Chapter 11.</i>	<i>Haiku Mainstream: The Path of Traditional Haiku in America</i>	127
<i>Chapter 12.</i>	<i>Spaciousness as a Key Element in Haiku</i>	137
	<i>Note on the Lectures</i>	145
	<i>Notes</i>	147

## *Illustrations*

<i>cover image</i>	Max Beckmann, <i>Falling Man</i> , 1950. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC and © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
<i>frontispiece</i>	Humanoid petroglyph with upraised arms, Joshua Tree National Park, California, © Bruce Ross, 2012.
<i>facing chapter 3</i>	Max Beckmann, <i>Departure</i> , 1932–1933. © Museum of Modern Art, New York/ Licensed by SCALA/ Art Resource, NY and © 2012 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
<i>facing chapter 6</i>	Ra’anan Levy, <i>Lumière jaune</i> , 2009. Private collection. Courtesy of the Musée Maillol and Ra’anan Levy, © 2009.
<i>facing chapter 8</i>	Mick Namararri Tjapaltjarri, <i>Big Cave Dreaming with Ceremonial Object</i> , 1972. Collection of John and Barbara Wilkerson; © Estate of the artist 2011, licensed by Aboriginal Artists Agency Ltd.
<i>facing chapter 10</i>	Atlatl Rock, Valley of Fire State Park, Nevada, © Bruce Ross 2012.



## Introduction

It seems that there is a dynamic that underlies the human psyche and comes to be expressed in literature and the arts as immanence and transcendence. The lectures collected for this book focus on transpersonal expression, those heightened states of feeling, emotion, and deeper regions of the psyche, from the Paleolithic (so-called rock art) to the medieval (Solomon Ibn Gabirol) to the modern (Rilke) to the postmodern (Haruki Murakami).

In many ways this book is an attempt to explore the psychic modalities of heightened states of consciousness and the records of these states in literature and art. The tug of war which goes on between our “positive” heightened states and our “negative” heightened states, perhaps no more than the old body-mind problem of philosophy, perhaps the opposition of good and evil of ethics, has been expressed throughout humanity’s existence, as prehistoric carvings on rocks, configurations of Buddhist consciousness, Islamic mysticism, nature epiphanies in haiku, alchemical and folklorist roots of ballet, modern lyric poetry, and postmodern fables. So Rilke encounters the “shock of the new” and transforms the world poetically in the imagination as in the *Duino Elegies*; Haruki Murakami experiences natural and manmade disasters and creates postmodern fables supported by the idea of heart (*kokoro*); Hieronymus Bosch responds to the immorality of his period through nightmarish images as well as those of redemptive grace; Max Beckmann reacts to cultural decadence and war with Bosch-like paintings such as *The Organ Grinder* (1935) and the suggestion of spiritual promise in the central panel of *Departure* (1932–1933); Francis Bacon engages an end-stopped “postmodern condition” with highly crafted expressions of that condition; the ballets *The Stone Flower* and *La Sylphide* articulate the challenge of other worldly experience through dramas of love and loss of love; Ra’anan Levy reflects the postmodern alienation through paintings of empty rooms and possible redemption in light; and Paul Theroux mediates natural catastrophe and world corruption through nature epiphanies and meaningful social encounters in his travel writing. Further, as expressions of the psyche, these experiences of heightened emotional states are often enigmatic and expressed in highly compressed verbal and visual metaphors.

The following lectures are an attempt to explore these metaphors and the idea that the psyche is hard wired for such states and for the forms that come to express them as well as for the kind of holistic virtue envisioned in the *Tao Te Ching (Book of the Way of Virtue)* and other spiritual systems and for the aesthetic impulse itself. Is there perhaps a Platonic model of the psyche in Greek mythology when the beautiful Psyche (“soul”) becomes immortal and unites with the god Eros (“love”) only after undergoing trials imposed upon her by the jealous Aphrodite (“beauty”)? Each lecture poses a similar question and explores some possible avenues of approach to an answer. The expressions of the literature and art thus examined are expected to reveal something of the model of the psyche and its modalities of expression.

The first lecture, “A Poetry of Mysticism: Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Jalaluddin Rumi, and Rainer Maria Rilke,” suggests that each of these poets reflected what might be called mysticism, Gabirol’s poetry orienting being to a state of “blessedness” and Rumi’s poetry offering a return to the spiritual through love, both poets infused with neo-Platonism, Judaism, Kabbalah, Islam, and Sufism. Rilke’s poetry reflects an approach to the challenges of the modern world through transforming this world into a higher modality not unlike the spiritual. This lecture examines how through poeticized acts of remembering and communion these three poets explore the nature of internal mystical experience.

