

Death-Travelers, Buddhas, and Comics: The Graphic Memoir of an American *Delok*

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Abstract: To narrate a life, one needs to live one, yet the correlation between biographical writing and βίος is hardly a given one. Otherworld journeys constitute a rich literary corpus that assume a unique character in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition of *delok* ('das log) literature. These texts offer a precious glimpse of complex narratological, as well as self-making, processes, especially when translated into a different cultural milieu. Taking my cue from Samuel Bercholz's *A Guided Tour of Hell* (2016), I will examine a *delok* account that is, in many ways, exceptional. Written in English by an American Buddhist and enriched by illustrations and drawings by a renowned Tibetan artist, the work is a fascinating textual and visual attempt to translate Tibetan Buddhist concepts of death and afterlife into a cultural context that is deeply "other".

Keywords: *delok*, otherworld journey, *A Guided Tour of Hell*, Tibetan Buddhism, graphic memoir

Human beings are narratological creatures, and nothing fascinates us more than life itself. Narratives of the self, ours and others', act as meaning-making processes whereby specific culture-bound structures are enacted and enforced. Life narratives must hence be understood as historically situated practices of self-representation, performed through distinctive discourses of memory, authority, and identity. The inescapability of such historical and cultural matrix cautions against accepting any firsthand recollection at face value, since the self-knowing of many autobiographical acts is relational, that is to say, embedded into a context that is "other". Regardless of its supposed singularity, the voice of the self is indeed a collective one, a choral convergence of real and ideal personhoods. This "thickness" is even more tangible the more we diverge from the "average" account of a life to embrace alternative narratives of self-formation in which the boundaries between this world and the other(s) are crossed and overcome. From mythemic *katábasis* to shamanic experiences, journeys to the underworld feature in nearly every culture. They are a ritualized expression of initiatory death and re-birth to be re-enacted and transmitted through public performances, dramas, and games – the passing from one state (i.e., life) to the other (i.e., death) marking a liminal condition out of which one can emerge only transformed. Return-from-death stories are a well-known field of inquiry in Western academia, and their evolution – from the emergence of the apocalyptic traditions of late antiquity to modern testimony of near-death experiences (NDEs) – has been the subject of countless studies. Scholarship on Tibetan life narratives of the otherworld is far more recent (and as such admittedly less impressive in its output), yet it can offer much in terms of comparative insights.

In the following pages, I will first introduce the genre of *delok namthar* ('das log rnam thar), literally "the liberation stories of those who came back from death," outlining its development and main features, and interpreting its narrative transitions – from orality to textuality, from narrative paintings to dramatic performances – as a pedagogical act, that allowed such literature to effectively integrate highly-sophisticated concepts

as expressed in scholastic and ritual texts into popular notions of death and afterlife. Having so set my interpretative ground, I will then examine a new, contemporary form of *delok* literature, namely *A Guided Tour of Hell* (2016), a graphic memoir written by the American Buddhist Samuel Bercholz in collaboration with the Tibetan artist Pema Namdol Thaye. In comparing this atypical *delok* narrative with traditional accounts, I will remark on the way and means through which the salvific message at the core of the genre is preserved and delivered in a context that is, culturally and historically, utterly alien to the intended one.

The popularity of death: The narrative power of *delok*

In her study of the otherworld journey, Carol Zaleski defines the genre as “a work of the narrative imagination”, in which “the universal laws of symbolic experience” bend to “the local and transitory statutes of a given culture” (7). As such, no journey to the underworld is the same, regardless of apparent similarities across time, culture, and place. Be they visionary experiences, shamanic trips, physical descents, or near-death experiences, all have culturally specific features, shaped by the social and historical setting in which they occur (5–6). Firsthand accounts of travels to the underworld and the heavenly realms represent an interpretative literary conundrum in many ways. The absence of a general theory of otherworld journey narration, and the tendency to level any “anomalies” in the search of a single comprehensive model, demand the scholar to be mindful of the singularities that differentiate each case and contribute to the particularity of the genre within the larger category of life writing, a task even more daunting once non-Western contexts are taken into consideration, as we shall see in the following pages.

