

# CORÉENNES

Chris Marker

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ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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On September 25, 1866, the escort vessel *Déroulède* appeared in Seoul harbor. Its name implied revenge.\* That March, the Koreans had massacred several French missionaries in a quite revolting manner (for the time), and it was normal that the French fleet should come to punish the outrage to its countrymen. Only the Scriptures might have found objection.

Aboard the corvette *Primauguet*, also part of the expedition, was a naval officer named H. Zuber, who kept a logbook. The excerpts he published in the *Tour du Monde* of 1873 are most illuminating for anyone interested in Franco-Korean relations.

While the *Déroulède* lay at anchor, "a mandarin named the Friend of the People" came aboard, bearing this message: "*Now that you have seen the river and the mountains of this insignificant little kingdom, please have the goodness to leave. The people will be glad of it!*" "We reassured him," Zuber relates.

Another mandarin had addressed those on the *Primauguet*: "He was absolutely intent on knowing why we had come to Korea. We told him that all we had in view was the observation of an eclipse of the moon which was to take place within a few days. He did not seem satisfied with this response..."

For his part, Zuber observed "our future enemies." He describes them like some tribe of Zulus, fascinated by all the wonders of European technology, particularly the boats. The upstanding officer was not obliged to know that the Koreans had invented the armored battleship in the sixteenth century, nor that their "turtle-boats" with 72 batteries on a side had routed the Japanese fleet in 1552. There was certainly the occasion to meditate on the decline and fall of empires, but although Zuber allowed himself a quite pertinent reflection on the abundance of books in the houses, he seemed to neglect a few of Korea's modest contributions to culture: the invention of movable type and wood-block engraving, the first national encyclopedia, the first astronomical observatory (and even, a paradox in the circumstances, the first Buddhist missionaries sent to Japan). These people of "careless education" so greatly contributed to the education of their easterly neighbor that other visitors, discovering Korean art after that of Japan, came to turn the reflection around backwards, like the collector who saw a touch of Picasso in certain African masks. Behind their poor façades, Korean artisans have perfected the most beautiful paper on earth—for instance, the "tribute paper" on which Ségalen had his Korean collection printed by Crès, to the enthusiasm of Claudel: "It is like a pearly felt whose transparency reveals seaweed, women's hair, the sinews of fish, cultures of stars or bacilli, billowing vapor and a whole world in formation..." As to the soldier's trade, our floating gunner might have been pleased to know that the Koreans had used the first cannons, the first bombs, and all kinds of contraptions and tools of war, including the elusive four-pronged star whose last examples, wrested from the museums, served again in 1951 against American jeeps.

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\*NOTE, 1997: Paul Déroulède was the most famous nationalist writer in France before WWI.

After the reconnaissance mission, the fleet regrouped and moved into action. On October 14, an expeditionary force gathered at Kak-Kodji, just off Kanghwado island. The inhabitants took flight. On the 16th, the city of Kanghwa was occupied. Its inhabitants took flight. On the 18th, the expedition leader received a missive from the Regent of Korea:

*"...What shall we obey? Justice, with no restriction. The man who violates it merits no pardon. I conclude that one must eliminate whoever denies it, decapitate whoever violates it."*

*"For all time, relations with neighbors and assistance to travelers have been traditional. In our kingdom we show still more thoughtfulness and goodwill. It often happens that navigators ignoring the location and name of the country touch on our coasts. We ask them if they come with peaceful intentions; we give foodstuffs to those who are hungry, clothing to those who are naked, and we care for the sick. Such is the rule which has always been followed in our kingdom, suffering no infraction. Thus in the eyes of all the world, Korea is the kingdom of justice and civilization. But if there are men who come to seduce our subjects, entering secretly, changing their clothing and studying our language, men who demoralize our people and upset our customs, then the world's ancient law holds that they should be put to death. Such is the rule for all kingdoms, for all empires. Why then do you take offense if we have observed it? Is it not sufficient that we do not ask you the reasons which have brought you here from faraway lands?"*

*"You establish yourselves upon our soil as if it were yours, and thereby you violate reason abominably. When your ships went up the imperial river a short time ago they were but two; the men upon them were no more than a thousand. If we had wished to destroy them, had we not arms? But through goodwill and because of the respect due to strangers, we did not suffer anyone to do them harm or to show them hostility."*

*"Thus after crossing our borders they took or accepted as many beef cattle or chickens as they wished, and were questioned in polite terms. They were offered gifts, without being disturbed in any way. Consequently you show a lack of gratitude toward us, whereas I do not toward you. This does not satisfy you; we had to force you away, your return is unseemly. This time you pillage my cities, you kill my people, you destroy my goods and my flocks. Never have we seen a more serious violation of the Heavens and the laws. What is more, it is said that you wish to spread your religion in my kingdom. In this you do wrong. The different books have particular sentences in which they present the true and the false. What harm is it that I follow my religion, and you, yours? If it is blameworthy to renounce one's ancestors, why then do you come to teach us to abandon ours and to take others foreign to us? If men with such teachings may not be put to death, we shall do better to renounce Heaven itself!"*

*"I treat you as Yu and Tan treated the impious Kopey, and you take umbrage like Nysean-yeon toward Tcheu-uen. Though I do not dare compare myself to these famous*

*kings, still one cannot pass over one's own magnanimity in silence."*

*"You now appear here again with a large army, as though you were the instrument of celestial justice. Come to my court: let us have an interview and decide if it will be necessary to bring the troops together or to send them back, to chance victory or defeat. Do not flee: bow down and obey!"*

*"The fifth year of the reign of Tung-Tehy, the ninth moon, the eleventh day."*

This text, in which Zuber recognized "a certain good sense," received "an unfavorable response."

And so it was war. It was short. The fort of Kanghwado held out against all attacks. Zuber notes with a touch of astonishment that the Korean troops "comported themselves well and displayed military skill and a certain bravura." It is likely that, for him as for many others, the "sweet Korean soul" was incompatible with warlike virtues. The theme would crop up again. At the time of the Russo-Japanese war, the magazine *Lectures pour Tous*, renowned for its Spartan spirit, reproached the Koreans severely for not keeping their gaze fixed on the "blue line" of Yalu, and found the key to Korea's misfortunes not in an untenable geographic location, a heritage of wars and invasions, or the gangrene of Chinese imperial behaviors, but instead in a mysteriously "apathetic" disposition of the Korean character.

These apathetic Koreans were the descendants of hill people who had cut apart three hundred thousand Chinese in a single battle. They were sailors and soldiers who had twice forced the Japanese to cross back over the sea. Decline? In 1871, at the self-same fort of Kanghwado, attacked in force by the U.S. Marines (already), the defenders stood until the last man—and in the following century, Koreans from both camps left more than a million (military) dead in the course of the war which, in all history, "brought together the largest number of combatants and the most bombs per square mile, and caused the greatest number of disasters" (Pentagon report). When the sweet soul is able to survive such things, it amounts to a virtue.

What is more, human nature is too concerned with maintaining a certain balance for a characteristic whose dominance becomes symbolic not to call up the countervailing force of its own denial. The extreme sensibility of the Koreans (for that one must see an entire theater burst into tears as soon as there is some heart-rending twist in the action) can transform into extreme violence and even extreme cruelty if pricked deeply enough. We saw it during the Japanese occupation, and we saw it—horribly—during the civil war. In fact this merely brings the Koreans back into line with a norm that we have learned to measure, and whose signs we read every day. Other traits are more exceptional. These Koreans capable of bravura are also capable of courage: in the history of how many people does one find an episode comparable to the "non-violent uprising" of 1919, when, totally dominated by the Japanese, without any possibility of armed revolt, the leaders of the Korean Resistance invited the leaders of the occupying power to dinner (the Japanese disdained to send anyone but a bureaucrat) in order to read them their Declaration of

Independence? Having proclaimed their liberty by force of will alone, they suffered the consequences of their act with the same lucid dignity. An attempt was made to compel the elderly Yi Yong-shik to reveal the location of the Korean headquarters. His response: "The Korean HQ is in Heaven." An answer worthy of Joan of Arc.

