

# The Dreadful Mystic Banquet

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Alexandra David-Neel tells of a rite practiced in old Tibet called *chöd*, which she had witnessed and into which she herself had been partially initiated. It is a kind of mystery play with one actor only, the celebrant. It has been so devised to terrify the participants that one hears of men who have suddenly gone mad or died while engaged in its performance.

It is performed in a cemetery, or any wild site whose physical aspect awakens feelings of terror. The place is thought even more suitable if it is associated with a terrible legend or if a tragic event had actually occurred there recently.

The rite is designed to stir up the occult forces or conscious beings which may exist in such places, generated either by actual deeds or by the concentration of many people's thoughts of imagined events. During the performance of *chöd*, the performer may see himself suddenly surrounded by players from the occult worlds.

The one to perform *chöd*, the *naljorpa*, must first learn the ritual dance, his steps forming geometrical figures, and also turnings on one foot, stampings and leapings while keeping time with the liturgic recitation. He must learn to handle, according to rule, the bell, the *dorjee*, and the magic dagger (*phurba*), to beat rhythmically a small drum (*damaru*), and to blow a trumpet made of a human femur (*kangling*). The dancers are young ascetics emaciated by austerities, clad in ragged robes, their unwashed faces lit by hard, resolute, ecstatic eyes. They are preparing themselves for a perilous undertaking.

The ceremony begins with long mystic preliminaries during which the celebrant tramples down all passions and crucifies his selfishness. Then the celebrant blows his bone trumpet, calling the hungry demons to the feast he intends to lay before them. He envisions a female deity, who esoterically personifies his own will, and who springs from the top of his head and stands before him, sword in hand. With one stroke she cuts off the head of the *naljorpa*. Then, while troops of ghouls crowd around for the feast, the goddess severs his limbs, skins him, and rips open his belly. The bowels spill, the blood gushes forth, and the hideous guests bite and chew noisily, while the celebrant excites and urges them on with the liturgic words of unreserved surrender:

"For ages, in the course of renewed births I have borrowed from countless living beings--at the cost of their welfare and life-- food, clothing, all kinds of services to

sustain my body, to keep it joyful in comfort and to defend it against death. Today, I pay my debt, offering for destruction this body which I have held so dear.

"I give my flesh to the hungry, my blood to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those who are naked, my bones as fuel to those who suffer from cold. I give my happiness to the unhappy ones. I give my breath to bring back the dying to life.

"Shame on me if I shrink from giving my *self*! Shame on you, wretched and demoniac beings, if you do not dare to prey upon it . . . "

The act of the "Mystery" is called "the red meal." If the initiate is one far advanced, it will be followed by "the black meal." The vision of the demoniacal banquet vanishes, the laughter and cries of the ghouls die away. Utter loneliness in a gloomy landscape succeeds the weird orgy, and the exaltation aroused in the *naljorpa* by his dramatic sacrifice subsides.

Now he visualizes himself having become a small heap of charred human bones that lie on a lake of black mud-- the mud of misery, of moral defilement, and of harmful deeds to which he has cooperated during the course of numberless lives whose origin is lost in the night of time. He must realize that the very idea of sacrifice is but an illusion, an offshoot of blind, groundless pride. In fact, he *has nothing* to give away, because he *is nothing*. These useless bones, symbolizing the destruction of his phantom "I," may sink into the muddy lake; it will not matter.

That silent renunciation of the ascetic who realizes that he holds nothing that can be renounced, and who utterly relinquishes the elation springing from the idea of sacrifice, closes the rite.<sup>1</sup>

How intense is this scene, how it flares before us! A scene from remote, hermetic old Tibet, forbidden to outsiders for centuries, which this Russian woman, having become a Buddhist nun, had penetrated in the first years of the twentieth century. It was something she saw with her eyes; for us it is a vision, a vision of visionaries. For her too it counted not simply as an empirical event but as a vision imparted in a mystery play in which she was a participant.

This vision stands out for us with exceptional force-- a vision from the most remote distances, from a Tibet inaccessible then and now destroyed. But also the radicality of this vision sets it apart. We see the most resolute stripping bare, the most extreme act-- the act in which a young ascetic confronts the farthest dimensions and most inhuman depths of the universe, in a journey that consumes him.