Delok narratives belong to the wider, and admittedly ambiguous category of Tibetan auto/biography. Conventionally subsumed under the umbrella term *namthar* (“complete liberation”), these texts have a strong edifying character, as they mostly narrate the *vitae* of exemplary figures, whose life is construed as an ideal model to be followed.¹ At a first glance, the identification of otherworld journeys as *namthar* appears contradictory. *Delok* are, on balance, ordinary people, either men or women, whose only (though impressive) peculiarity lies in having died and returned to report what they have witnessed in the underworld. Yet, it is their very same ordinariness – their being deceptively “mediocre” – that sets them apart, to the point of becoming themselves “a source of religious authority and an object of popular worship” (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the ‘Das-log” 21). The salvific element, so pervasive in *delok* literature, closes any perceived gaps between these personal testimonies and the highest form of hagiography. The didactic aim of traditional *namthar* – to inspire a virtuous emulation in the devotee – is here pursued contrariwise. Whereas the life stories of the religious figures are meant to show the benefits of good actions, *delok* narratives, with their graphic descriptions of suffering in the hells, vividly elucidate the negative consequences of poor behavior.

Since much has been written on the history and socio-religious functions of *delok* narratives, I will hereafter provide a generic overview, referring any interested reader to the extant literature on the subject.² Despite some sporadic textual evidence reporting the existence of the phenomenon as early as the twelve century (Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 4), *delok* narratives emerged as distinctive literary genre only in the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries, a period that saw the systematization of specific liturgical programs concerning the dead and the afterlife (137). These treasure-texts,³ collectively known as *Peaceful and Wrathful Deities of Karma Lingpa* (*Kar gling zhi khro*) and titled after the treasure-revealer who originally discovered them in the late fourteenth century, comprise esoteric yoga teachings centered on the *maṇḍala* of one hundred peaceful and wrathful deities as well as detailed instructions on religious practices to

be performed in the prolonged and delicate phase that starts with the physical death, continues in the postmortem limbo of *bardo* (*bar do*), and ends in rebirth. From the late fifteenth century onward, knowledge of this latter, smaller set of funerary texts, titled *Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* (*bar do thos grol*), along with the main cycle of which it was part, gradually spread beyond Karma Lingpa (Karma Gling pa, 1326-1386)'s birthplace in south-east Tibet, following different transmission lines. With the diffusion of xylography in the eighteenth century, printed versions of the treasure tradition became easily available, but by that time, these ritual texts, originally recognized as a primary liturgical source only in certain Nyingma (rNying ma) and Kagyu (bKa' rgyud) communities, had lost any distinctive institutional identity (Cuevas, *The Hidden History* 17-20) and figured among the most commonly employed funerary practices.

The wide popularity enjoyed by the *Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* undoubtedly contributed to the standardization of Tibetan Buddhist concepts of death and afterlife (Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 137) and heavily influenced, for better or worse, Western perceptions of Tibetan Buddhist eschatology since 1927, following the publication of Walter Evans-Wentz's English translation of the funerary set – the infamous *Tibetan Book of the Dead*.⁴ The popularization of these and other, much older rituals, such as those associated with the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana* (*Elimination of All Evil Rebirths*) and *Hevajra* tantras, provided the ideological foundation of traditional *delok* narratives, most of which date from the early sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the 'Das-log” 22). In their traditional form, these auto/biographical testimonies present a distinctive narrative pattern repeated almost unaltered in all the extant versions, regardless of the narrator's gender, social status, or origin. In her ground-breaking ethnography of modern *delok*, Françoise Pommaret divides the inner structure of the narrative into seven sequences: narrator's presentation, i.e., names of oneself and one's parents, and birthplace (1); preamble to the otherworld journey (2); awareness of death (3); first contact with (4) and description of (5) the netherworld; encounter with Yama, the Lord of Death (6); and return to the world of the living (7) (*Les Revenants de l'au-delà* 79-80).