The end of Zuber's account is hazy. According to the Korean version of events, the French drew back before the resistance of the fort and, pursued by their enemies, re-embarked with all haste. According to the *Tour du Monde*, after a few initial clashes had earned the Koreans their certificate of good conduct, the little war turned into a hunting party to occupy the soldiers' leisure. And on October 22, with no other explanation, the squadron left Korea.

"The result that had been expected of the expedition was not in the least obtained," notes Zuber. Indeed, the Koreans concluded it was a technical knock-out, showed greater suspicion toward foreigners, refused all attempts at commerce more firmly than ever, and, where the departure point of the whole affair was concerned, launched a wave of persecution against the Christians, whom they accused of colluding with the foreign aggressors.

The officer concludes on a melancholy note: "As you can see, we had not the fortune to make ourselves loved during our stay."

The first Korean girl descended from the heavens. A friendly rose, flat and rather far from the archetype (*Indigenae candidi sunt, et procerae staturae*, says Mercator's *Atlas*), she alone among her sisters betrayed the far-off Tunguskan origins that the anthropologists ascribe to her ancestor, the demi-god Tangun (2332 B.C.). No doubt it was this blend of traits that led the Korean employment counselors to glimpse her vocation, the same as the Druggist's in Giraudoux's *Intermezzo*: the gift for transitions.

The Far East lines are guarded by young women: Olga in Omsk, a shepherdess of Tupolev-Macha in Chita, leading the twin-engines out to pasture in the violet dawn of Mongolia. The last relay, the Air-Eastess, skewered us through China: congregations of incredulous camels startled by the shadow of the Ilyushin, squares of Tartar silk drying alongside the yurts, the petrified thunder of the Great Wall to which a train, silent for our ears, laid siege with its white cry. *Kalmuki murus contra Tartaros*. Another wall of pink and white dust, brick and mercury: on the Taedong river, before the bridge rebuilt by the Chinese volunteers, a fisherman let his net slip between his fingers, grain by grain, like a rosary. *Soft morning, city*. Tolcrant even toward its clichés, Korea greeted us...

with morning calm.

*Is there no one  
to keep the  
moon from  
disappearing,  
to tie the morning  
sun beneath  
the horizon?*

*Then I would live  
one more day.*

(Story of Sim Chon)

Korea, *Korai*... On my first image of Pyongyang, the same curling lips, the same playful, tranquil smile that I had photographed a year before in the Athens museum. Language has its reasons.

There are different ways of traveling—the Barnabooth way, the Genghis Khan way, the Plume way (invented by Henri Michaux). For example: accepting the disorder of rhymes, waves, shocks, all the bumpers of memory, its meteors and undertows. Chance has intuitions, which shouldn't always be taken for coincidences. The country where you have just set foot delegates you a woman's face which sums it up already, and names it. (A great ship whose prow slowly turns round and stares at you, like a horse.) Its name is Sweetness.

Between the praying figure of the Acropolis and this woman met before the monument to the war dead, carrying her baby Korean style like a parachute, there is probably nothing in common except Eve's smile before the first owl. (The smile of which Malraux writes—but thinking only of art...—“each time it reappears, something of Greece is waiting to blossom.”) But that all of history, with its rasps and its blood sweats, has not yet done away with the human smile... Upon reflection, this meeting was worth a cable. “FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT IN PYONGYANG STOP LIFE IS STILL SWEET STOP PHOTO FOLLOWS”

Her name is Softness, her other name is Gravity. Difficult names to fix on the Western face, where the smile's erasure can (at best) become sadness, but almost never this second key, this obscure side of sweetness. As difficult to describe as the restraint of these young women, their integrity, their self-respect, everything that gives

its untranslatable freshness to the expression—so little “partisan” when addressed to them—*Cho nyo tong mou*: comrade young girl...

One evening, at the intermission of *The Story of Sim Chon*, I ran into Lee Hai-sun in front of the theater gate. Sim Chon had just been torn away from her poor blind father, to be thrown as bait to the sea demons. The intermission stretched out the uncertainty of her fate, and of course Lee Hai-sun was sobbing, her handkerchief crumpled against her face. I dared to tell her that, in order to help us follow a somewhat discrepant plot, our Korean hosts had provided us with a resumé and that everything, it seemed, would work out for the best. Lee Hai-sun, who had seen the play two hundred times, looked at me with suspicion: how could I be so sure of the future? And, ceasing to cry, she began reflecting on the arid hearts of foreigners who exchange their tears for reasoning.

Koreans are sweet. Ezra Pound quotes Emperor Hong Vu: “Koreans are gentle by nature.” They are *white*: Mercator isn't alone in saying so. It is confirmed by the Arab traveler Ibn Khordadbeh, who frequented these regions in the ninth century. They are confident: “They exchange presents with the Sovereign of China. They believe that if they did not exchange presents with him, it would not rain in their country.” (I.K.) They are virtuous: “After Ki Tse had published a Code, composed simply of eight laws, the Koreans' mores became so well balanced that the crimes of rape and adultery were unknown to them, and it was unnecessary to close the doors of the houses during the night,” writes Father du Halde. And the author of the *Recueil des Voyages du Nord* goes on: “As to their beliefs, the Koreans are convinced

that whoever does good will be rewarded, and whoever does evil will be punished.” Far from imported beliefs, there exists a national credo that can be formulated more or less like this: We are in the world, and we must live... Good-natured metaphysical sobriety. “Indeed, they are quite ignorant of controversies, disputes over the mysteries, heresies, excommunications...” They are compassionate, and this trait pushes them to rather unusual actions. In 1905, the war correspondent Kann reports that a battalion sent to reestablish order in a faraway district, having melted away en route “to the exception of four soldiers and a general,” so moved the Emperor that he had gratifications distributed to the deserters, so that they should not remain without means of subsistence. And what else? Ah yes... “*I wish*,” says Giraudoux, “that my country should truly be worthy of being called the most polite in the world, which is to say: that its men and women should be beautiful.” Along with China, Italy and Bororo land, Korea is worthy of being called the politest country in the world.

It remains that the Oriental smile, as everyone knows, is a mask—that the Asiatic is a tiger stitched in cat skin. An Oriental dramaturge would have his tragedies played behind a lowered curtain. Such is their dissimulation; and the most dangerous passions circulate in the shadows. (Variant: The Asian has *no* passions.)

One morning, at the Pyongyang Hotel, a young woman told us her life story. Or more precisely, she explained to us that there was nothing to be told, really nothing... Her life is completely, completely simple... Having recorded a few notes from this gamut of explanations, I chalk up the following photographs—cat stitched

in cat skin—to the account of the Famous Asian Inscrutability.

Where have I ever seen these expressions so literally embodied: a smile that melts away, a face that crumples? The swift or slow corrosion of flesh that a smile had smoothed and stretched—a planet attacked by the leprosy of space. I think of Lee, running after our railway car at the border station, as we were leaving Korea by those northern marches that the Korean kings kept deserted, to hold the Tartars at a distance—a wall of emptiness, forty kilometers wide—I think of his face suddenly going blurred, as though seen through his own tears. Or this:

We were visiting the chemical plant of Hungnam, so proud of its smokestack, “the highest in Asia,” and of its female cadres. One of these cadres, the youngest I believe, had been invited to the table set for the ritual of Foreign Delegations: introductions, refreshments, ginseng candies, speeches of welcome, the history of the plant, refreshments, production figures, refreshments, do you have any questions?—and we did. Of course the French spirit immediately went to work on the female cadre: Was she married? Would she marry soon? Was she thinking of marriage? How did she go about giving orders to men? All these questions were completely out of place in a Communist and Korean world, but the she-cadre answered with the most generous kindness, cupping her beautiful plebeian hands over her face when it was a question of marriage. (“She is confused,” as our dragoman, Mr. Ok, gleefully explained...). Finally, Marx winning out over Offenbach after all, we came to the economic and professional information, and, in a detour, to this question: “What do your parents do?”