This vision transfixes us too because our sight of the working world about us is today doubled by a cosmic vision, supplied to us not by monks but by our scientists.<sup>2</sup> We do not live any longer in the confines of our own practicable fields, in a human world. Our eyes are relayed by the eyes of astronauts in outer space. We see our own planet from beyond, a colored stone in the immensity of cosmic voids. The Hubble telescope shows us photographs of the swirling spirals of incandescent gases exploding billions of light-years ago. Astronomers measure the number of years yet ahead before the incineration of our planet, the extinction of our sun, the burning out of all the stars of the Milky Way galaxy. To our pragmatic perception of the practicable field about us our science superimposes a deanthropomorphized and apocalyptic cosmic vision.

To respect the other, to respect his intrinsic dignity-- whether it is his rational capacity or his fantasy space that gives him dignity, that prevents him from seeing himself as a means only-- has become the supreme maxim in our liberal-democratic societies. But to find oneself illuminated in the light of this Tibetan vision is not to respect the boundaries, the space of the visionary. It is to be dazzled, blinded, wounded by this vision. The sight of perceptual seeing scouts out the terrain in advance, foresees obstacles and resistances, stakes out the path through to the goal. The vision of visionaries dazzles, burns, wounds.

When we locate the rite as something performed in old Tibet, we envision that region organized according to a feudal economy and theocratic government, different from the mining and industrializing capitalist economy of this region today managed by a Chinese-controlled secular bureaucracy. But in old Tibet, the mystery play *chöd* was performed in a place withdrawn from the places of economics and politics. This place is not nature, outside the domesticated zones of work and reason; the visions the mystery play imparts are not visions of natural beings and behaviors. The phenomenology of religion has long distinguished sacred places separated from the profane world. That terminology, however, inclines us to think that the individual who leaves the profane fields of work and reason to go to these separated places marked out by taboos and prohibitions goes there to make contact with, and to contract with, extrahuman forces. In this "mystery play," the *naljorpa* encounters only famished demons-- hungry, thirsty, naked, unhappy, dying-- that devour him. The place where the *chöd* will be performed is not marked out as sacred, consecrated, but rather a place of disintegration and decomposition of the practicable and profane world of work and reason-- a place of tragic events, a cemetery, in the night, a wild site that evokes emotions of insecurity and terror. Let us then designate the places where the rite is performed as the *elemental* regions beyond every practicable field.

Work lays out a field of security and instrumentality. A human primate detaches something-- a loose stone, a branch, a pipe wrench-- from the continuity of the natural or fabricated environment about him. He detaches himself with his tool, and shifts his

view from the environment continuous with his body to goals or results beyond it. Between the goals or results and his tool he sees a relationship of means and end, cause and effect. The field of perception becomes a practicable field-- a layout of means and ends, of paths, obstacles, and goals. The further down those paths one goes, picking up things, manipulating things, using things, the further the practicable field extends, intersecting with the practicable fields of others. Technological science depicts ever further stretches of the outlying forests and deserts, the rock and mineral strata beneath, the oceans, finally outer space as practicable fields, extending its map of means, ends, paths, obstacles, and goals to the furthest ends of the universe.

But beyond the confines of the practicable layout or beneath it extends *the elemental*-- the uncharted depths of light, resonance, ground, heat, night. We do not confront and manipulate the elemental, which has no contours or segments. Having left work and reason behind, our sensuality espouses the support and repose of the ground, sinks into the meaningless radiance of the light, drifts over the hard edges of things decomposing in twilight, abandons itself to the sound and fury signifying nothing, and loses itself in the beginningless, endless anonymity of the night. The elemental is faceless, surfaceless, formless, but dense with untamed and turbulent forces. It is beyond the practicable fields, to the elemental and the night, that the *naljorpa* betakes himself. He goes to expose himself to the untamed and turbulent forces of the elemental.