Out of these sequences, each representative of a narrative turn, much attention has been paid for their socio-historical content to the first and seventh ones – the *alpha* and *omega* of the tale, where its gist, construed to encompass time and space, is connected to here and now of the *delok* and their community.⁵ The narrative format, standardized as it is, makes it almost impossible to identify the “original” *delok* account, for these life narratives constitute, as Bryan J. Cuevas aptly points out, “a conglomerate of traditions that circulated in both oral and literary form and were worked and reworked over time by the collaborative efforts of multiple contributors, including the *delok* themselves, their biographers, editors, scribes, printers, and other interested promoters” (*Travels in the Netherworld* 11). From a narratological point of view, it is such *interchangeability* of the narrator against the *unchangeability* of the message that constitutes the most important feature of *delok* literature; a quick glance at the list of extant traditional accounts will suffice to confirm the heterogeneity of the *delok* themselves vis-à-vis the set plot (Pommaret, *Les Revenants de l'au-delà* 83-84). From the narratives, it emerges that those who return from death are not “chosen ones”: tellingly, many *delok* attribute their extraordinary experience to mistaken identity (Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 51). Such “randomness” enhances the paradigmatic role of the narrator as the embodiment of the average, failing human being, who unwittingly wastes the rarest of births, that in a human body. While Buddhist cosmological sources depict the denizens of the six realms of existence (i.e., hell beings, hungry spirits, animals, humans, demigods, and gods) as equally trapped in an endless cycle of death and rebirth (*samsāra*) and bound

to experience pleasure and pain in bodies that reflect karmic trajectories of their own creation, the very few whose *karma* led to a human birth may aspire to take control of the process of rebirth by engaging in merit-making practices (Powers 2021).

Delok narratives, centered on the law of *karma* and impermanence, testify the horrors awaiting those who do not heed the *dharma* tenets. The core instructions of the *Liberation upon Hearing in the Bardo* are here delivered without sophistications: the *delok* see the signs of death on their own body and experience firsthand the agony that heralds the end of one's life, as well as the visions that accompany the entrance of the conscious principle into the narrow path of the *bardo*. In vivid detail, they recount the sufferings inflicted to the damned in the eighteen hells and the judgment that awaits the dead. Yet, theirs is, after all, a testimony of hope. As the sixteenth-century female *delok* Lingsa Chökyi (Gling sa chos skyid) reminds herself (and us) in her much-beloved tale,

All light is your own light, all rays are your own ray, all bodies are your own body, all sounds are your own sound, they are all the inner glow of your own mind.⁶

Like nightmares, the hells and their denizens are nothing more than mental creations that will dispel as fog in the light of awakened mind. While such awareness may be reached in this life by advanced meditators, the mere recitation of ritual texts, such as the *Liberation upon Hearing*, and prayers, like the *Diamond Cutter (Vajracchedikā)*, is deemed beneficial in assisting and supporting the uninitiated in their journey through the *bardo*. Anonymous in life, the *delok* return from death to a new status, akin to that of a prophet. The otherworldly experience endows the narrator an authority recognized by their community first and by the religious institutions later, the same ones who coax the “returner” to set their tale to record. In line with *namthar* tradition, the composition of *delok* accounts is thus the result of explicit and reiterated requests and is often carried out by third parties under the patronage of invested sponsors.⁷ Such a complex nexus of telling, drafting, and editing introduces a set of issues about the process of appropriating and overwriting the original oral narrative, and may go a long way to explain the standardization of *delok* literature over time. As Zaleski notes for medieval accounts of otherworld journeys, “we cannot simply peel away the literary wrapper and put our hand on an unembellished event. Even when a vision did occur, it is likely to have been re-worked many times before being recorded” (86). The latter point is particularly relevant if we consider that the transition from orality to textuality often occurred after the death of *delok* (Pommaret 2012) – the prescriptive influence of the institutional environment over the whole process undoubtedly ensured the ideological compatibility between the didactic aim of *delok* literature and the canonical principles on death and afterlife as expressed in ritual texts (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the ‘Das-log’” 70; Cuevas, *Travels in the Netherworld* 137).

The experiential authority of the *delok*, that is to say, the authority they gain in virtue of their otherworld journey and encounter with Yama, is an expression of the proactive function that experiences play in the construction of subjectivity. By dying and returning, *delok* are jolted out of synch with reality as they know it: their sense of self – that amalgam of identities created through the material, cultural, economic, and interpersonal relations – is inescapably changed, forever morphed by the experience they went through and the message they were entrusted with at the end of their judgement. The judicial assessment of deeds, executed in a divine court, is a central theme of *delok* literature, but it is by no means an exclusive feature. Here,

[a]s in many other traditions, death provides the occasion for a dramatic unmasking, in which one's true character (often represented by the triad of “thoughts, words, and deeds”) is externalized for all to see ... (Zaleski 27)