At that moment I was sunk in my camera. It was on the Rollei's ground glass that I saw the metamorphosis, the smile vanishing into pain like water drunk by sand. Everyone lowered their eyes into that chasm of silence, hastily inventing an imaginary Rolleiflex, a viewfinder to shelter their gaze, and I heard Mr. Ok explain in a half-whispered voice that yes, her parents had died during the war, that it was the case for many Koreans, and that yes, they felt great pain when it was mentioned—and now the young woman's face was covered in tears, but she did not lower her head, and the hands that had hidden her laughter lay immobile on the table.

This instant was hers: it was hers to make use of, and no one had the mediocre audacity to offer words of consolation. Just as she had had the courage of her tears, so she had the courage to break the silence that we had respected. The extraordinary hymn of hate and willpower that followed would need more than a story and an image to do it justice: holding herself very straight, looking at no one, her hands drawn behind her, speaking quickly, blending the words of her pain and the slogans of the Party, she said that she hated the Americans who had killed her parents, but that now her path was perfectly clear, that she would constantly have to overcome her own limits, that thanks to the Party her pain itself had a meaning, and that by working for her country she would revenge her dead... All of that, in another tone of voice, would have only been the catechism of a good militant; here it became both a Mass of Shadows and a somber Hallelujah.

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*O vos omnes qui transitis  
per viam, attendite, et  
videte si est dolor sicut  
dolor meus.*

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The dragon had iron teeth: one finds them here and there, alongside the roads, in the rice fields, refused by the earth.

*Extermination passed over this land.* Who could count what burned with the houses? Traditional Korean beliefs profoundly linked the spirits to their material abode—Iyoeng Chu, the Spirit of the Highest Beam, Tyei Syok, the Guardian Spirit of the master of the house, and the souls of the ancestors preserved in the baskets of clothing... For all those there can be no resurrection, and there is no other choice for the living.

But first of all: four million dead, the hatreds fanned to flames, the infinite accounts to be settled (a new saga of the Atreidae), all the accumulated lies... Spare me passionless judgments. The misunderstanding of the other is as inseparable from war as from love, and to rebuff the warrior convinced that the others started it would hardly go down well with the Heroes-of-the-Big-One in our own families. When a country is split in two by an artificial border and irreconcilable propaganda is exercised on each side, it's naive to ask where the war comes from: the border is the war.

The tale says that an orphan, rediscovering her parents' home after many years of exile, had the surprise of finding herself there already—a double of herself, identical down to the smallest detail, who obviously greeted her as an intruder. She remained nonetheless, and after some time, in spite of all the examinations, it was still impossible to tell one from the other. Until the day when a neighbor (a skeptic) came to see them—with a cat. At the sight of it, the usurper jerked bolt upright with fright and took her true form again—that of a rat.

The '45 border made the two Korcas into these orphans, and one wonders which will be the rat, but above all—who will be the cat?

*"Still licentious, General MacArthur...":* the event shook up even the typesetters. *"The Third World War has begun. It has begun in Korea,"* wrote Marguerite Higgins. General Bradley was less strident: *"Wrong war, in the wrong place, at the wrong time, and with the wrong enemy."* It must be said that a certain difference of mentality appears, to objective eyes, between a Chinese soldier confident that he is kicking the imperialists off the Asian continent and the gung-ho roaring Marine who writes: *"Who the hell wants to blow up a column of Chinese? Not me. I've got nothing against them. Nobody ever bothered to tell us why we should be angry. Something about the U.N. or something like that there. And aggressors and stuff. I don't know. And I'm willing to bet that none of the other men up here know either"* (Martin Russ—*The Last Parallel*). For lack of information they mobilized DeLacroix's Liberty and the yellow peril (ROKs excluded), with Christ appearing in the sky over Korea (*Paris Match*, October 20, 1951). In the POW camps, specialists in Psychological Action submitted the gooks to Rorschach tests to flush out the communists, and other specialists published statistics: *"Two out of five Chinese volunteers are tubercular and one out of five is mentally unbalanced."* Unfortunately we have no statistics on the specialists in Psychological Action.

The idea that North Koreans generally have of Americans may be strange, but I must say, having lived in the USA around the end of the Korean War, that nothing can equal the stupidity and sadism of the combat imagery that went into circulation at that time. *"The Reds burn, roast and toast!"* Shall those who pray before the burnt, roasted and toasted bodies call



out to other burnt and mutilated bodies for help, as though the torture victims of opposite camps somehow canceled each other out? Such is the mathematics of the day after war. I prefer to keep a few four-leaf clovers like this one, borrowed once again from dear old Martin Russ: on the night of June 27–28 when the cease-fire was proclaimed, a Chinese commando group came up to Ava outpost—which had been regularly attacked until then—and laid out candy and handkerchiefs at the Americans' feet. "*The men that were still on Ava stared, nothing more.*"

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*Sit, gods, upon your thrones,  
and smile at Troy!*

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In the Land of Darkness, there is a dog named Ball-of-Fire. The king of the Land of Darkness sent him to search out the sun in the world of men. Ball-of-Fire ran all the way to the sun. Finally he found it and grabbed it in his mouth. But the sun was too hot and he was forced to let go. Disappointed, the king told him to go find the moon, at least. Ball-of-Fire ran all the way to the moon. Finally he found it and grabbed it in his mouth. But the moon was too cold and he was forced to let go. "Try the sun again," said the king. And when he came back: "Try the moon again." It has been that way ever since, and the eclipses of the sun and moon prove that Ball-of-Fire is still at work. The sun is too hot and the moon is too cold, but because he is a very brave dog he never gets discouraged, and after him his children will try ever more. That's how dogs are.

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At the Korean market, in his bookstore open to most all the winds (those of the northeast and the southwest at any rate—the favorable ones), walled up on one side by planks, on the other by sheets of corrugated iron covered by paintings and scrolls, between shelves equally laden with modern magazines and old bound editions (the thin spines of the folios gathered together and stitched up like flower stalks, the paper rather poor, but still a caress for the eyes even before the fingers: a poor man's caress)—the bookseller sits *reading*. This country will never cease to amaze. Zuber, our *miles gloriosus*, already remarked on the abundance of books in the most impoverished dwellings, drawing a few bitter reflections at a time (1866) when the illiteracy of young French soldiers was a standing source of jokes. But to each his illiteracy: culture began, in Korea, with those who could read *Chinese* characters (indeed, the Korean alphabet

was invented to help people correctly pronounce Chinese—and incidentally their own language, but nobody seemed particularly worried about that). Let's face it, the Korean letters, those little Miró characters, backbone flutes and crabapples (true, the *corée* is a cider apple in Calvados), can only suffer from comparison with the sumptuous bacteria of Chinese graphics. But the latter are already condemned in their own land: our world is one of corridors, gangways, escalators—to move with the traffic, words have to put on functional, interchangeable garb: a nylon. Brocaded and chasubled, festooned with pennants and aigrettes like the generals of Peking Opera, Chinese characters just can't make it through anymore.