By going to such a place, by performing a rigorous ritual dance and liturgical recitation, by brandishing the thunderbolt bell, the *dorjee*, the magic dagger, and blowing the trumpet made of a human femur, the *naljorpa* receives a vision. The Nietzschean psychogenesis of visions fails here: Nietzsche had explained the origin of visions out of frenzy, the collective frenzy that intensifies the forces of the Dionysian orgiasts. The *naljorpa* on the contrary has pursued long asceticism, and goes to the elemental regions alone.<sup>3</sup>

In English "vision" can designate the faculty of the perception with eyes: we speak of vision, hearing, and touch; we say he has 20-20 vision. But "visions" designates scenes seen with clairvoyance. What is the vision of visionaries, of seers? The visions of Dante, William Blake, and James Joyce? The visions of the great myths, Gilgamesh and the Mahabharata, the Odyssey and the Ring of the Niebelungen? The visions of Plotinus and St. John of the Cross? The visions of Simon Bolivar and Che Guevara, and Gandhi and Nelson Mandela?

In English we also speak of "having visions," "seeing things" which are delusional. The visions of visionaries of themselves separate from delusions-- just as, Maurice Merleau-Ponty showed, the visual field of itself separates out visual memories and images which do not settle in among the really visible things but float over them.<sup>4</sup> The

authenticity of a vision is not the result of a procedure of criticism and verification. The most skeptical epistemologist does not marshal a set of criteria to authenticate the visions of William Blake, the Odyssey, St. John of the Cross, or Mahatma Gandhi. Yet delusions give themselves out sometimes as perceptual seeings, and sometimes as visionary visions. Do we have a set of criteria and procedures to identify, and dispel, all delusions? If the visions of visionaries and seers reveal what is not physically present to the eyes, it does not follow that what delusions present is simply collated out of fantasies in the mind of the seer.

The young ascetics who perform *chöd* undertake long training, not only in the gestures, incantations, and music that will be performed, but in the hard resolve for a perilous undertaking. During the course of the ritual, Alexandra David-Neel tells us, men have suddenly gone mad or died. During the long mystic preliminaries to the vision, the celebrant tramples down all passions and crucifies his selfishness. But in fact does not every vision involve great risk for the visionary? Scholars who speak of the visions of epic poets and religious writers do not make us feel the risks involved; perhaps they themselves feel no worse risks than peer neglect in academia. The psychoanalysis of literature and art has brought into discredit the alleged insights into the sources of Milton's and Joyce's visions in their psychopathology. But with that discredit, we have neglected the effects of their visions on them-- and on us. There remains for us to map out the rupture into the practicable world the vision effects, the ways the vision makes practicable and social considerations, feelings, and initiatives alienated or impossible.

The vision of the prophet, the epic poet, and the great historical figure is not simply the overarching conceptual framework that guides his thought and action; it is a *vision*. Since the first epistemologists of modern times, this vision of visionaries has been assimilated to imagination. "Imagination" has served as a cover term for so many disparate things-- the afterimages persisting on the eye, monocular images, the imagos that structure perceptions and memories, the imagination of imaginative variation and projections and models, dreams, the archetypes in dreams but also in waking perception and discourse, the fantasy of wish-fulfillment, hallucination, the imagination of plastic artists, poetic imagination, the creative imagination of productive thinking, the mythical and religious imagination, and the visions of seers and visionaries.

Imagination retains a relationship to visual perception; to imagine is to visualize. Auditory, tactile, and gustatory imagination have remained marginal to the discussion of imagination. Imaginative visualizing would be derivative of perceptual vision. If vision is seeing what is there, what is given, if it is intentional and receptive, then the visions of the productive imagination cannot really be simply a creative projection of the mind itself. In our dreams, Merleau-Ponty wrote, it is debris from the perceived

world we still see. "During the dreams itself, we do not leave the world behind: the dreamspace is segregated from the space of clear thinking, but it uses all the latter's articulations; the world obsesses us even during sleep, and it is about the world that we dream." Dreams, hallucinations, erotic obsessions, and psychedelic intuitions "endeavor to build a private domain out of fragments of the macrocosm . . . The most advanced states of melancholia, in which the patient settles in the realm of death, and, so to speak, takes up his abode there, still make use of the structures of being in the world, and borrow from it an element of being indispensable to its own denial."<sup>5</sup>

Immanuel Kant recognized an essential function of the imagination in every mind that is both receptive and active, both empirical and theoretical, both a perception of what is given and a conceptualizing and reasoning about what is given. For there is a fundamental nonconformity of our concepts to our perceptions: our concepts are abstract and universal but our percepts are particulars. An imagination supplies schemas that make the application of concepts to percepts possible. The schemas share with percepts a sensuous materiality; they share with concepts a generality; they are general images. This "transcendental" imagination productive of schemas turns out to be reproductive: imagination produces these schemas by generalizing images of things seen and recalled from memory. An imagination that would produce images to conform with concepts for which no percepts had been given only produces transcendental illusions.