Contrary to the Christian narratives of otherworld journeys and near-death experiences to which Zaleski refers, the final judgment reported in *delok* accounts is not a solipsistic event, “an encounter with oneself” (27), rather it is a testimony to the universal exactness of the law of *karma*. The subject of scrutiny is not the narrator (although they too will be judged prior to their return), but mankind’s weakness in the face of evil, and the remedies the living could adopt to escape future suffering. Among these, pride of place is given to the recitation of the Avalokiteśvara six-syllable mantra, the ubiquitous *om maṇi padme hūm*.⁸

It has been noted elsewhere (Epstein 1982, Pommaret 1989, 1997, 2012) that most traditional *delok* narratives advocate Nyingma, Kagyu, or non-sectarian approaches in conjunction with the salvific ethics of the Avalokiteśvara cult. The worship of this bodhisattva, originated in India and Nepal in early centuries of the common era, assumed prime status in Tibet from the eleventh century onward, following the diffusion of the *Maṇi Kabum* (*Maṇi bka’ ’bum*), a collection of texts attributed to the seventh-century Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (Srong btsan sgam po) and concerned with Avalokiteśvara devotional practices (Kapstein, *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism* 144). The popularity of the *maṇi*-mantra as an effective, purifying charm much owed to the preaching activities of the *maṇi pa*, storytellers and professional reciters, simultaneously narrative *personae* and propagators of *delok* literature.

As warp and weft, *maṇi pa* and *delok* contribute to the narrative fabric of these stories, both in terms of composition and, as we shall see, diffusion. Bodily vessels of Avalokiteśvara’s salvific power, *maṇi pa* appear in the narrative as saviors: due to their ability to move between the realms of existence, they are believed to regularly descend to the underworld to liberate hundreds of thousands of beings and lead them to the heavens. Unlike that of the *delok*, theirs is a true *katábasis*, a journey in physical form akin to that of the Buddhist saint Maudgalyāyana.⁹ Bearers of blessings, *maṇi pa* are therefore welcomed and respected in the world of the living, the same that they roam as venerated beggars, bringing their tales and reciting their mantra. These storytellers often rely on visual supports, such as painted cloth strolls (*thangka*), parasol-adorned *maṇi*-wheels, or *stūpa*-shaped statues, known as *tashi gomang chörten* (*bkra shis sgo mang mchod rten*), literally “the auspicious, many-doored *stūpa*”. *Delok* narratives are part of the repertoire of any *maṇi pa*. Thanks to their clear, edifying message and vivid depictions of the underworld, these stories are still popular in the Tibetan cultural sphere, where they are performed in dramas¹⁰ and well as in solo recitals, the words of the storyteller brought to life by the images on a *thangka*.

Acting synergically, visual and textual narrative recreate the reality of *delok*’s experience – the images materializing the words, the words elucidating the images. Reading occurs at a double register – the details on the *thangka* do not merely illustrate the text, they complement it, adding a new layer, that of the artist, to the already complex literary nexus. The correlation of visual and textual narratives, which figures prominently in the process of popularization of *delok* literature in the Tibetan sphere, adds to the heuristic tools we may use to evaluate Samuel Bercholz’s *A Guided Tour of Hell* (2016), a work that is, in many ways, a cultural hybrid. Based on the near-death experiences of an American Buddhist practitioner and accompanied by the illustration of the Tibetan artist Pema Namdol Thaye, this work translates traditional Tibetan concepts of death and afterlife into a context where those same notions have been severely misinterpreted (or better yet, *reinterpreted*) since 1927, despite the several attempts at rectification done in the following years.¹¹ Like a modern rendering of a *maṇi pa*’s *thangka*, the comic-style drawings in *A Guided Tour of Hell* are meant to facilitate the reader’s grasping of the narrative’s message, and function as a bridge between the two cultural worlds, as we shall see in the following section.

A Guided Tour of Hell: An American delok?

