

The Western Quest for “Secret Tibet”

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As recently as 1962 an eminent Western Buddhist wrote, “Nowhere save in Tibet is there so much sorcery and ‘black’ magic, such degradation of the mind to selfish, evil ends.”¹ Another European practitioner, writing a few years later, asserted that the Vajrayana “is the ultimate flowering of the Mahayana doctrine.”² Yet another argued that, “The importance of Tibetan tradition for our time and for the spiritual development of humanity lies in the fact that Tibet is the last living link that connects us with the civilizations of a distant past.”³ These were familiar motifs in the Western literature on Tibet which has often evoked deeply ambivalent European reactions—fear and contempt on one side, romantic idealisations on the other. At one moment Tibet is seen as a “feudal” and “Oriental” despotism pervaded by a degenerate “Lamaism” in which base superstition, “devil-dances and butter statues”, “mummery” and “black magic” (exerting its own sinister fascination) are the order of the day; at the next Tibet appears as the last surviving treasure-house of a primordial wisdom, as the crown-jewel of the Mahayana, as an idyllic land hermetically sealed against all the contaminations and pathologies of modernity. In the period since the earliest European incursions in the 17th century Tibet has become a “focus of European desire and fantasy”.⁴ As Donald Lopez has observed, the whole corpus of Western writing on Tibet is shot through with a series of oppositions by which the religious-cultural heritage is variously perceived as pristine and polluted, authentic and derivative, holy and demonic.⁵ In recent times the “positive” aspects have been foregrounded. “Shangri-La”, “Shambhala”, “the Forbidden City”, “Potala”—these words have long since acquired a talismanic charge in the Western imagination.

¹ Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism* Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962, 189.

² John Blofeld, *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* New York: Causeway Books, 1974, 35.

³ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* London: Rider, 1969, 13.

⁴ Donald S. Lopez Jr, “Foreigners at the Lama’s Feet” in *Curators of the Buddha* ed. Donald S. Lopez Jr, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, 252.

⁵ Donald S. Lopez Jr, “New Age Orientalism: The Case of Tibet”, *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* 3:3, 1994, 38.

“Tibet” (the realm created by Western imaginings) has also become a kind of sacred space within the desecrated world of the modern West. As Peter Bishop has observed,

Sacred space has been defined in terms of its separation from the profane world, by the limited access accorded to it, by a sense of dread or fascination, as well as by a sense of order and power combined with ambiguity and paradox.⁶

Tibet has been amenable to all of these characterisations. Bishop has also noted how “Tibet” has been constructed in three European imaginative contexts: those of European imperialism, of adventure and exploration, and of comparative religion and mysticism. Moreover, “Tibet also lay at the intersection of three discourses, namely those concerning the relationship of the West (1) to nature... (2) to non-European cultures; and (3) to ideas of personal experience.”⁷ Western writings often reveal “contradictions, tensions and paradoxes” in the European understanding of this alluring land.

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the eminent Indian philosopher and first President of India, has written of the West’s attraction to “the glamour of the exotic”, and has remarked that “The East has ever been a romantic puzzle to the West, the home of adventures like those of the Arabian Nights, the abode of magic, the land of heart’s desire...”⁸ Michel Le Bris has characterized the East as it exists in the European imagination as

That Elsewhere, that yearned for realm where it was supposed that a man might get rid of the burden of self, that land outside time and space, thought of as being at once a place of wandering and a place of homecoming.⁹

But, of course, this is only one facet of a very complex phenomenon. Since the time of the classical historians and playwrights the East has also been depicted not only as exotic, mysterious and alluring but as sinister, dark, threatening. Stephen Batchelor has put the matter in psychological terms:

⁶ Peter Bishop, *Tibet in Its Place* Bedford Park: Charles Strong Trust, 1983, 3.

⁷ *ibid.*, 5.

⁸ Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* New York: OUP, 1959, 251.

⁹ Quoted in J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* London: Routledge, 1997, 19.

In the European imagination Asia came to stand for something both distant and unknown yet also to be feared. As the colonizing powers came to identify themselves with order, reason and power, so the colonized East became perceived as chaotic, irrational and weak. In psychological terms, the East became a cipher for the Western unconscious, the repository of all that is dark, unacknowledged, feminine, sensual, repressed and liable to eruption.¹⁰

Both in its historical actuality and as an imaginary European construct, Tibet has played a significant but somewhat neglected role in the development of Western esotericism. In this context it might be remarked that the attraction of Tibet for occultists and esotericists of various kind, like the appeal of the Orient generally, can be read in *both* negative and positive terms: as an “escape”, a romantic flight, as a kind of hallucination; *and* as a means of confronting and challenging what might loosely be called the tyranny of “scientific rationalism” in the West. These impulses are distinct but often inseparable and can be clearly discerned in figures as diverse as Madame Blavatsky, Carl Jung and Hermann Keyserling, to mention three who have played a significant role in the recent history of Western esotericism.

This article offers a brief sketch of European presences since the arrival of the first missionaries, an account of the Tibetan engagements of several key figures in the 20th century, and reflections on the significance of Tibet in the recent psychological and spiritual history of the West.



Pathfinders & Mythologizers: Desideri, de Koros, Waddell, Taylor

Lopez has analyzed three “moments of urgency” in the Occidental encounter with Tibet, dramatized in the experiences of a Italian missionary, an Hungarian philologist and a British colonial functionary.¹¹ These “moments” can serve as convenient points of departure for our present inquiry. The first European missionary to enter Tibet was probably Father Antonio d’Andrade, a Portuguese Jesuit who established a small mission at Tsaparang in Western Tibet in 1624. Throughout the 17th century there was an intermittent missionary presence in Western Tibet and in the Himalayan borderlands. In 1707 two Capuchin missionaries, Fathers François de Tours and Giuseppe d’Ascoli, were

¹⁰ Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West* Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994, 234.

¹¹ Lopez, “Foreigners at the Lama’s Feet”, 251-295.

the first to reach Lhasa but the earliest sustained visit was by the Jesuit Ippolito Desideri who walked from Delhi to Ladakh and across western Tibet to Lhasa. He remained in Tibet for five years (1716-1721) before a Vatican directive forced him to leave in favour of a rival Capuchin mission.¹²

Desideri was a man of considerable intellectual means; his was the first systematic attempt by a European to explain the doctrines and practices of the Tibetan Buddhists.¹³ Desideri’s time in Tibet included a lengthy stay at the great monastery of Sera where his researches included a study of the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* and a translation of Tsong-kha-pa’s *Lam rim chen mo*. Desideri’s study was motivated by missionary zeal. His initial encounters with Buddhism persuaded him that in order to convert the Tibetans he must first understand the cardinal doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*). As Lopez notes, Desideri’s “pressing agenda” could not be implemented without the aid of his “perceived opponents”.¹⁴ The ambivalence of the European before the lama was to become a familiar thread in the Western fascination with Tibet.

Two years after Desideri’s reluctant departure from Tibet, Csoma de Koros, a member of the Magyar nobility in search of the provenance of the Hungarian language, somewhat unexpectedly found himself in Ladakh.¹⁵ His agenda was philological and nationalistic, rather than evangelical, and reflects the 19th century obsession with origins (of nations, cultures, languages, religions). After travels in Afghanistan, the Punjab and Kashmir, all preparatory to an expedition to Bokhara where he hoped to discover “the obscure origins” of his homeland amongst the Hungars of Mongolia, de Koros encountered Dr William Moorcroft, East India Co. representative, veterinarian, explorer and spy. Moorcroft persuaded de Koros that a knowledge of Tibetan was crucial to his linguistic researches. De Koros was to spend the next seven years in Ladakh and south western Tibet, studying under several lamas and producing a Tibetan-English dictionary, a grammar, and a translation of a compendium of Buddhist terminology. After leaving Tibet de Koros published these works and a series of articles in *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, earning him the posthumous title of “the Father of Tibetology”. He

¹² See David Snellgrove & Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet* Boston: Shambhala, 1995, 202, 220-224.

¹³ See Richard Sherburne, “A Christian-Buddhist Dialog? Some Notes on Desideri’s Tibetan Manuscripts” in *Reflections on Tibetan Culture: Essays in Memory of Turrell V. Wylie* ed. Lawrence Epstein & Richard F. Sherburne, Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990, 295-305.

¹⁴ Lopez, “Foreigners at the Lama’s Feet”, 254.

was one of the first to turn the attention of European Buddhologists away from the Pali texts to those of the Vajrayana, asserting that, “The principal seat of Buddhism is in Tibet.”¹⁶ His ultimate destination of the Tarim Basin was never attained: de Koros died of malaria in Darjeeling in 1842.

L. Austine Waddell filled a minor colonial post in Sikkim between 1885 and 1895 during which time he made a close study of “lamaism”—i.e., the religious beliefs and practices of a distinctively Tibetan variant of Buddhism mixed with the potent remnants of the shamanistic Bönpo indigenous to the Tibeto-Himalayan regions. The monks of Sikkim apparently believed that Waddell was an incarnation of the Buddha Amitabha whose coming was prophesied in their Scriptures. “This recurrent trope of the colonial conqueror, reminiscent of Cortés and Captain Cook, allowed Waddell a double claim to superiority: on the one hand, he was an emanation of the Buddha of Infinite light; on the other, he understood, better than the credulous monks and lamas, that he was not.”¹⁷ This, says Lopez, allowed Waddell “a posture of control over and contempt for his informants” which characterized many Victorian Orientalists.

Waddell unsuccessfully adopted the time-honoured stratagem of trying to enter forbidden Tibetan territory in the disguise of a pilgrim but finally reached Lhasa as a medical officer on the Youghusband expeditionary force of 1904, sent to secure a trading agreement between Britain and Tibet. Waddell’s account of the expedition in *Lhasa and Its Mysteries* captures something of the romantic mystique which had accumulated around Tibet and exposes an ideologically-governed mythology of imperial conquest.

Wreathed in the romance of centuries, Lhasa, the secret citadel of the “undying” Grand Lama, has stood shrouded in impenetrable mystery on the Roof-of-the-World, alluring yet defying our most adventurous travelers to enter her closed gates. With all the fascination of an unsolved enigma, this mysterious city has held the imagination captive, as one of the last secret places of the earth, as the Mecca of East Asia, the sacerdotal city where the “Living Buddha”, enthroned as a god, reigns eternally over his empire of tonsured monks, weaving ropes of sand like the schoolmen of old, or placidly twirling their prayer-wheels, droning their mystic spells and exorcising devils in the intervals of their dreamy meditations. But now... the fairy Prince of “Civilisation” has roused her from her slumbers, her closed doors are broken down, her dark veil of mystery is lifted up, and the long-sealed shrine, with its grotesque cults and its idolised

¹⁵ Material on de Koros is taken mainly from Lopez, “Foreigners at the Lama’s Feet”, 256-259.

¹⁶ Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* Boston: Shambhala, 3rd edit., 1992, 285.

¹⁷ Lopez, “Foreigners at the Lama’s Feet”, 259.

Grand Lama, shorn of his sham nimbus, have yielded up their secrets and lie disenchanting before our Western eyes.¹⁸

The sexual imagery of penetration and conquest, and its association with a civilising mission, attest to some of the highly charged, subterranean currents in the Orientalist discourse of the era.

Although Waddell’s major work, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (1895), contained a good deal of information hitherto unknown, his understanding was severely limited by his Protestant prejudices and by his animus to what he took to be alien elements in Tibetan Buddhism, evident in his dismissal of much of Tibetan Buddhism as “contemptible mummery and posturing”¹⁹ (a view which persisted amongst some Tibetologists for many years). Waddell reinforced the Orientalist myth of the Tibetan tradition as deviant and degenerate:

...the Lamaist cults [wrote Waddell] comprise much deep-rooted devil-worship... For Lamaism is only thinly and imperfectly varnished over with Buddhist symbolism, beneath which the sinister growth of poly-demonist superstition darkly appears.²⁰

Interestingly, Francis Younghusband himself seems to have experienced a revelatory awakening as he departed Lhasa after his bloody and ultimately futile campaign in which hundreds of Tibetans were needlessly slain. Surveying the mountainous vista Younghusband felt an exhilaration which “thrilled through me with overpowering intensity. Never again could I think evil, or ever be at enmity with any man. All nature and all humanity were bathed in a rosy glowing radiancy.”²¹ “That single hour on leaving Lhasa,” he wrote, “was worth all the rest of a lifetime.”²² The experience, in the words of his biographer, was an “epiphanic marker from which the

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 263. See also Lopez’s comments on this passage, *Curators of the Buddha*, 292, n27. The Viceroy of India, also referring to the Younghusband expedition, apologized to the thwarted Swedish explorer Sven Hedin: “I am almost ashamed of having destroyed the virginity of the bride to whom you aspired, viz. Lhasa.” Bishop, *Tibet in Its Place*, 10.

