

[Review Article]

Wading into Manasarovar Lake: Tibet as Balm for the West's Self-Doubt

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Abstract *This article reviews four recently published or republished works that bear on changing Western perceptions of Tibet over the past two centuries. It acknowledges that Tom Neuhaus' study provides the clearest framework for categorising, if not explaining, the shifting images produced both by those who travelled to the country and those who observed it from afar; and it accepts his contention that there was a significant change in European attitudes to Tibet that owed much to the damage to the continent's conception of itself and its values wrought by the First World War. But the argument is made that other events must be considered in any diagnosis of the growth of Western self-disgust, and that the problem also has an important American dimension. The conclusion reached is that the West's mythmaking with regard to Tibet is certainly revealing, but that it is chiefly symptomatic of a crisis of self-confidence and identity that will not overcome by a search for esoteric wisdom beyond its borders.*

Paul G. Hackett. 2012. *Theos Barnard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life*. New York, Columbia University Press. Pp. xxii, 494. ISBN 978 0 231 15886 2 (hardback).

Arthur Henry Savage Landor. 2011. *In the Forbidden Land, Volumes I and II: An Account of a Journey in Tibet, Capture by Tibetan Authorities, Imprisonment, Torture, and Ultimate Release*. Oxford, Benediction Classics. Pp. 499. No ISBN: reprint of original publication of 1898 (hardback).

Tom Neuhaus. 2012. *Tibet in the Western Imagination*. Basingstoke, England, Palgrave Macmillan. Pp. ix, 264. ISBN 978 0 230 29970 2 (hardback).

Colin Thubron. 2012. *To a Mountain in Tibet*. New York, Harper Perennial. Pp. 227. ISBN 978 0 06 176827 9 (paperback).

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What have Westerners discerned in Tibet that has so fascinated them over the past two centuries? Only some, of course, have looked on what is actually there, or at least what is presented to the eye: the form of the land

itself, the impenetrable, rarified, fortress-like quality of its mountain-locked valleys and plateau, floating above the world, the Switzerland of Inner Asia; and the people that inhabit it, their ancient strangeness, a way of being so exotic that they seem something akin to the Balinese at altitude. But the country's lofty, aloof isolation also created perceptions that reflected more than just physical or cultural distance. It allowed the West, for a time and for reasons entirely of its own, to transmute Tibet into a land of make-believe, another Narnia, a Middle-Earth or, at worst, a utopia. In the early years of the 20th century, South America had provided the virgin space for such imagined locations, as in the fabled valley of H. G. Wells' 'Country of the Blind' or the prehistoric plateau of Conan Doyle's 'Lost World.' But as exploration and familiarity made such fictions ever harder to sustain, the even mightier and as yet unconquered Himalayas replaced the Andes as the chief near-insurmountable barrier to the ever-rising tide of the mundane; and the resistance of the Tibetan authorities to foreign intrusion helped cement the role of their territory as the final semi-plausible setting for a never-never land on our planet. That resistance was unavailing, and the Chinese takeover of the country in the 1950s meant that Tibet's portrayal as a sky-realm was no longer credible — any kind of Maoist *Shangri-la* would have been a complete contradiction in terms. Nor, with the advent of space travel, was it any longer needed; Western science fiction now had *carte blanche* to create any number of worlds as the backdrops for tales of questing and moralizing, as repositories of mystic wisdom, and as battlegrounds for the struggle between intrinsic good and extrinsic evil. So in the second half of the century the Tibetans were allowed to descend from their peaks and rejoin common humanity as victims of Communism along with so many millions of others. In the process their country inevitably lost a good deal of its allure as the *locus classicus* for modern myth; in terms of providing a setting for fantasy, the Himalayas could not hope to compete with the new 'final frontier', the unconstrained, seemingly limitless imaginative possibilities for exploration available to the creators of *Star Trek* and the like.