In the foreword to his memoir, Bercholz recalls how, after hearing of his near-death experience, Tulku Thondup Rinpoche amusedly branded him “the first American *delok*”. Whether said in jest or in earnest, the Tibetan master’s words struck a chord, and the seed of what will be later become *A Guided Tour of Hell* was planted. Planning at first to structure his testimony as a graphic novel centered on a dialogue between Dante Alighieri, Patrul Rinpoche (dPal sprul rin po che, 1808–1887),¹² and himself, Bercholz soon discards the format as “too conceptual”. Yet, the idea of a narrative that is both textual and visual proves to be impossible to abandon, and the longer Bercholz thinks about it, the more he is convinced that his experience can only be conveyed graphically. The following years see much collaboration between the author and Pema Namdol Thaye, a traditionally trained Tibetan artist, whose mastery won him permanent residency in the US in 2008. The synergy between narrator and artist is transformative for both. While Bercholz re-lives his otherworld experience twice, in memory first and on the pages later, Pema Namdol Thaye contemplates in his mind’s eye the hellish landscapes and encounters – his *samten bardo* (*bsam gtan bar do*), or “*bardo* of meditation”, thus acting as a perfect counterpoise to Bercholz’s *chönyi bardo* (*chos nyid bar do*), or “*bardo* after death”. A trained traditional artist, Pema Namdol Thaye is aware of the importance that correct mental disposition has in the realization of a drawing. In the same way of a *thangka*, his comic-style illustrations are thus meant to spiritually engage and educate the reader, offering them a narrative that is both textual and visual.

From a narratological point of view, Bercholz’s work is punctuated by sequences, roughly identifiable with his death(s), journey to the underworld, and return to life. The similarities between modern accounts of (Western) near-death experiences and *delok* narratives have already been discussed elsewhere (Epstein, “A Comparative View”), and it suffices here to say that, broadly speaking, *A Guided Tour of Hell* does not diverge from the generic template identified in previous scholarship on the subject. There are nevertheless substantial discrepancies in the episodic sequences, both in their order and content, that distinguish Bercholz’s memoir from either modern NDEs or traditional *delok* narratives and make of it a sort of cultural hybrid. For the sake of the present discussion, I will focus in particular on those dissimilarities that mostly differentiate the work from traditional *delok* literature.

The explicit reference to multiple near-death experiences is the first variation we encounter in the narrative. Bercholz died and returned twice, first in his youth and then in his middle age. In both cases, he reports sensations common to all “returners”: tunnel vision, intense light, and out-of-body experience (OBE). Although traditional *delok* narratives usually report a single event, ethnological studies conducted by Pommaret (1989) and, more recently, Prude (2016) have demonstrated that contemporary *delok* embark on otherworld journeys on a regular basis.¹³ The phenomenology of these events, much resembling in their features shamanic trips, are akin to modern near-death experiences, and incidentally to Bercholz’s – their duration, for instance, rarely stretches beyond a few hours, a far cry from the week-long death purported in traditional *delok* literature.

The shifting of the narrative climax is the second variation in Bercholz’s narrative. While his passing is marked by excruciating physical and mental pain – a feature his tale shares with that of the *delok*, but that is rarely present in modern NDEs,¹⁴ the absence of any references to divine judgement remarkably differentiates the memoir from traditional otherworld journeys, be they Tibetan or otherwise. The didactic function of the court, with its clear description of sins and punishments, is here fulfilled by encounters with denizens of the various hells – hot, cold, and peripheral. The evocative

text-cum-image medium reaches its apex in these phantasmagorical vignettes, which can only “point”, as the author says (viii), to the message underlying them. Like the judicial cases reported in traditional *delok* narratives, the fantastic nature of the figures populating Bercholz’s journey nods to popular imagery and should therefore be read against the specific cultural and historical contexts in which both the author and his targeted audience are embedded. The hellish snippets in Bercholz’s writing address contemporary Western, and particularly American, fears: terrorism, autocracy, solitude, obesity, environmental crisis. Boogeymen of modern age, the stereotypical – in many ways politically incorrect¹⁵ – vignettes advise against adopting extreme views, be they nihilism or a dualistic perception. The function and mechanisms of the law of *karma* and impermanence, that in traditional *delok* literature are explicated through examples, are here spelt out clearly. The fundamental alienness of these Buddhist concepts – so familiar to Tibetans of all ages – requires Bercholz to address any interested Western reader to the appendix, where a brief explanation of key notions (e.g., *saṃsāra*, Wheel of Life, *karma*, the six realms) is provided for guidance.