At least they sifted out the greater part of Korean literature, our ignorance of which is hard not to regret. If Valéry Larbaud's shade invited me to play desert island on the theme: Korean books, I'd be reduced to poaching from the bibliography by Marcel Courant, and trusting the titles. Everyone knows that *The Sacred Book of the Copper Man* is an anatomical treatise, and *The Marvelous Collection of Extended Succor* is a medical dictionary. But what about *The Carefree Treatise on the Brilliance of Jade*, *The Five Happy Procedures to Obtain the Ten Thousand Treasures*, and *The Story of Two Dragons Seen in a Dream*? I would certainly take two treatises among the nine tomes of *The Story of the Cinnamon-Tree Palace*, *Offerings to the God of Literature: The Treatise of Mysterious Influences*, and *The Treatise Counseling One Not to Be Misled by Shameless Books*—although that would restrict the rest of my choices. The generous Larbaud might accept not to count the *Verses That Can Be Read in Both Directions* as two... But if I had only one left to choose—not a moment's hesitation, number 2933: *Give No Free Rein to Sentiment, Even if Alone*.

A marketplace is the Republic of Things (I mean the ideal Republic, of course): the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, it is beautiful even if the details are gauche or banal. Thus the Mercato Nuovo in Florence, where every object taken separately is an offense to the spirit's good manners, while the whole is as flamboyant and funny as a high altar. The Mercato Coreano is not so simple. "Korea," writes Father du Halde, "furnishes white paper, brushes of hair and wolf tail, Ginseng, gold, silver, iron, yellow varnish so beautiful that anything coated in it appears gilded: the tree whence this gum is distilled resembles a palm; chickens whose tail is three feet long, ponies three feet high, sable and beaver pelts, and fossil salt." To which I would add, on the basis of my modest knowledge of Korean marketplaces: playing cards which are pleasant-looking flat dominoes, as in Japan, women's clothing—the short tapestry bolero, transparent and stiff as a chrysalis, and the long, dark-colored skirt knotted at the first swell of the breasts—ribbons covered in gilt letters to encourage longevity, cothurne sandals with incurving prow, blue elephants, pink cats, pens and lamps, old opium pouches modestly called the smoker's necessity, watch faces strung together like sapeks, flowers... and a somewhat Promethean, I mean aquiline, taste for the entrails of things: the innards of radios, the plexus of an electric razor or the thorax of a lock. Men sit chatting, squatting like the dead in the niches of Mexican cemeteries. And Mexico is not far off: it's in the white cloth suits, the broad-brimmed straw hats, it surfaces in the tanned faces, in the nonchalance of an eye stretched out in its slit like a hammock at the gleaming crest of the cheek—it's walking with this peasant (it could be an old Tarasco) who amuses himself scaring groups of people by uncovering, in a single movement, the serpent (though not

plumed) that he holds on his fist—it bursts out of the sack just as I frame, when suddenly another figure violently enters the field and bang!—he slaps the old man with the back of his hand, and the latter shies away to disappear who knows where, bringing his serpent along with him... maybe for some little baby-sitting at Alcmena's?

An instant later the self-appointed lawman has disappeared in his turn, and the people on the street are smiling at me and gesturing that everything is fine now. It all went by as quickly as a forgotten image between two shots, but what I felt there, the way a foot laid inadvertently on a tomb makes you feel the cold of death for one second, was a flash of hatred (so Mexican!). Toward me? Toward him? Blame, shame, fear? A critique of bad country manners, exasperation at my desire for the picturesque while they're trying to build a modern Korea—or is it just that ophiolatry is prohibited in this town? I'll never know. Vexed, I buy a pink cat. It has Apollinaire's look in its eyes, and that reinvigorates me: after all, some things escape *them* as well.

At the end of the Kaesong market, where the canal divides the last shops from the oldest district of the city, six children watched me watching them. A mirror game that goes on and on, where the loser is the one who looks down, who lets the other's gaze pass through, like a ball. The long volley of smiles.

My third eye was a bit like cheating. Every click of the shutter was greeted with great hilarity, like when Chaplin puts an iron in his boxing glove. At half-time the three little girls got together, and with much natural grace and gravity they offered me their performance.

Behind me, the muffled sound of the market crowd, numerous, calm, almost without

cries or shouts, rather all rustles and soft squeaks—a gathering of birds. And before me, without a single adult in view (except for the white shadow busy at some kind of cooking behind the windowed door), three very young Fates tracing figures of style, from the berceuse to the paean.

Perhaps they were Haisuni, Talsuni, and Peolsuni, the three little girls in the story (our Little Red Riding Hood multiplied by three, with the wolf replaced by a tiger—of course, how else could he pass for their grandmother?). In the end, Haisuni becomes the sun, Talsuni the moon, and Peolsuni the stars, and their job is to leave no patch of shadow on the surface of the earth, nor in the hearts of men.

A great deal of Korea strolls by on Koreans' heads. Like those salon magicians hired round the turn of the century—barely introduced beneath a false name before they would begin juggling with the furniture to entertain the guests—the Koreans like to set objects dancing. Baskets, earthenware jars, bundles of wood, basins, all escape the earth's gravity to become satellites of these calm planets, obeying exacting orbits. For the Korean street has its cycles, its waves, its rails. In this double decor, where hastened ruins and buildings still aborning strike a second's balance of incompleteness, the soldier who (foresightedly) buys a civilian's sun hat, the worker leaving the construction site, the bureaucrat with his briefcase, the woman in traditional dress and the woman in modern dress, the porter carrying a brand-new allegory to the museum of the Revolution with a woman in black following step by step to decipher it—all have their route and precise place, like constellations. Nobody *crebillonates*.\* If they stop, it's to learn something: Syngman Rhee receives phony fangs of corruption from the Yankees, Sputnik 3 is

a great socialist victory... Ballasted with this knowledge, the sputniks of the street gravitate again to their meditative round.

Another wonder: ginseng (*insam* in Korean). Father du Halde surprises me with this one: "The *Gin Seng* of Tsoe toen resembles a man: it is purple and rather flat" It's the most precious vegetable in the world. (In the Chinese apothecaries, levites with lunar skulls bustle like so many Bruce Willises around delicate hanging scales tracing figures in the air, to deliver you ten grams of the salutary mandrake for the price of a hundred grams of gold.) It was the Chinese aphrodisiac: rich Mandarins outfitted caravans to seek this root of deathlessness. They died of it. Raised to the rank of divinities by their exploits, they were called back by the jealous (or curious) gods. The eighteenth century, which took an interest in such things, gave a great reputation to ginseng. Looking for flying men, I found it mentioned in Richard Owen Cambridge's *Scribleriad*: "that restorative the tartar boasts..."

Jesuit chastity and Marxist austerity agree to underscore other medical properties of ginseng. It *heals*. This must be understood in the absolute: it is not one of those vulgar medicines that only treats a single illness, or a hundred—as ridiculously specialized as the prostitutes of Pompeii. With ginseng, the verb to heal must be used like the verb to rain.

Father du Halde consents nonetheless to get into detail, but the detail soon covers the whole and overflows it: "It maintains the girth; it fixes the animal spirits in place; it stops the palpitations caused by sudden fright." It even cures that sickness the Portuguese call *pesadelo* ("those afflicted by this illness imagine in their sleep that someone is lying next to them"). It is

\*NOTE, 1997: *crebillonner* is a neologism coined by French writer Valéry Larbaud after the rue Crebillon in Nantes, "center of elegance," where people go just to be seen.

good for sleep (when one is "troubled by dreams and phantoms"), good for dog bites ("and troubles of the spleene"), and finally, last, not least, it can help "when the entrails come out the sides"

But the seventh wonder of Korea, more wonderful still than the art of the ginseng gardeners, is the work of the builders.

It takes fifty years to complete a ginseng plant (five thousand, says the Hsi yu chi) but only five days to complete a street—five weeks to build a house—five months to transform a neighborhood. Korea grows like a plant in a movie. It's a phenomenon that surpasses architecture and politics to enter biology.

You can travel without fear across the countryside: if the car is just a little slow, the road will catch up. Don't reverse too fast after moving ahead: there may be a house behind you. Never retrace by night a path you followed one week earlier by day. And above all, never rely on landmarks. They get moved.