The myth did leave a residue, one that continues to influence today's Western spiritual/political interest in Tibet and its people, a phenomenon that has been thoroughly explored by Donald S. Lopez Jr. in what is perhaps the most influential of recent studies of the country, *Prisoners of Shangri-La* (1999). Contending that past Western mystifying of Tibet, and especially of its Buddhist inheritance, still shackles our present understanding of it, he argues that the first task for anyone wishing to uncover its reality must be to explore the 'flights of fancy and imagination' that had their points of origin within Tibet itself, but which passed rapidly across its borders and entangled themselves with Western self-preoccupations; the knotted skeins that

resulted, he says, have today to be carefully unravelled before we can have any hope of escaping the 'mirror-lined cultural labyrinths that have been created by Tibetans, Tibetophiles, and Tibetologists, labyrinths that the scholar may map but in which the scholar also must wander. We are captives of our own making, we are all prisoners of Shangri-la' (1999: 12-13). It is these same distorted, misinterpreted reflections that provide the subject matter for Tom Neuhaus, as he in turn seeks to delineate the place of *Tibet in the Western Imagination*.

His book grew out of a Cambridge Ph.D. thesis, and in places it still retains the features of its only begetter, notably the occasional detours into matters very tangential and the way it sometimes strains to assert the significance of its findings. Given the pressures on a newcomer to an already crowded field to stake out some space of his own by offering something distinctive and original, this is understandable enough; as are the rather excessive pains Neuhaus takes to emphasize how his angle of approach differs from that of previous studies of the subject like *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies*, the volume edited by Dodin and Räther, and Martin Brauer's *Dreamworld Tibet*, which are still little more than a decade old. His task is made somewhat easier by the fact that, although he appears to be German by birth, he has elected to research and write largely within the English academic world. This immediately gives him an unusual perspective and the very considerable advantages of bilingualism. There are minor unavoidable costs: his repeated use of the term 'transnational' often says as much about himself as it does about his subject, and there are a few places where his grasp of language lets him down (as when writing (p. 168) of Western reluctance to counter Chinese interference in Tibet after 1949, 'The reason for this disinterestedness [sc. lack of interest?] on the part of Western governments seems to have lied in strategic considerations...'). Yet for the most part his background is a source of strength, and while his book is not always elegant or easy going, it deserves the closest attention. In part this is because Neuhaus believes, correctly, that Western images of Tibet, even when laughably illusory, are worthy of serious attention for what they have to tell us about the West rather than about Tibet itself. But the chief value of his study is that, at its heart, it treats of matters vital to Europe's (and so in some measure the West's) self-understanding at a critical juncture in its history.

Neuhaus stakes out the years 1853-1959 for treatment, and then divides his chosen century or so into three unequal chronological sections at the years 1904 and 1947: the first two parts of the book are both further subdivided into chapters that treat the history of (in general terms) the diplomatic, ethnographic, religious and scientific points of contact between

Tibet and the West; the final part serves as epilogue and conclusion. As far as geography is concerned, he casts his net over 'the present-day entities of Ladakh, Assam, Sikkim (all parts of India), Nepal, Bhutan and the Autonomous Region of Tibet, as well as some small parts of Pakistan and Western China...' (p. 2), thus appearing to opt for what Sam van Schaik has termed 'ethnographic Tibet' over 'political Tibet' (2011: xv). The 'particular focus' is on 'British and German representations of the region...representations of Tibet and the Himalayas generated by a host of different types of travellers, most notably missionaries, scientists and adventurers, as well as some fictional representations of the region' (pp. 1, 3).

All of this is not without its problems. The term 'representations' conflates rather too readily those who saw Tibet with their own eyes and those for whom it was a purely mythical construct. Certainly such a distinction is not always easy to draw in individual instances (to which category should Madame Blavatsky, for example, be assigned?), and how people interpret what they see or fail to see is undeniably conditioned by their background and expectations. But for all that, the experience of the senses does need to be differentiated in some fashion from that of the imagination; the statements 'I have been to Tibet' and 'I have been to Shangri-la' may both be of interest to the historian, but they remain, to an important degree, different in kind, since the former alone is capable of verification by historical documentation. Neuhaus' rather too easy migration between categories is somewhat sleight of hand and owes more than a little, one feels, to paucity of evidence. He notes (p. 9) the estimate of Peter Bishop that 'by 1975 not more than 1250 Europeans and North Americans had been to Tibet, half of whom had been there as part of the military mission of 1903/04.' A book entitled *The Western Experience of Tibet* would, then, probably have been a rather slim volume, hence the shift in the conceptual and geographical boundaries of Neuhaus' study as it progresses. For while 'political' Tibet provides adequate material for the chapters on diplomacy and ethnography, religion can be much more fully treated in 'ethnographic Tibet', and science, exploration and mountaineering require 'the Himalayas' or even 'Inner Asia' for their canvas. Even so, the ice remains pretty thin in places. Chapter 4, 'Science and Exploration' between 1853 and 1904, for example, relies heavily on the accounts of Henry Savage Landor (which we will examine later) and the German Schlagintweit brothers, all of whom have a plausible claim to be called explorers. But thereafter we must feed on scraps such as the hunting journal of Henry Markham which, Neuhaus admits, is 'aimed at readers seeking tales of adventure and rugged individualism' (p. 76), and whose relevance is really very marginal indeed.