Martin Heidegger saw that the production of schemas for our concepts works by synthesizing past with present and with future. There is at work in it a power to envision the future and retain the past, and extend the present with them and from them. The "transcendental imagination" is, Heidegger declares, this very temporalizing power in us. But Heidegger's explanation leaves aside visualization; his imagination is peculiarly nonimagistic. And indeed the thrust of Heidegger's interpretations is to reduce the separation between understanding and imagination. The understanding does not produce its universal concepts (as a priori forms) for which then the imagination supplies general images. If the imagination is a synthesizing, or synopsising, activity, and if this activity is more fundamentally the unfolding of a field of time where the future gives direction and the past momentum to the present, then this activity is also the activity that produces transtemporal forms, that is, concepts.

Slavoj Žižek argues that "obsessed as he is with the endeavour to synthesize, to bring together the dispersed manifold given in intuition, Kant passes over in silence the opposite power of imagination emphasized later by Hegel-- namely, imagination *qua* the 'activity of dissolution,' which treats as a separate entity what has effective existence only as a part of some organic Whole."<sup>6</sup> "Imagination," Žižek says, "stands for the capacity of our mind to dismember what immediate perception puts

together, to 'abstract' not a common notion but a certain feature from other features. To 'imagine' means to imagine a partial object without its body, a colour without shape, a shape without a body: 'here a bloody head-- there another white ghastly apparition.'"<sup>7</sup> But Hegel has characterized understanding also as the power of the negative, which separates, abstracts or extracts, elements from the living whole of experience, setting them up as concepts, that is, fixed and inert determinations. Thus Zizek too posits an essential affinity between imagination and understanding.

How inadequate is all this epistemology and transcendental phenomenology for understanding of the visions of visionaries and seers! Vision is the distance sense, and the visionary vision is a visualizing vision. What is visual in the vision of a visionary is not so many fragments recalled from the daytime empirical perception. The vision of a visionary is not just reproductive, and not just reproductive and generalizing. The force of vision in them is not a force that dismembers and dissolves what perceptual vision encounters as organic wholes-- although it is a force that breaks through the whole fabric of what is given in ordinary and pragmatic sight. It makes visible what lies beyond the horizons of perceptual sight. Far from fabricating out of fragments of the macrocosm a private domain in which the individual can take up his abode, the vision of the visionary opens up on immense spaces inhabited by vast populations of human and extrahuman beings. The visions of visionaries are open upon remote distances and vast depths with a singular intensity. They intensify with their light all things visible to perception. And they excite and exalt our emotional forces.

The visions of visionaries have a relationship with understanding: they break through the old conceptual paradigms with the force of their epiphany; they inaugurate new ways of understanding. They then do not, like the transcendental imagination, whether taken as Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, or *ñ ek* understands it, illustrate conceptual universals or mediate percepts toward conceptual universals. The vision acquired in *chöd* is also a deep understanding-- of the predator nature of the adept who performs the ritual. And of the vacuity of his euphoria in giving.

Visions see what is not physically there in front of one's eyes. To separate visions from delusions, our epistemology invokes meaning. What the vision presents is not what is there and seeable; instead it anchors meanings in a visual quale. Thus our epistemology admits that the vision can well be more meaningful than what is given to perceptual sight, and more meaningful than what can be represented in the universal and abstract terms of a conceptual diagram or mapping.<sup>8</sup>

There lies in this way of valuing the visions of prophets and poets the notion that the essential activity at the core of an individual is an activity of elaborating meaning. And the notion that our individuality is constituted by a ceaseless spinning of an ever-wider spider web of referentiality.

