

**MIRABILE, Paul****Voyage on the Mekong from China to Upper Laos<sup>1</sup>**

*Etre l'artiste de sa propre vie suppose la possibilité de vivre selon certains styles au lieu de certaines obsessions, c'est-à-dire la possibilité de se répéter dans une variété de paroles, de gestes, d'actions.*

Leo Bersani

**Forword**

*'Chaque homme porte la forme entière de l'humaine condition'*

*Montaigne*

My Voyage on the Mekong completes a triptych that has required thirty-two years or so to accomplish, and although my final destination in Northern Laos on the Chinese border was never attained, one must keep in mind that it is the Road that measures the meaning of a Voyage and not necessarily the realisation or the goal foreplanned...

I had discovered Nicholas Roerich, the Master of the Mountains, during my retreats in the Himalayas, discovered Sir Richard Burton, the Master of Tongues, whilst journeying over the Sahara Desert to Timbuktoo. This third Voyage, on the Mekong River, allowed me to discover Alix Hava, Aymé or Delaware Fautereau, the Master of the Road, for her life was accomplished on the Road. The French painter, musician, professor, explorer, in short, *Voyageuse*, whose mural paintings at the Royal Palace in Luang Pra Bang stunned me by their colour and density, travelled through Asia and Africa, impassioned by Life's colour and density because these are the very medium or vehicle of her artistic accomplishments. Her paintings, a manifestation of her Philosophy of Life, contribute thus to Humanity's weal of noble souls. The discovery of this noble soul, or better put Pilgrim of Humanity, drew into relief the Mekong adventure, when in spite of my efforts the Lao authorities refused me entrance into China via the On Nam, the northern tributary of the Mekong, out of bounds to foreigners due to mines, military activities, weapon and drug smuggling, and other reasons that linguistically I

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<sup>1</sup> This travelogue was originally written in 2001. The piece here is an abridged version of it. The full version can be read in the supplement to this issue. — *Editor*

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failed to understand. The fact, too, that I spent so much time on the river caused my mind to drift through many worlds of confused revelations. Were they real ? Surely there must have been some reality to them...But is it all that important to define and class various plateaus that one gains so desperately, and remains upon without intelligent attestation or luminous testimony ?

That green and misty wonderland indeed transported me back into my Self, and consequently once again away from the self-indulgent mediocrity of our globalising world, be it in the West or in China : *c'est blanc bonnet et bonnet blanc* ! A Self again purged of ideological indoctrination, racism and beguiled superiority which began with the cleansing sands of the Sahara, continued with the icy warmth of the Himalayas, and wended its desintoxicating way along the quietessence uncanniness of the Mekong River. Each Voyage into Self meant a violent severage from Habitude, that lethal nemesis ! But without that severage there cannot be any transformation. And without transformation there can be no Voyage : only tourism, business *déplacement*, neurotic *fuites en avant*...Did not Segalen express the Voyage as those '*marais des joies immortelles*' and those '*remous pleins d'ivresse du grand fleuve Diversité*' ? To voyage is to follow that river of Diversity ; to wallow in the marshes of immortality ! These are indeed the realities of peripheral errings, metaphorically couched because authentically experienced ; they are not addressed to 'experts' bred and groomed on self-centred essentialising, whose programmes for future *décideurs* abroad illumine the theatres of business schools and university departments of language or political science...

To judge the world from some centre is to misinterpret the Reality of Humanity : Noble souls contribute to the world as being part of the world, not scornfully aloft from it, for without direct contribution, however insignificant, the world can never achieve wholeness. Thus all that constitutes the wholeness of the world is derived from the continual centrifugal and centripetal forces which construct the Self ; alternating forces, analogical, antagonistic or complementary, full of the fury of Life because willed by the Self for the Whole and by the Whole. To Voyage sparks the quest of fully understanding that a contributable part of the Whole signifies plenitude with it, and not a part or rôle of it, which reduces it to a mere subservient cog of it ! And the true traveller senses this and realises it ; he or she strides to stimulate and sustain interest in this, beyond the clichés and platitudes, beyond *la langue de bois* and the childish phantasy of a monolithic world-order. This is what, I am sure, Alix Aymé understood and fully accomplished in her ill-illuminated life. Beyond is where the Other lies and waits to be part of the Whole, waits to be **thought of** and not only **communicated to** ! Her life was on the Road ; the Road as that contributable part of our world as a Whole. A noble adventure indeed, one that escapes ignoble minds whose quest of New World Orders has blinded them to the richness of those invisible activities of men and women who achieve nobility for our world through other means than what is demanded from them by callous producers of canon fodder and consumer cattle. To be the Pilgrim of Humanity is to be *really* part of Humanity. And as Soharwardî once proclaimed whilst on the Road towards Khazar Lake in Southern Turkey:

«*I am the eternal pilgrim; without respite I voyage throughout the world, and upon its wonders I contemplate* »

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Part One

The Mekong

Strange are these scenes amongst thick muddy waters and void. Amongst glassy greens and oily azur blues. Mountain hazes and river swirls. Jinhong and Hatsa...and beyond the spiralling mountain mists and spongy ferns into the Unknowness of hazardous conjectures of circumstances: U Tai...those bluish green mountains over which slide and settle mops of alto-cumulus. South China to North-East Laos: U Tai. Slowly, very slowly abandoning my Self to the movement of the Mekong waters; dark here, glistening there, alto-cumulus piling higher and higher upon me, below the dull sound of motors, of ploughed waters, all wedged in by matted jungle, sweating a soggy smell.