The third variation lies in the function that Bercholz’s spirit guides fulfil in the narrative. Most of traditional *delok* accounts agree in presenting the narrator escorted in their journey by a vaguely divine figure, either male or female, whose role is to blunt the *delok*’s anxiety and confusion, offering explanations and comfort whenever needed. Tibetan returners share, with few exceptions,¹⁶ a dismal ignorance of formal doctrines; even those trained in sophisticated tantric practices like the “transference of consciousness”, or *phowa* (*’pho ba*), fail miserably when put to test. While the *delok* journey the hells fearing their own final damnation, Bercholz is welcomed and guided by Yama himself, the Buddha of Hell. Through the divine touch of the Lord of Death, the narrator immediately experiences nonduality, which he identifies as the “saving grace” and “catalyst” for liberation (34). The guiding figure of Yama, described as “a gray, masculine body surrounded by flames” (34), is later in the narrative flanked by Janna Sophia, “a young feminine deity-like presence” (63). This female guide – whose name, a composite of Hebrew and Greek terms, refers to “divine mercy” and “knowledge” – is to Bercholz one and the same with the Buddha of Hell. Janna Sophia’s compassionate and motherly essence, that the author wanted akin to that of the female bodhisattva Tārā, is tellingly visualized by Pema Namdol Thaye as an androgynous winged creature – an angel of biblical memory. The function of Bercholz’s spirit guides is not to lead, rather to show. Immanent and aloof, they turn the author’s attention to various scenes, so that he could witness the horrors brought forth by wrong views. In many ways, the two buddha-like figures are the ultimate expression of the cultural hybridity and intertextuality of Bercholz’s graphic memoir: whether consciously or unconsciously, the author flagrantly morphs his mentors on Western literary tropes. Like a Dante Alighieri *sui generis*, Bercholz tours the hells escorted by his own Virgil (Yama) and Beatrice (Janna Sophia), safe in the realization that “there [is] no judgment” (29), and what is seen are merely projections of a deluded mind.

Conclusion

As any journey home, ours too brought us back to where we started. I began my discussion lamenting the difficulty of evaluating otherworld journeys from a literary point of view and I will end it on the same note. Is Samuel Bercholz really the first American *delok*? Can we even talk of *delok* in a Western context? I cannot claim to have answers to either question, but I will offer a few preliminary observations, in the hope that future scholarship may shed some light on the matter.

Accounts of returns from death are numerous and ubiquitous. Regardless of time, space, and culture, they share common features, as they address similar human hopes and fears, but they do so in a culturally and historically specific way. As previous studies have shown (Pommaret, *Les Revenants de l'au-delà* 86-100), *delok* literature did not emerge in a literary vacuum. Chinese and Indo-Iranian themes connected to the underworld, such as the judgment of the dead, the realm of the ghosts, and *katábasis*, were adopted and adapted in the Tibetan world. Here indigenous ideas on death and afterlife merged with Mahayanic and Vajrayanic notions, in a popularization of religious tenets of which *delok* narratives are expression (Cuevas *Travels in the Netherworld*).

The diffusion (and increasing popularity) of Tibetan Buddhism in the West makes Bercholz's labeling as *delok* less ludicrous than we may expect. Interpreting his near-death experience(s) in the light of the teachings imparted to him by his Tibetan masters, the author aims to offer solace to his readers. Gone are the judgment of deeds and the external salvific interventions (no mention is made to either saintly saviors or *manī*-mantra) of traditional *delok* literature. Bercholz is not interested in offering instructions on how to behave or alleviate the sufferings of the damned, as he believes that the ultimate "grace" (note the loaded term) and "catalyst" of salvation may be easily reached once one abandons wrong views of nonduality and nihilism. The court of Yama – with its terrifying and unavoidable justice – simply sits too close for comfort to apocalyptic visions of Evangelical tradition and has no place in his journey to enlightenment and self-awareness.¹⁷

The author's confident approach is in many ways the outcome of Western cultural perceptions of the self, which is the most intriguing difference between traditional *delok* narratives and *A Guided Tour of Hell*. The authority of the autobiographical subject, that in the Tibetan cases lies completely on otherworld journey, is in Bercholz's writing unapologetically self-referential. To be doubted is, in his case, the near-death experience itself, paradoxically the only thing *delok* never question. Their journey is an intrinsically communal experience, as they embody in themselves the average human being, with their flaws and their merits. Their testimony confirms the truth of religious and social beliefs, consolidating a sense of community belongingness. The same cannot be said of Bercholz's memoir. His narrative is intensely individualist and self-reliant. The damned, phantasmagorical in their appearance, are to the awakened mind nothing more than holograms. He does not interact with them, cannot even speak to them. Where the *delok* are participant observers, he is a passive spectator. His narrative – "part personal experience, part fiction" (viii) – is offered as a sort of self-help to any reader who is going through their own personal hell.