When there aren't any cranes, they invent them—in sections. When there aren't any trucks, out come the wheelbarrows, the hods, the boats, the cupped hands, the Marne taxis.

Little Korean inventions like the pedal pump or the string shovel serve to multiply the effort (with a bit of training you can leave the work to the girls).

All that in a grand flourish of trophies, red flags, embroidered slogans stretched between two poles, with the International or the Little Red Berries in the loudspeakers, if not the marching song of the People's Army, which—to a rather bouncy rhythm—is none other than *O Tannenbaum*...

At nightfall, on the Taedong river bridge, one hears the students' songs fading away as the boat brings them back to the University after a day on the worksites—but the dusk is quicker: it hides them, and their song disappears some time after they do, like the memory of the dead.

All night long, the aurora borealis of welding torches, spotlights on the cranes, reflections of the moon and the headlights on the great glassy façades of new buildings—and the coarse chants of the haulers, the porters, mounting in waves amid the half-sleep of an imaginary Africa shot through with electric flashes...

I don't much care for propaganda photos in the style: "Yesterday... Today..." But still I took these pictures of what I saw out my window, at fifteen day's distance. Just not to get the wrong room.

Every Korean meal is a costume party—but the food wears the disguises. The eggs are cross-hatched, the duck is lacquered, the beef askew, the greens red-hot... The salad is mixed up, the tongue falls silent, the brains are amnesiac. As for the fish, you'd best be quick—it's cuttles.

In the midst of dinner appears the Grail ("the room overflowed with fine smells, as though scattered with all the earth's spices")—it's the kettle of fairies, a culinary tower of Babel, herbs, seaweeds, segments, slivers, microcosms all counterpointing to infinity, feverish as a Constituent Assembly.

The poorest Korean child sees these wonders at least once a year: for his birthday. But at midnight the enchantment is over and, like Cinderella in reverse, he regrets the vanished pumpkins.

A roadway of meteors—it would already have been a street on the moon, and will soon be one on Earth. The little girl took a stone, pressed it lovingly to her heart, and crawled over to contribute it. The Kid followed approvingly, lost in Fourierist statistics.

On the earthen sidewalk, they played with pebbles (you gather up all you can, before the stone thrown in the air is taken back by the gathering hand). She gathered jerkily, fascinated by the springing stone that measured out such scanty time. She tried to hypnotize it, to suspend its flight, to work the well-known miracle of the Irish ascetics.

What could I do for her...  
... if not stop time?

*"If you're not very careful, you're going to take your father or mother, your sister or brother, for a cow, and then—gobbled up. Nothing's more bitter than being unable to tell the difference between people and cows. And yet there's nothing for it. One day a man eats his own brother! After a while he realizes what he has done, but it's too late. And nothing can provide him an excuse..."* This is the literal translation of the beginning of a Korean tale. And if you get the impression that you recognize someone\* in this written-spoken, lost-found tone, it's the right impression.

Eating bird's flesh weakens the memory. And without memory, no stories to tell, and untold stories go rotten. And words left to sleep drift into terrible dreams. One man closed up all his stories in a sack—they took revenge, became poison fruits, scalding water, red-hot iron, a tangle of snakes. They had to be killed with swords.

When a cat and a dog set out in search of a precious stone, stolen from their masters by an evil woman (and I ask you, what better use for a cat and dog's time?), the dog began barking in front of the woman's house, but the cat ordered the mice to go find the stone (the green one) in the closet, and the mice prudently obeyed: then the dog with his stupid questions made the cat drop the stone he was holding between his teeth, and it fell to the bottom of the water, but when a fisherman found a dead fish, the cat took to reckoning: "This fish died from eating the stone," so he opened the fish—and the dead fish gave up the stone. Which is why the clever cat has the right to stay inside the house, while the stupid dog stays out.

\*NOTE, 1997: "someone...": Can you tell me why I didn't simply write "Michaux"?

In Korean tales you glimpse more than you see. Lots of apparitions, dreams, cracks into another world of which only a wavering memory remains: "I am the tiger you saved yesterday" says a pretty girl. And Sim Chon: "Your face I so dreamed of has disappeared like the wind..." (I have already spoken of *The Story of Sim Chon*, which for Korea is *David Copperfield*, the Book of Tobias and the *Götterdämmerung* all rolled into one).

Or the Holy Virgin, at that: when Sim Chon's mother, Lady Okjin, appears between the crystal candles in Act IV (which takes place under the sea), you can't help but feel Fatima rising in your esteem. (It may be worth stressing that at the end of the play, the blind see.)

So faraway, so inaccessible is the world of miracles, revealed only by tatters of fairies, beasts, masked things, images furtive like the rumblings of a hidden God, narrow as the cracks in the mirrors of enormous Korean closets, arrow-slits through which no Eurydice could possibly return.

Your name is Kim Shen-Suk, you are a great actress of Korean cinema—and theater: you have played Desdemona (and yet, says the author of *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des peuples idolâtres*, "where jealousy is concerned, [the Koreans] are less obsessed than the Chinese..."). You have married Tche To-miung and your baby is called Tche In-tcho. Your husband tells him the stories of Sim Chon, Chunhyang, and Heun Bo, and you sing him the song that begins with *Kwae-ji-na-ching-ching-nah-neu*, or with *Toraji, Toraji*, or the one whose refrain goes *Nilliria, Nilliria, Nilliria*—and of course *Arirang*, the Korean lament of homesickness (the Asian version of the blues), which says poetically: "So many stars in the sky, so many sighs in my heart," and prosaically: "If you leave me your feet will ache—less than a mile away"

The smell of the fields had already brought me back to Italy, even before the tombs of Kanso brought me back to Cacer and the Etruscan tombs. It seems that the geographical comparison between Korea and Italy is traditional: isn't it touching to find geography in tune with feeling? (But perhaps geography is no more than coded feeling.) The light, the beauty of the faces, the savor of life that makes nothing appear negligible or futile ("a day that would have been lost had it passed anywhere but in Italy" says Larbaud...). And here, the same grass-covered domes like fortress turrets, the same corridors, the same square rooms with their parallel beds, their walls covered in frescoes, ochre, white, blue—and extending memory backwards like a film rewinding, the road to Cerveteri with its X-shaped barriers in the fields, its stone bridge and zigzags (*kobl-ah, kobl-ah*, sang Kim), the same things you already see in the painting by Filippo Lippi.

The same goatpath near the tumuli—the same goats—the same shadowy square for Berenice. Fewer tombs, three only, and no tourists. But the same cool air, making the beasts weep on the walls.

The guardian's little girl watches over these animals with perplexity. There is the phoenix (which the translator, lacking the proper word, succeeded in defining as a *fantastic chicken*) and the four cardinal points: the Cock, the blue Dragon, the white Tiger, and the black Tortoise. Perhaps in the mountains they hunt the man-eating West, the fire-breathing East. Perhaps lovers wake at night to the song of the South, and children catch the North at river mouths, to make their soup.

The Koreans' fondness for legends earned them jibes from the missionaries, who preferred to trust only what they saw with their own eyes—like Guillaume de Ruysbroeck in Tartary, describing curious hairy animals that leap to their drinks crying Chin-Chin.

Having seen nothing of the like at the bottom of the river Taedong, I won't insist on an involuntary plunge,\* nor on the reflex that led me (rather than any attempt at swimming) to clasp tightly in my pocket the silver tetrachma that protects me.

Even though I read today, in an article by M.C. Haguenaer: "*The water spirits detest gold and silver, one merely need carry a little on one's person to avoid drowning.*"

This trust in the past comes perhaps from the fact that the world, here, has hardly budged since its creation by Hannanim, the Celestial Lord. If the painting can be superimposed upon the photograph, so can legend upon history, and the brushstrokes of Hannanim's decor are too clear and sure for it to be abandoned simply because the play has changed.