¹⁹ Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 285.

²⁰ Lopez, “New Age Orientalism”, 38.

²¹ Younghusband, quoted in Pico Iyer, “Lost Horizons”, *The New York Review of Books*, January 15th, 1998 (internet website).

²² Quoted in Bishop, *Tibet in Its Place*, 4.

second half of his life could be charted”.²³ On his return to London he founded the World Congress of Faiths, dedicated to the promotion of inter-faith understanding.

Annie Taylor presents us with another type altogether.²⁴ An English missionary with the China Inland Mission, she had arrived in the Orient in 1884. She soon determined to spread the Good News to the Tibetan heathens. For eight years she tried to enter Tibet through India to the south and China to the east, only to be repeatedly frustrated although she did visit the great Tibetan monastery at Kumbum in 1887. But she was nothing if not determined and in September 1892 she finally left the Chinese city of Tauchau, her sights firmly set on Lhasa which had not been visited by Europeans since 1846 when the French Jesuits Abbés Huc and Gabet had been evicted and the doors of Tibet closed to missionaries. Taylor was accompanied by a Chinese guide and four Tibetans on a spectacularly ill-prepared expedition but, through indefatigable will power and a measure of luck, the diminishing party survived illness, robbery, accident and the many hazards of a brutally inhospitable environment to get within three day’s walk of Lhasa, only to be captured and turned back by Tibetan officials. By the time she arrived back in China Annie Taylor had walked some 1300 miles in seven months. Although she made no significant observations—scientific, anthropological or religious—her heroic but largely forgotten trek deserves at least a footnote in the chronicles of late Victorian travelers in the trans-Himalaya.



In Search of Secret Tibet

Madame Blavatsky

The role of the redoubtable Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in popularizing “eastern” doctrines remains hotly contested. However, it is now clear that, despite the legend which she and her hagiographers propagated, Blavatsky never stepped on Tibetan

²³ Patrick French, *Younghusband: The Last Great Imperial Adventurer* (1997), quoted in Jeremy Bernstein, “The Road to Lhasa”, *The New York Review of Books* June 12th, 1997 (internet website).

²⁴ Material on Annie Taylor taken from Luree Miller, *On Top of the World: Five Women Explorers in Tibet* Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1984, 47-69. Alexandra David-Néel’s exploits have somewhat overshadowed other women explorers in the Tibetan region in the Victorian and Edwardian periods. These included Nina Mazuchelli, Isabelle Bird Bishop, Fanny Bullock Workman and Jane Duncan, the first three of whom are portrayed in Miller’s entertaining book.

soil.²⁵ Her claims that her later writings derived from Himalayan Mahatmas, forming a kind of Atlantean brotherhood residing in secrecy in a remote region of Tibet and with access to long-hidden, antediluvian sources of esoteric wisdom, need not be treated seriously. Nonetheless, she contributed to the association of Tibet with a mystique of occultism and arcane “doctrines” originating in a primordial “wisdom” associated with hermeticism, gnosticism, the Kabbalah, and alchemy. Whilst *Isis Unveiled* (1877) was based on heterogeneous Occidental sources, her second major work, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), includes elements that clearly derive from the Vajrayana, often conflated with Vedantic ideas. Wouter Hanegraaff observes that any “attempt to reduce Blavatsky’s later synthesis of western occultism and ‘Oriental wisdom’ to specific sources is likely to suffer shipwreck on the capacity of her ‘omnivorous mind’ to assimilate whatever she found useful.”²⁶ Nonetheless, Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub was sufficiently confident of Blavatsky’s account of the *Bardo* to endorse her claim that she had been initiated into “the higher lamaistic teachings”²⁷ whilst no less an authority than D.T. Suzuki was prepared to say that her explication of Buddhist teachings in *The Voice of Silence* (1869) testified to an initiation into “the deeper side of Mahayana doctrine”.²⁸ On the other hand her many stringent critics have included Max Müller, René Guénon and Carl Jung, while Agehananda Bharati dismissed *The Secret Doctrine* as “a melee of horrendous hogwash and of fertile inventions of inane esoterica”.²⁹ Whatever might be said about the pedigree of Blavatsky’s ideas—and a great deal has been said: a recent count of books directly about Blavatsky and her teachings numbered no less than six hundred!³⁰—there is no question that Blavatsky played a significant role in wedding Western esotericism and Eastern religious traditions and in popularizing concepts such as maya, karma, and

²⁵ Even today it is still often asserted that Blavatsky spent time in Tibet, despite the absence of the smallest evidence to support such a claim. See, for example, Eileen Campbell & J.H. Brennan, *Dictionary of Mind, Body and Spirit* London: Aquarian Press, 1994, 55, or Emily B. Sellon & Renée Weber, “Theosophy and the Theosophical Society”, in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality* ed Antoine Faivre & Jacob Needleman, New York: Crossroad, 1995, 312.

²⁶ Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, Albany: SUNY, 1998, 454. (The same problem arises with a good many “occultists” and “esotericists” in the modern world: precisely the same observation might have been made, for instance, about Gurdjieff, the Armenian thaumaturge.)

²⁷ W.Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edit., 1960, n7.

²⁸ Andrew Rawlinson, *The Book of Enlightened Masters: Western Teachers in Eastern Traditions* Chicago: Open Court, 1997, 195, n3.

²⁹ Agehananda Bharati, “Fictitious Tibet: The Origins and Persistence of Rampaism”, *Tibet Society Bulletin* 7, 1994 (internet website).

³⁰ For a review of the recent and ever-proliferating literature on Blavatsky see Stephen Prothero, “Theosophy’s Sinner/Saint: Recent Books on Madame Blavatsky”, *Religious Studies Review* 23:3, July 1997, 256-262. See also Frederick Clews, “The Consolation of Theosophy”, *The New York Review of Books*, September 19th, 1996

meditation.³¹ Indeed, it has recently been argued that perhaps the signal achievement of the Theosophical movement, of which Blavatsky remains the presiding deity, has been its role in generating interest in and respect for Eastern religious conceptions.³² However, it should also be noted that Blavatsky’s purported shift from a “Hermetic” (i.e., Western) to an “Oriental” perspective has been greatly exaggerated. Hanegraaff, drawing on the work of Helmuth von Glasenapp and Jörg Wichmann, persuasively argues that this shift is “more apparent than real” and that theosophy as a whole, despite its popularisation of some Indian doctrines, “is not only rooted in western esotericism, but has remained an essentially western movement”.³³

Alexandra David-Néel

After a flamboyant career in France as student anarchist, opera singer, journalist, feminist, and adventurer, Alexandra David-Néel (b1868) was introduced to Buddhism through her studies, in the first decade of the century, at the Sorbonne. Her teachers included the eminent Orientalists, Sylvain Levi and Edouard Foucaux, the latter providing her introduction to Tibetan Buddhist texts. She had made her first trip to the East in 1891, to Ceylon and India where she received some training in the Vedanta. She also visited Hanoi as part of a touring opera company. After producing a well-received book on Buddhism (*The Buddhism of the Buddha and Buddhist Modernism*), in 1911 David-Neél set out again for India, with serious intent: “There are great men at the Sorbonne, who know all the roots of the words and the historical dates, but I wish to live philosophy on the spot and undergo physical and spiritual training, not just read about them.”³⁴ She was one of the earliest in a long line of seekers for whom bookish learning was only a prelude to a more direct existential engagement with Eastern spirituality. This sojourn in Asia was to last fourteen years. We cannot here retrace David-Néel’s many journeyings through ashrams, temples, monasteries, shrines and centres of learning in the subcontinent, in the Tibeto-Himalayan regions, Southeast Asia and China —but she had adventures aplenty. She interviewed the thirteenth Dalai Lama, was befriended by the Crown Prince of Sikkim, studied Tibetan doctrines with Lama Dawa Kazi-Samdup,

(internet website). For a brief, dispassionate and well-informed discussion of Blavatsky’s influence on Western occultism and esotericism see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture* 448-455.

³¹ J.J. Clarke, 89. See also Mark Bevir, “The West Turns Eastward: Madame Blavatsky and the Transformation of the Occult Tradition”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62:3, 1994, 747-765.

³² Emily B. Sellon & Renée Weber, “Theosophy and the Theosophical Society”, 325-326.

³³ Hanegraaff, 455.

³⁴ David-Neél, quoted in Miller, *On Top of the World* 145.

adopted a novice Karg-yu monk in Sikkim (Yongden, who was to remain her constant companion until his death in 1955), spent a harsh Tibetan winter in a cave under the tutelage of a reclusive *gomchen*, became highly fluent in Tibetan, spent three years in the monastic citadel of Kumbum and undertook prodigious studies of Vajrayana texts and practices. During her travels she also encountered figures such as Nyanatiloka Thera, one of the first Westerners to become a Theravadin monk,³⁵ Lama Anagarika Govinda, another Western convert to Buddhism, and D.T. Suzuki.

In her fifty-fifth year, disguised as a Tibetan beggar-woman and accompanied by Yongden, she embarked on her most famous expedition, the journey to Lhasa, 2000 miles on foot, achieving a goal that had defied many intrepid travelers throughout the 19th century. In fact, the French priests Huc and Gabet and the eccentric Englishman Thomas Manning were the only European visitors to Lhasa during the whole of the nineteenth century. Amongst those who had failed to reach the Tibetan capital were the Russian explorer Prejevalsky in 1879 and the Swede Sven Hedin in 1898, as well as several American and English travelers.³⁶ David-Néel’s account of this journey and of her two months in Lhasa (described in distinctly anti-romantic terms) has recently been challenged as a fabrication but the case against her is flimsy in the extreme.³⁷ No doubt David-Néel herself played a significant part in creating her own legend—her biographers have had the devil’s own job in separating fact and fiction in her multifarious writings³⁸—but she was certainly neither a fraud nor a credulous romantic.

After her return to Europe David-Néel was showered with honours, and became a popular lecturer and prolific writer on Eastern subjects. In 1936 she returned to the Orient, via Siberia, for what was to be another long stay, extended by the vicissitudes of war, after which she returned to her home in Digne, France. Befitting such an indomitable explorer, David-Néel lived on until 1969, her one hundred and first year.

³⁵ Nyanatiloka Thera was born Anton Gueth in Germany, 1878. He came to Buddhism through theosophy and was ordained in Burma in 1904, later founding the Island Hermitage in Ceylon. For a biographical sketch see Rawlinson, *Enlightened Masters* 459-461. See also Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West: the Encounter of Buddhism and Western Culture* Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994, 307-308.

³⁶ See Bishop, *Tibet in Its Place*, 1.

³⁷ See Barbara & Michael Foster, *The Secret Lives of Alexandra David-Néel* Woodstock: The Overlook Press, 1998, 225-234.

David-Neél’s most significant works on Tibetan subjects are *My Journey to Lhasa* (1927), *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (1931), *Initiates and Initiations in Tibet* (1931) and *The Secret Oral Teachings in Tibetan Buddhist Sects* (1967), the last of which was first published in English by the Beat poet and bookseller Lawrence Ferlinghetti. As one scholar has recently observed, “The representation of Tibetan Buddhism historically has been and continues to be situated in a domain where the scholarly and the popular commingle, a domain that is neither exclusively one or the other.”³⁹ Alexandra David-Néel’s writings illustrate the point, occupying a position somewhere between those of the popular theosophists/occultists on one flank and the more sober (though often misinformed) works of Orientalist scholars on the other. David-Neél herself is often relegated to the ranks of “women adventurers”—this despite the production of some forty-odd books, several of which have wielded an extraordinary influence. Her absence from the annals of Orientalist scholarship is to be explained, perhaps, by the fact that her writings are an idiosyncratic admixture of autobiography, travelogue, scholarship and, at least according to her detractors, fantasy.⁴⁰ Her books have been disparaged by both practitioners and scholars. John Blofeld, for instance, wrote that, “David-Néel was so deeply concerned with her public image that her most widely read books are limited to Tibetan Buddhism’s popular aspects. Little is said about its spiritually or philosophically profound aspects.”⁴¹ The occultists and esotericists, for their part, are often out of sympathy with the rational and skeptical aspects of David-Néel’s sensibility.⁴²

Whatever one might make of the contradictory claims made about David-Néel, the tangible achievements remain, and many have found intellectual and spiritual nourishment in her work and inspiration in her example—Alan Watts, Lama Govinda, Peter Matthiessen amongst them. Not without reason did Lawrence Durrell call her “the most astonishing woman of our time”.⁴³ Unlike most of her predecessors she believed that the only way to understand the spiritual economy of the Tibetans was to live amongst

³⁸ The two most recent biographies are those by the Fosters (already cited) and Ruth Middleton’s *Alexandra David-Neél: Portrait of an Adventurer*, Boston: Shambhala, 1989. (Although the Fosters have a taste for the lurid and the sensational their biography is rather more robust than Middleton’s.)