Another misgiving is that although James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* is given extended treatment, there is not a great deal of time spent with other non-European sources; and the 'Western imagination' is, after all, a transatlantic affair at the very least. Neuhaus makes much play with the 'transnational' aspect of his approach, but its range turns out to be rather limited in practice. The 'West' resolves itself for the most part into Europe, and Europe into Britain and Germany, coincidentally the two countries in which the author feels most at home. These self-imposed restrictions do not, however, matter overly much when we come to consider the book's greatest strength, its treatment of how changing attitudes to Tibet after World War I illustrate (European) 'disillusionment with modern warfare, organized religion and a perceived over-reliance on scientific positivism' (p. 142). Indeed, such is the interest and importance of this subject that one regrets it did not form the organizing theme of the entire book, for Neuhaus has a great deal of interest to say about how the experience of 1914-1918 led to a 're-thinking of religion and spirituality' (p. 131) and, beyond that, to a wider loss of self-confidence and self-belief.

The interwar period not only witnessed a more romanticized view of Tibetan religion but also of the natural environment of Tibet and the Himalayas...when positioning themselves in relation to Inner Asians and other Europeans, more and more travellers were critical of what they perceived to be the dark side of European modernity. Just as in many comments on Tibetan religion and spirituality, there was a distinct fear that modern warfare, pollution and urbanization were posing a real threat to humanity...

In the late nineteenth century, there had been a comparatively strong sense of confidence in the values of European science and adventure travel. Consequently, the environment was discussed in terms of a supposedly rational, globally applicable frame of knowledge. After the First World War, this confidence waned rapidly...Inner Asia held up a mirror that accentuated development in Europe...' (pp. 162-163).

That the First World War inflicted great, perhaps mortal, damage on Europe's confidence in itself as the cradle and homeland of Christian civilization, and of scientific and material progress, and that one can detect evidence of this in changing representations of Tibet, are both undeniable propositions. The 'Great War' destroyed millions of lives on the continent in ways that could be reconciled neither with belief in a religion of peace,

nor with the notion that science and technology were leading humankind to a terrestrial paradise. Being buried deep in the African jungle allowed Alfred Schweitzer to see what the war would mean for Christianity with perhaps even greater clarity than if he had been on the spot.

We [Christians] are, all of us, conscious that many natives are puzzling over the question how it can be possible that the whites, who brought them the Gospel of Love, are now murdering each other, and throwing to the winds the commands of the Lord Jesus. When they put the question to us we are helpless. If I am questioned on the subject by negroes who think, I make no attempt to explain or extenuate, but say that we in in "front" of something terrible and incomprehensible. How far the ethical and religious authority of the white man among these children of nature is impaired by this war we shall only be able to measure later on. I fear that the damage done will be very considerable. (1922, p. 138)

But the 'damage' to European credibility was as much internal (that is, to the continent's self-confidence and self-belief) as external (to its image in the eyes of non-Europeans), and in tracing how the sense of 'helplessness' and of a loss of 'authority' was reflected in changing European attitudes to Tibet in the interwar period, Neuhaus opens another window onto this important story. Yet the nature and causes of the decay of belief and self-belief in Europe are more complicated than his exclusive focus on the Great War allows; too many questions cannot be answered by the material he provides. Was the 'comparatively strong sense of [European] confidence' in the pre-war period in fact more bravado than inner certainty? And since the authority of Christianity in Europe had been under assault for two centuries or more before 1914, did the Great War do more even damage to faith in science than to faith in God? Then, too, was the damage really 'Western' or just European in scope? Did it encompass the United States to any meaningful degree as well? And even if it did, were not other events like the Great Depression at least as important as the Great War in provoking growing Western self-doubt? Finally, what measure of satisfaction lay in wait for those who chose to damn their own cultural inheritance and turn to Tibet in the hope of finding solutions to Western problems in its ancient wisdom? In trying to furnish preliminary answers to these questions, we can avail ourselves of one of Neuhaus' primary sources that has just made its reappearance in print, and of two very different works on Tibetan themes by Paul Hackett and Colin Thubron that were published too late to be consulted for his book.