The second lecture, “Words Turn into Stone: Haruki Murakami’s *after the quake*,” examines Murakami’s emotional reckoning to the 1995 Kobe earthquake. Suggestive of Kafka and magic realist writing, the stories in this collection are ruminations over the perennial issues of living and dying and the Buddhist idea of suffering, *dukkha*. A critique of the malaise and conformism of his generation, *after the quake* approaches a resolution of these issues through the equation of one’s psyche and catastrophe, such as through the metaphor of dance in “all god’s children can dance” in which suffering is mediated by the heart (*kokoro*)

The third lecture, “The Triptych between Heaven and Hell: The Case of Bosch, Beckmann, and Bacon,” considers three artist who used the triptych as an expressive form. Bosch’s *The Last Judgment* (c.1492 or after) sets the standard for utilizing the triptych format as an allegory of spiritual failure. This metaphoric early Renaissance landscape of brutality and excess transfers well to the ravages of World War I and cultural decadence in Max Beckmann’s imagery of savagery and torture in *The Night* (1918–1919) and *Hell of the Birds* (1938), with *Departure* (1932–1933) offering a suggestion

of spiritual promise (central panel). Francis Bacon uses the triptych for unrelenting portraits of angst and spiritless desire under the twentieth-century failure of grace as in *Crucifixion* (1965). This lecture considers these artists' challenging reformulations through dense symbolic imagery and powerful expressive emotion of the triptych during the Renaissance and through modernism and postmodernism.

The fourth lecture, "Matsuo Bashō, Suthorn Pho, and Contemporary World Travel Haibun," reflects on the Japanese *haibun* form as a vehicle of travel writing. The sense of open-ended travel is evoked in the Japanese master Bashō's (1644–1694) writing, centered on the *haibun* form, a narrative of an epiphany interspersed with haiku linked to that narrative, as a state of internal discovery and in the Thai poet Suthorn Pho's (1786–1855) writing, centered on the *nirat* form, travel poetry interspersed with memories of lost or distant love, as a record of Buddhist merit. These approaches, broadly stated as spiritual pilgrimage, recur in contemporary international versions of the *haibun* form.

The fifth lecture, "Altered States: The Artistic Quest in *The Stone Flower* and *La Sylphide*," evaluates two Romantic ballets that reflect the potential danger of an encounter with an altered state in the quest for artistic perfection in *The Stone Flower* and otherworldly joy in *La Sylphide*, both reflecting Platonic Idealism and the Romantic quest. In *The Stone Flower* Danito, the artist, undergoes instruction, a spiritual and alchemical transformation, by the Mistress of the Mountain who turns him into stone. The purity of his forgotten earthly beloved Katrina reunites them and softens the Mistress's heart. In *La Sylphide* James is enticed by the sylph in the magical forest realm but forgets his beloved Effie, and by offending the witch Madge and forgetting Effie he loses both Effie and the sylph. The characters and dance passages are metaphors of transformation, love, and loss.

The sixth lecture, "'Ra'anán Levy's Metaphysical Space," critiques the first French retrospective (November 2006–January 2007) of Levy's work, which featured a new series of studies of empty rooms. These studies along with other series on street drains and sinks evidenced an impressive emotional resonance. Several critics have assumed these paintings reflect Levy's rootless early background, one suggesting a precise Freudian-based interpretation of the empty rooms and paintings of pigment bottles and other art supplies. That Levy consults a book of human anatomy before painting his empty rooms suggest that the undeniable existential depth of these atmos-

pheric representational paintings rather seems to reflect a metaphysical space with a perhaps symbolic interest in empty human spaces and light.

The seventh lecture, “The Kindness of Strangers: Epiphany and Social Communion in Paul Theroux’s Travel Writing,” explores a central vacillation between epiphanies in natural landscapes and meaningful social encounters in the travel writing of Paul Theroux. The poetics of travel writing in general is explored while focusing on the philosophic issues of consciousness and of self and others. Theroux’s travel writing exhibits the implications behind these issues. This lecture concentrates on four of his works: *The Old Patagonian Express* (1979); *The Happy Isles of Oceania* (1992); *Dark Star Safari* (2003); and *Ghost Train to the Eastern Star* (2008). The dialectic of solitary epiphany and heightened friendship is complicated by the unavoidable natural and social failures Theroux finds in the contemporary world. Yet the complaint by a Japanese man that the seasons are no longer orderly is balanced by the account of a man living a traditional Jain life of devotional wandering.