³⁹ Donald S. Lopez Jr, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 110.

⁴⁰ For instance, there is no mention of her in recent works by J.J. Clarke, Donald Lopez or Raymond Schwab although she is clearly more significant than many of the figures they do discuss.

⁴¹ Blofeld cited in Foster, *Secret Lives*, 299 (source uncited).

⁴² The dates are of the first English translations. For bibliographical information on books by and about David-Neél see Foster, *Secret Lives* 310-319.

⁴³ Foster, *Secret Lives*, xxi.

the common people as one of them.⁴⁴ Her close familiarity with ordinary folk in the Tibeto-Himalayan regions, her mastery of Tibetan, her lengthy studies under authentic teachers, her austerities and sustained meditational practice, and her residence in several great monasteries all qualified her to speak and write about the mysteries of the religious heritage. Her now well-known accounts of such alien practices as divination or *lung-gom-pa* gather more weight when we remember that David-Néel thought of herself as an orthodox Buddhist who abhorred superstition of any kind. Nonetheless, she was able to approach strange religious practices with an open mind and a sympathetic receptivity. One of her contemporaries, Professor A. d’Arsonval, wrote of the Frenchwoman:

This Easterner, this complete Tibetan, has remained a Westerner, a disciple of Descartes and of Claude Bernard, practicing the philosophical skepticism of the former which, according to the latter, should be the constant ally of the scientific observer. Madame David-Néel has observed everything in Tibet in a free and impartial spirit.⁴⁵

The claim may be naive but certainly David-Néel cannot be dismissed as either gullible or simple-minded. Her accounts of Tibetan doctrines and practices, and of the culture at large, need to be treated with some caution; nevertheless, they retain much that is lively and illuminating, and we would be the poorer without them.

W.Y. Evans-Wentz

“In this book I am seeking—so far as possible—to suppress my own views and to act simply as the mouthpiece of a Tibetan sage, of whom I was the recognized disciple.” So wrote W.Y. Evans-Wentz in his Preface to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, published for the first time in English in 1927, and later to become a canonical text amongst Westerners turning to Tibetan teachings.⁴⁶ The credentials of the “Tibetan sage” (Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup), the nature of the “discipleship”, and Evans-Wentz’s scholarly qualifications (which did not include fluency in Tibetan) have all come under scrutiny in recent years.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, the publication of this text remains a pivotal moment in the Western encounter with Tibet. Evans-Wentz was subsequently instrumental in the translation and

⁴⁴ See Miller, *On Top of the World*, 171-172.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Miller, *On Top of the World*, 186.

⁴⁶ Evans-Wentz, *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ix.

⁴⁷ For some merciless criticism of the Evans-Wentz/Dawa-Samdup translations see John Reynolds, trans & ed., *Self-Liberation through Seeing with Naked Awareness*, Barrytown: Station Hill, 1989. This is a new translation of what Evans-Wentz published as *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. See also Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri-La*, Chapter 2.

publication of three other texts seminal in the rapidly growing field of Tibetology: *Tibet’s Great Yogi, Milarepa* (1928), *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines* (1935) and *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (1967).⁴⁸

Walter Yeeling Evans-Wentz was born in 1875 into a wealthy American business family of one-time Baptists who had turned to spiritualism and theosophy.⁴⁹ From an early age Evans-Wentz was disenchanted with conventional Christianity and interested in psychic phenomena, coming under the spell of Madame Blavatsky’s writings. He retained an interest in theosophy throughout his life and wrote in his unpublished autobiography, “As I have held myself formally with no one country or race, so I have not allied myself formally with any of the world’s religions. I have embraced them all.”⁵⁰

Evans-Wentz studied religion, philosophy and history at Stanford where he was little impressed his teachers but much affected by two visitors to the university, William James and W.B. Yeats. His subsequent studies at Oxford produced his first major work, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (1911), in wide circulation to this day. At Oxford Evans-Wentz met T.E. Lawrence with whom, he later somewhat implausibly claimed, he fought atop camels in the Middle East. Lawrence encouraged him to visit the Orient. After a year in Egypt, Evans-Wentz boarded a ship in Port Said for Colombo, and so launched a journey which was to last three decades and which he later described as “wandering from the palm-wreathed shores of Ceylon, and thence through the wonderland of the Hindus, to the glacier-clad heights of the Himalayan Ranges, seeking out the Wise Men of the East. Sometimes I lived with city-dwellers, sometimes in jungle and mountain solitude among yogis, sometimes in monasteries with monks; sometimes I went on pilgrimages as one of the salvation-seeking multitude.”⁵¹

Evans-Wentz initially devoted himself to studying the ancient history, customs and religious tradition of Ceylon, amassing a collection of valuable Pali manuscripts which he later donated to Stanford. In 1918 he set off on pilgrimage to virtually every

⁴⁸ In each case the translation work primarily coming from Kazi-Samdub, Evans-Wentz being a compiler, editor and commentator.

⁴⁹ Most of the biographical material which follows is taken from Ken Winkler, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light: The Biography of Dr. Walter Y. Evans-Wentz* Berkeley: Dawnfire Press, 1981. A short sketch can also be found in Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 285-287.

⁵⁰ *Some Notes for an Autobiography*, quoted in Winkler, 8-9.

⁵¹ Preface to the first edition of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ixx-xx in the 3rd edition.

major religious site in India—Madurai, Madras, Amritsar, Simla, Badrinath, Rishikesh, Benares, Bodh Gaya, Calcutta, Darjeeling amongst them. He interviewed Annie Besant in Madras (where he briefly became entangled in Theosophical Society machinations), developed close relationships with Swamis Satyananda and Syamananda, and later in his Indian travels met Krishnamurti, Paul Brunton, Ramana Maharshi, Swami Yogananda, Sri Krishna Prem (Ronald Nixon), and Sunyabhai (the Norwegian Alfred Sorenson who had gone to India at the behest of Rabindranath Tagore and who became a sunyassin of sorts in the Almora district⁵²). However, the most providential of these meetings proved to be with Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub in Sikkim. The lama, who had already acted as a translator for Alexandra David-Néel, was at this time the headmaster of a boys school in Gangtok. He had earlier been Tibetan Plenipotentiary in India and on the staff of the thirteenth Dalai Lama during his Indian exile in 1910.

The lama was a colourful character, fond of the drink and given to wandering off for days at a time to the neglect of his pedagogical duties. Alexandra David-Neel, in a charming portrait of the lama in *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, tells us that

His passion for reading literally tyrannized the man. Wherever he went he carried a book with him and, absorbed in it, he lost himself in a kind of ecstasy. For hours he would forget where he was. His learned translations, long conversations with lamas and the celebrating of occult rites constantly distracted him from attending school. Indeed, he often seemed to forget of its very existence.⁵³

His foibles should not obscure the fact that the lama was also a man of considerable learning, spiritual discernment, humility and good humour, and the compiler of an English-Tibetan dictionary. It was he who translated the *Bardo Thodol*, using Evans-Wentz as his “living English dictionary”. Evans-Wentz’s references to himself as a disciple of the lama seem to have been rather loose, this kind of relationship never being confirmed by the lama himself nor by anybody else. Kazi Dawa-Samdub was appointed as a lecturer at the prestigious University of Calcutta in 1919 and died three years later. It was not until 1927 that Evans-Wentz was able to publish the translation which owed so much to the efforts of the lama.

⁵² On Sorenson/Shunya see Rawlinson, *Enlightened Masters*, 528-532. There are also some scattered references to him in Ken Winkler’s biography of Lama Govinda, *A Thousand Journeys* Shaftesbury, Element, 1990.

⁵³ Alexandra David-Néel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* New York: University Books, 1956, 17.

The later life of Evans-Wentz, this eccentric and insular “gypsy-scholar” (so dubbed by one of his Oxford professors, Dr Marrett) is not without many intriguing aspects—his friendship with Lama Govinda, his encounters with figures such as Carl Jung and Dwight Goddard, his work on sacred geography, culminating in his last publication, *Cuchama and Scared Mountains* (1981) (a work which anticipates the contemporary interest in a resacralized “nature”), and his defence of the spiritual heritage of the American Indians. He was a highly principled, somewhat puritanical and isolated man who, despite considerable wealth, lived the last twenty-five years of his life in a down ‘n’ outers motel in San Diego. He spurned public life and never took on the role of spiritual teacher. Of his life he wrote—and the evidence supports the claim—that he had “striven to love all mankind of all nations and races and faiths... dwelt in the solitude of deserts, of the jungles, of the mountain tops... sought neither worldly goods nor worldly honors... relinquished those things men struggle for most.”⁵⁴

In our present context his work on the religious literature of Tibet is of primary interest. In considering Evans-Wentz’s significance for Tibetology it needs be remembered that the central Tantric texts of the Vajrayana were at that time completely unknown in the West. Those few scholars who knew something about Tibetan tantra, such as Sir John Woodruffe, tended to dismiss it as a degraded form of Hinduism. It is not surprising that the collaborative efforts of Evans-Wentz and Dawa-Samdub produced translations which subsequent scholarship has shown to contain a good many errors.⁵⁵ It must also be said that Evans-Wentz understood Tibetan Buddhism through spectacles coloured by theosophy and by his intent to find in the Himalayas a worldwide “wisdom religion” of whose existence he had been persuaded by his inquiries into Gnosticism, the Egyptian and Greek Mysteries, and Hinduism.⁵⁶

Although Evans-Wentz only spent one day of his life on Tibetan soil, and notwithstanding the various criticisms to which his work has been subjected, nor

⁵⁴ *Some Notes for an Autobiography* quoted in Winkler, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light*, 1.

⁵⁵ See comments by Lama Govinda in Winkler, *Pilgrim of the Clear Light*, vi. In defence of Evans-Wentz it must be said that he was always ready to be apprised of errors and inadvertencies: after World War II, for instance, his friend Lama Govinda (at this time living on Evans-Wentz’s modest “estate” at Kasar Devi, near Almora) came across an authorised Tibetan block print of the *Bardo Thodol* with which he closely compared the Evans-Wentz translation. Govinda’s corrections appeared in subsequent editions of the text. See Evans-Wentz’s Preface to third edition. Details of Evans-Wentz’s friendship with Govinda and his wife, Li Gotami, can be found in K. Winkler, *A Thousand Journeys*, Chapter 12.

⁵⁶ See Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 286.

forgetting the contribution of Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdub, there can be no doubt that he performed a heroic labour in bringing the Tibetan texts to a Western audience. He was also successful in spreading the view, earlier treated with scholarly derision, that the Vajrayana was neither a degeneration of Theravadin Buddhism nor incompatible with it, but the highest expression of Buddhist esotericism, related to orthodox Buddhism as “higher mathematics to lower”.⁵⁷ In introducing *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* he voiced his hope that the translation would “serve as one more spiritual strand in an unbreakable bond of good will and universal peace, binding East and West together in mutual respect and understanding, and in love such as overleaps every barrier of creed and caste and race.”⁵⁸ It was a noble if grandiose hope; who is to say that it has not been at least partially realized?

Carl Jung

The most influential Western psychologist who evinced a serious interest in Eastern doctrines and methods was Carl Jung: Taoism, Zen, Tibetan Buddhism and Indian yoga all left an imprint on his work, though some of Jung’s more scientific followers have sought to obscure these influences which they see as antagonistic to a “scientific objectivity”. Indeed, Jung himself was often troubled by the tensions created by the commitment of Western psychology and psychiatry to the modern scientific paradigm. His interest in Oriental doctrines can be traced back to his teenage years when he was much influenced by his reading of Schopenhauer who believed that India was “the land of the most ancient and the most pristine wisdom” from whence could be traced many currents within European civilisation, Christianity included.⁵⁹ One senses in Jung’s somewhat ambivalent attraction to the East something of these Schopenhauerian motifs.

Jung launched his inquiries into Eastern religions in 1909 when he turned to a cross-cultural, comparative study of religious mythology and symbolism: it was out of these researches that Jung fashioned one of his cardinal ideas, the collective

⁵⁷ Evans-Wentz quoted in Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 287.

⁵⁸ p. xxi in 3rd edition.