The referring of what is seen to what lies beyond, the referring of means to ends, of causes to effects, of paths and obstacles to goals is the activity that constitutes the perceptual field into a practicable field. Referring where I stand to where I can be, might be, aim to be, referring what I touch to what I can detach, acquire, possess, assimilate, is the activity by which the one who works gives himself a practical individuality. I identify what I am doing by specifying what I shall be doing. It is tomorrow that gives sense to whatever I do today; it is tomorrow that gives sense to whatever I am today.

The anthropologist who recuperates the myths and legends of a culture by explicating them as symbolic mappings of the environment and the institutions of a people takes each facet of the vision to function as a symbol, materializing connections and relationships. The psychotherapist who recuperates the "fantasy space" of the individual as the place where that individual fills in, with meaningful symbols, the gap between the universal meanings of the public myth and the particularities of his own situation, takes the eccentric images of individual fantasy as meaningful symbols of what Claude Lèvi-Strauss and Jacques Lacan called a private myth.<sup>9</sup> This anthropology and this psychoanalysis are hermeneutical; they interpret symbols to explicate conceptually their meaning.

But what the *chöd*, the vision stages is the disintegration of the practicable field and all its referential connections and contexts into the elemental night. All things which the celebrant had perceived, understood, and used as means and nutrients are visualized in a wild, phantasmal, ghoulish form of pure consuming mouths, now consuming the celebrant. There is not the utterance of a new discourse, imbued with a higher meaning, but instead the demented cries and the laughter of the ghouls. Laughter interrupts discourse, breaks with the enchainment of thoughts in the coherent succession of words.

There are words, but they are the liturgic words of unreserved surrender with which the celebrant excites the ghouls that are biting and chewing his dismembered body and urges them on. With these words the celebrant makes the ghoulish feast on his body into a willful act of sacrifice.

At the same time they arouse the elation that springs from the idea of sacrifice, the exaltation of emotional forces. The celebrant does not experience the dismemberment and devouring of his substance as pain and agony but as plentitude that restores, heals, resurrects, and beatifies innumerable alien species. "I give my flesh to the hungry, my blood to the thirsty, my skin to clothe those who are naked, my bones as fuel to those who suffer from cold. I give my happiness to the unhappy ones. I give my breath to bring back the dying to life." And he experiences this plentitude in the ecstatic giving,



in the exhilaration of emptying himself. For every extreme joy is an ecstatic expropriation, a gratuitous discharge of excess forces, a squandering without return.

What the vision stages then is not at all the epiphany of sovereign, cosmic or sacred, meaning, but the potlatch in laughter and demonic outcries of meaning and of its source the individual.

In the final "black meal," the laughter of the consuming ghouls and the exultation of the celebrant in his sacrifice subside, leaving silence, loneliness, and darkness. The vision does not culminate in the transfiguration and glorification of the visionary. He sees that the very idea of sacrifice is but an illusion; the meaning he has given to his act disintegrates. The vision closes with the silent renunciation of the ascetic who realizes that he holds nothing that he can renounce, and who utterly relinquishes the elation springing from the idea of sacrifice.

In the world of work and reason we acquire our individual identity from the future we project before ourselves and set out to realize. We have taken the flesh of plants and animals freely to satisfy our hunger, sated our thirst with their blood, clothed and adorned our nakedness with all the plumes, furs, and jewels of nature. In the world of work and reason we stand ever higher as demiurgic and Promethean agents, and as cosmic legislators, obeying only laws of our own making. And when we have turned to the visions of the prophets, epic poets, and historical figures, have we not sought there transfigurations, glorifications of ourselves? But the *chöd* celebrates the last extremism of magnanimity, of a gratitude that gives without limit, of a generosity that squanders without thought of recompense, the last extremism of renunciation, renouncing even the wild exultation of this expropriation.

The vision the *naljorpa* received in the wild places where he betakes himself to perform the mystery play intensifies for us with its light the deanthropomorphized and apocalyptic vision with which our evolutionary biology and astronomy confront us.

When our ancestors descended from the trees and advanced into the savannah, they entered an environment where most of the plants are edible for seed eaters and for ruminants. The savannah teems with insects, rodents, large hoofed mammals. In the midst of such multitudes, there evolved predators that prey on them. When our ancestors advanced into the savannah, they too became prey, but they soon became predators.