The eighth lecture, “The Songlines: Dreaming the Ancestors and Sustaining the World in Aboriginal Art,” is based on the November 2009 New York University exhibit “Icons of the Desert,” a selection of modern and contemporary Australian Aboriginal art from Papunya, perhaps the most significant center for such art. Issues of the ancestor realm, Dreaming, singing, and the walkabout serve as a context for discussing Aboriginal art in ritual, narrative, and artistic manifestations. Among the oldest art traditions in the world, these paintings of semi-abstract and patterned spaces can be viewed as a living connection to the mythic realm or Dreaming which presupposes the essence of basic survival and social continuity in the present as well as the moral order and fate that continues to sustain the present. The Aboriginal artist is immersed in Dreamtime, a mythic past eliding into the present that challenges certain Western views of consciousness and fundamental reality.

The ninth lecture, “Big Mind: The Nature of Consciousness as Internal Space in Transpersonal Experience,” speculates on the experience of spaciousness in elevated consciousness as discussed or expressed by spiritual practitioners, poets, and fiction writers with a focus on the heavens as a corollary or mirror of internal states, including Shunryu Suzuki, Sappho, Dante, Nevit O. Ergin, Rumi, and Jim Harrison. Issues addressed include: the mind and sky interrelationship; big mind and spaciousness; objectivity and subjectivity; the issue of other minds; the figuration of light as a universal



archetype; and the essence of transpersonal experience where the psyche may be predisposed to ethical and aesthetic manifestations.

The tenth lecture, "Traveling to Other Worlds: Visitation to the Heavens as Transpersonal Experience in Rock Art," surveys the transpersonal experience of traveling to the heavens as expressed in world rock art. Relying on a model now favored by many anthropologists, a "complex geometric motif" of the perhaps oldest rock art can be explained as a facet of the psyche in a transpersonal experience. The most common direction of a shaman's passage to the other worlds is to the "upper" world. Representations of this passage are sometimes representational (a human figure connected by a line to an object in the sky) but more often metaphoric (lines arched around a human figure's head). Issues discussed include: internal and external realities; bodily orientation; the heavens; dreams and heightened states; and union with the heavens. These states as recorded as rock art in part reflect social meaning, such as "spiritualized" animals, and are brought back to society, such as geometric design.

The eleventh lecture, "Haiku Mainstream: The Path of Traditional Haiku in America," reviews American haiku from Amy Lowell to contemporary haiku writers in the traditional format as a continuous exploration of the objective and subjective qualities of the poetic image. This exploration centers around the inner dynamic of haiku, what I term the "absolute metaphor," the joining of the universal and particular to produce anew awareness in what is called a "haiku moment," a heightened moment whether meditative, reflective, or exuberant. Truly American traditional haiku is influenced by the poetic feeling of Imagist poets such as Amy Lowell with infusions of Japanese, Buddhist, and experimental poetics.

The twelfth and last lecture, "Spaciousness as a Key Element in Haiku," proposes that spaciousness is an essential element of haiku and defines this poem's uniqueness. An extended analysis of the *kireji*, the "cutting word" that separates a haiku's feeling into two parts, *mu*, "nothingness," that provokes deep feeling of a metaphysical nature, and *ma*, a space between two parts with aesthetic implications, supports this proposal. Such values of spaciousness are connected with ideas about nature found in Taoism and Shinto, particularly the Shinto concept of *yoshiro*, an object in nature that attracts divine energy.

Transpersonal expression as a response in literature and art to resonance of numerous kinds in the psyche belie the simplicity of "art for art's sake." If the human psyche is hardwired for spiritual experience, for aesthetic and

ethical expression, one wonders why we find ourselves in the so-called “postmodern condition” and before in war and the like which themselves come to reverberate in the psyche and in turn be expressed in literature and art. It is an enigmatic problem that seems to have no easy solution. However, as the poet Marianne Moore wrote in “In Distrust of Merits,” “There never was a war that was /not inward.” European Expressionism as a literary and artistic movement preceded World War I as if a presage of the great changes already apparent in Russia. It is likely however, as the subjects of these lectures suggest, that external tumult is not the last word on the dynamics of the psyche. So this book’s cover reproduction of Max Beckmann’s dreamlike painting “Falling Man” (1950) with its expression of psychic space in which a man falls between Western spiritual heaven, angels floating in boats, and Western hell, flames erupting from a building window, suggests the considerably more ancient petroglyph, so-called “Falling Man,” from the Gold Butte, Nevada area, with its similar expression of psychic space, probably a shaman’s trance state, in which a man appears to be falling, both evoking a common motif of recorded dreams.<sup>1</sup> That both “Falling Man,” each with arms crooked in flight, are expressions of a universal human exploration of the transpersonal and perhaps a fundamental ground of being is another word on the matter.