A new boat can be built without throwing away the sea, says a Gorgolian proverb. All the new Korea is built on ancient soil, a thousand times overturned and wounded, beneath which—like blind rivers, lakes of solvent—stretch the weary souls of warriors, the ductile souls of separated lovers, the skeptical souls of innumerable literati destroyed by the tyrants.

Hannanim did not cut his creation into slices, like some God concerned with his effect, bringing the action gradually to climax (Sixth and Last Tableau: Man! Finale with the whole cast...). Hardly had he perfected a form, but he offered it to the full gamut of creatures, and to nature itself. He invented the curve and on this form he lay the eye of the literati and the roof of the temple. The same mold served him for the grain of rice and the peasant's tooth. And when he succeeded, clever foundryman, in an alloy of strength and sweetness, he shared it equitably between the ocean and man, teaching each how to let his strength lay at the bottom of his sweetness, like an anchor.

\*NOTE, 1997: And why didn't I insist? The shattered look of three contacts, plus the words "involuntary plunge," was that really enough to reconstruct the chain of events? The boat that slips away from the dock at the last moment, my step into the void (the subliminal consciousness that it was nothing, that I would walk on water—I swear...), the quick descent to the bottom of the river and, after an instinctive kick, the equally quick ascent, no time for panic but one immediate concern: "The photos!" And the good ol' Rolleiflex dismounted in a flash, dried, one roll damaged but saved... With today's electronic marvels, the journey would have been over.

Here, torn from the pages of Hanninam's diary: the Man of the Heavens, the Man of Earth, the Man of the Sea.

*Calm waters*

*The Chilsan drums  
shatter the silence.  
Do they speak of dawn?*

*Upon the severed sea  
Chejoo island  
at hand's reach.  
Goodbye Mount Halla!  
Until we return.*

*Sky and ocean  
studded with stars.  
The silken waves  
touch the heavens.  
Goodbye, dear homeland,  
we leave on the sea.*

(The Story of Sim Chon)

(List of the spirits and stars that govern human life)

1. The Five Elements
2. The Nine Mansions
3. The Ten Trunks
4. The Twelve Branches
5. The Four Spirits
6. The Great Spirit of the Year
7. The Bad Luck of the Year
8. The Plague of the Year
9. The Great Marshall  
(spirit of trials and quarrels)
10. Sickness
11. Brigandage
12. War
13. The Plagues
14. The Disasters
15. Death
16. The Silkworm Disease
17. Ruin (Tai soai)
18. The Fivefold Demon
19. The White Tiger
20. Mourning
21. The Spirit of Metal
22. The Punishments
23. The Yellow Standard
24. Failure
25. Funerals
26. The Wind
27. The Epizootic
28. The Ruin (Tai ho)
29. The Leopard's Tail
30. The Spirit of the Silkworm
31. The Moon
32. Koan pou,  
"which lends access to high functions"

(Marcel Courant – Bibliographie Coréenne)

*When atop the  
mountains' silk  
the winter moans,  
Together we will  
remain alone  
–You, the bamboo–  
I, the pine.*

*The wind's cold hands  
will twist  
the other trees, naked  
without leaves  
–Who will not be  
envious then  
of you and I, unchanged?*

(Story of Chunhyang)

We left in the early morning, at the same time as the woodcutters. A man of the forest—purple and rather flat, as Father du Halde would say—showed us our path. Was he the last avatar of T'yoen ha tai chang kun, the Great Commander beneath the Heavens, charged with guarding all pathways?

In the forest awaited the figures of the gods, countersigned by the visitors (Korean writing, where graffiti becomes ornament!), and farther above were the severe waterfalls, their cheeks tattooed with poems—Chinese characters, each fifteen meters high—gurgling with the sound of some huge animal drinking.

*Kumgan-san*, the Diamond Mountain... The tigers that inhabit it have now disappeared. The last were disguised as women picking potatoes, and girls bearing earthenware jars. All have been destroyed, even the grandfather, the White Tiger.

We met a young woman. As she was not picking potatoes and bore no earthenware jar, but a cyclopean baby, she was not a tiger. But if accounts are made, there must remain in the mountains one bear-doctor, nine dragons, and fifty-three golden Buddhas disembarked from a stone ship. There are also the Sinseuns, immortal beings. So you never quite know whom you meet.

One must be circumspect in these parts: even before being told, you can guess that the water of lake Samilpo "is better than that of Heaven," and that the fairies prefer to come draw their drink here, at the risk of being ravished by a hardy woodcutter.

(This woodcutter had saved a deer pursued by a hunter. The deer, who knew, revealed to him that three fairy-sisters came every day to

fill their pitchers. A first attempt failed, and the prudent fairies continued to draw their water from the lake, by lowering a bucket from Heaven. Seeing this, the woodcutter—I told you that he was hardy—simply hid in the bucket and rose to Heaven to take his wife.)

The earth frays and rips here near the sea, and the planet's true skin shows soft and finely grained through its rags. Between these false, striated islands, joined by isthmuses of sand as fragile as the touch of two sleepers brushing each other in the night, in this sweet and solitary land on the edge of green water (where so many cats must have dropped soluble stones), upon these gray, flat boulders, silence mounts like fog—troubled only by the strange countersigns of French journalists, conveyed by the wind: deal—my turn—cut... incantations of a recalcitrant, but apparently effective magic, since no bucket came to carry them to the heavens, despite my prayers.

Among the summits of the Diamond Mountain, there are three which recall the episode of the lake, the deer, and the hardy woodcutter. Here again, the rules of the game: you have to look a long time, staring at the three summits, then close your eyes. At that moment, it is said, the colors are reversed, the sky darkens, and shadows of shadows appear in the darkness, the faces of the three sisters.

Ahn Seung-hi dances the sword dance (*Kal tchun*), the fan dance, the butterfly dance, the gypsy dance (the most exotic for us), and the dance of the *Mou nyo*, the sorceress, the matchmaker of the dead.

(As late as 1933 one could still find the "union of pious persons" registered in Seoul—gathering all sorcerers and sorceresses in awareness of their rights.)

With her little bells, her large-handled knife, her fans, her feathered hat, slow at first, then successively casting the bells, the knife, the fans, casting her gaze in the end—her mouth stretched out by the frozen speed, like the pilots of supersonic jets—the passage of the Wall of the Dead, given over to all the blows and insults of the dear departed, a screen shredded by their nails, a window shattered by their cries—*Aigo!* *Aigo!* the cry of mourning and suffering—falling exhausted, her throat burning with the oxygen of hell, paying the passage of the Styx with the money thrown to her, *Aigo!*

"Some of them are quite pretty," writes Haguenhauer, "and not only the spirits are touched by their charms."

*Tonight and every night...* Like the Windmill Theatre during the Blitz, the underground theater of Moranbong kept playing, every day of the war. The sound of the bombardments disappeared, swallowed up by the earth. Outside, Pyongyang burned, the roof lines changed form, the walls fell, the doors slammed. Korean theater lived there for two years, a hundred meters beneath the hill, with pyramidal corridors, Piranesian galleries, school benches, and a wooden stage, buried like a fakir.

Today, the theater of Moranbong belongs to the children. They come to see puppet plays: swallows gather in conclaves, feudal ghosts return to pester cheapskates, musicians pop out of pumpkins. The existence of the underground adds to the enchantments.

The Underworld exists, in the legends. An ogre sleeps there, eyes wide open. The young hero prepares for combat by drinking mandrake juice and wrestling with an iron flail. Just like Suen U Kung. But instead of saving his soul, he marries a beautiful princess. Boys will be boys.

*"My dear, when you are  
gone,  
Choose, if you can,  
To be a temple bell  
Rung morning and evening.  
And remember, remember,  
The wooden mallet that  
strikes you  
Is me..."*

(The Story of Chunhyang)

Nearby the village of Haisanni, a few kilometers from Kaesong, eight stone giants guard the tomb that the thirty-first king of Koryo (Kongmin, the painter-king) built for the woman he loved, the queen Kokuk Kong-chu.