⁵⁹ Schopenhauer subscribed to the widely held Romantic belief that Christianity “had Indian blood in its veins” and claimed that “Christianity taught only what the whole of Asia knew already long before and even better”, for which reason he believed that Christianity would never take root in India: “the ancient wisdom of the human race”, he stated, “will not be supplanted by the events in Galilee. On the contrary, Indian wisdom flows back to Europe, and will produce fundamental changes in our knowledge and thought”. Quotes from Schopenhauer taken from Clarke, 68-69. See also Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe’s Rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, 427-428.

unconscious—and one which helped rupture his relationship with Freud. We can find more than a few traces of Eastern thought in such early works as *Psychology of the Unconscious* (1912) and *Psychological Types* (1921). However, it was only in the 1920s that Jung’s interest in Eastern psychology came into sharp focus, largely through his encounters with the distinguished Orientalists Richard Wilhelm and Heinrich Zimmer, leading to a series of short but potent works. These included his foreword to D.T. Suzuki’s *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (1939) and his commentaries on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* (a mystical and alchemical Chinese text) (1929), *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (1935), *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* (1939) and the *I Ching* (1950).⁶⁰ His Oriental interests culminated in 1938 in a somewhat unsatisfactory trip to India and Ceylon of which he wrote in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*:

I had felt the impact of the dreamlike world of India...My own world of European consciousness had become peculiarly thin, like a network of telegraph wires high above the ground, stretching in straight lines all over the surface of an earth looking treacherously like a geographic globe.

He was profoundly disturbed by the thought that the world of Indian spirituality might be the real world and that the European lived in a “a madhouse of abstractions”.⁶¹

In his commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* Jung avowed that he wanted to build “a bridge of psychological understanding between East and West”:

he claimed to discover in this ancient text an unexpected ‘agreement between the psychic states and symbolisms of East and West’ which not only helped to provide confirmation for his theory of the collective unconscious, but also indicated that the goal of becoming a conscious and fully realised person ‘unites the most diverse cultures in a common task’.⁶²

From *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation* Jung derived the lesson of the fundamental reality of mind, or consciousness, insisting that the text “bases itself upon psychic reality, that is upon the psyche as the main and unique condition of existence.”⁶³

Of *The Book of the Dead*, some time after its appearance in English, Jung wrote that “it has been my constant companion, and to it I owe not only many stimulating ideas and

⁶⁰ Most of Jung’s writings on Eastern subjects can be found in Volume XI (*Psychology and Religion: West and East*) of *The Collected Works of Carl Jung*, London: Routledge, 1969 (second edition). His commentary on *The Secret of the Golden Flower* is in Volume XIII, *Alchemical Studies*.

⁶¹ Gerhard Wehr, *Jung: A Biography* Boston: Shambhala, 1988, 283.

⁶² Clarke, 154

⁶³ C.G. Jung, “Commentary on *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*”, *Collected Works XI*, 481.

discoveries, but also many fundamental insights...Its philosophy contains the quintessence of Buddhist psychological criticism; and as such, one can truly say that it is of unexampled superiority...”.⁶⁴ (It should be noted that Jung was careful to distinguish between the metaphysical and religious dimensions of the Eastern texts, and their psychological significance⁶⁵ — but from one point of view it might be argued that this distinction was only cosmetic and primarily for the benefit of “scientific” Westerners.)

In general terms we can say that Jung’s project was to reanimate an understanding of the inner psychological world which had been neglected by the Western preoccupation with a mastery of the physical world. He believed that Eastern doctrines could play a vital role in counterbalancing a Western science engrossed in the physical properties and processes of the external material world. However, he had grave misgivings about the direct European application of Eastern spiritual techniques. Despite the fact that Jung saw considerable overlap between his own therapeutic practices to enhance individuation and the techniques of Indian yoga, he wrote of the latter: “...yoga in Mayfair or Fifth Avenue, or in any other place which is on the telephone, is a spiritual fake”⁶⁶ — and here we may permit ourselves to read “yoga” as signifying all Eastern psycho-spiritual techniques, be they Indian, Tibetan or Chinese.

Jung’s significance in the West is manifold. In our present context we can simply note that his interest in Tibetan doctrines helped to strengthen the tenuous connections between the Vajrayana in the East and both psychotherapy and esotericism in the West.⁶⁷ In this respect his work marks an attempt at the kind of synthesis of oriental and

⁶⁴ C.G. Jung, *Psychological Commentary in The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. W.Y. Evans-Wentz, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition, 1960, xxxvi-vii.

⁶⁵ “I quite deliberately bring everything that purports to be metaphysical into the daylight of psychological understanding...[and] strip things of their metaphysical wrappings in order to make them objects of psychology”; from *Psychology and the East*, quoted in Clarke, 154-155.

⁶⁶ C.G. Jung, *Psychological Commentary on ‘The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation’* (1939), in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol XI*, 500. Likewise: “Study yoga, you will learn an infinite amount from it—but do not try to apply it.” Eastern techniques of spiritual transformation, he believed, had over millennia grown in a climate very different from that of the West whose development “had been along entirely different lines”. C.G. Jung, *Psychology and the East*, 82.

⁶⁷ There has been a recent surge of interest in Jung’s understanding of Eastern doctrines and on his role in disseminating them in the West. For a small sample of this literature see J.J. Clarke, *Jung and Eastern Thought: A Dialogue with the Orient* London: Routledge, 1994; Harold Coward, *Jung and Eastern Thought* Albany: SUNY, 1985; Radmilla Moacanin, *Jung’s Psychology and Tibetan Buddhism*, Boston, Wisdom Publications, 1986; Philip Novak, “C.G. Jung in the Light of Asian Psychology”, *Religious Traditions* 14, 1991, 66-87; Harry Oldmeadow, *Mircea Eliade and Carl Jung: ‘Priests without Surplices’?* Department of Arts, La Trobe University Bendigo, 1995 (Studies in Western Traditions: Occasional Papers, 1). On Jung’s role in the recent history of Western esotericism see Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* Albany: SUNY, 1994;

occidental ideas which had been one of the principal aims of Keyserling’s School of Wisdom, founded in Darmstadt in 1920—and with which Jung had some contact in its early years.⁶⁸ (Count Hermann Keyserling [1880-1946] traveled extensively in Ceylon, India, China and Japan early in the twentieth century, and subsequently wrote *The Travel Diary of a Philosopher* [1919], an influential book in the inter-war period in which he argued for an internationalist outlook which could accommodate the best of Eastern and Western thought. More recently Keyserling is of interest as one of the primary influences on Roberto Assagioli and his system of “Psychosynthesis” which, it might be remarked, also owed a good deal to Eastern mystical traditions.)

Giuseppe Tucci

Giuseppe Tucci’s work on Tibet might be situated in various contexts and has recently attracted some attention in the debate about the collusion of Orientalism and fascism. This is too complex and hazardous an area to enter here. However, we should note in passing that, unlike many contemporaneous Tibetologists, Giuseppe Tucci did actually make extended visits to Tibet: between 1927 and 1948 he visited Tibet and the contiguous Himalayan kingdoms no less than eight times. He had earlier spent five years in India (1925-30), and later, in the fifties, directed two expeditions to Nepal.⁶⁹ He combined in himself the qualities of the explorer, naturalist and scholar. In *Tibet, Land of Snows* (1967) he describes his impressions of both the landscape and the culture in rhapsodic prose:

Only those who have been in Tibet know the fascination of its huge landscapes, its diaphanous air that scarfs the icy peaks with turquoise, its vast silence that at once humbles man and uplifts him. Flights of mountain ranges flow on endlessly like the elaborations of a single musical theme in some oriental melody... Bountiful hospitality, constant good humour, attentiveness to the stranger, sincerity of religious beliefs yet sensible tolerance... life in Tibet was lived on another plane, a kind of miraculous mediaeval survival behind the sheltering, isolating mountain-belt.⁷⁰

The trope of Tibet as “medieval survival”, a “timeless reliquary”, was a popular one in many European writings of the time and was perhaps given its most extended and

Gerhard Wehr, “C.G. Jung in the Context of Christian Esotericism and Cultural History” in *Modern Esoteric Spirituality*, 381-398; Wouter J. Hanegraaff, 496-513.

⁶⁸ On Keyserling see Mercedes Gallagher Parks, *Introduction to Keyserling: an account of the man and his work*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1934. See esp. Ch 3. For some commentary on Keyserling’s influence on Assagioli see Jean Hardy, *A Psychology with Soul: Psychosynthesis in Evolutionary Context* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.

⁶⁹ For a brief account of Tucci’s career see Luciano Petech, “Giuseppe Tucci”, *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 7, 1984, 137-142.

⁷⁰ Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibet, Land of Snows* London: Paul Elek, 1967, 13-14.

eloquent expression in *Secret Tibet*, written by Fosco Mariani, Tucci’s photographer on his last expedition.⁷¹

Tucci recounted his experiences on the 1948 expedition in *To Lhasa and Beyond*. He visited Western Tibet and joined pilgrimages to Mt Kailas and Lake Manasarovar. “Those places”, he wrote, “deserve to be sacred, if for nothing else, for the natural beauty God lavished on them in the luckiest days of His creation.”⁷² He also visited Tibet’s ancient Western capital, Sakya where he explored its temples and libraries while the 1948 expedition included researches in Shigatse, Gyantse and the Yarlung Valley as well as Lhasa and the great monasteries of Drepung, Sera and Ganden. He was accompanied on part of this expedition by the Sherpa Tenzing, soon to ascend Mt Everest with Edmund Hillary.⁷³ *To Lhasa and Beyond* includes a fascinating account of Tucci’s highly formal audience with the fourteen-year old Dalai Lama who, more than three decades later, was warmly to commend a new edition of the book, writing, “Tucci’s description of the timeless civilization of the Tibetan people, is as perceptive and relevant today as it was when he wrote the book thirty years ago.”⁷⁴

Heinrich Harrer

In 1939, after climbing the northern face (“Murder Wall”) of the Eiger in Switzerland, Heinrich Harrer participated in a mountaineering expedition in the Himalayas. The outbreak of war saw the Austrian captured by the British, his fellow-internees including Nyanatiloka Thera and Lama Govinda. In 1943 Harrer and a companion, Peter Aufschnaiter, escaped and trekked from the Indian foothills, over some of the most dangerous passes in the Himalayas, across the Tibetan border, eventually arriving in Lhasa some 21 months later after covering nearly two and a half thousand kilometres without benefit of maps, guides or equipment. Harrer spent the next five years in Tibet, acting for a time as a tutor to the young Dalai Lama who was aged eleven when they first met in 1946. The Chinese invasion of 1950 prompted Harrer’s departure from Tibet.

⁷¹ Fosco Mariani, *Secret Tibet* London: Hutchinson, 1952. For some discussion of the medieval theme in Mariani, and more generally in European writings about Tibet, see Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La* London: the Athlone Press, 1989.

⁷² Giuseppe Tucci, *To Lhasa and Beyond* Ithaca: Snow Lion Books, 1983, 8.

⁷³ Tenzing gives his own portrait of Tucci, dictated to James Ullman and reproduced in his *Man of Everest*. For Tucci’s comments on Tenzing see *Tibet, Land of Snows*, 13.

⁷⁴ Preface to *To Lhasa and Beyond*, 1983 edit., 5.

Harrer’s *Seven Years in Tibet* (English edition, 1953) offered colourful and engaging, if not very deep, accounts of various Tibetan rites and customs, and undoubtedly served for many Westerners as their first introduction to Tibetan culture. It was also through this book that many first became aware of the institution and the person of the Dalai Lama. It became an immediate best-seller, and was eventually translated into nearly fifty languages; it still sells well today.

The recent film of the same name, starring Brad Pitt as Harrer, prompted an Austrian reporter to delve into Harrer’s life in the thirties, leading to the disclosure of Harrer’s involvement in both the SA and the SS, and his continuing links with underground Nazi groups. The ensuing publicity was something of an embarrassment for the Hollywood producers who thought they had a sure-fire winner on their hands with a film about the now-chic subject of ante-Chinese Tibet.⁷⁵

Marco Pallis

Marco Pallis was born of Greek parents in Liverpool in 1895, educated at Harrow and Liverpool University, and served in the British army during the Great War.⁷⁶ Later he studied music with Arnold Dolmetsch, and was much influenced by the writings of two great perennialists, Ananda Coomaraswamy and René Guénon, whom he visited in Cairo and two of whose books he translated with his friend Richard Nicholson. In 1923 Pallis visited southern Tibet on a mountaineering trip. He returned to the area in 1933 and 1936, consumed by an interest in its traditional culture, and stayed in monasteries in Sikkim and Ladakh. He returned for a more extended visit after World War II. After visiting Ceylon and South India, and receiving the darsan of Ramana Maharshi at Tiravunnamalai, he studied under Tibetan lamas near Shigatse and was initiated, with the Tibetan name of Thubden Tendzin, into one of the lineages.⁷⁷ Pallis returned to England in 1950 and with Richard Nicholson and some other musicians formed the English Consort of Viols, a group dedicated to the preservation of early English music. Pallis made several concert tours with this group. On one such tour to the U.S.A. he visited the Abbey of Gethsemani

⁷⁵ See William Cash: “The Nazi who climbed a mountain and came down a Hollywood film star”, *The Age*, October 18, 1997, News Extra 8. The Harrer case also raises again the painful problem of the possible collusions between Orientalism, Western exponents of Eastern practices and fascism.