Any potential purchaser of the reissue by Benediction Classics of Henry Savage Landor's *In the Forbidden Land* needs to be aware at the outset that the work can now readily be consulted and downloaded online. Not only does the text made available at Project Gutenberg, for example, effectively cost nothing (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/22210/22210-h/22210-h.htm>, accessed 25 November, 2012), it turns out in fact to be superior to the Benediction reprint in that some of the illustrations are reproduced in colour rather than black and white. As noted above, it is one of the sources on which Neuhaus relies very heavily, despite the problems it poses. The most immediate of these is how much one can believe of Savage Landor's tale of his aborted adventures in Tibet in the summer and autumn of 1897. The physical feats he recounts, including repeated and extended marches at extremely high altitudes in very poor weather, the privations and especially the tortures he alleges he suffered at Tibetan hands, his apparent ability despite all this to record his experiences and make scientific observations, and his mastery of the notoriously difficult Tibetan language, all stretch the bounds of trust. Neuhaus records the doubts cast by Tom Langstaff on Savage Landor's veracity, but does not venture on any kind of definitive judgment himself. Since assessing the reliability of a source is one of the basic tasks of the historian, it is regrettable that Neuhaus does not engage very strenuously with it here, contenting himself with the rather lame observation that Langstaff's criticism 'suggests [sc. proves?] that debates about accuracy did take place in the context of Himalayan exploration' (p. 75). It is true that he does assert elsewhere that Savage Landor was 'somewhat prone to embellish the truth' (p. 47), and his quotations from *In the Forbidden Land* are liberally sprinkled with 'he claims', 'according to his own account', and so on, but all this still begs the simple but vital question of how much of what Savage Landor says he experienced actually happened.

It is, then, much easier for Neuhaus to retreat into characterising Savage Landor's story as a 'representation' and so embark on mining it for insights into European attitudes. He argues that Savage Landor

...depicted himself as the upright, proud, and infinitely superior European male. Once again, it was the ideals of masculinity, self-discipline and authority that informed Savage Landor's sense of superiority over others. Individual self-reliance was what distinguished the Himalayan traveller. As a traveller, Landor clearly constructed for himself an identity based on certain (supposedly) positive values and thereby distanced the Tibetans as 'others' who did not conform to these values. (p. 47)

All these assertions sound reasonable enough, and they certainly fit with the general argument that the self-confidence of pre-1914 Europe was one of the many casualties of Great War. The problem with using Savage Landor's account as evidence for this, though, is that one has to overlook so much of the context. Let us take, by way of example, his description of how he crossed the Maium Pass into the Tibetan heartland despite the (verbal) opposition of some of the country's soldiery.

'...[The soldiers'] leader, pointing at the valley beyond the pass, cried: "That yonder is the Lhasa territory and we forbid you to enter it.'

I took no notice of his protest, and...stepped into the most sacred of all sacred provinces, "the land of God."

A little rivulet, hardly six inches wide, descended among stones in the centre of the valley we were following, and was soon swollen by other rivulets from melting snows on the mountains to either side. This was one source of the great Brahmaputra, one of the largest rivers of the world. I must confess that I felt somewhat proud to be the first European who ever reached these sources, and there was a certain satisfaction in standing over this sacred stream which, of such immense width lower down, could here be spanned by a man standing with legs apart.