Such apparently irreconcilable discrepancy, paradigmatic of the difficulties of translating Tibetan Buddhism into a Western context, is partially resolved in the commonality of intentions. As traditional *delok* before him, Bercholz too is moved by loving-kindness and compassion toward fellow human beings. In signing the intersubjective pact between himself and his readers, the author aims at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of life, according to Tibetan Buddhist tenets. The graphic and gory details of his narrative, in their intensity equal to those of traditional *delok* literature, are conveyed to the Western reader through illustrations, in a transposition of the *thangka* painting used by the *manī pa* in their storytelling. By opting for a Western-style comic art, Pema Namgyel Thaye intentionally adopts a medium that American readers are familiar with to stimulate their engagement and ease their immersion in a context that is deeply "other". Regardless of its literary value, *A Guided Tour of Hell* undoubtedly situates itself among new forms of life narratives that push the limits of the genre and open new issues of self-placement within a context of cultural adaptation and religious

integration. Samuel Bercholz may have been the first American *delok*, but it remains to be seen whether he will be the last.

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Notes

- ¹ On the Tibetan auto/biographical tradition and life writing in general, see, among others, Gyatso (1998), Jacoby (2014), and the volumes edited by Connermann and Rheinghans (2013) and Galli and Erhard (2021).
- ² See, in particular, Epstein (1982, 1990), Pommaret (1989, 1992, 1997, 2012), Cuevas (2008), and, more recently, Prude (2016).
- ³ Treasure-texts, or *terma* (*gter ma*), are spiritual instructions allegedly concealed by enlightened beings for future times. Central to this process is the figure of the treasure-revealer, or *tertön* (*gter ston*), a realized master whose agency is vital for the re-emergence of this material. The treasure tradition (*gter lungs*) plays a key role in the “Old School”, or Nyingma (rNying ma), of Tibetan Buddhism, whereby the concealment of treasures is mostly reconducted to the eight-century Indian master Padmasambhava, simply known as Guru Rinpoche.
- ⁴ Guided by Theosophical ideas and Hindu new-Vedantin teachings, Evans-Wentz decontextualized the mortuary text, connecting it to an imaginary “art of dying”, the symbolism of which he believed to be the expression of an ancient and universal wisdom. The choice of the title itself was a direct reference to the Egyptian funerary text known in English as *The Book of the Dead*. On the figure of Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz and his tetralogy, see, in particular, Lopez (2011).
- ⁵ Unfortunately, the amount of information is barely enough to place the narrator into their social texture. The *delok* have care to present themselves and their parents, their birthplace as well as their role in the community, but omit any relevant date, such as those of their birth or otherworld experience. In lack of a colophon, approximative dating may only be attempted in the presence of cross-textual references (Pommaret 2012).
- ⁶ *'od thams cad rang 'od | zer thams cad rang zer | gzugs thams cad rang gzugs | sgra thams cad rang sgra yin | rang sems mdang yin* (Gling bza' chos skyid 310-311). For translations of selected excerpts of the most popular *delok* narratives, including that of Lingza Chökyi, see Epstein (1982), Pommaret (1989), and Cuevas (2008).
- ⁷ For the sake of comparison, it is worth noticing that medieval returners also exhibited modest posture, and coaxing was frequently required to extol their tale. Such reticence, originally ascribable to real pressures intrinsic to the patronage system and monastic discipline, became in time a literary trope (Zaleski 81), a process that we see in *delok* literature too.
- ⁸ I will here follow Matthew Kapstein's rendering of *mañi padme* as appellative of Avalokiteśvara. According to such interpretation, much in line with the Indian and Tibetan understanding of the Sanskrit original, the mantra translates to “[possessor] of jewel and lotus”, both items part of the bodhisattva's iconography. The terms *om* and *hūṃ* are symbolic, untranslatable utterances (“The Royal Way of Supreme Compassion” 71).
- ⁹ Maudgalyāyana's *katābhis* is a popular Mahayanic tale. According to the legend, the second chief disciple of Buddha Śākyamuni travelled by magical power (*rdzhi*) to hell in search of his mother. Despite the saint's intervention, the woman could not be liberated, as she had to expiate her *karma* and suffer rebirth after rebirth (Epstein, “On the History and Psychology of the 'Das-log” 29-30).
- ¹⁰ The tale of the eleventh-century female *delok* Nangsa Öbum (sNang sa 'od 'bum), in its operatic version, is still performed as a theatrical play today. It is noteworthy though that the line between drama and recital is thin. In the *buchen* (*bu chen*) tradition of Spiti, the storytellers do

