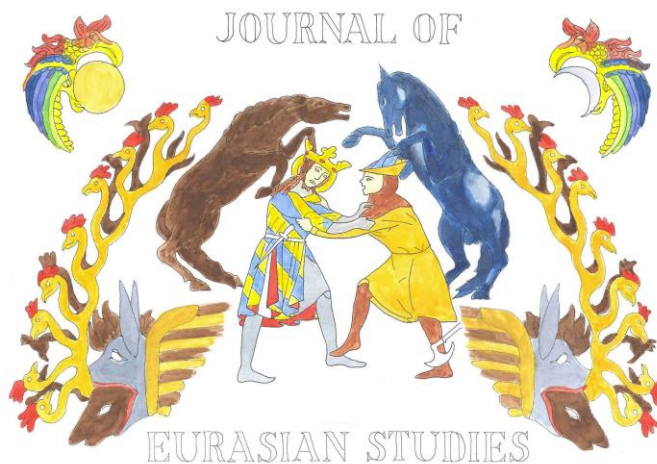


JOURNAL OF EURASIAN STUDIES

Journal of the Gábor Bálint de Szentkatolna Society

Founded: 2009.

Internet: www.federatio.org/joes.html



Volume V., Issue 3. / July — September 2013 — Supplement

ISSN 1877-4199

Publisher

Foundation 'Stichting MIKES INTERNATIONAL', established in The Hague, Holland.

Account: Postbank rek.nr. 7528240

Registered: Stichtingenregister: S 41158447 Kamer van Koophandel en Fabrieken Den Haag

Distribution

The periodical can be downloaded from the following Internet-address:

<http://www.federatio.org/joes.html>

If you wish to subscribe to the email mailing list, you can do it by sending an email to the following address:

mikes_int-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

The publisher has no financial sources. It is supported by many in the form of voluntary work and gifts. We kindly appreciate your gifts.

Address

The Editors and the Publisher can be contacted at the following addresses:

Email: mikes_int@federatio.org

Postal address: P.O. Box 10249, 2501 HE, Den Haag, Holland

Individual authors are responsible for facts included and views expressed in their articles.

ISSN 1877-4199

© Mikes International, 2001-2013, All Rights Reserved

EDITORIAL BOARD

Editor-in-Chief

FARKAS, Flórián

The Hague, Holland

Deputy Editor-in-Chief

OBRUSÁNSZKY, Borbála

Budapest, Hungary

Editors

ALIMBAY, Nursan

Almaty, Kazakhstan

ARADI, Éva

Budapest, Hungary

BÉRCZI, Szaniszló

Budapest, Hungary

BÍRÓ, András

Budapest, Hungary

CSORNAI, Katalin

Budapest, Hungary

CZEGLÉDI, Katalin

Pécs, Hungary

ERDÉLYI, István

Göd, Hungary

HORVÁTH, Izabella

Hangzhou, China

KARATAY, Osman

İzmir, Turkey

MAHAPATRA, Debidatta Aurobinda

Boston, MA, USA

MARÁCZ, László

Amsterdam, Holland

MARCANTONIO, Angela

Rome, Italy

MURAKEÖZY, Éva Patrícia

The Hague, Holland

SARBASSOVA, Guldana

Amsterdam, Holland

SECHENBAATAR

Hohhot, China

UCHIRALTU

Hohhot, China

ZOMBORI, Andor

Nagoya, Japan

Voyage on the Mekong

from China to

Upper Laos



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

Paul Mirabile

2001

Foreword

'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...