The engines below are deafening. Rattling metal. Three days aboard the Chinese riverboat *Chong Guo Ban No* out of Jinhong with the Dai. Xishuangbanna, the Dai autonomous region of China, where Dai, Yi, Han, Dao, Naxi and Bai cultivate their respective languages and writing systems. Xishuangbanna slips quite imperceptively into Northern Laos, an extension of the Dai culture, a slice of land wrested from them after the Second World War... I thus crossed the China-Laos river border with the Dai -a border that hardly exists for them because as many borders it is artificial, imposed by a conquering administration-, perhaps the first Westerner to have done so since the crestfallen cowboy pilots of the sixties and seventies : the secret war?

*'...Nameless here for evermore.'*

Wisdom has its soil and roots in the wander's geographical and existential Traces. Traces engraved upon the crust of the Earth, upon the Memory of Humanity. Signs to and for those who have learnt the subtle Art of Exposure: *Xu Xiake* the geographer...*Xie Lingyun* the traveller-poet. Exposure to the Outside...And yet keeping a cool aloftness from Power, Glory and Riches; for indeed much deeper territories await him who penetrates the *terrae incognitae* of Being. That innermost voyage borne by the winds of circumstances: accident after accident, contingency after contingency. That inner voyage which paves the Royal Road... *wang dao*, by which the sands are cleared away, weeds uprooted, debris tossed aside. The Road on which melodies and rhythms are beaten out, descending into verdant valleys, mounting ever so high into icy, snow-coiffed passes, where the gelid whiteness blinds the unsuspecting, streaming through hamlet, village and town amongst the teeming hordes, both man and beast, settling in deep, dank grottoes in which the stench of urine, sacrifice and campfire blend into a vast phantasy of some primeval past of ikon-filled and fresco-laden caverns, where the spirit of the World Soul still dwells, still hovers above and below us...

And thus into the depths of Mekong Asia I descended, that great Mother of all waterways, snaking through Asia's womb, worming through her intestines like the ever-growing ring-worm. Like the scaly dragon-snake ; an antediluvian, telluric force, fuming...coiling...twisting. This tropical density drew my

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eyes back over unfamiliar libidinal scenes, where the rampant roots of Parashorea and Giant Elephantsear rampaged down into slimy banks, crept upon unctuous waters like dinosaur claws clutching an unfortunate victim: strangling, throttling...smothering.

The boat motored languidly on her course down river, transporting tons of garlic and animal feed. An eight-man crew manned her: all Dai, all experienced, all reserved in both manner and speech towards the foreigner. The cook, especially, whose Chinese and cooking were excellent. His sole responsibility: feed the crew...and the foreigner. And so he fed me and whilst doing so spoke of the Mekong, the voyage to Thailand once a week upon the *Chong Guo Ban No* : a matriarcal penetration into a jade-green womb of islanded stûpas, sweet-scented soil, petrified forests, drunken vessels gliding on silken waters; telluric forces whose weeping willows, crown ferns and spinulose drove me ever back, back into the heart of some ageless epoch of Poetry. Snatches of blue tore through the grey pregnant skies. Rolling, fleecy mousse hills emerged to the left into which crept sharp, flaky cloudlets, whose coiling manes dipped into densely forested *cirques*, hidden arenas which imprisoned bearded ferns and gossamer boughs. To the right, a riot of *fougères*, glowing green in the midday sun, fanning ever so lightly the creamy clouds, silvery white, away. Such fluffy, solitary Beings there above: an ivory sculpture, snuggled up against a backdrop of papier-mâché blue. Below the current ran swift and erratic.

The thick jungle girt villages. Stilt-homes stabbed the sloping pasture lands of thick, glazed carpets; a gentle cant of meadow brushed through root and knotty bark, skimmed by razor-sharp elephant leaves. Splays of ochre-yellow rose out of shimmering greens. Palms, in serried ranks, stood guard round these islanded hamlets, isolated from civilisation.

The speed of the boat slackened...ten, five knots? Soon we were drifting with the current. We ported at the Laos border, and awaited police inspection. Thorough fellows they were these Chinese: arms, drugs, illegal merchandise...or immigrants. A team of about five Chinese officials scoured the vessel whilst a young officer secured our passports and disappeared into a riverside wooden hut built on stilts. The crew and I waited obediently at the bow, in silence. Then a young officer called each of our names, mine causing him some embarrassment to which no one dared snigger, after which one by one we retrieved our passports. Mine being the last, the young Chinese officer carefully examined the exit and the re-entry visas for China, somewhat dubious about my being aboard. But the Chinese do not question their authorities : he handed me my document, his forehead furrowed in intense interrogation.

Boarding the transport vessel had been arranged quite miraculously at Jinhong. I simply loitered about the docks from morning till night, gathering information here and there, noting boats leaving for the South to the border town between China and Laos, Guanlei. On the second day of my observations, I met an officer of the merchant marines, a Dai, and explained to him my intentions. He informed me that no exit visa was issued at Guanlei, but that I could buy one at Jinhong, and get aboard a boat that would be departing that very day at about six o'clock. All agog, I ran back to my hotel, packed my things, rushed back to the harbour, bought my exit visa, and waited for this same officer to call the captain of the departing vessel. The conditions were agreed upon over the hand phone, and two hours later, from the opposite bank, the *Chong Guo Ban No* came into sight and moored alongside us. The crew waved me on, so I shook the friendly officer's hand, jumped into the boat, and away we ploughed downriver out of the huge port of Jinhong. My bag was placed in a cabin for four. I was the only passenger aboard besides the captain's wife.

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Six hours later...

The cook nodded into the darkening walls of jungle: the motor suddenly pushed us sideways towards a beachhead. The captain poked his thick-haired head out of the pilot-house, yelling to one of the younger boys who, incredibly agile, hopped overboard onto the wet sands, trailing behind him the winch cable which he feverishly wound round a metal pike that had been hammered deep into the sands. The cook, busy washing vegetables with two young crew members, made me understand that we would be spending the night at the edge of the jungle. For no boat, no matter how versed her captain in nautical skills, could be navigated after dusk upon the turbulent waters of the Mekong, lest it be ripped open by snags or caught up on a shoal.