The moment the pass was crossed we were in a mild, pleasant climate, with a lovely deep blue sky over us and plenty of grass for the yaks, as well as low shrubs for our fires; so that after all our sufferings and privations, we felt that we had indeed entered the land of God. Notwithstanding that I expected great trouble sooner or later, I was not at all sorry I...had marched straight into the forbidden territory — it was a kind of wild satisfaction at doing what is forbidden. (pp. 300-301)

There is, of course, a good measure of self-dramatization in all of this. But a view of himself as a colossus bestriding river, hill and plain was a necessity for Savage Landor for reasons other than a desire for admiration and book-sales. While it certainly reflects pride in personal achievement ('the first European'), underlying his self-magnification is a profound though unacknowledged sense of being completely unwelcome, an intruder in a place where he had no right to be; ultimately, then, it he reveals that he

knew himself to be extremely vulnerable (the 'wild satisfaction' gives a whiff of the intoxication brought on by Promethean self-destructiveness). Neuhaus claims (p. 45) that Savage Landor 'chose to fight his way through Tibet in an interminable series of fisticuffs.' But this was simply not the case. He and his handful of servants in fact spent most of their time running and hiding, desperate to avoid contact or conflict with the natives. And this has a wider import; like any European in Tibet, and to a degree like any European in Asia in that era, Savage Landor felt himself to be humanly isolate, far from anything he could call home, surrounded by latent and sometimes overt hostility. He did not belong, he was an alien and uninvited presence in Tibet, and so without any resources other than his own; being unable to ask for or rely on common human sympathy and aid, having no meaningful contact with people, friendless and alone, he had no choice but to become utterly self-reliant, always watchful and mistrusting, constantly forced into talking up his own powers just to reassure himself. And this was the European condition in these years not just in Tibet, but also in India, jewel of the British Empire, and in the rest of Asia.

It is not primarily significant, then, that Europeans felt themselves to be superior to the native population, but that they felt themselves to be apart from it, and sensed somewhere its hidden dislike, something that could easily boil up into hatred and overwhelm them; the memory of the Black Hole of Calcutta was still fresh enough even after half a century. The reason for that latent hostility was simple; like the general European presence in Asia, Savage Landor's trespassing into Tibet ultimately owed everything to force, money and guile. In these circumstances, his only true friend was the gun — or in his case guns, since in preparing for his expedition he was careful to include 'in a water-tight box 1000 cartridges from my 256° Mannlicher rifle, besides 500 cartridges for my revolver...' (p. 8). These weapons (added to his silver coins) were, in truth, all that made him 'superior'. Even while still in India, he found people 'more particularly attracted by my rifles, revolvers, and other weapons, especially the 256° Mannlicher sighted to 1000 yards' (p. 35). Small wonder, then, that Tibetan soldiers armed only with matchlocks were so chary of approaching his small party, something which Savage Landor was far too ready to ascribe to cowardice. Had the advantage of weaponry been reversed, he too would have been very circumspect; as it was, even when meeting with apparently friendly Lamas, 'I carried my rifle in my hand' (p. 236). Those seven words could do duty as the European motto in Asia, and they do not belie genuine self-confidence or self-belief.

And what of religious belief? What has Savage Landor's book to tell us about the current state of confidence in the Bible? It is true that he

confesses to spending an agreeable few hours being entertained to tea by two ladies of the Methodist Episcopal Mission prior to entering Tibet (pp. 50-55), but it is all too evident from his book that science occupied vastly more of his thoughts than religion, and that Christianity was at best a social institution for him. But then there is also his statement that having crossed the Maium Pass, he felt he had entered 'the Land of God', a 'sacred' space. While clearly not the sentiments of a Christian missionary of his time, his words do seem to reflect as early as 1897 the 'growing interest in a privately experienced spirituality' that Neuhaus believes occurred after rather than before the Great War, when 'As spirituality entered the scene individual experiences became even more important, particularly so as more and more travellers seem to have been disillusioned with any kind of larger organized form of culture. In particular, they were able to give expression to their disillusionment with modern warfare, organized religion and a perceived over-reliance on scientific relativism' (p. 142). Now it is certainly true that such 'disillusionment' is absent from Savage Landor's book, but in terms of Christianity its place seems largely to have been occupied by indifference — and if this was more generally the case, then the impact of the Great War on Christian belief needs a rather more nuanced interpretation than Neuhaus offers us here.