⁷⁶ Information on Pallis taken from his own books, from his article “A Fateful Meeting of Minds: A.K. Coomaraswamy and René Guénon”, *Studies in Comparative Religion* 12:2 & 4, 1978, 175-188, and from Thomas Merton, *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* New York: New Directions, 1975, 71-72.

⁷⁷ Arnaud Desjardins *The Message of the Tibetans* Stuart & Watkins, London, 1969, 20.

(Kentucky) where he met Thomas Merton, with whom he had already opened a correspondence.⁷⁸

Marco Pallis wrote two books deriving from his experiences in Tibet: *Peaks and Lamas* (1939) which was reprinted several times and became something of a bestseller, and *The Way and the Mountain* (1960). They are a unique blend of travelogue, botanical lore, discursive essays on Tibetan civilisation, and metaphysical expositions. In the former Pallis allows the reader to become familiar with the landscape, with its inhabitants and with the values which govern their lives without obtruding Western “interpretations” on his subjects. The second of his books, written in the light of a fully matured understanding of the Vajrayana, includes several peerless essays on such subjects as the “presiding idea” of Tibetan Buddhism, the institution of the Dalai Lama (on which any amount of nonsense had hitherto appeared), and Buddhism in Sikkim. Pallis’s oeuvre is unhampered by any assumptions about the superiority of the West; indeed, his books derive much of their insight from his adamant opposition to the modern spirit and his receptivity to the lessons of tradition in one of its last strongholds. During his trips he enhanced his fluency in the Tibetan language, wore Tibetan clothes and mixed freely not only with learned lamas and geshees but with ordinary folk.⁷⁹ He achieved momentary public attention for his role in the exposure of Lobsang Rampa (about whom more presently!). Pallis wrote many articles for *Studies in Comparative Religion*, some of which are included in his last publication, *A Buddhist Spectrum* (1980). Marco Pallis died in 1990. Huston Smith wrote of his work, “For insight, and the beauty insight requires if it is to be effective, I find no writer on Buddhism surpassing him.”⁸⁰

Lama Anagarika Govinda

To strike a personal note: in the early 1970s I returned to Australia from postgraduate studies in England. Although I had a vague but sympathetic interest in matters religious and spiritual my worldview was largely shaped by a constellation of humanistic and radical European thinkers to whom I had been exposed in my undergraduate studies.

⁷⁸ See Marco Pallis: “Thomas Merton, 1915-1968”, *Studies in Comparative Religion* 3:3, 1969, 138-146.

⁷⁹ See review of a later edition of *Peaks and Lamas* by R.W.J. Austin in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 9:4, 1975, 253-254.

⁸⁰ Huston Smith, Review of Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* in *The Eastern Buddhist* 15:2, Autumn 1982, 145. The work of Marco Pallis fulfils a vital function in the traditionalist school in which Buddhism has received comparatively little attention. Mention should be made of a major work on Buddhism by another traditionalist: Frithjof Schuon’s *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968 (later revised and published as *Treasures of Buddhism* Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1993).

During my absence my brother Peter had become deeply interested in Buddhism, particularly the Vajrayana, and was much impressed by the works of one Lama Anagarika Govinda. His efforts to persuade me to read this author met with some resistance and it was not until I was on a visit to India and Nepal in 1974 that I finally, and somewhat reluctantly, picked up a copy of *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* (1960). It proved to be an astonishing experience and helped to alter my own spiritual and intellectual trajectory. Soon after, on the slopes of the Himalayas and in sight of Mt Annapurna, I read the autobiographical *The Way of the White Clouds* which — though I would scarcely have thought it possible—made an even more profound impact than *Foundations*. A whole new world opened up before me. I was amazed by the density and colour of Tibetan iconography, by the profundity of the doctrines explicated in these books, by the spiritual richness of the traditional Tibetan culture, and by the acute intelligence and noble character of the author. Although I never became a Buddhist Govinda’s works were decisive in my eventual return to the fold of Christianity and in my intellectual commitment to the field of comparative religion. My experience was not uncommon: one could find copies of Govinda’s works anywhere on the “hippie trail” of the time—Amsterdam, Marrakesh, Istanbul, Kabul, Kathmandu, Bali, San Francisco. By this time Govinda’s works were not only well-known amongst counter-cultural aspirants but were also infiltrating academia (though they continued to be regarded with suspicion in some academic quarters).

Lama Govinda was born Ernst Hoffman in Saxony in 1898, the son of a German father and a Bolivian mother. After being invalided out of the war with tuberculosis he studied architecture and philosophy at Freiburg University, and soon became interested in Buddhism, particularly Buddhist philosophy and meditation, on which he published two books. In 1928 he determined to join the *sangha* by way of a small community of German Buddhist monks in Ceylon, headed by Nyanatiloka Thera. Govinda took vows and found time in his monastic schedule, after mastering Pali, to make a close study of the Abhidharma, leading to the publication of another work under the name Brahmachari Govinda.

In 1911 Govinda attended a Buddhist conference in Darjeeling, intending to affirm the purity of the Theravadin tradition against the Mahayana which, in his view,

had degenerated into “a system of demon-worship and weird beliefs”.⁸¹ He little realised that the trip was to alter his life. There he met his Tibetan guru, Tomo Geshe Rinpoche, under whose influence he “converted” and by whom he was initiated into the Gelug-pa sect. He spent the next thirty years in northern India and Sikkim, made several visits to Tibet, most notably in 1933 and 1948-49, and was initiated into the Karg-yu and Nyingma lineages. He was interned by the British during World War II, and after his release married the Indian artist Li Gotami, Govinda himself being an accomplished painter. During the sixties and seventies Govinda lectured widely in Europe and America and spent his later years in California where he died in 1985.

Govinda’s Tibetan experiences are recounted in his luminous *The Way of the White Clouds* which includes elements from several genres—spiritual journal, adventure narrative, anthropological field report, philosophical commentary. To my mind it is one the century’s classic spiritual autobiographies. As well as the works already mentioned Govinda also published *Psycho-Cosmic Symbolism of the Buddhist Stupa* (1940), *The Psychological Attitude of Early Buddhist Philosophy* (1969), *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness* (1976) and *The Inner Structure of the I Ching, the Book of Transformation* (1981). Some of his lectures and talks were collected by his students in two posthumous anthologies, *A Living Buddhism for the West* (1990) and *Insights of a Himalayan Pilgrim* (1991).

In 1933 Govinda founded the Order of the Arya Maitreya Mandala, dedicated to the preservation and dissemination of the Tibetan religious heritage, and by the fifties had accumulated a small circle of Western “disciples”. The German branch of the Order (still in existence) enjoys the distinction of opening the first centre in the West devoted entirely to the study and propagation of Tibetan Buddhism.⁸² In recent decades Govinda’s Order has been somewhat overtaken by the presence in the West of significant numbers of Tibetan teachers of whom Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Tarthang Tulku, Namkhai Norbu, Lama Yeshe, Lama Zopa, Sogyal Rinpoche, and the Dalai Lama himself have been amongst the most influential.

⁸¹ Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds* Boulder: Shambhala, 1970, 13.

⁸² Rawlinson, *Enlightened Masters*, 276.

Lama Govinda’s credentials as an expositor of Tibetan Buddhism and a spokesman for Tibetan culture been queried by Donald Lopez in *Prisoners of Shangri-La*.⁸³ Lopez makes a great deal of several apparently damaging “facts” about Govinda’s “career” as a spokesman for Tibetan Buddhism. He is sceptical about Govinda’s various initiations, emphasizes his reliance on secondary Western sources, and charges Govinda with “psychologizing” various Tibetan texts and doctrines. He also derides Govinda’s “extravagant commentary” in *Foundations of Tibetan Buddhism*. These “criticisms” certainly carry some weight. On the other hand, very little is made in Lopez’s account of the fact that Govinda spent seventy years immersed in the intensive study and sincere practice of Buddhism, that those who knew the lama personally were almost invariably impressed by his scholarship, his integrity, his commitment to the dharma and his wisdom, that his works have been applauded by all manner of commentators, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike, as providing deep spiritual and intellectual sustenance. He was described by another Western Buddhist, John Blofeld, as “that golden eagle amongst adepts”, one “who possesses that rare and indescribable quality by which a man of transcendent spiritual attainment is instantly recognized”.⁸⁴



Tibet and the West in the Contemporary Era

Later Travelers and Seekers in Tibet

Western writings on Tibet have rapidly proliferated in recent times. “Secret Tibet” and “the Forbidden City” have continued to draw a steady stream of Westerners—mountaineers and explorers, adventurers, pilgrims, anthropologists, missionaries, monks, occultists, travel writers, scholars. One may here mention such figures as Spencer Chapman, André Guibaut, André Migot, George Patterson, Geoffrey Bull, Han Suyin, John Blofeld and Sorrell Wilby.⁸⁵ Similarly, large numbers of Westerners with a variety

⁸³ See Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 59-62, 125-126.

⁸⁴ John Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life* Berkeley: Shambhala, 1972, 236-237.

⁸⁵ Amongst the many works by such authors, as well as works cited elsewhere in this chapter, the following are amongst the better-known: Spencer Chapman *Lhasa, the Holy City* London: Readers Union/Chatto & Windus, 1940; André Guibaut, *Tibetan Venture* London: Readers Union/John Murray, 1949; André Migot, *Tibetan Marches* London: Hart-Davis, 1955; George Patterson, *Tibetan Journey* London: Readers Book Club, 1956; Geoffrey T. Bull, *When Iron Gates Yield* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1955; Han Suyin *Lhasa, the Open City* London: Jonathan Cape, 1976 (an apologia for the Chinese occupation); Sorrell Wilby, *Tibet, a woman’s lone trek across a mysterious land* Melbourne: Macmillan, 1988.

of motives visited and resided in the Tibetan border regions and the Himalayas of India and Nepal. Amongst some of the more well known were Paul Brunton, David Snellgrove, Arnaud Desjardins, Lizelle Raymond, Thomas Merton, John Snelling, Andrew Harvey and Peter Matthiessen.⁸⁶ Here we can only cast a quick glance over a few works which illuminate aspects of the Tibeto-Himalayan religious heritage.

One of the more authoritative historical accounts appeared in 1968: *A Cultural History of Tibet*, by David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson. Richardson had spent nine years in Lhasa as the Head of the British Mission, arriving in Tibet in 1936.⁸⁷ Almost at the moment the first great wave of Tibetan refugees were leaving their homeland, David Snellgrove published a scholarly edition of *Hevajra Tantra*, the first complete tantra to be published in English, soon to be followed by Herbert Guenther’s translation of Gampopa’s *Jewel Ornament of Liberation* (both 1959). Snellgrove had made a seven-month journey in north-western Nepal in 1956, recounting his experiences in *Himalayan Pilgrimage*, one of the best books in the genre. Both Snellgrove and Richardson published important scholarly works on Tibetan religion and together founded the Institute of Tibetan Studies at Tring.

In the Preface to their book the authors wrote this:

We have taken upon ourselves to write this book at this time because the civilization of the Tibetan people is disappearing before our very eyes, and apart from a few gentle protests here and there the rest of the world lets it go without comment and without regret. ...If we succeed in awakening the interest of readers in this tragic drama, which affects us so closely in the human problems involved, the task of writing this book will have been well repaid.⁸⁸

This echoed some of the themes of the Foreword to Lama Govinda’s *The Way of the White Clouds* which had appeared in the year previous. Another book which appeared at the same time (and with similar sentiments expressed in the Foreword) was *The Tantric Mysticism of Tibet* (1968) by John Blofeld. It deserves mention as one of the earliest of the books by Western Buddhists which, in its attempt to explain meditational techniques, was directed not towards scholarship but practice. Blofeld (b1913) was an Englishman

⁸⁶ As well as works already cited elsewhere see Paul Brunton, *A Hermit in the Himalayas* (1937), London: Rider, 1980; John Snelling, *The Sacred Mountain*, London: East West Publications, 1983; and Lizelle Raymond, *To Live Within* Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1973.

⁸⁷ For a biographical sketch and a brief assessment of Richardson’s scholarly work, see the tribute by his collaborator, David Snellgrove, “An Appreciation of Hugh Richardson” in Michael Aris & Aung San Suu Kyi (eds): *Tibetan Studies in Honour of Hugh Richardson* Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1979, vii-xv.