The predator instincts that made them hunters as well as gatherers soon made them warriors. Humans have become predators on other humans. Our World Wars were fought among the most advanced nations of this century, and the forty years of thermonuclear arms race have brought to the forefront of our consciousness the

realization that not only thermonuclear war but modern warfare is Mutual Armed Destruction--MAD. It was something we saw already in the American civil war, in the European Hundred Years War.

But now our ecological science is showing us that our omnivorous, predator practices have amounted to a war on the planet. Deforestation, monoculture, cattle rearing, fishing the rivers and the oceans, damming the rivers and irrigation, pesticides and genetic engineering are not only overextending the possibilities of food production; they are devastating the planet's biodiversity and polluting the top-soil, the water table, the oceans. For us to face our nature is to face the enemy each is for the other species.

Our ecological science has given us a radically new vision of ourselves. It is a vision that breaks through our millennial perception of ourselves as masters of a practicable space where everything nonhuman is there to be taken, used, and consumed.

Ecological science shows us as one species in a complex planetary ecosystem, unable ourselves to survive without countless other species thriving. Microbiology presents us with a vision of sovereign microbe life, from the beginning not only in ecological interdependence but in symbiosis. The first celled organisms developed as one species of microbe entered in symbiosis with another, the chloroplasts and mitochondria, the oxygen-processing cellular energy-producers in plants and animals, being originally independent cyanobacteria and proteobacteria that came to live inside the cells that eventually cojoined into plants and animals. Human animals now live in symbiosis with thousands of species of anaerobic bacteria, six hundred species in our mouths that neutralize the toxins all plants produce to ward off their enemies, four hundred species in our intestines, without which we could not digest and absorb the food we ingest. Some synthesize vitamins, others produce polysaccharides or sugars our bodies need. The number of microbes that colonize our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by up to a hundredfold. Ecological science and evolutionary biology confront us with a vision in which our species is but one avatar of microbe evolution, our individuality but an abstract figure floating over swarmings and symbioses.

Our cosmological and astronomical science has extended the time of the universe beyond the time of our own tasks, of our civilization, of our species. It has reduced to infinitesimal proportions whatever significance we can assign to ourselves in the universe. It opens us upon a cosmic space and time where the end of our species, of our planet, of our sun are marked.

Today what a disconnection there is between our visions and our lives! We have let go of the old anthropocentric myths and stoically accepted as true the astronomer's representation of the vast empty spaces and finite time of the whole universe. We have let go of the Edenic myths that represented all species as created for our use and

consumption. But our whole economic and political life is crafted and fine-tuned for continual production, continually increasing domination over want, hunger, disease, discomfort, and even death.

Until now we refuse to recognize the end to which our kind is destined. We put it out of our minds, restrict our perspectives to the traditional times of our lifetime, our civilization, our species; we see our species still advancing to take over deserts, oceans, and glaciers. Or we think we will have mastered interplanetary, intergalactic migration in time. We do not personally incorporate the visions of astronomical and of ecological science. Although movies have projected visions of our planet after global warming has raised the level of the oceans over all the continents, of our planet after interplanetary and intergalactic wars and migrations, they continue to depict humans as a predatory, dominating species.

We do not have visions which show the compulsion of one to whom so much was given, to give in turn. We do not have rituals to free that giving of that return to self, that recuperation, which is self-satisfaction.

The *chöd* in old Tibet is an enactment and not only a vision. The ritual is a concentrated form of many actions that will be performed consequent upon the vision. What we lack is an action in which the ecological and astronomical vision will be given in such a way that it will transform our lives and our actions.