So much for Europe, the old West; what of the new, the far West, the United States? When and why did it too begin to look in hope or despair to Lhasa, another, if very different, 'City on the Hill'? In the life of Theos Bernard, the self-styled 'White Lama', the subject of what is in many respects a model biography by Paul G. Hackett, there are at least some suggestive hints.

Born in 1908, Bernard was, of course, too young to have fought in the Great War, nor does his upbringing in Tombstone, Arizona, seem to have been impacted in any noticeable way by the sufferings of Europe. Far more significant was that his coming to manhood coincided with the onset of the Great Depression, which made any kind of conventional career far harder to pursue. But his family background perhaps made that unlikely anyway. Although his parents divorced when he was two, leading him to lose all contact for a long time with his father, Glen, the latter's preoccupation with Indian religion, and especially Tantric yoga, was to condition Theos' life in many more ways than the choice of his (rather un-Christian) Christian name. Paul Hackett explains the Bernards' attraction to oriental teachings in terms of the failure of United States to live up to the image of the 'New World' that Columbus and his contemporaries had fashioned, and which gave

...the nascent Protestant movement in Europe a feeling of validation and historical predestination, seeing the American continent as a land ripe for conquest and reformulation along the lines of the utopian ideals espoused for a “Christian” (i.e. Protestant) country.

Three hundred and fifty years later, the United States had not turned out as Columbus or anyone else following him had hoped. By the mid-nineteenth century, social tension between the northern and southern halves of the country were on the verge of tearing the nation apart, and when the dust of the brutal and bloody Civil War had settled, the scars it left on the American populace and landscape were just as much psychological as they were physical. The states of the old Southern Confederation lay in smouldering ruin, waves of non-Protestant and non-Christian immigrants were landing on both the eastern and western coasts of the country, the rapidly industrializing cities in the North were becoming increasingly secular, and rural areas were rife with alcoholism and promiscuity. If anyone had thought that America would evolve into a Christian utopia — a “Millennial Kingdom” — before, by the late nineteenth century it was a myth that few could sincerely espouse. (pp. 35-6)

All of this is a useful supplement and corrective to Neuhaus’ focus on the impact of the Great War on belief in Christianity, but it is in its turn inadequate, since it ignores the (crude, maybe, to European eyes) vigour evident in the material success and self-belief of a nation that, whatever its internal problems, stood on the threshold of world leadership. It is true that Glen and Theos Bernard showed scant respect for Christianity, but their attitude to materialism was at best ambivalent, and this complicated the path they took in seeking out sources of hidden wisdom in India and Tibet.

Through his brother Perry (later Pierre), Glen had come into contact with a Hindu yogi, and he settled in California after the birth of Theos to pursue his studies with other Indian teachers of the ‘Yogic Sciences’. Some of their attraction for Glen may be owing to the fact that money never seemed to come his way in significant quantities, and money was the standard by which success was measured and respect accorded in his place and time. For those like Glen (and later Theos) who felt themselves to be undervalued by society, religious teachings that rejected materialism were obviously comforting. But they also offered a career path to the riches they affected to despise, and this feeds into a Tibetan theme whose role in American history Donald Lopez Jr. detects extending even to the present:

...perhaps the most famous of the Western adherents of Tibetan Buddhism, Richard Gere...describes Tibet as everything that the materialist West wants. Here Tibet operates as a constituent of a romanticism in which the Orient is not debased but exalted as a surrogate self endowed with all that the West wants. It is Tibet that will regenerate the West by showing us, prophetically, what we can be by showing us what it has been. It is Tibet that can save the West, cynical and materialist, from itself. Tibet is seen as the cure for an ever-dissolving Western civilization, restoring its spirit. (1999, p. 202)

And yet Richard Gere is no true ascetic and, like him, Glen and Theos Bernard, having been reunited in Los Angeles in 1932, saw nothing wrong in combining material success with the wisdom of the East. For Theos, though, that success did not seem likely to be achieved through his own abilities alone, especially given the ever-lengthening lines of the unemployed in early 1930s America. Never short on self-confidence, however, he set his sights on academic glory, first in the field of anthropology, where he rapidly came to believe that his fieldwork in New Mexico qualified him to replace Ruth Benedict, one of the early luminaries of the field, in teaching a course on the subject at Columbia. This was the first in what was to be an unending series of unrealized ambitions, for which lack of talent, or perhaps connections, are the best explanation. Columbia would only accept him for a master's on Tantric yoga, but by the time it was completed he no longer had need for the security and salary that came with an academic position.