⁸⁸ Snellgrove & Richardson, *Cultural History*, 13.

who spent nearly all of his adult life in the East after converting to Buddhism as a student at Cambridge, traveling and living in Mongolia, China, Thailand, Burma, Japan, Sikkim and India, producing translations of the I Ching and several Zen texts, the autobiographical *The Wheel of Life* (1959) as well as the work on tantra (heavily influenced by his interests in Vedanta).⁸⁹

Four later books by Western seekers of different kinds, all written in the period of the Tibetan exile (i.e., post-1959), deserve particular mention as distinguished works. Arnaud Desjardins’ *The Message of the Tibetans* (1969) offers a clear, sensible and accessible account of some of the distinctive aspects of the Tibetan tradition, based on Desjardins’ interviews with Tibetan lamas in exile in India. *The Asian Journal of Thomas Merton* (1975) records the deep impressions made on the Trappist by his meetings with the Dalai Lama and with several Nyingma monks in Dharamsala and Darjeeling, shortly before his death in Bangkok.⁹⁰ *The Snow Leopard* (1979) by the novelist and Zen practitioner Peter Matthiessen (later to become a roshi), vividly recounts a journey in the Nepalese Himalayas with the naturalist George Schaller. The book blends travel narrative and spiritual journal, and offers a recent specimen of what Bishop has called “mountain mysticism”.⁹¹ Andrew Harvey’s *A Journey to Ladakh* (1983) also belongs to the time-honoured genre in which the physical adventure is paralleled by a spiritual odyssey. These books by Matthiessen and Harvey were widely—and properly—celebrated in the Western press. However, neither can match those by Pallis and Govinda which are less self-preoccupied, and written by men much more deeply immersed in the Tibetan tradition.

Counterfeit Tibetan Esotericism: The Lobsang Rampa Case

The best-selling books on Tibet in the 20th century have been T. Lobsang Rampa’s “autobiographical” trilogy: *The Third Eye* (1956), *Doctor from Lhasa* (1959), and *The Rampa Story* (1960). Donald Lopez has given us a detailed account of the whole Rampa case in *Prisoners of Shangri-La* on which the skeletal account which follows draws heavily. This trilogy purports to tell the life story of Tuesday Lobsang Rampa, born into

⁸⁹ For a review of Blofeld’s *Wheel of Life* see Arthur Lederman & Patricia Bjaaland, *The Eastern Buddhist* 6:2, Oct 73, 154-156.

⁹⁰ Excerpts from Merton’s *Asian Journal* concerning aspects of Eastern spirituality have recently been published as *Thoughts on the East*, ed. George Woodcock, New York: New Directions, 1995. The passages concerning Tibetan Buddhism can be found on pages 70-81.

⁹¹ Peter Bishop, *Tibet in Its Place*, 6.

an aristocratic Lhasa family closely associated with the thirteenth Dalai Lama. The boy was identified at an early age as having an extraordinary and providential role to play in the spread of Tibetan esotericism “among strange people”. As well as undertaking intensive training under the most eminent lamas of the day, at the age of eight Rampa was given an arcane surgical procedure to create “the third eye”, thus releasing various clairvoyant powers and the ability to discern auras.⁹² The Dalai Lama himself, we are told, commissioned Rampa to undertake his great work in preserving the wisdom of Tibet. After all manner of astounding trials and tribulations in Tibet itself—the most strenuous training and asceticism, perilous journeyings far and wide, horrific initiation rites, and some spectacular astral journeys—the Dalai Lama instructs Rampa to leave Tibet for China where there is a profound ignorance of “the Science of the Overself”.

In the second volume our protagonist enrolls in a medical college in China, registering as “Tuesday Lobsang Rampa, Lama of Tibet. Priest-Surgeon Chakpori Lamasery. Recognised Incarnation. Abbot Designate. Pupil of Lama Mingyar Dondup.” Here he complements his occult Tibetan medical and psychological knowledge with training in both Chinese and western healing disciplines. After teaching himself to fly he is recruited into Chiang Kai-Shek’s army as a medical airman. Following a return to Lhasa to participate in the funeral ceremonies for the Dalai Lama Rampa, Lampa serves in flying ambulances in China. During the war with Japan he is shot down, taken prisoner, survives brutal tortures and interrogations, escapes, is recaptured and incarcerated, and eventually transferred to a camp for recalcitrant prisoners near Hiroshima. He escapes on the very day the bomb is dropped on Hiroshima and drifts into the Japan Sea in a stolen fishing boat.

The third volume opens fifteen years later by which time Rampa is living in Windsor in Canada but is in constant telepathic communication with lamas in Tibet who, in the face of the Chinese invasion, are hoarding a collection of Tibet’s most precious religious texts and artifacts in an underground labyrinth in a remote part of the country. High Tibetan lamas telepathically instruct Rampa to write his third book which recounts events of the intervening years—Rampa’s experiences as a dog trainer in the Russian army, torture in Lubyanka, deportation to Poland, involvement in Czechoslovakian

⁹² The doctrine of “third eye” has a long and honourable pedigree in many religious traditions: as is the case with much of Rampa’s “esoterica”, what we get in these books is often a parody of authentic doctrines.

smuggling operations, crossing the Atlantic as a merchant seaman, a spell as a radio announcer in Schenectady, various escapades in America before returning by sea to India and thence to Tibet. He tells of an earlier astral journey with his guru to another planet where he received instructions on his mission from extraterrestrials. Most extraordinary, however, is an astral meeting in “the Land of the Golden Light” with the late Dalai Lama who tells him that he is to take over the body of a man in England, but also warning him that if Rampa agrees to return to earth he will “return to hardship, misunderstanding, disbelief, and actual hatred, for there is a force of evil which tries to prevent all that is good in connection with human evolution.”⁹³ After his clandestine return to Tibet he undertakes another astral journey to the Akashic Record where he familiarizes himself with the past of the man whose body he is soon to inhabit and in which incarnation he would write his trilogy, thus fulfilling his task of bringing the treasures of “Lamaism” (which he distinguishes from Buddhism) to a Western audience at a time when the Tibetan heritage was threatened with extirpation. As well as tracing the life-story of Rampa, the trilogy offers commentaries on all kinds of recondite doctrines and techniques—astral travel, psychic healing, Egyptian death practices, clairvoyance, breath control—as well as an account of the earth’s prehistory.

The story of the controversial publication and reception of Rampa’s books in the West, and the exposure of “Lobsang Rampa” as Cyril Hoskin, a surgical goods maker and part-time photographer who had apparently never left Britain, has been analysed in some detail by Lopez. Here we shall only touch on a few aspects of this curious case. When the first manuscript of *The Third Eye* was sent by a potential publisher to Hugh Richardson he immediately adjudged the book a “fake built from published works and embellished by a fertile imagination.”⁹⁴ His assessment was endorsed by David Snellgrove, Agehananda Bharati (who later called the book “these cretinistic confabulations”), Heinrich Harrer and Marco Pallis, amongst others. Nonetheless, Secker & Warburg published *The Third Eye* in 1956. Despite the most damaging reviews by various Tibetologists the book was a runaway hit and was quickly translated into French and German. Marco Pallis was so appalled by this “libel on both Tibet and its religion” that, in 1958 and on behalf of a group of Tibet experts, he hired a private detective to investigate the identity of “Lobsang Rampa”. This led to Rampa’s subsequent exposure in

⁹³ quoted in Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 93.

⁹⁴ quoted in Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 98.

the press, one which did not prevent him from publishing many more books before his death in Canada in 1981. (One of his later works was *My Trip to Venus* the royalties of which were donated to one of Rampa’s pet causes, the Save a Cat League of New York.)

On one level the Rampa case seems to be nothing more than a somewhat lurid instance of the literary hoax in which, as Lopez nicely remarks, the ghostwriter turns into a ghost! At this level the Rampa books

are the works of an unemployed surgical fitter, the son of a plumber, seeking to support himself as a ghostwriter. The first book... could have been drawn from various English language sources... supplemented with an admixture of garden variety spiritualism and Theosophy... providing an exotic route through Tibet back to the familiar themes of Victorian and Edwardian spiritualism...⁹⁵

However, as Lopez remarks, it also raises interesting questions about who has authority to speak and write about Tibet/“Tibet”. Reflecting on the career of Rampa, Lopez writes,

The confluence of the scholarly and the popular is strikingly evident in *The Third Eye*, where Rampa draws on the accounts of travelers and amateur scholars... and combines them with standard occult themes... into a work that is neither wholly fact nor wholly fiction... he was able to represent the Tibet of Western fantasies...⁹⁶

The Rampa books furnish further proof—if any be needed!—that there remains an insatiable public appetite for “occultist” fantasies in which one often finds a warmed-over stew of traditional esoteric doctrines, Blavatskyisms, science fiction, psychoanalysis and pop-existentialism. Layfayette Ronald Hubbard, Eric von Danniken, and Georgi Ivanovitch Gurdjieff furnish us with variations on the theme. Rampa’s success also attests to the anti-scholasticism of all millenarian movements, another canopy under which the Rampa trilogy might also be situated. There remain all manner of baffling aspects to this particular case and we need not subscribe to the view that Hoskin’s “Lobsang Rampa” was a completely fraudulent creation. As Whitall Perry has remarked,

...since not just anyone could pull the stunt and everything has its explanation, one can admit the hypothesis that Hoskins [sic] might somewhat improbably be the beneficiary of certain errant psychic residues emanating from Tibet, his distortions approximating those monitored by spiritist mediums contacting the residues or “psychic cadavers” of the dead—with a large serving of imagination to embellish the fragments.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 105.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 112.

⁹⁷ Whitall Perry, Review of Christopher Evans, *Cults of Unreason* in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 9:3, 1975, 183-187 (quotation from 185).

Beats and Hippies

Over the last four decades we note the burgeoning Western literature on such subjects as near-death experiences, psychedelics, out-of-body experiences and the like, all familiar subjects in the religious literature of the East. Much of this contemporary interest can be traced back to the beats and hippies of the fifties and sixties who, in many respects, were themselves the direct descendants of the New England Transcendentalists: in each movement we find a sovereign concern with the nature of consciousness, a rejection of conventional Christianity, the repudiation of the “Enlightenment Project”, and a turn to the East for more authentic modes of thought, expression, and experience.⁹⁸ The Beat movement drew on many different cultural streams: Blake and the Romantic poets, American transcendentalism, black musical idioms, European existentialism. Among their Eastern sources Japanese Zen was pre-eminent but the Beats also evinced a serious interest in aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism.

We need not look very deeply into the Beat movement to find plentiful evidence of a deep-seated interest in and, in several cases, sustained commitment to Eastern religious teachings and practices. A few examples. Philip Whalen was perhaps the first of the Beat poets to develop a serious interest in Buddhism which he discovered, along with the theosophical writings of A.P. Sinnett and Madame Blavatsky, in the Portland Public Library in the early 1940s. (The route to the East so often passed through theosophy.) He was eventually ordained as a Zen monk in 1972. Gary Snyder spent the best part of a decade in a Zen monastery in Japan. Over a period of several years Jack Kerouac made an intensive study of Eastern religious texts, translated Buddhist Scriptures from French into English, attempted to live like a Buddhist monk and wrote an unpublished biography of the Buddha. Kenneth Rexroth translated Japanese and Chinese poetry. Over the last twenty-five years of his life Allen Ginsberg was much influenced by the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa and devoted much of his exuberant energy to dharma work. Here too we find, perhaps for the first time, a significant engagement with Buddhism by women

⁹⁸ On American transcendentalism and its connections with Eastern religion, philosophy and spirituality see Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

writers, amongst whom we may mention Diane di Prima, Joanne Kyger, Lenore Kandel, LeRoi Jones, Anne Waldman and Natalie Goldberg.⁹⁹

By the early sixties when the Beat movement was apparently strangled by media hype and before the hippies had appeared, there were signs of a budding interest in some of the more arcane aspects of Eastern traditions, perhaps most notably the convergence of psychedelic experimentation and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.¹⁰⁰ Aldous Huxley’s earlier experiences with mescaline anticipated the counter-cultural preoccupation with consciousness-altering drugs such as LSD and “magic mushrooms”: *The Doors of Perception* ranked highly on the hippie curriculum along with the *I Ching*, Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and various books of dubious provenance, perhaps most notably Carlos Casteneda’s “Don Juan” series. Richard Alpert, Timothy Leary and Ralph Metzner, three Harvard LSD “researchers”, produced *The Psychedelic Experience* an adaptation of the Tibetan Book of the Dead for the guidance of trippers. Their work with psychedelic drugs (including extensive personal experimentation) and their growing interest in Eastern spirituality provoked the chairman of their department to remark in a memo to the faculty:

It is probably no accident that the society which has most consistently encouraged the use of these substances, India, produced one of the sickest social orders ever created by mankind, in which thinking men spent their time lost in the Buddha position under the influence of drugs exploring consciousness, while poverty, disease, social discrimination and superstition reached their highest and most organized form in all history.¹⁰¹

We will not here excavate the manifold prejudices which lurk in this passage—but it does tell us something about attitudes to both consciousness-altering drugs and Eastern religions. By May 1963 both Leary and Alpert had been dismissed from Harvard but continued their experimentation and their proselytizing for drug-induced experiences. A flyer for their journal *The Psychedelic Review* began,

⁹⁹ On the Beats’ engagements with Buddhism see Carole Tonkinson (ed) *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* New York: Riverhead Books, 1995. On Ginsberg see Harry Oldmeadow, “To a Buddhist Beat: Allen Ginsberg on Politics, Poetics and Spirituality”, *Beyond the Divide* (Bendigo), 2:1, Winter, 1999, 56-67.