And that night in my tiny cabin, which I failed to describe, for indeed besides the three other empty berths, the cubicle only contained casks, baskets, a generator, crates and bales of chain and cordage, scattered about in the most chaotic fashion either on the empty berths or on the steel-plated floor ; that night I say, sweating in the mosquito net, the silence of the still vessel and the jungle thickness grew terribly frightening. I gagged. Interred alive in that overgrowth without a cough or cry. A shroud in which the body gradually decomposes, gnawed by the creatures of the underworld; those subterranean species grovelling in the dark. Injungled Beings of the Night...Creeping into the coffin, like a grey, vaporous steam along a mountain crest, like a caterpillar slithering along the blade of the Knife of Hell. I struggled out of the suffocating mosquito-net -that draping shroud- to seek fresh air. In the Night I brooded over the full, waxen moon. Silvern beams cut out tunnels in the rises and falls of matted jungle. Hollowed sanctuaries. And there in the lunar rays a million gods danced and chanted. Cowry bells dangled from ebony arms, drums made tremble fern and palm. Bluish flames licked and lapped the *fougères* of their oozing emerald. The moon turned blood red...and droplets dripped steadily, thickly, unctuously into the spongy verdure...until, like a candle, both the blood-red moon and the verdant green jungle melted into some mass of hissing cerumen. The sound of the motor startled me: Rosy Dawn had arisen out of the Black of Night...

Churning through cross-currents and whirlpools, the boat was lunched and rolled as if out at sea. She zig-zagged from bank to bank eschewing sand-banks, snags and eylots, heavily overgrown with reeds and bamboo, one of which, particularly large, harboured a gold-tipped stûpa. The sun rose and with it the flaws of heat which seemed to float above the treetops, above the surface of the swirling pools of water. Here the Mekong, in spate, had considerably risen during this very rainy season, devouring Parashorea and Vatica, washing away rooted banks and willows. We churned past quivering tree-tops whose boles and roots lay imprisoned in their watery graves, buried alive like sailors of some sunken, drunken vessel, the crow's nest the last visible sign of Hope...The speedy current made glisten the quivering leaves in the sun, made them tinkle in spite of the infernal engines...tinkle like the buffalo bell...

Peering into the jungle, rocked to the rhythm of the mighty Mekong, I envisioned one of Alix Aym's paintings : *On the Mekong River in Upper Laos* : the green jungle, swaying ferns and branches...a perfect resemblance ! Her visions were wrought from both without and within...

Alix Angèle Marguerite Hava or Alix Aymé or Alix Delaware de Fautereau was an extraordinary artist-traveller. Her paintings inspired me, oily and dense, like Lao jungles ; bright-coloured, like Lao

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clothing ; joyful, like people and their markets and village life. She wished not to emulate but to transform the banal and blank walls of the royal palace into a spirited kaleidoscope. A richness and density of colour that creates stark contrarities, for example, to Roerich's airy pastels ; indigo rivers which rival Roerich's airy azures, depending greens and violet wavelets which greatly contrast Roerich's snowy whites and icy purples...The colours of the Mekong changed with the passing of day in the same way that the colours of her mural paintings changed with the shifting light of day. Indeed, I stood wrapped in meditation before a house on stilts along the banks of an unruffled Mekong, and lo and behold, there sprang her *House on Stilts*, the purplish waters reflecting that house and that foliage, violet and purple, there before my eyes ! She travelled throughout South-East Asia, Sri Lanka and India, exploring, painting, living. Her life was a novel, like those written by her brother-in-law, the French novelist Marcel Aymé, whose stories of the fantastic were taught in all the French High Schools of Asia where I had worked. She too worked in the French schools of Indochina : was she then a fervent colonialist ? How could she have devoted such energy and time to Laos if she had been ?

She taught at Hanoi in the 1920's prior to her painting the frescoes at the Royal Palace in 1931. Odd really, she painted the Lao people's eyes blue : a reflection of the azure or the Mekong ? I had never met a Lao with blue eyes ! A colonialist cliché or *clin d'oeil* ? Her bouncy, fiery colours put to shame so splendidly the dull and drab colonial machine-programme. It was with those bombastic colours that she staged her revolt, I am sure of it...like André Malraux's first rebellious writings some twenty-five years later in Indochina...The artist's revolt against convention, conformism, unquestioned superiority !

The Voyager wends on the High Road : his or her desire materialises in images that are unsought, unexpected, unforeseen. The globe-trotter discovers exactly what he has set out to discover ; an image of the Other that likens to and thus comforts his own. It is not a question of the exotic or the picturesque ; but of painting or expressing in words that which is in constant tension, that which risks to sever him or her from the familiar and accustomed.

Alix Aymé's life was on the Road, and like many Pilgrims of the Road she remains hardly known...

We reached Mamo on the third day.

This small Lao village lay wallowing in the effects of three days of tremendous rainstorms : descending the boat, I waded in scummy water, mud, excrement and trash in search of some police bureau. A driving rain had kept most of the crew members aboard the boat; only two or three had jumped off to attend formalities, they sloshing through the sloughy lanes and alleys of this monsoon-stricken village. The accountant suddenly appeared before me, charging out of a curtain of rain like a ghost risen out of its tomb. He pointed upwards over a few shops towards a cluster of Hardwood trees. His mouth opened and closed but not a word did he seem to utter. I slapped him on the shoulder and ploughed through the mud. And indeed, under three or four magnificent Oak trees a small, ugly bureau of concrete had been built. All smiles, although rather nonplussed at my presence in Mamo, the police staidly informed me that they had not the authority to stamp my passport, and although my entry in Laos be illegal, they would magnanimously permit me to carry on towards Hoçay where the river police would take care of all formalities...in one way or another! And so with these cryptic tidings a speed-boat sped me to Hoçay before nightfall.