His freedom to pursue his interests wherever they might take him owed everything to marriage to a wealthy heiress, Viola Wertheim, whose interest in Indian philosophy led her to the Clarkstown Country Club run by Theos' uncle (now Pierre), and so into the arms of Theos. Once again, spirituality and materialism were intertwined in true American fashion, and Theos now had all the funds he needed for himself and his father to do 'research' into Tantric yoga in India. The quest for esoteric wisdom in this field led Theos in 1937 to Lhasa, which he was only the third American to visit; and yet the ultimate mysteries that only the great masters of the land could teach him always seemed to elude his grasp. Instead, on his return to America, he sought recognition for his 'achievements' by giving public lectures whose contents were more fantasy than fact. This readiness to deceive, allied to his utterly self-serving treatment of Viola (and, after their divorce, of the other women who came into his life) does much to explain why he deserves the epithet 'jerk' that Paul Hackett bestows on him in an

unguarded moment (p. 417). For Theos, Tibet at root represented 'sensationalistic' career possibilities, and he was murdered on its borders in 1947 as the Partition of India descended into anarchy in pursuit of his 'last fallback plan...an audience with a great lama or yogi and a great discovery as well.' He owed his early death to one final, fatal, self-deceiving and unrealizable ambition, albeit an ironic one; the belief that he had discovered the location 'of the manuscript of the secret life of Jesus in India, and [that] he, Theos Barnard, would be the one to bring that manuscript back home to America' (p. 423). Murder by person or persons unknown (Hackett says he has discovered their identities but chooses not to reveal them) was, in this case at least, the reality of Shangri-la in its entirety.

And yet there are still those who, in some fashion or other, go in search, and write, of it. One of the latest accounts, *To a Mountain in Tibet*, is from the pen of perhaps the world's best-known travel writer, Colin Thubron, who, like Savage Landor — whom he calls 'bigoted' (p. 100) — over a century before, chose to enter Tibet effectively alone, and only partly in search of material for a book. His objective, geographically at any rate, was to make the kora, the ritual circuit, of the fabled Mount Kailas. That this isolated peak north of Lake Manasarova has a deep spiritual significance for others he is well aware. It is the

...most sacred of the world's mountains — holy to one fifth of the earth's people...To the pious, the mountain radiates gold or refracts like crystal. It is the source of the universe, created from cosmic waters and the mind of Brahma...

But the God of death dwells on the mountain...About a millenium ago the pagan gods in charge of the mountain were converted to Buddhism and became its protectors...the Buddha himself arrived and nailed Kailas to earth with his footprints before it could be carted off by a demon...Hindus believe its summit to be the palace of Shiva — the lord of destruction and change — who sits there in eternal meditation...Kailas [has] kept its own taboos. Its slopes are sacrosanct, and it has never been climbed. (pp. 4-6)

And on his way to its foot, Thubron spends time by the equally sacred waters of Lake Manasarovar, linked to Kailas as the heart of the world by more than literal reflections.

At its [Manasarovar's] southern end the shelving ridges of Gurla Mandhata ebb still snowlit even along the eastern shore, while at the other end, beyond waves of brown foothills, Kailas mushrooms into

the blue. The two white summits haunt the lake. Between them its indigo void appears coldly primeval. Tibetans call it Tso Mapham, 'the Unrivalled', or Rinpoche, 'the Precious'. Its hushed stillness seems to freeze it in a jewel-like concentrate of water. In both Buddhist and Hindu scripture the universe is born from such primal matter...

To Hindus, especially, the lake is mystically related to the mountain...the epic Ramayana, describing the Tibetan plateau, sites Kailas beside a great lake, beyond which spreads unending night. Manasarovar, they say, was created by the mind of God. It is the flower of first consciousness. In a time before scripture, a band of seers came here to worship Shiva, the god of destruction and change, who meditates on Kailas. To empower their ablutions, Brahma, the primal lord of creation, engendered from his thought these astral waters...

It was in these pure waters that the Buddha's mother bathed before receiving him into her womb; and here the serpent king taught enlightenment to his *klu* water spirits, as Hindu and Buddhist traditions seamlessly fused.