¹⁰⁰ See Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters: Searching for Wisdom in America* New York: Bantam Books, 1995, Ch 1, and Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture* London: Faber, 1970, Chs 4 & 5.

¹⁰¹ Quoted in Tony Schwartz, *What Really Matters* 37. (In fairness it should also be pointed out that the chairman, David McClelland, protected Leary and Alpert for as long as he reasonably could.)

Mescaline! Consciousness! Phantastical Transcendence! Hashish! Visionary Botany! Ololiuqui! Physiology of Religion! Internal Freedom! Morning Glory! Politics of the Nervous System!¹⁰²

The hippie “flower power” movement and the emergent counter-culture of the late sixties was in many ways, “the apotheosis of the beat movement”.¹⁰³ J.J. Clarke has characterised it as a reaction against “the competitive materialism of conventional culture”, a “radical critique of scientific rationalism”, and religiously, “a search for new routes to spiritual enlightenment through the use of mind-expanding techniques and drugs”.¹⁰⁴ In many cases a spiritual agenda was wedded to a politics of liberation.

The beats and hippies who turned Eastwards, particularly artists, intellectuals and teachers, have had a significant role to play in what Mircea Eliade has called the “deprovincializing” of Western culture in a “crepuscular era”.¹⁰⁵ The possible connections between expressive artistic forms and foreign religious teachings, between aesthetics and metaphysics, were foregrounded by the Beats. As Susan Sontag has remarked,

Every era has to reinvent the project of “spirituality” for itself... In the modern era one of the most active metaphors for the spiritual project is “art”... a particularly adaptable site on which to stage the formal dramas besetting consciousness, each individual work of art being a more or less astute paradigm for regulating or reconciling these contradictions...¹⁰⁶

On one level one might suppose that a good deal of the Beat/counter-cultural infatuation with the exotic, the “oriental”, the “mystical” and “magical” was indeed of a sentimental and fashionable order. Doubtless, there was a good deal of counterfeit spirituality peddled by false gurus, by charlatans and hucksters, as there is today under the canopy of New Age-ism which often seeks to meld together heterogeneous elements of Western esotericism (particularly eschatological doctrines), modern psychology and Eastern religion into a new syncretism. But, no question, the interest in Eastern

¹⁰² Quoted in William O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the Sixties* Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1971, 239.

¹⁰³ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 104.

¹⁰⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ See Mircea Eliade, *Autobiography II: 1937-1960, Exile’s Odyssey* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988, pp. 152-153, and *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969, 62-63.

¹⁰⁶ Susan Sontag, “The Aesthetics of Silence” in *A Susan Sontag Reader* ed. E. Hardwick, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983, 181.

spirituality met some deep yearning for a vision of reality deeper, richer, more adequate, more attuned to the fullness of human experience, than the impoverished world view offered by a scientifically-grounded humanism. As J.J. Clarke has observed,

As living social phenomena the beat and hippie movements are now part of history, or survive on the margins as vestigial remnants, but in all sorts of ways their legacy lives on, not least in the popularity of Asian philosophies. Though the utopian rhetoric has cooled, and the revolutionary given way to apolitical pragmatism, the quest for personal authenticity and for a new form of spiritual growth has continued to preoccupy later generations, and indeed in many respects the Eastward search for alternatives to home-grown philosophies has if anything gained in depth and seriousness.¹⁰⁷

The adherence of a rapidly growing and highly significant portion of the Western intelligentsia—artists, writers, philosophers, social activists prominently—to Eastern religious forms (most notably from the Tibetan and Japanese branches of Buddhism), and the assimilation of Asian modes of spiritual experience and cultural expression into Western forms, is one of the more remarkable cultural metamorphoses of the late 20th century, one as yet barely recognised let alone understood. It is a transformation in which the Beat generation of the fifties and the counter culture of the sixties and seventies played a vital role.

Transpersonal Psychology and New Paradigms

In 1951 the English jurist and scholar, Christmas Humphreys, remarked that, “...in the world of the mind, including that Cinderella of mental science, psychology, the West has more to learn from Buddhism than as yet it knows.”¹⁰⁸ More recently there has been a serious engagement with Eastern thought in the domain of “transpersonal psychology”. As one commentator has observed, “thinkers with interest in transpersonal states of being have generally felt it necessary to look to Eastern thought as a source of conceptual language, theoretical models, and practical guidance.”¹⁰⁹ The leading contemporary figure in this field, perhaps, is Ken Wilber whose work is centrally concerned with a synthesis of scientific and mystical understandings of consciousness, drawn from both East and West, but one might also mention, in our present context, thinkers such as Roberto Assagioli, Stanislav Grof, Frithjof Capra and other figures concerned with the creation of “new paradigms”.

¹⁰⁷ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment* 105.

¹⁰⁸ Christmas Humphreys, *Buddhism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951, 223.

One cannot maintain any vaguely serious interest in Tibetan Buddhism in particular or Eastern spirituality generally without being interested in consciousness and in the nature of the “self”—in short, in psychology. Alan Watts, perhaps a little recklessly, went so far as to say this:

If we look deeply into such ways of life as Buddhism and Taoism, Vedanta and Yoga, we do not find either philosophy or religion as these are understood in the West. We find something more nearly resembling psychotherapy...The main resemblance between these Eastern ways...and Western psychotherapy is the concern of both with bringing about changes in consciousness, changes in our own ways of feeling our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world.¹¹⁰

Recall, too, Jung’s claim that “...all religions, down to the forms of magical religion of the primitives, are psychotherapies, which treat and heal the sufferings of the soul, and those of the body that come from the soul.”¹¹¹ To cite but one more example of this motif, this time from Stanislav Grof,

Many open minded scientists and mental health professionals have become aware of the abysmal gap between contemporary [mainstream] psychology, and the great ancient or Oriental spiritual traditions, such as the various forms of yoga, Kashmir Shaivism, Tibetan Vajrayana, Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Sufism, Kabbalah or alchemy. The wealth of profound knowledge about the human psyche and consciousness accumulated within these systems over centuries and often over millennia, has not been adequately acknowledged, explored, and integrated by Western science.¹¹²

Tibetan Buddhism is one of several sources to which both the theoreticians and practitioners of Western psychology are turning for new insights and techniques.¹¹³

Tibet and Western Esotericism

One chapter in Western engagements in Tibet which remains largely unexplored is the impact of Tibetan mysticism on Western esotericism. One finds frequent reference and allusion to esoteric Tibetan doctrines and practices in the works of theosophists, anthroposophists, Gurdjieffians, traditionalists, and “occultists” of various stripe. In

¹⁰⁹ Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 159.

¹¹⁰ Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, x. (See also Frithjof Capra, *The Turning Point*, London: Fontana, 1983, 167-168.)

¹¹¹ C.G. Jung in a 1935 paper on psychotherapy, cited in Gerhard Wehr, *Jung: A Biography* Boston: Shambhala, 1988, 293.

¹¹² Stanislav Grof, *The Holotropic Mind*, San Francisco, 1993, 21.

¹¹³ Of the many sources on this subject one might mention the following: Guy Claxton (ed), *Beyond Therapy: The Impact of Eastern Religions on Psychological Theory and Practice* Sturminster Newton: Prism, 1996; Nathan Katz (ed), *Buddhist and Western Psychology* Boulder: Prajna Press, 1983; John Welwood (ed), *Awakening the Heart: East/West Approaches to Psychotherapy and the Healing Relationship* Boulder: Shambhala, 1983.

recent decades there is no doubt that books such as *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and Govinda’s *Foundations of Tibetan Mysticism* as well as the efflorescence of recent books on Tibetan tantra by both exiled Tibetan lamas and their Western disciples, have generated interest in the esoteric traditions not only of Tibet but of the West. As yet this territory remains largely uncharted. Note, for instance, that in the two most comprehensive and scholarly histories of Western esotericism and of “New Age Religion”, by Antoine Faivre and Wouter Hanegraaff respectively, we find no mention of Tibet.¹¹⁴

A fertile line of inquiry might take up the model of Western esoteric thought proposed by Faivre to see how well it characterizes Western understandings of Tibetan mysticism.¹¹⁵ Faivre posits six “fundamental characteristics” of Western esoteric thought (the first four indispensable and the latter two “relative”): 1. the principle of symbolic and real *correspondences* among all parts of the universe, often underpinned in traditional esotericisms by the doctrine of macrocosm and microcosm and recently evinced in more popular ideas about “interdependence”; 2. the idea of *Living Nature*—the cosmos as complex, plural, hierarchical and vital, a linch-pin of many forms of Western “magic” and integral to alchemy and all forms of *magia naturalis*; 3. the visionary uses of the *imagination* in “mediations” and explorations of a “mesocosm”; 4. *the experience of transmutation* afforded by gnosis; 5. *the praxis of concordance* which embraces the *philosophia perennis* in its several variations; 6. an emphasis on *transmission* which affirms the need for authentic lineages of esoteric wisdom such as can issue in genuine initiation. A detailed exploration of this model with reference to Western writings on Tibetan esotericism would take us beyond the scope of the present paper (already threatening to proliferate in unruly fashion in several directions!). However, it can be stated with some confidence that each of these marks of Western esoteric thought is to be found in abundance in Western renderings of the Vajrayana. The most problematic component, at first sight, might appear to be the concept of “Living Nature” which Faivre suggests might be undermined by Oriental forms of “monist spiritualism”. My own view is that it is quite mistaken to understand various metaphysical monisms, such as those of Advaita Vedanta and Mahayana Buddhism, most fully elaborated by Sankara and Nagarjuna respectively, as being “world-denying” or implacably antithetical to ideas

¹¹⁴ Antoine Faivre, *Access to Western Esotericism* and Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*.

about “Living Nature” as Faivre articulates them. Such pivotal metaphysical concepts as *maya* and *sunyata* have all too often been understood only in their negative applications—but this is a theme which cannot be pursued here.¹¹⁶ However, we can perhaps pause to take note of a representative sample of quotations from *Creative Meditation and Multi-Dimensional Consciousness* by Lama Anagarika Govinda to suggest that Faivre’s six marks of Western esoteric thought can easily be found in Western writings on some of the more arcane and occult teachings of the Tibetans. (This particular book has been chosen because of its widespread popularity amongst the more serious-minded Western seekers tapping into the sources of Tibet’s wisdom tradition. However, the exercise could easily be repeated with any number of books written by Westerners and dealing with Tibetan esotericism.) Here I can do more than simply list these quotations, randomly chosen, by way of suggestive illustration:

1. (Correspondences & Interdependence)

Even the simplest form or color is a symbol revealing the nature of the primordial reality of the universe and the structure of the human psyche in which this universal reality is mirrored. In fact, if the structure of our consciousness did not correspond to that of the universe and its laws, we should not be aware of either the universe or the laws that govern it. (162)

2. (Living Nature)

The Tantric Buddhist does not believe in an independent or separately existing external world. The inner and outer worlds are the warp and woof of the same fabric in which the threads of all forces and of all events, of all forms of consciousness and of their objects, are woven into an inseparable net of endless, mutually conditioned relations... (40)

3. (Imagination)

This power of the creative imagination is not merely content with observing the world as it is, accepting a given reality, but is capable of creating a new reality by transforming the inner as well as the outer world. This is the very heart of the Tantric teaching and experience...a spiritual discipline or meditational practice which shuns the power of imagination deprives itself of the most effective and vital means of transforming human nature as it is into what it could be...(42-43)

4. (Transmutation)

Liberation is not escapism, but consists in the conscious transformation of the elements that constitute our world and our existence. This is the great secret of the Tantras and of the mystics of all times...It is an act of resurrection, in which the ultimate transformation takes place...in which all things become transparent, and all that has been experienced, whether in joy or in suffering, enters into a state of transfiguration... (288-289)

¹¹⁵ See pp10-15 of *Access to Western Esotericism*. (This suggestion was recently put to me by Arthur Versluis.)

¹¹⁶ For some commentary related to this general issue see my articles “Sankara’s Doctrine of *Maya*”, *Asian Philosophy*, 2:2, 1992, 131-146, and “‘The Translucence of the Eternal’: Religious Understandings of the Natural Order”, *Sacred Web* (Vancouver), 2, 1998, 11-31. See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Religion and the Order of Nature*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, 46-48.