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The police of Laos share certain traits with those of India: an awkward situation, however irregular, however illegal can be regularised, legalised in a trice without one's honour ruffled or tainted, and without extravagant cost. In China it is altogether a very different matter : Chinese pragmatics at borders do not allow haggling ; negotiating terms belong exclusively to the Chinese, and of course the premium is very high. The Chinese only negotiate when they hold all the cards; a Chinese compromise means they get the better of you without, however, you losing face...and the Chinese can be very convincing in making you believe that you haven't lost face; that you haven't lost at all for that matter. In China no one ever *really* loses...

Would I lose in Laos, however intact my honour? Not only did the river police at Hoçay object energetically to this irregular entry into their country, they also ordered me to return to the Chinese border, via Udomçay, at Mohan, in order to obtain a 'proper' entry stamp. Mohan is located some 250 kilometres overland via a pot-holed and beaten track: two days of lorry-jolting back up North. I refused categorically. The Chinese border authorities had stamped me out in Jinhong, knowing perfectly well that their Lao comrades (Laos is Communist ruled!) at the other end of the river would stamp me in. (This was a lie: the Chinese stamped me out at a high fee. No foreigner should travel on those transport boats. But the Lao police were obviously unaware of this.)

Confused because they had never come across a foreigner entering the country from China via the Mekong, the police, kindly but sternly, reiterated their request ; I stood my ground, which in India meant pushing back your passport that the authorities attempt to return, meant not budging an inch until some 'higher' authority -the chief- is called to resolve the discrepancy. The tactic worked. A hour or so later I was summoned into an office where a mustached 'chief' sat behind an imposing hackney bureau. And like many of the Indian 'chiefs', he too wore dark glasses which prevented the requester to examine his beady eyes...

Through a translator, my solitary adventure from China to Hoçay was told. I did so in the most obsequious manner, fully aware that my situation be a dodgy one, and being as such, one must cringe and smile...It goes without saying that as I spun my tale, I found myself getting carried away, inventing here, lying there; epically stentorinous, elliptically racy: at one point my story got rather entangled, like the intricate overgrown bracken running along the Mekong banks, quite involuntarily of course, embroiled in the Tubular roots of those steep, rooty banks, entwined in those thick clusters of *fougères*. The 'chief' appeared rather concentrated on the story, although how all my rambling on was translated I had not the faintest idea ! Yet what was he really thinking of me: a petty *bourlingueur* who spins farangoes of garish grotesqueries? A cynic who derides coloured people as he stomps his merry way over newly conquered hunting grounds ? He suddenly threw his right arm up in the air and made a sweeping gesture...Enough is enough? Get him out of my sight? The translator stuck an entry application form under my nose to be filled out, which I did for a small fee, regulations requiring. Honour and integrity intact, pride unruffled, the 'chief', wreathed in golden-capped smiles, nodded to the door. All's well that ends well. I joined my hands in *anjali* whilst nodding my head in slavish obsequity.... I exited before he had any misgivings...

After two boring days in Hoçay, I paid my fare on one of those colourful box-boats that I had seen moored at several of the villages down river from China ; and for two days travelled at close quarters amongst a horde of Western tourists en route to Vietnam. Two days of noise and Lonely Planet jargon.

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After a welcome respite at the Pak Ou Cave Sanctuary, we arrived at the former mediaeval capital of the Lao kingdom, Luang Pra Bang...

Mediaeval Laos, like all mediaeval lands, is that fascinating centuries-old process of symbiotic forces, allied or antagonistic, that vied for supremacy or survival. Their commingling, willy-nilly, created a novel force : Lao under the victorious and wise auspices of the first Lao king Fa Ngum ! From the South, Khmer Theravada Buddhism penetrated, already bearing certain traits of a Cholan South Indian heritage. From the North, Mongol lamism and Chinese confucianism, subtly entwined since the XIII<sup>o</sup> century Yuan Dynasty. Aristocratic and nomadic strata converged in this nascent kingdom, fashioning a Newness out of those assimilated forces of the invading old. This osmotic Newness debunks the concept of harmony and grace : its spirit rather lies in the tension of extremities that seek reconciliation without compromise !

Luang Pra Bang : a town forged on a patchwork of historical monuments, many restored quite nicely, joined by muddy roads, patches of jungle and small bazaars. Costly hotels for tourists can be found in finely kept residential areas. I stayed in a small house whose easy-going owner, attired in an impeccably white *dhoti*, rented out three or four rooms for a small fee. He was in his late fifties and spoke French very well. I remember him possessing many valuable antics in his home, one of which was a musical instrument, a wooden xylophone, methinks. His house was not too far from the Royal Palace Museum, and very near to some outdoor tables and benches where workers ate their breakfast and drank tea. I joined them every morning for breakfast during my eight-day stay in the mediaeval capital.

It was my visit to the Royal Palace, or the 'Haw Kham', built in 1904 by the French for the Royal family -today a musuem since the Communist take-over in 1975-, that piqued my curiosity and led me to discover Alix Aymé's or Hava's wonderful works of art in guise of mural paintings in the king's former reception hall. Her depictions of so many stilted homes along the Mekong not only display a material reality of the Mekong valley dwelling conditions, but also symbolically refer to the Lao nation : did not king Fa Ngum declare that all people living in homes on stilts are to be identified as Lao, demarcating them from the Vietnamese and the Khmer ? So states the documents which I had perused many months after my voyage when returning, rather downheartedly to China.

Besides Alix Aymé's mural paintings, the palace held little interest for me, although something should be said about the gifts that presidents, kings and other diplomates offered to the Lao kings on their official visits to them. In a series of showcases, one can observe a lunar rock that president Nixon had offered to his royal host, and in another case, a French president whose name I no longer recall, offered the king fine procelain from Limoge. A lunar rock ! What a lovely gift, much more lofty-spirited than the napalm and agent orange that rained down upon that same host offered by that same visitor...