Our old anthropocentric and predatory vision flows on in the rituals of our culture. We no longer bless our meals or lose our individualism in carnivals--our modern culture has psychopathologized individual rituals from our own feudal and theocratic past and demythologized and commercialized collective rituals. But our life is full of rituals which restage the anthropocentric and predatory vision. There are the small concentrated dramas of *Everyman* which are television commercials. There are spectator sports-- which are not just spectacles; they are participationist visions of transfigured vitality, glorified power and skill, a triumphant animal species. There are the daily rituals of consumption. Haute cuisine is the high mass of our global capitalist liberal civilization. Our high culture identifies as haute cuisine the cuisine that prepares the most remote and rare species for our consumption. By bringing every plant, every fish, every serpent, every bird, every mammal to the table, we put ourselves at the summit of the great chain of Being. In taking possession of jungle and tundra, the oceans and the polar icecaps, in unhesitatingly defying all the *genii loci* to make all substances resources for human needs and pleasures, the politico-economic institutions of humankind not only establish their sovereignty within the family of nations, but establish a cosmic sovereignty over all things. In traveling from country to country, being served like the emperor by every alien culture in restaurants where any substance, any plant or animal, is laid out for our consumption, we situate

ourselves in the food chain at the top, making ourselves the uneaten ones, the unexchangeable value, the cosmic dignity. Our most terrible taboo is cannibalism. We situate ourselves ritually in nature as the species for which all other species are destined as food, but which themselves are not to be eaten. We buried our corpses out of the reach of scavenger animals, dogs and hyenas, we encased them in stone mausoleums and steel coffins, we mummified them and we inject them with formaldehyde so that they not be food of larvae, we cremate them to make them inedible even to bacteria.

What rituals will we have to contrive, to celebrate in elemental spaces, in order that the visions imparted by our ecological and evolutionary biology and our astronomy today enter into our lives?

### *Notes*

1 Alexandra David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (NY: Dover, 1971) 148-152.

2 The red meal and the black meal of *chöd* is a vision from remote old Tibet, as far removed from our lives, our interactions, our institutions, our traditions as possible. A vision is what breaks through practical ways of living, institutions, and traditions. Yet the vision is Tibetan, it emerges in the midst of a ritual for which there is long and disciplined preparation prescribed in Tibetan books and initiatory traditions. For a vision to take hold, it must not only break through the crust of our axioms, maxims, formulas, conceptual paradigms and representations and impose itself in the radiance of its epiphany. It must also pull at the anchors of our practice. What is it about Ireland and Irish Catholicism that made the visions of Milton and Dante take hold of James Joyce? What is it about life in our high-tech archipelago that makes Joyce but not Milton and Dante grip us?

3 The visionary is one who breaks with tradition and with institutions; he is a heresiarch. Yet at the same time the visionary is seated deeply in his tradition, its scriptures, and its institutions. Because the visionary is and can only be perceived as a heresiarch, the institution overcomes him only by recuperating his visions into its orthodoxy. In our day multiculturalism recuperates all the traditions, scriptures, and institutions, but deactivates their orthodoxy. The relationship is no longer between the Scriptures and the orthodoxy and the visionary, but between the disappearance of orthodoxy and the visionary.

4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) 341.

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 293.

6 "The human being is this night, this empty nothing, that contains everything in its simplicity-- an unending wealth of many representations, images, of which none belongs to him-- or which are not present. This night, the interior of nature, that exists here--pure self-- in phantasmagorical representations, is night all around it, in which here shoots a bloody head-- there another white ghastly apparition, suddenly here before it, and just so disappears. One catches sight of this night when one looks human beings in the eye-- into a night that becomes awful." G.W.F. Hegel, "Jenaer Realphilosophie," in *Frühe Politische Systeme*, (Frankfurt: Ujllstein, 1974) 204; Slavoj Zizek, *Hegel's Recollection*, trans. Donald Phillip Verene, (Albany, NY: SUNY P, 1985) 7-8.

7 Slavoj Zizek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso, 1999) 29, 30.

8 Although the essential of the vision is in the silent, silencing epiphany, most of what we know as visions comes to us from texts-- from Sacred writings, epic poets, mystic writings, the literature of Joyce and Beckett, the speeches of Che Guevara and Nelson Mandela. There is a language, then, that conveys vision-- epic, prophetic, visionary language. There is also a presence of language in the vision itself-- the visionary is language reduced to utterance, to an invocation and appeal. His voice is cast in ritual formulas and repetitions; his own individual voice is enveloped and lost in anonymous chants. Very often his voice calls up visible beings who have voices, and who may be only voices-- the *najlorpa* hears the laughter and greedy cries of ghouls.

9 Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry, An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P, 1992) 156-7.

## BOOKS BY THE AUTHOR