Thubron is clearly both intrigued by such beliefs and respectful of them. Yet since he himself does not travel to the mountain as a believer in company with others, his choice of Kailas as a destination seems an enigma. His motives, though, 'inchoate' by his own admission (p. 47) as they are, can still be identified as belonging to Neuhaus' category of 'spirituality'.

I am doing this on account of the dead.

Sometimes journeys begin long before their first step is taken. Mine, without my knowing, starts long ago, in a hospital ward, as the last of my family dies. There is nothing strange in this, in the state of being alone. The death of parents may bring resigned sadness, even a guilty freedom. Instead I need to leave a sign of their passage. My mother died just now, it seems, not in the way she wished; my father before her; my sister before that, at the age of twenty-one.... You cannot walk out of your grief, I know, or absolve yourself of your survival, or bring anyone back. You are left with the desire only that things not be as they are. So you choose somewhere meaningful on the earth's surface, as if planning a secular pilgrimage. Yet the meaning is not your own. Then you

go on a journey (it's my profession, after all), walking to a place beyond your own history, to the sound of a river flowing the other way. In the end you come to rest, at a mountain that is holy to others.

So his book is in part a diary of experiences in new lands, intermingled with a restrained sorting of memories of those closest to him by blood. At its heart, though, it is a search for something he cannot, or will not, define, and which the vicariously sacred is unlikely to satisfy. This becomes clear as he submerges his body in the embrace of Manasarovar.

Hindus more than Buddhists bathe in the icy water, drink it, carry it away. Its purifying powers deepen in their scriptures, until it washes away the sorrow of all mortal beings...

Close to shore the water comes oddly warm to my touch. The Hindu Puranas ask that pilgrims here pour out a libation to the shades of their forefathers. This rite of *tarpan*, it is said, eases their souls into eternity.

As I wade a few years into the shallows, they turn cold. I cup the water in my hands. I feel a momentary, bracing emptiness. But the *tarpan's* truth is not mine. Its dead are changed into other incarnations, or faded into eternity...

I still my feet in the cold water. I want to call out a name, but flinch from the expectation of silence. In these waters of Hindu consolation, people as I know them are extinguished... the lake is immense, primordially alien. I hug myself against an imaginary wind. A tightness opens in my stomach. I want to touch hands that I know have gone cold. The air feels thin. (pp. 141-142)

Nor does Kailas itself bring consolation either. The book ends abruptly with the circuit complete, but there is not the least hint of a 'coming to rest'. In terms of a 'secular pilgrimage' we are left with what we were offered at the start, a simulacrum only.

So what does the 'spirituality' of Tibet have to offer the West amid its travails? Westerners must answer that question for themselves individually, but at least on the evidence of Theos Barnard and Colin Thubron, no simple panacea is on offer, and there is good reason why this should be so. Donald Lopez speaks of Western longing for a 'surrogate self' that will regenerate it. But regeneration comes not from without, but solely from

within, from self-struggle; and in its absence one is left with self-abandonment pure and simple, numbed capitulation to the forces of extinction merely. The temptation to self-surrender is understandable enough, given the West's flaws past and present, but its enticements are illusions only, among which Tibet has offered some of the most beguiling. The temptation may well increase as the twenty-first century progresses and the balance of power shifts inexorably towards Asia. But it remains, in the end, what it has always been, symptom rather than cure: the desire for a surrogate self, one that works, never mind an exalted one, only becomes overmastering when belief in the value of the historical self, the self that has existed until this critical moment in time, becomes so fatally compromised that it is to be written off as worthless, beyond repair or rebirth. It marks the point, in other words, at which self-belief disintegrates and, with it, identity. What, if anything, lies beyond that point has not yet been disclosed to us. But that it will be a dreamworld Shangri-la, miraculously relieving us of the burdens of living and dying by washing away all sorrows, that is the most inconceivable as well as the most undesirable of all fairy-tale endings. So it is with good reason that the waters of Manasarovar lake grow cold to the Western touch so quickly; for their right and proper task is not to proffer comfort to the sick and shrinking self as to a child, but to rouse and yes, *pace* Colin Thubron, to brace it. Waders awake!

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