Down to the river I trudged on my eighth day at Luang Pra Bang, negotiated the fee and left, the only passenger on a small vessel whose wooden armature above protected me and the captain from the heavy rains which never stopped until Nong Kiaw...The Nam Ou would snake me up to U-Thai, then into China, or so I believed ! Did U-Thai really exist ? China certainly existed ; it was there on my Chinese map ! And when I inquired about U-Thai the Lao would nod their heads. But a nod in Asia does not necessarily mean acquiescence. The Indians are champions of the ambiguous nod...Southeast Asians are too, perhaps...After all, they were invaded and conquered for a century or so by the Cholan Tamils ! And



so I set out for the North on the affluent Nam Ou in search of my mediaeval river town on the Sino-Laotian border...

The Voyager adheres to the rhythm of the river, as he does to that of the deserts and the mountains, and in doing so, penetrates Time that is in tune with his, not the mechanical, artificial, technological time of the modern city and town. And where the urban denizen's Time speeds by in a wink of an eye, the Voyager's lingers on for centuries, like that of the desert's, mountain's and river's...because it is Space that measures Time, real Time; and not the workings of man's, his, set on production for production...Adhere to the river's meandering Time dear wayfarer, for you will then desert the obsession of Time, and your Self will traverse the world's treasured Spaces for centuries...

Swallowed up by the winding, timeless river, I grew tinier and tinier before the gigantic splendour of its primeval Poetry:

*'...L'art de ne pas paraître...'*

Art, forsake me not to rootlessness; Rhythm, provide me the strength to measure my steps :

*'Make the Experience of the World  
And walk amongst Humans,  
See yourself  
Rest upon the summits lofty.  
Terraces and pavillions -mountains and forests-  
There was never any reason to distinguish them.'*

Su Shi's life of plenitude: Poetry-Vagabondage-Solitude, the Chinese trinity! The echoes off the matted jungle walls are, when all is well and said, simply ours...Echoes screaming back from the Past, hollowed nights listening to the murmurs of one's own terror; the river widened and narrowed, folded and spread like the tempo of some phantasmagoric ritual. This prehistoric world would surely get the better of me...Boschian figures began to crowd my memory, but they soon disappeared, leaving the spaces clear for those of the Buddhist Hells, be they Mahayana or Hinayana.

The dimness of light as the mountains rose and the river narrowed, circumscribed my destination. The rushing waters: appeasing or inebriating? Moored to a metal stanchion a metre or two from a sandy beachhead, I was suddenly seized with an urgent urge to defecate. I jumped into the ankle-deep water, ran into some clusters of reeds, made my hole and relieved myself. A page from *La Voie Royale* served to wipe: did not the noble pages from *The Hobbit* serve the same sanitary purpose in Africa? Mercenary indeed, yet better than polluted water or urine-stained sands...

Barefoot on the beach. Dugouts ferried women from bank to bank: the Hmongs, dressed in black, mercenary fodder of the C.I.A., and the slandered scapegoats of the American Forces when the rout in Vietnam and Laos began! Ahead the river sliced through two canyons. The tiny wavecrests glistened in

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the sun's rays. Glistened and exploded as they battered the boulders and banks. Such peace. Such tranquility. Then the bark was poled into the current and began anew her impassive upstream ascent: two hours later Nong Kiaw...

Nong Kiaw: ensconced amongst lofty mountains and thick forests : what a glorious spectacle! No one stood high on the shores observing either my arrival or struggle up the slippery slope. In a clearing just above the frail barks and dugouts, surrounded by wooden shops, not a creature stirred. I trudged up an earth-beaten road which led to a wider dirt road, aligned with shops, stilt-homes and little vegetable and flower gardens. A small signpost tied to a tree indicated a guesthouse, a name which has long since escaped my memory. No one took heed of the foreign presence; an odd sensation indeed, nothing unfriendly mind you, nor belligerent, simply an indifferent attitude or poise. Children did smile when the foreigner smiled, but nothing more. To my left quite suddenly, a magnificent Bodhi Tree cast the road in cool shadows with her razor-sharp Elephansear leaves. Under her serenity I experienced a soothing sensation, like after having bathed in a stream during the hot summer months. And there, out of the coolness of the expressive shadow, to the right, the ochre-yellows of the guesthouse. Bouncing off the tiny windows of the second storey, reddish-orange rays of the sinking sun; they filtered back through the huge leaves of the Bodhi, blending into the blackness of the tree's rhizomatous vortex.

I strolled out into the soft, dusky light, then into a small front courtyard in which a family, busy slicing, chopping, peeling and tearing all sorts of vegetables on a long, wooden table stood up graciously to greet me. The older boy spoke excellent English. He immediately took my bag and showed me to a room on the second floor from whose diminutive window the orange rays of the setting sun softly mantled two or three stilt-homes and a distant meadow, peppered with Palm Trees that umbrellaed *fougères*, Royal Crown ferns and a myriad plant stranglers in an alleviating mellow sheen. Women strolled out on their verandas to hang clothes on the banister, one or two of them picking stems of flaxen straw from the low-hanging roof to chew them. Far out at the end of the meadow I noted a hill upon whose brow a gold-tipped watermelon stûpa, or *Mak Mo* had been built: the hemispherical-shaped shrine suggested the presence of a monastery or *vat*. I liked my little window to the world: through it bathed in the poetry of this MOMENT...I left the window open in order to clear out the stuffiness of the room then climbed down the ladder which led directly into the courtyard, where the toilet and a basin of well water were at my disposal. I swung round to the front of the guesthouse and joined the family. Dinner would be at seven, hour in which the electricity would faintly light some homes, shops and the main road until ten o'clock.