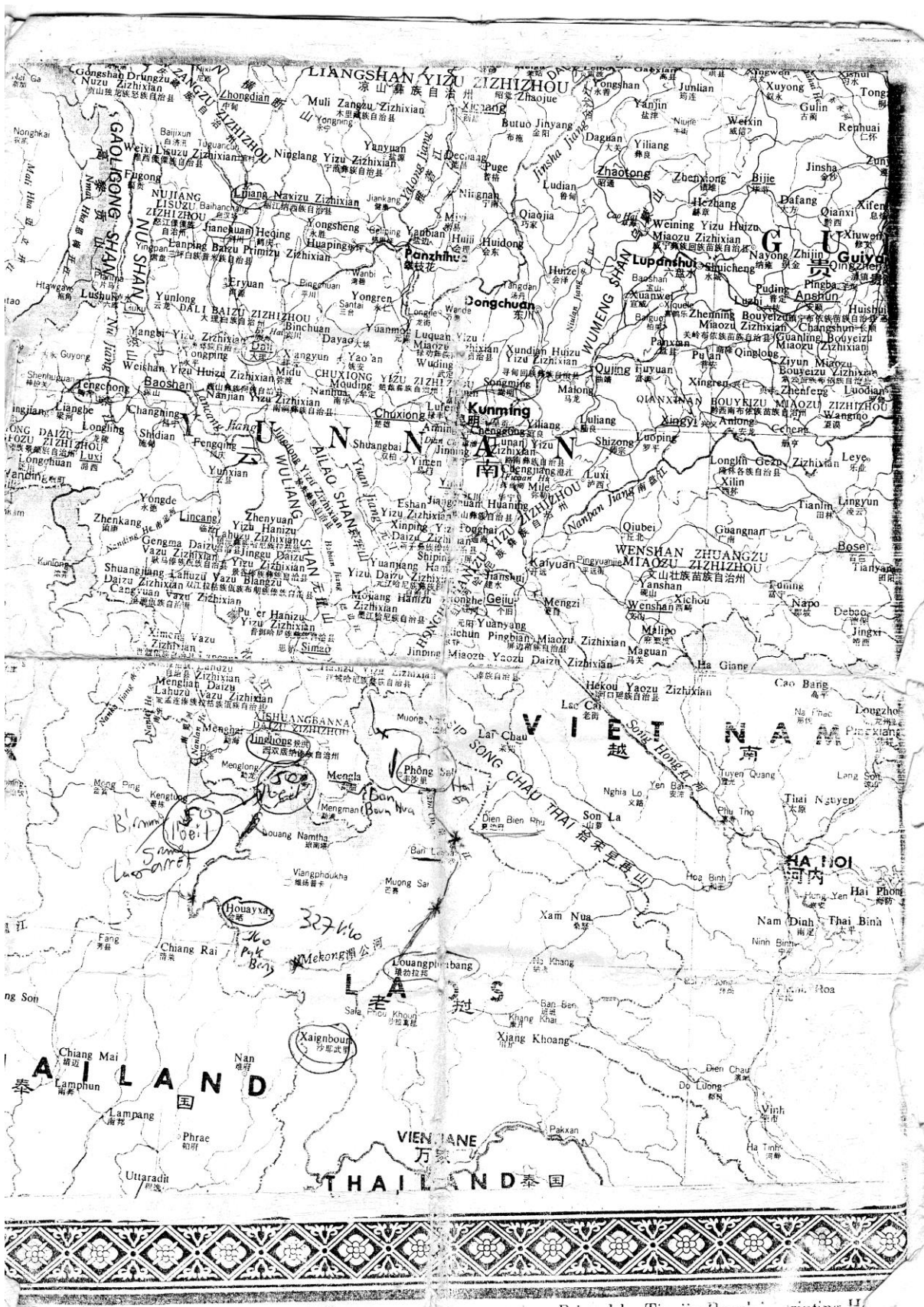
I had discovered Nicholas Roerich, the Master of the Mountains, during my retreats in the Himalayas, discovered Sir Richard Burton, the Master of Tongues, whilst journeying over the Sahara Desert to Timbuktoo. This third Voyage, on the Mekong River, allowed me to discover Alix Hava, Aymé or Delaware 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 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 centrepedal 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»



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. Xishunagbanna 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 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.

Yet at the banks, steamy and root-infested, the waters appeared oddly immobile; a lipoid liquid which reflected frozen boughs, trunks and ferns; a glacial canvas of quietessence. Indeed, the Mekong worms through us all: a devious Drake that inhabits the realms of other Realities, alienated from the humdrum of Dragon economies, New Chinas...Celtic Tigers...This dragon has *Dracaena Fragrans* running through its veins. It runs through ours, too! It whips through the glassy greens and dappled stone. Slithers over mossy earth and moiré bark. A hostile green at times, for the lurching dragon must be on its guard against the turmoil of a chaotic soul, ensnared within puzzling circumstances, experience-laden riddles. The dragon will rise and coil in anger. Rise up from its bloody waterways and vomit death at the guileness Ravens. It is in this fashion that the Art of Complexity developed: the Self observed, observing the Other. Thus the inner and outer voyage converge in both depth and superficiality to perfect and eschew the Art of Exposure...

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.



Photo 2: At the Beachhead...

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.

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.



Photo 3: The Cook busy washing...

The crew, busy with their activities, I stretched my legs on the small beachhead. The odourless jungle glistened with steam, with a dull blue-green, vaporous gloaming. The voices of the crew grew dim, almost inaudible. How astonishing, no bird or animal cry rose from the foliage. Sweat poured off my neck as I peered into the sweltering pores of this livid world, the enchantment of the *f erie*, its exasperating heat which froze the sougning boughs, the tinkering ferns, the eloquent silence of Darkness' creatures. A hand touched my shoulder. It was the accountant; he who had negotiated at Jinhong with the Chinese authorities who had taken my money for both the formalities involved and the voyage (a large percentage of which fell into his, the captain's and the custom official's pockets), he who jumped from the boat with papers in hand when we ported at the border village to have the crew's special passports stamped.