5. (Concordance)

...even before the advent of the Buddha, great saints and sages had gained the highest realisation...The awe before all that is great is the root of all that is great in ourselves...he who possesses this awe, this profound reverence...has at the same time respect for the living form and the inherent law of each spiritual way and the symbols in which they are expressed... (196)

6. (Transmission)

...the Guru is the living representative, the mouthpiece of the Buddha, the transmitter and the embodiment of the Buddha’s teaching, who kindles the flame of faith in the disciple and inspires him to follow in the footsteps of those who have realised the Sacred Teaching...Thus the term “Guru” comprises the complete chain of spiritual teachers who passed on the living tradition through millennia from generation to generation... (140)

Whilst these passages may not all mesh precisely with Faivre’s six criteria, they do so sufficiently closely to warrant further investigation of the possible parallels and interactions between Western and Eastern esotericism. No doubt we should be cautious in constructing facile “correspondences” of our own and we must be attentive to the many conspicuous differences between the esoteric traditions of East and West. Nonetheless, Faivre’s “intrinsic elements” of Western esotericism are also readily apparent in European understandings of the Vajrayana. Furthermore, I suggest, the whole field of possible convergences between scholarly inquiries into and experiential encounters with Western esotericism on the one hand, and Western engagements with esoteric Eastern spirituality on the other, awaits much more detailed exploration.

“New Age” Orientalism and the Significance of Tibet

The popular success of books such as James Hilton’s exotic novel *Lost Horizons* (1933) (in which we find a variant of the “white brotherhood” myth perpetrated by the Theosophists), Harrer’s *Seven Years in Tibet*, the Rampa trilogy, and recent films such as *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun*, testify to the continuing potency of “Tibet” in the Western imagination.¹¹⁷ The presence of a growing number of Tibetan teachers in the West, the proliferation of monasteries, institutes and centres of learning devoted to Tibetan religion, the tireless work of the Dalai Lama in bringing the attention of the world to the plight of his compatriots, the disillusionment with communist China amongst the radical/liberal intelligentsia (and thereby their greater willingness to denounce the imperial barbarities of the Chinese occupation) and the recruitment of Western media

¹¹⁷ For a thoughtful review of the films *Seven Years in Tibet* and *Kundun* see Pico Iyer, “Lost Horizons”.

celebrities such as Richard Gere and political figures such as the late Petra Kelly to the Tibetan cause, have all conspired to make Westerners much better informed about Tibetan realities.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, a certain mystical aura still surrounds the very name of Tibet, deriving in part from those persistent myths which writers like Peter Bishop and Donald Lopez have so rigorously anatomized. No doubt the image of Tibet in the West has as much, or more, to do with deep-seated fears and fantasies in the European psyche, as with the realities of Tibetan history and culture. As Ursula Bernis has put it,

Tibet evoked a longing for purity of spirit and perfection. Images of Tibet answered our need for otherness to speak to us in terms of spiritual authenticity. Tibet became ours in a very profound way. We internalized the vast, forbidding, inaccessible, mysterious spaces of Tibet described by early travelers. They became the hidden domain of a collective spiritual depth-dimension filled with our soul's innermost yearnings. Always withdrawing from ordinary gaze, Tibet's uniqueness today serves the basic human craving for meaning on levels other than the material.¹¹⁹

“Tibet” has variously been constructed as a dark realm of superstition, sorcery and decadent Buddhism, and as a never-never land realm peopled by childlike peasants of simple piety and by monks of fabulous psychic powers. Sometimes the two streams of European fantasy commingle in the same site, producing those peculiar ambivalences which mark much of the Western literature, especially in the 19th century. Doubtless, too, a sentimental romanticism has obscured the material particularities of Tibetan history. The processes of mythologizing can indeed often be accommodated in recent models of Orientalism, such as that intimated by Gustavo Benavides when he writes, “Orientalism could... serve as a conduit through which Western elites could replenish their ideological arsenal by employing representations that because of their spatial, temporal, and even ontological otherness could function as utopian horizons.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, we may in some measure agree with Lopez when he argues that the Western romance of “Tibet” may actually be harmful to the current Tibetan cause:

Fantasies of Tibet have in the past three decades inspired much support for the cause of Tibetan independence. But those fantasies are ultimately a threat to the realization of that goal. It is not simply that learning that Tibet was not the place we dreamed it to be might result in some “disillusionment”. It is rather that to allow Tibet to circulate as a constituent in a system of fantastic oppositions... is to deny Tibet its history, to exclude Tibet from the real world of which

¹¹⁸ Many of these developments are discussed in the most recent edition of *How the Swans Came to the Lake*.

¹¹⁹ Ursula Bernis, “Tibet in the Shadow of Our Imagination”, *Parabola* 22:3, August 1997, 84.

¹²⁰ Gustavo Benavides, “Giuseppe Tucci, or Buddhology in the Age of Fascism” in *Curators of the Buddha*, 181.

it has always been a part, and to deny Tibetans their role as agents participating in the creation of a contested quotidian reality.¹²¹

All these observations notwithstanding, the fact remains that the most fundamental significance of Tibet in the modern world was as a living refutation of all those values and ideas which define modernity. In the Preface of *The Way of the White Clouds* Govinda gives us one of the most eloquent pleas for the preservation of Tibetan culture, one which has only taken on a deeper poignancy in the light of subsequent events. It is worth quoting at some length as it beautifully articulates the case for a unique religious and cultural heritage whose extinction would remove one of the last fully traditional cultures to survive the onslaughts of modernity:

Why is it that the fate of Tibet has found such a deep echo in the world?... Tibet has become the symbol of all that present-day humanity is longing for... the stability of a tradition, which has its roots not only in a historical or cultural past, but within the innermost being of man, in whose depth this past is enshrined as an ever-present source of inspiration.

But more than that: what is happening in Tibet is symbolical for the fate of humanity. As on a gigantically raised stage we witness the struggle between two worlds, which may be interpreted, according to the standpoint of the spectator, either as the struggle between the past and the future, between backwardness and progress, belief and science, superstition and knowledge—or as the struggle between spiritual freedom and material power, between the wisdom of the heart and the knowledge of the brain, between the dignity of the human individual and the herd-instinct of the mass, between the faith in the higher destiny of man through inner development and the belief in material prosperity through an ever-increasing production of goods.

We witness the tragedy of a peaceful people without political ambitions and with the sole desire to be left alone, being deprived of its freedom and trampled underfoot by a powerful neighbour in the name of “progress”, which as ever must serve as a cover for all the brutalities of the human race.¹²²

Lopez cites part of this passage as an instance of the post-diaspora tendency to idealize Tibetan culture “as if it were itself another artifact of Shangri-La from an eternal classical age, set high in a Himalaya keep outside time and history”.¹²³ Lopez’s interrogation and debunking of the perpetrators of a “mystical” romance of Tibet is often well-directed and some of the shocks he administers are no doubt therapeutic. But one cannot help feeling that at times he succumbs to the postmodernist climate of suspicion in which anything and everything must be subjected to a corrosive irony. Lopez is all too

¹²¹ Lopez, “New Age Orientalism”, 43. See also Lopez’s comments on what he calls “the demonisation of China” which he sees as “yet a further manifestation of the continuing orientalist romance of Tibet” in *Curators of the Buddha*, 292-293, n32.

¹²² Lama Anagarika Govinda, *The Way of the White Clouds*, xi.

¹²³ Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 7

ready to speak glibly about “fantasies of lost wisdom”, as if it were reprehensible to acknowledge a sapiential tradition, or to recognize a culture as authentically traditional, or to regret its extinction. There is a kind of experiential understanding of the Tibetan wisdom which far outstrips anything “scholarship” might have to say on the subject, an understanding which is not restricted, either in principle or in practice, to Tibetans. To my mind we find just such an understanding pre-eminently in the work of Lama Govinda and Marco Pallis (about whom Lopez has remarkably little to say, given the attention he devotes to far less significant figures in the Western encounter with Tibet). In *Peaks and Lamas* Marco Pallis wrote this:

Sheltered behind the rampart of the Himalaya, Tibet has looked on, almost unscathed, while some of the greatest [religious] traditions of the world have reeled under the attacks of the all-devouring monster of modernism.¹²⁴

Lopez adduces this claim as evidence of the “volatility of the mythologizing and mystification of Tibetan culture”.¹²⁵ One might retort that Lopez’s treatment of figures like Pallis and Govinda betokens his own apparent surrender to a postmodernist relativism which is suspicious of *all* values and commitments, particularly religious ones. The past becomes a shifting sand which can never be understood for what it was but only as a kind of mirage viewed through ideologically-tinted spectacles. Lopez does us a useful service in dismantling and qualifying some of the more persistent popular stereotypes about Tibet — as a “timeless” culture, as an Edenic paradise, as a static polity etc—but in so doing he all too often seems to surrender to a danger of which he is intermittently aware, that of reducing Tibet to a vacuum filled by nothing more than the “ideological fictions” of the West. On the other hand, for Marco Pallis, as for Govinda, the significance of Tibet is to be found in the word *traditional*, which is to say that the separation between religion and culture is non-existent, the whole social order being shaped and governed by that distinctive form of Buddhism which had developed over centuries and which kept alive a sense of the sacred in every aspect of Tibetan life.

¹²⁴ Marco Pallis quoted by Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 8.

¹²⁵ Lopez, *Shangri-La*, 8.

In *The New Religions* Jacob Needleman suggested that “a land like Tibet perhaps stands to the whole world like... a teacher stands to ordinary men”.¹²⁶ One cannot, of course, expect those in the West who are unaware of their own spiritual impoverishment and thus oblivious to their need for teachers of any kind, to understand this kind of claim. It must also be said that the limitations of the modern (i.e., profane) outlook are all too evident in the work of many scholars seeking to explain the significance of Tibet exclusively in terms of Western “fantasies” and “mythologies”, Orientalist “constructions” and “nostalgic meta-narratives” which are only, apparently, to be understood within the Freudian/Foucauldian/Saidian categories—“fantasy”, “projection”, “discourse”, “hegemony”, “Otherness”, “ideologizations” and the like. Indeed, it might be observed that the ostensible critique of “Orientalism” by such scholars is, as often as not, an inverted form of the very phenomena which they themselves so robustly castigate—which is to say that the “post-colonial” scholarly apparatus constitutes yet another imposition of essentially alien ideas, values and categories onto phenomena which actually surpass their reach. One is also reminded of Govinda’s remark about our unfortunate modern attitude whereby

a scholar is regarded as being all the more competent (“scholarly”) the less he believes in the teachings he has undertaken to interpret. The sorry results are only too apparent, especially in the realm of Tibetology, which such scholars have approached with an air of their own superiority, thus defeating the very purpose of their endeavours.¹²⁷

However starry-eyed many Western understandings of Tibet may be, and no matter what psychic and political motivations may be at play, the fact remains that this culture represented one of the very last living expressions of Tradition (in the Guénonian sense) in the modern world. Most Western observers, even those whom we might reasonably have expected to be more or less impervious, registered something of the spiritual radiance issuing from this condition even if they were ill-equipped to understand it. Let us give the last word not to an effusive “occultist”, not to a library-bound Orientalist, nor to a parricidal “postcolonial” skeptic. Instead, let us ponder the words of a self-effacing Englishman who knew Tibet and the Tibetans better than most, who loved

¹²⁶ Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* New York: Pocket Books, 1972, 168.

¹²⁷ Lama Anagarika Govinda, “Introductory Foreword” to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, lxiii. Arnaud Desjardins recalls showing some passages from the works of “certain celebrated Western scholars” to Tibetan lamas in India, passages which “caused them considerable astonishment”—to which one can only say, “no doubt!”. See *The Message of the Tibetans*, 132.

and committed his life to the dharma whilst respecting the claims of all integral traditions, and who had no axe to grind beyond a sincere wish to help preserve and make more widely known the spiritual treasures of the Tibeto-Himalayan region. No one has stated the fundamental significance of Tibet, beyond all immediate and expedient considerations, more profoundly than Marco Pallis, with whose words we bring this article to its conclusion:

One can truly say that this remote land behind the snowy rampart of the Himalaya had become like the chosen sanctuary for all those things whereof the historical discarding had caused our present profane civilisation, the first of its kind on record, to come into being... the violation of this sanctuary and the dissipation of the sacred influences hitherto concentrated there becomes an event of properly cosmic significance, of which the ulterior consequences for a world that tacitly condoned the outrage or, in many cases, openly countenanced it on the plea that it brought “progress” to a reluctant people, have yet to ripen.¹²⁸



¹²⁸ Marco Pallis, Review of Jacob Needleman, *The New Religions* in *Studies in Comparative Religion* 5:3, 1971, 189-190.

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