After a dinner of soup and vegetables, and being the only guest that day, the English-speaking son proposed that we go for a walk in the village. Scantily supplied shops, dimly lit with a candle or two, began to close as darkness crept in. People mingled about the street or in the flower gardens out of which appeared the silhouettes of the sturdy stilt-homes: no one here was barefoot! Very few men wore *dhotis* and fewer were shirtless. A path to the right led off into an open meadow, in the middle of which wooden stalls and planks had been installed for the morning mart; it would open at four thirty or five. Fruit, vegetables, meat and some clothes items were sold, carried in from the surrounding fields and hamlets by the toiling peasants, some of whom walked about seven or eight kilometres over jungled paths infested with mines.

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A peculiar flaxen-coloured light bathed the village and her surrounding mountainous vegetation; yellowing orange or orangy yellow. The boy turned to me:

« My father told me stories about this light. He calls it Agent Orange or Yellow Rain. American light from the black-spotted sky. Sprayed over villages and temples and fields and people and trees and mountains. It burned holes in children's bodies. Their hysterical tears were never seen or heard in the West. A misty, burning light whose smell stung the holes of noses, whose weight smothered crops, whose taste poisoned water. The airborne cowboys burned down temples and hospitals and homes. Did anyone see our yellow tears, our orange skin in the West? Did anyone pray for us, lay flowers on the rubble of our civilisation, of our crushed bodies, sing our national anthem for us? »

« No. » I answered.

*Ghastly grim: 'nameless here and nothing more...'*

Two days later I strolled down to the river, negotiated my fare and set out on bark number 010 for Muang Khouna.

A small vessel as could be expected, but I must admit more sophisticated than the one that got me up to Hong Kiaw. True, there was no padding on the two-row, little wooden chairs nailed to the hull. However, both the passengers and the helmsman were protected by a sturdy roof. The pilot, in fact, sat comfortable in a petit cabin with sliding windows at the front in order to prevent monsoon rains from disrupting his manoeuvres. The passengers climbed in and out behind the pilot-cabin, where a roofless space allowed everyone to stand. There was no bow so to speak, only a short 'beak' where heaps of cordage had been stowed for mooring. The stern, much wider, provided space for the motor, a water-pump and the second-in-hand who remained behind them for the entire journey. Two red-coloured pails at the front and the stern provided ample volume to bail out the bilge-water if the pump failed...which it did!

Three-hundred kilometres upriver without any respite from the driving rains. The two red-coloured pails were indeed not enough! The pump never worked at all. The helmsman must have stopped the bark twenty or thirty times for passengers to descend or mount in order to bail her out of bilge-water, then wait for the motor to dry. The hull lay submerged in water not so much due to the stinging rains, but mostly because the level of the river and that of the lees was well-nigh the same! Whenever we hit a rapid or ploughed into a cross-current, foam and spray would drench us all, especially those Lao who were seated directly behind the pilot-cabin, where they received the brunt of the impact. In spite of the pounding rains, the captain kept to his course, zig-zagging from bank to bank, steering clear of dangerous shoals, avoiding the dappled greys of sunken rocks. At one point the rapids jolted the vessel to such an extent that the wooden roof rattled: would it get worse upriver? It certainly would...and for the first time the river began to frighten me.

And there to the left: a few rafts drifted dreamily through the drooping branches of willows along the banks; calmly drifting without pole or paddle. The motor of our bark suddenly stopped. Everything grew so calm, so tranquil. Only a rainy breeze from the East blew in, lightly touching the stalwart reeds

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of tiny isles of the root-infested banks. The mountains towered around us here where the Nam Ou narrowed considerably. The Lao rafts, large, long, smooth and green, floated adjacent to our now motionless craft. Now I discerned two or three men soaping themselves on one of the rafts, whilst on another, further down stream, a solitary villager had just cast his fishing net into the choppy waves. And there, almost in the middle of the river, still another raft on which three boys had stretched out ; it floated listlessly amongst uprooted trees, reed-woven isles and clumps of stationary debris. Wonderful rafts called *maipei* which means 'bound wood', similar in construction and function to those *catamaran* of Dravidian stamp in South India, and to those Chinese rafts of Guangxi, glided and slipped into the small inlets, moving in and out of willow tunnels, leafy bowers and viny vaults with such ease and grace. Little by little, they would disappear into the supine inlets, snaking deeper into the heart of the mountain jungle, girt everywhere by tremendous jagged cliffs and copses of palm and *fougère*.

The scene hypnotised me : there, two dugouts poled by ten or eleven people, dressed in gay colours, along the banks, behind whom lay a vast stretch of green jungle, but whose swaying ferns and branches were easily counted because separated from each other. And further on, a path of ochre cut through the swaying vegetation in front of which the ochre colours of the Mekong were mirrored. But what am I beholding ? Yes, it is Alix Hava's *On the Mekong River in Upper Laos* ! Incredible ! A perfect resemblance. A perfect fit ; a reminiscent of a painting I had seen only once ! Yet, I'm sure both the painting and the scene that hypnotized me belonged to a shared identical Time and Space ; one of that very Instant...the Artist's...Nature's...and the spectator's...

Nine hours later, hungry, tired and drenched, the pilot hauled in his vessel on a cement landing at Muang Khwa: four passengers alighted. It had been a long day...

Perched upon the brow of a small hill which overlooked the river was nestled the delightful terrace of a guesthouse, recommended to me by one of the passengers on the bark, and whose owner -so this passenger explained- spoke excellent French.

It was a rather large house whose second storey had been fitted out to accommodate the trickle of foreigners who ventured into North-East Laos. The large terrace, bedecked with colourful flowers and vine-bowers, overlooked the fast flow of the Nam Ou, here in spate. To the East, Viet-nam, and more precisely, Dien Bien Phu: the symbol of Viêt-minh, of Giap over de Castries, of French humiliation and defeat. The prelude to Algeria, and to the final curtain-dropping of the Colonial Theatre: remember this boisterous phrase?