*Et amava perdutoamente Ixotta degli Atti...* With its stone tables, its animals oriented by the stars, its moon-based domes draped in lichen, nothing is foreign in this royal cemetery. At Teotihuacan, at Saint Peter's in Rome, we met with barbarity (I mean that which offends the heart, not the mind). But here we recognized the passion of Pedro and Ines, laying foot to foot in Alcobaça, "so that when they lift their heavy tombstones and rise up on Judgment Day, their first gaze will be for each other." And the passion of Sigismondo erecting his temple in Rimini—the eclipse of love and glory, with its core of shadow and its flaming corolla: *Tendre-sur-Orqueil*.\*

The weight of the past, enforced by these countless tombs, these tortoises bearing the mileposts of time, advancing imperceptibly across the countryside, heads raised skyward... Can it be reduced to the sole role of ornament, as we do? Can the borderline between statues and men be drawn so tight that no vertigo crosses, no vast cry of madness or destruction?

For some time still two Koreas stand face to face. The question arises everywhere, except where culture has irrevocably become the stuff of museums. What will be lost, what will not, what will change skins, these forms threatened with remaining forms, these forces threatened with remaining forces, all these enemy currents: the

construction that lies and the truth that destroys, free constraint and free despair, hymns to joy and deep-dwelling chants—all we can do is listen to their mutually jamming broadcasts in ourselves, while waiting for the bigamy of spirit to be condemned by the law. All the while straining never to forget—if one did, the Korean legend would be there to say it in its way—that a moment comes when man's life must be paid for with the death of his gods.

A woodcutter had saved a pheasant threatened by a snake. Changed into a girl, the snake succeeded in leading the woodcutter into a tower, and there—caught tight. The woodcutter invoked the protection of the gods, and the serpent-girl agreed to wait until dawn: if the woodcutter could prevail upon the gods to sound a temple bell a few miles distant, she would let him live. The vigil began, the woodcutter in agony, the snake-girl attentive. And toward the middle of the night, the temple bell rang heavily. Terrified, the snake slipped away, the tower disappeared in a puff of smoke. When the woodcutter reached the temple after several hours' march to thank the gods, he saw a smear of still-fresh blood on the bell, and on the ground, the broken body of a pheasant.

The ten-meter teeter-totter, the Icarian seesaw that shoots you up and takes you back, feet together, palms at your sides—those are ladies' games. A man doesn't fly, he lets fly.

Bowmanship remains the sport of the elite. The bamboo and buffalo-horn bow, with its double curve, obeys the eye more than the hand. Once the gaze is planted squarely in the middle of the target, the arrow has only to follow.

Throughout whole afternoons, the men (a few old-timers among them) riddle a plank stuck some 150 meters away among the bare stones. It seems to waver in the sun. A hit on the target sends back a brief echo, like a popgun. People stroll at the foot of the shooting ground, beneath the deluge of arrows, indifferent to the piles mounting above their heads like the horsemen of *The Triumph of Death*.

The gaze of the victor, perhaps alone among all the gazes captured in Korea, seems lacking in modesty.

The *changgo*, a drum shaped like an hourglass, makes even tigers dance. A young man who inherited such a drum saw a great cat prance out of the forest and do the tiger trot all around him. (The black gum—the *hyen* gum—a melodious stringed crocodile derived from the Chinese *khin*, is in fact called *hyen hack* gum, the "gum of the black cranes." Its inventor found himself surrounded by black cranes as he strummed its first chord—and they too began dancing. It's enough to make you wonder if all Korean instruments should not receive the honors of the Animal Academy of Music.)

Is it the *changgo*, or are the Koreans truly tireless? At the factory of Sonsan (as in all the others, we would later realize), hardly has the break-whistle sounded but the workers—after struggling four long hours with ruined Japanese locomotives that they make sparkling new, like counterfeiters—gather together in circles and: *Ongeya...* As though they could only rest from one effort with another, as though they somewhere had an hourglass that need only be upturned for all that accumulated, inert fatigue to become energy again—an hourglass of which the *changgo* would be less the stimulant than the image.

If, the last time I went swimming in Santa Monica (California), instead of returning to the land, called back by who knows what Hollywood frivolities, I had continued straight ahead, I would have arrived today, if I calculate right, at Sonsan beach—where I am. *Appointment in Samarra*.

Sunday in Sonsan: on a platform planted with trees, the *changgo* and the accordion play by turns. Under the pale yellow sun of late afternoon, the dancers—couples of men, couples of women, even a Pierrot Lunaire dancing only for himself—appear and disappear in my viewfinder like visitors to an aquarium. When the music stops, one hears the sleeper's sigh of the nearby Pacific, a hard sleeper.

Indolence, that famous Korean indolence (no doubt their transparency before the military brutes) had its anthropological guarantee: an Oceanian connection. Only the sound and fury of an incomparable history could have shifted the destinies of a second Tahiti.

\*NOTE: 1997: Literally, "Tenderness-on-Pride"—refers to the sentimental geography established by Madeleine de Scudéry in her *Le Carte de Tendre* ("Map of Love").



Must one be thankful to history for preserving Korea from the terrible old age of former paradises, for helping it, not to corrupt its beauty but rather to clothe its innocence, to exchange its Gauguins for Renoirs, and to choose the right Robinson?

*"Hei hei y ai; hei, hei ya..."*

When the bamboo leaves begin rustling in the wind, we seem to hear the sound of a hundred thousand men...

The water-lily blossoms, moistened by the rain, as beautiful as the three thousand servant girls bathing...

Last year the weather was kind, the harvest rich; the rain fell in time and the wind was propitious. This year will also be good: if the harvest is fine we will sate our hunger and fill our bellies, our backs will be warm, we will be happy.

*Hei hei y ai; hei, hei ya...*

Butterflies! Butterflies! Let's go to the blue mountain! Tiger-striped butterflies! Come with us! If the night catches up to us on the way, we will rest in flowery bouquets...

Let us go! If the flowers have fallen we will hide beneath the shadowy trees...

We crossed a carpet of flowers on our horses; at each step our mounts crushed the flowers and freed their perfumes...

*Hei you hei you, ei, hei ya ya; ha ha, hei yo...*

Comrades, *o y tcha, ha tcha, ha, hei you, hei ya, o ho, tcho yo tcha, tcho yo tcha*, lift, lift our sticks..."

(Work song "taken by dictation from the laborers who worked in 1890 on French Commissariat in Seoul," quoted by Marcel Courant.)

(letter to the cat G.)\*

—No, cat G., I will not deal with the Big Issues. They don't lack other hands, look to your usual newspaper. Were I to speak of them, it would be in the style of Henry V: "An orator is only a loud-mouth, a motto is only a slogan, politics change, statistics are faked, fine alliances break, bright flags tarnish, but a human face, good cat, is the sun and the moon..."

It is with the face turned toward me that I have true relations. No longer are there Korea and Koreans, singular and plural of the same night, but only these familiar faces—and that is the Golden Fleece...

(I know you will have the intelligence—cats understand such things—not to see me playing Humankind against History, all those capital H's with which one works up a sweat of understanding each morning, barbells for the intellectual... I know that my relations with these faces, with these familiar people, all filter through history, and that to help or to harm them there are other means than pataphysics. But if the Big Issues must be involved in this relation, let that remain between them and me—it's not for the onlookers. At the bottom of this trip is human friendship. The rest is silence.)

I also know you will not ask me, perched atop god's flail, to hand out praise and blame, to make accounts and—least of all—to give lessons. They're not lacking either. My Korean friends (and my Chinese and Soviet friends), you have not finished receiving lessons—lessons in political realism from the honest scribes of the Great Agony, lessons of tolerance from under Inquisitor's robes, while from the back seat they'll tell you, really, you attach too much importance to material success. The blind husband will snicker at your daughters' purity, the half-learned at the infancy of your art, and everyone will wave you a crown of thorns from their own failures.