not limit themselves to support their recitation with *thangka* but physically engage with the tales, in a dramatization clearly fashioned on Alche Lhamo (*al che lha mo*), the Tibetan opera. *Buchen*, literally “great son”, represent a local variant of the term *lochen* (*blo chen*), by which the *mani pa* are also known. Both *buchen* and *lochen* (literally “great translator”) refer to the origin of the storytelling tradition, customarily ascribed to the fifteenth-century master Ratnabhadra, or Rinchen Zangpo (Rin chen bzang po, 1489–1563) in Tibetan. Disciple of Thangtong Gyalpo (Thang stong rgyal po, 1361/85–1464/85), the “father” of Alche Lhamo, *lochen* Ratnabhadra is said to have been the first of the *mani pa*. On the origin of *lochen/mani pa*, see Gelle (2012) and Cuevas (*Travels in the Netherworld* 123–136); on the *buchen* tradition, see Sutherland and Tashi (2011). For a comprehensive study of Alche Lhamo, see Henrion-Dourcy (2017).

- ¹¹ I am here referring to the different forewords, introductions, annotations, commentaries, and afterwards accompanying the different editions and publications of the text since its first appearance in 1927. These authoritative (and sometimes conflicting) interpretations, which by themselves double the length of the work they comment upon, have become in time the most popular and widely read “Tibetan” text in the West (Lopez 6).
- ¹² Patrul Rinpoche, or Orgyen Jikme Chökyi Wangpo (O rgyan ’jigs med chos kyi dbang po), was a Nyingma and Dzogchen (rDzog chen) teacher and renowned scholar. A prolific author, he belonged to the tradition of wandering practitioner.
- ¹³ Multiple near-death experiences are also reported in the life narrative of Dawa Drolma (Zla ba sgröl ma, d. 1941), a famous female *delok* and mother of the Nyingma master Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche (lCags mdud sprul sku rin po che, 1930–2002). Dawa Drolma’s account is a real *namthar*, as she journeys in the realms of hell and heaven with the self-awareness of a *yoginī*. For an English translation of her *delok* narrative, see Dawa Drolma (1995).
- ¹⁴ Modern near-death experiences are generally described as pleasant and conducive to self-awareness (Zaleski 113–116). There are cases though in which the out-of-body sensation accompanying the event is perceived as negative and anxiogenic (Boer 2020).
- ¹⁵ Any reflection on Orientalist stereotyping in modern American popular culture is beyond the scope of the present article. It will suffice to draw attention to the choice of specific cultural, religious, and ethnic groups in relation to terrorism (Muslim), violent tribalism (African), mass-murder and dehumanization (East Asian).
- ¹⁶ Generally speaking, male *delok*, such as the sixteenth-century Lama Jampa Delek (Bla ma Byams pa bde legs) or the eighteenth-century Jangchup Senge (Byang chub seng ge), display a remarkable knowledge of the stages of death and even, in Lama Jampa Delek’s case, of advanced tantric practices. Any awareness of more formal, canonical ideas of death and afterlife present in certain female *delok* narratives, like those of the seventeenth-century Karma Wangzi (Karma dbang ’dzin) or the twentieth-century Dawa Drolma, may be ascribed to former religious training. See Pommaret (1989) and Cuevas (2008).
- ¹⁷ It is worth noticing here the tendency among most Western *dharma* converts to praise Buddhism as scientific and rational, grounded on reason and individual experience while embracing meditation and rituals, the practice-based features of which still reflect folk-religious and shamanic aspects (Baumann and Prebish 3). For a study of Buddhism in the West, see, in particular, the volume edited by Prebish and Baumann (2002).

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