*«Ce qu'on donne pendant la guerre à l'humanité est volé à la patrie »*

dixit some umbrageous French officer whose war crimes have yet to be judged....

Alix Hava, alias Aymé, might have never existed without the French colonial empire. She died in Brazzaville in 1989, long after the fall of the empire, long after the independance of those former French colonies and protectorates, long after the blood had dried...but not the insult and the humiliation...

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True, if the French had never colonised Indochina, there might have never existed a Alix Aymé ! And yet, her existence confirmed the victory of the Vietnamese at Dien Bien Phuh, the Pathet Lao over the American Ravens...

*...nameless here and never more...*

The Road made Alix Aymé exist; and this Road was one of ontological and existential independance...of existential integrity and ontological identity. The Road that paves and paved the way for the independant spirit that Art requires. The Road of Art liberates nations, saves many a pilgrim who treads the dark recesses of History's abominable truths...

There were only six of us who left Muang Khwa to Hatsa one rainy dismal morning. A six or seven-hour voyage over treacherous rapids and snags: six of us tucked into a frail bark whose only shelter shook and jolted at each and every violent wave, current or rapid encountered. The six of us, tossed, bounced, convulsed as she banged into swift cross-currents, caromed off to the left or right at such a speed that I truly believed the steerman had lost control of his vessel. All six of us gripped the flimsy sides of the boat, straining at every rough passage. After an hour upriver I was so tense that my muscles stiffened; I could hardly pivot my neck. Seated on planks nailed into the hull, we found ourselves ankle-deep in bilge-water. It poured in from the breaking foam. Worse, a storm broke over us, filling the vessel with so much more water. Yet the pilot, without any shelter, nor his wife who governed the motor at the stern, never once rested: they fought on and on when smashing over the thunderous rapids, bailing out bilge-water with the hand pump and pails. At one moment, when the rains had abated, I caught a glimpse of a light-green bark, hardly visible due to its extraordinary flatness, being poled down river, very near to the root-entangled bank. Besides the poler, a saffron yellow-robed man sat cross-legged, the brightness of his robe, a monk's, contrasted in an esthetic sort of way with the dense greenness of both the bamboo raft and the stretches of matted jungle behind him. The image mesmerised me for a moment, for indeed the whole scene had already appeared before my eyes at the monastery of Polisai at Luang Pra Bang, inframed in an outer wall fresco...The bamboo raft moved further away, drifting dreamily amongst this fantastic scenery...fading away in this strange, prehistoric world: was it Conrad's or Alix Hava's? Or a fresco in which I had been painted and framed?..

We made a halt on a beachhead peppered with thick gaggles of reed and thistle : Around me, awe-inspiring and complicated configurations formed vaults of root, vine and leaf; festooning ramifications intertwined with *fougères*, whose flaming red flowers hung limply over our diminutive craft. Here and there bamboo rafts transported Hmong tribesmen up and down the river from bank to bank...

A savage, pristine world: Tabular roots of the enormous Vatica and Gurja crept out of the humid soil and spread wide like the giant steps of prehistoric animals. Was this the world of green-sparrow boats and vermilion gates? A world *en abyme*?

*'..I am like the willow tree following the wind. I am like sand in the water. The marrow of rocks...'*

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So sang Ming Liao Ze in the lands of erring... The more I reveled in these primitive, explosive scenes, the more Alix Aymé became an heroic reality to me ; a serious rival to the illustrious Alexandre David-Néel ! My thoughts throbbed under the weight of such oily depictions which pressed in on me which from all quarters. I felt her companionship on many a lonely and delicious excursion into the emerald green curtains of the jungle, within the moist dark browns of the stilted homes, amongst the indigo and light blues of village markets. I erred between canvas depictions and Reality, from the macroscopic to the microscopic worlds: regions barely visible to the naked eye, where insects grovel over veiny leaves and sinewy bark. Millions of red ants marched in terrifying discipline over and under soggy leafage. Plunging downwards, floating, eddied to the depths of despair...into an infinite chasm of the womb of the Beingless...into the pure Subject ?..

Hours and hours and hours sweeping by stûpa-islands, briny-scented shoals, huge cakes of debris. Villages were scarce: passengers would descend and vanish into the jungle; others would climb aboard, black-clothed women fingering their heavy, silver jewelery; others would squat on the strand or scramble across it, carrying baskets of fruit which dangled from the ends of their shoulder poles. Screaming, naked children would leap into the river, waving in joy, riding atop rosy buffaloes. From their stationary rafts fishermen would toss finely woven nets into the rushing waters, eyes hidden under their large hats of osier. The monsoons had ravaged the area: Willows and Hardwood Trees, swallowed up in the rising flow, flapped and floundered in the swirling cross-currents. The final hour of one's existence contains every hour of existence, every hour of an ontological epic...Not a résumé, but a containment...the Whole of many fragments...a phantasmagoria during which time every image-hour sails past the eyes, be it rocky or smooth. This final hour is perhaps the only authentic hour of one's existence on Earth...

Narrower and narrower twisted the river; twisting round grassy bends out of whose gutted jungle rivulets gushed the long months of monsoon rains. Wisps of some eerie effluvium crossed the waters of the Nam Cu like an evil miasme, hesitant, waiving...a primeval image of another Experience...Aïon. As if that Time, Aïon, our Time, had taken the form of a Space whose rhythm no longer flowed mechanically, but skimmed: immaterially, dreamily along the misty froth of the Nam Cu. A muffled cry of a bird. A languished toss of a fishing net. A spouse yelling to her toiling husband ; the hull of the boat brushing the thick reeds that grew on the many islets or on the edges of the sandy bends.