The times are strange, good cat, and fast. Lewis Carroll lied: a fox terrier wanders among the signs of the zodiac. And on the oceans the great whales proclaim the glory of the Lord, hallelujah.

It's the festival of machines: so they are decorated—flowers, green plants, flags, quotations. Offer them necklaces, pendants, they will become vain like owls. Just a little longer, cat, and they will take care of the house. Just a little longer.

And then, cat, we'll be their cats.

Pyongyang-Paris, 1958

\*NOTE, 1997: Why so many mysteries? And why deprive him of his name, after all these years, the good cat Gédéon, who lived on Ile Saint-Louis and ambled over the rooftops in the company of unlikely bicycles?

I have chosen to reproduce this text exactly as it was published in 1959. Nearly forty years later, it's legitimate to ask a few questions: does it refer to a world irremediably rejected by history, in the name of the famous "crisis of ideologies"? Those men and women who I saw work so hard, with a courage the propaganda-makers weren't shy of exploiting, but which it would be extremely silly to reduce to its imagery—did they really work for nothing? The newspapers one reads in spring 1997 are devastating: "famine," "total failure," "corruption everywhere".... There's no reason to beat around the bush: that wager was lost, terribly, and the Koreans have once again illustrated their Greek propensity for *hubris*. Always excess, in sentiment, in war, in history.

As to this book, it had a peculiar destiny. Rejected by both camps, not flattering enough for the North (with this primary and inexpiable stain: not a single mention of Kim Il-Sung's name!), immediately identified as communist propaganda by the South, which did me the honor of exhibiting it in a vitrine at the counter-revolutionary museum with the label "Marxist dog" (which didn't seem particularly insulting to me: I can see Snoopy leaving Herman Hesse aside for a while to read *Das Kapital*...). You can let yourself be flattered by that kind of symmetry, you can make comparisons with Chaplin at the end of *The Pilgrim*, sniped at by both sides, walking tip-toe along the border line—you can tell yourself that getting flak from both ends is a pretty good indication you're on the right track. It's a short-sighted glory, an easy way of setting yourself above the fray. The times are demanding more than that. If I ever had a passion in the field of politics, it's a passion for understanding. Understanding how people manage to live on a planet like ours. Understanding how they seek, how they try, how they make mistakes, how they get over them, how they learn, how they lose their way... Which immediately put me on the side of the people who seek and make mistakes, as opposed to those who seek nothing, except to conserve, defend themselves, and deny all the rest.

What did we go looking for in the fifties–sixties in Korea, in China, and later in Cuba? Above all—and this is so easily forgotten today, with the hocus-pocus over that uncertain concept of "ideologies"—a break with the Soviet model. Chronology has its importance here. I do not belong to the generation that rose with the great wave of 1917. It was a tragic generation, buoyed by a disproportionate hope, only to become the accomplice of disproportionate crimes. In the film I devoted to him, Alexander Medvedkin uses this powerful image: "In all of human history there was never a generation like ours... It's like in astronomy, those 'black stars' that shrink down to a few square inches and weigh many tons. My life could be represented by such a black hole." We who were lucky enough to be born on the other side of the black hole could not ignore the depth of its failure, and those who say "we didn't know" are damn liars. Long before Solzhenitsyn, we had read Victor Serge, Koestler, Suvarin, Charles Plisnier (oddly forgotten today, although he exposed the entire mechanism of the Moscow trials as early as 1936, in *Memoirs of a Secret Revolutionary*). Nobody was ever going to feed us the workers' paradise line again. Which was just another reason to go see

how younger peoples, geographically and culturally removed from the old European models, were going to face the challenge of constructing a new society. Those children of Confucius, Lao-Tzu, Bolivar, or Marti had no reason to kneel before dogma elaborated by bureaucrats born from a Leninist host-mother inseminated by Kafka. The answer is: they did.

Another thing: in the mid-fifties, a quiver of expectation ran through the USSR itself, and the Muscovites of today speak with poignant nostalgia of those years when life became livable again, when the terror receded, when nothing had been won with any certainty but it wasn't sheer madness to envisage gradual progress toward freedom. In short, *perestroika* was imaginable at a time when its side-effects would have been infinitely less costly. The doors of the future had begun to swing open, slowly, with lots of grating and creaking, but they were moving. It would have taken enormous historical pessimism to foresee Brezhnev and the period of what the people back there call *stagnation*, more criminal still than Stalin from the historical viewpoint, because no one could have changed Stalin, whereas it was possible to change Brezhnev. And once again, the pessimists would have been right.

So the balance sheet is totally disastrous, and I feel neither the right nor the inclination to ignore that. But I'd like to note two things, which for me have their importance.

Much has been made of the resemblances between the two totalitarianisms, communism and Nazism. They are undeniable, with this one difference, that the communists committed their crimes in betrayal of the values on which they founded themselves, and the Nazis, in fulfillment of theirs. Maybe that's the wrong question. Or maybe it's the whole question.\*

And to close: all the despair accumulated at this century's end, all the shattered hopes, so many victims, so many resignations, all that still doesn't give me an ounce of inclination for even a sketch of indulgence toward society "as it is." During the Cold War I used to say to my comrades on both sides, "What you call the errors of socialism is socialism, what you call unbridled capitalism is capitalism." For now only one of those two behemoths remains on its feet, but the other's defeat has not humanized the survivor, on the contrary. Interviewed on television shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, my fellow filmmaker Claude Lelouch, who is not a Marxist dog, made a comment full of good sense: "*Communism had at least this much going for it, it scared the money-men—and left to their own devices, the money-men are capable of anything, believe me, I know what they're like...*". I find it fitting to give a filmmaker the last word on the twentieth century, which despite all its shams had so little real existence—which may after all have been nothing but an immense, unending fade-over.

Port-Kosinki, May 1997

\*NOTE, 1997: There was so much blabbering around that topic (communism=Nazism, or not) that perhaps it's convenient to refine. I will have spent the first half of my life battling with the Stalinists about the similarities between both monsters, and the second half fencing with others about the differences. The catchword is "utopia" and how it applies to reality. The Nazi model applied perfectly, there wasn't any gap between the ideology and its realization. So-called communism was a perpetual errancy between an impracticable doctrine and the cavortings of real life. Here war communism, there NEP, then Class Against Class, and again Popular Fronts—and the disciplined intellectuals exhausting themselves in order to give a posteriori the polished look of revealed truth to a completely insane praxis. The seminal book by Edgar Morin, *Self-Criticism*, establishes clearly how the Party, like the Church, perpetually feeds heresy for the simple reason that just proclaiming the dogma is enough to underline its caricatural estrangement from society. No Nazi heresy will arise from the reexamination of the founding texts. (Inner contradictions are just power struggles, read Ian Kersaw.) Try to imagine what a "Nazi dissident" could be... You read the Holy Scriptures and watch the Vatican, you read the *Manifesto* and watch USSR, and you wonder who goofed. You read *Mein Kampf* and watch the Third Reich: everything fits, everything applies, not the slightest crack.

And finally, culture... True, to most politicians, culture is little more than an appendice to charity. But when you take seriously the cultural field, when you look at it as a *clue*? On one side, a sample of the greatest achievements that XXth century begot as far as poets, painters, musicians, filmmakers are concerned. Persecuted, betrayed, self-murdered, exterminated, misunderstood, diverted, desperate, sullied, what else? (with strange historical twists: Stalin defending Mayakovsky and Pasternak...) but present, and indissociable from the whole enterprise. On the other side, NOTHING—apart from, in movies, a talented adventurer. Would such unbalance be meaningless?