But what was my Destiny on the river? Indeed, I knew I wouldn't reach China ! Let it be again noted here and now. I have no inclination towards spinning suspense stories. The erring Subject of the *flux flumen*? To merge with the stricken bamboo, ferns, bracken, roots, palms...the arching *fougères* and sagging willows which swept the muddy waters? From out of the descending mists lurched jungle outgrowths, eerie configurations, unsettling to the naïve, to the unsuspecting. Under the mantle of humidity the waters blackened into an oily, moiré Substance whose Form no longer resembled that of the river. Huge swaths of red and orange floated in the wake of the tiny bark. The whole waterway smelt like Byzantium Fire, laden with the swollen corpses of the stricken Ravens and their Oriental side-kicks. Waves were heard lapping the corpse-spewn banks. The world grew petrous, ossified: a stiffening realm of white-wisped brazen greens and slaty greys. The bark appeared to fill with bilge-bodies...Bail them out! Bail them out!..

« Lima Sites! » affrightened voices shouted from the mists. And from the indistinct river banks villagers gesticulated in silent tongues: « Pluck their plumage! Pluck their plumage! » And there, fires spat embers into the hoary, bearded trees, each bole now a charred ghost.. Orange blasts exploded out of the petrified Hardwood forests. Reddish-orange mushroom billows coiled upwards, spread thick o'er the glaucous graveyard. And I can assure my readers that these scenes were not Alix Aymé's! Bodies writhed and wriggled and wiggled, wrenched from their flow of Time, from their flow, *tout court*...An immense humus tomb! These scenes were our nightmares...

*'...La nuit est ton séjour...'*

I have never felt the pangs of Routine because I navigate upon the rhythm of erratic Time...Known to the few and far between, and to remain unknown for whom the hinges of Time have long since rusted rigid...

From the ominous skies of orange the craven Ravens were plucked of their plumage, no longer croaking projectiles of fire, no longer enflaming the serried ranks of razor-sharp Elephantsear leaves...

*'...meant in croaking 'Nevermore'...'*

The jungle now lay clean and healthy...

Bound to his circumstances, the Pilgrim ascends the many plains of Reality. He may straddle them all, legs dangling freely over the edges...or jump from one to the other. Ascent and descent. And although the rains may efface this ontological rhythm, its Traces will survive the fading wake, fan out in V-form towards the misted banks. On those corse-strewn banks puffs of bluish fire spat destruction, bursts of raging and uncontrolled orgasms mushroomed out; unrelieved tension, unbridled hate and unprecedented ignorance of the Other convulsively erupted. Victory at Lam Son! Victory of the Other...for the Other...over the Same!

The *Epic of Being* traces the convergences and the divergences with the Other. *L'Autre* as the *Même*, be it mineral, vegetal, animal or human. The transition between cell and plant, plant and animal. The strappy threads of mist of the Mekong pulled me along without any further Destination save the river herself...the Road forever onwards...for ever...

The heat of orange blaze in the Night *-la Nuit Noire-* lifted the screams of village children, like flowers of aromatic wine or sulphur; vomiting out against illicit contrivance, unsound secrets, aborted manufacture of consent, still-born management of opinion. Out of the hoary vaporous flames: blue, orange, red *-fuchsia red-* played within the jungle greens, crept in and out of the acid-yellow nervures of the Hardwood leaves. Strange eruptions lay aglow: the gaunt Ravens..

*'...with such name as 'Nevermore'...'*

The bark grazed a lattice-work of aerial roots and gossamer vines:

...swish...swish...swish...

Was there any end to this snaking river? a Voyage up North towards a Chinese border that does not exist...that probably never existed, nor will ever exist for that matter...Tinier and tinier it all became, like a microscopic amoeba swallowed up in a large-mouthed fish...

Truly, Exposure renders us brittle, vulnerable to the treble movement of verticality, transversality and circularity, from whose implacable triad the kernel of Self bursts asunder. A violent separation that reminisces the penetration of the Other's otherness, that ambit of one's feeble grip on the little self...

A crystallising *modus operandi* settled in, bathed the petrified region in a filtered, somewhat troubling luminosity; a fierce twilight, flaming fiery from the doomed Ravens yet dulcet, mellow...thawing, which peeped through the leafy eyes of boles like rays penetrating stained-glass windows: fiery orange and blood-red...The charred and sorrowful ghosts of yore...

...like those Daisey Cutters:

*A shaft of cheerless light  
Cleft the Way...*

Back I tossed my head, listlessly, like the river. Then I overheard, like a fey whispered intimacy, this familiar voice, which awakened my dormant memory ; abrupt it awakened it, in so many subterranean jolts:

*'Les houles, en roulant les images des cieux,  
mêlaient d'une façon solennelle et mystique  
Les tout-puissants accords de leur riche musique  
Aux couleurs du couchant reflète par mes yeux.'*

...Wounded wings borne away into the jungle hollows, wide and cavernous; into the black sun, that ravenous Night:

*'...Shall be lifted-nevermore!...'*



### Afterword

No, I never reached the Chinese border upriver. The Authorities turned me back, as could be expected, as I had expected : but hope is what keeps the Road ever-winding, *n'est-pas* ? Perhaps it was all an illuminated dream. Crestfallen, *j'ai rebroussé chemin*. Crestfallen, I say, yet without regret...I was struck, rather, by a odd thought, or better put, by a revelation : I had no future. Or if future it could be called, it was behind me ; I had only the Present to contend with, to confide myself in, to live without regret or sorrow...

*'Les fleurs de pêcher s'en vont  
au loin,  
emportées par le courant.  
Là où se cache une autre terre et  
un autre ciel,  
qui ne sont pas ceux des hommes...'*

Li Bo

En hommage à Alix Aymé