Six crew members sat on the hard-packed sand picking their teeth with bamboo shoots. One or two tossed floating debris at the bow. From the pilot-house roof four flags fluttered: Chinese, Laotian, Myanmar and Thai. But the name of the boat was no where to be found: perhaps on the poop-deck, the pilot-house or the lee. Only the characters *Chong Guo Ban No* had been painted big and red just below the paneless windows of the pilot-house. A metal awning had been built over the windows into which a radio antenna had been installed. The four portholes of the pilot-house, as well as the two of each of the eight cabins aboard all had panes, though neither thick nor solid. The captain jumped from the bow on

to the deep runnels that the cable had dug into the wet sand. A sudden wind made the flags flap...the window panes rattle...

« Zuo ba! » he cried above the wind-swept ferns and palms. Was that why the accountant touched my shoulder : were we to go somewhere on foot? From the poop-deck the only light-bulb that worked, dangled to and fro, casting a pale hollow of light into the blackness of the jungle. The cook's hollowed footsteps clanked on the deck, to and fro, from the stove to the water-tank; the smell of Chinese cabbage, bamboo shoots and long green beans filled the air. « Zuo Ba! » cried the captain again as he led us over a steep bank bulging with roots and entangled vines, then through an opening in the moist wall of leaf, aerial root and bark. Yes, that was why the accountant touched my shoulder, we were to go somewhere on foot ! The sandy trail soon transformed into a smooth stone path covered with clumps of odd-smelling moss and red-ant eaten ferns. The captain trained his powerful flashlight ahead, illuminating a ghastly world of crepuscular shadows...His pace was steady and swift although the path zig-zagged higher and higher into a forest of bamboo and poplars. We must have passed through mangroves because the scent of that sweet fruit orientated my thoughts to Tamil Nad, and to the delight I had taken in eating that fruit in spite of the aphthas that monstrously swelled my lips. The air grew cooler, chillier. At one point I believe we passed under several gigantic prop roots because the stench sickened me. The stone path now became a granite-slab stairway climbing still higher into the dense evening. Over my shoulder I caught a glimpse of the dangling light-bulb of the poop-deck, swaying to and fro between the darkening ferns of the crepuscular shadows, ever-darkening...ever thicker...

*'L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.'*

The stairway soon conducted us to a small, arched bridge of stone under which a brook could be heard running...but not seen. The moon now full, lit our path adequately enough, although the captain's trained flashlight remained a sound companion. Ahead loomed two finely carved lions, fiercely mounting guard on both sides of a monumental stairway. In the pastel moonlight each colossal step rose solemnly, majestically into the utter darkness far above us. Her width measured the awesomeness of her height: what a strange encounter in this jungle, for save the fleecy moss, dead fern and split granite, the stairway appeared remarkably intact.

And so we began our climb upon those mossy slabs. Endless seemed that ascent: the moonlight dimmed as a chilly mist descended imperceptibly into the dampening foliage, dripping thick upon fern, round knotty bark, swirling in and out of bent bough and dependent palm. A myriad of hazy cloudlets swarmed before my eyes. At the top, the captain, somewhat out of breath, signalled in a raucous voice for us to follow him to the right. Which we did. A few steps later we found ourselves in front of a massive wooden door, embossed with iron bolts and an enormous knocker, above which, written on the lintel, were these three words: *Feng Lai Si*. Were we still in the Yunnan ? But the border control ? However, just above one of the two-mossed covered lion-guardians, the one with the broken snout, I noted Dai or Laotian scripture. The temple appeared abandoned, although the door had been left ajar.

We pushed on through the portal, the mossy-green door creaking angrily at the touch of the jungle interlopers...

The Laughing Buddha greeted us in the first Hall. The statue was in excellent condition. Incense burned; fresh flowers lay at the base of the shrine. Circumambulating to the right, we entered a courtyard, lit here and there with petrol lanterns and candles. An uncanny scene indeed, the beams of the moon added to the wierd swathes of light: creamy, waxen, a sort of George de la Tour or Stanly Kubrick luminosity. An old woman slumbered on a bench. A monk, attired in a saffron-yellow gown carried a bunch of faggots across the whole scene, slowly, theatrically, each gesture a secular one. I stood mesmerised by that trudging monk, and by the hissing of melting wax. A faggot plunged to the stone slabs, bounding from crevice to crevice, rolling sluggishly towards the captain. His guttural voice snapped my lethargic state. He made a bee-line for the main shrine, followed closely by three crew members. I swerved to the left, passed through an O-door and discovered an enchanting garden bathed in moonlight; an undomesticated garden, abandoned to itself. A pool of stagnant water laden with dead water lilies and twigs shone black. Untrimmed plants and shrubs grew wildly over the stony paths, bolted up through the cracks and fissures of granite slabs, scurried over the green tiled roof of a Taoist temple. I stood in the middle of the temple-square: here Chinese obsessional constraint had ceased to be common currency, had ceased to force Nature to conform to puerile desires. A tiny kiosk, overlooking the diminutive pond, rotting and moss-mantled, glowed dull red. A musical phrase flitted through my mind: gong-boom...gong-boom...gong...gong...gong...gong...boom...The voices of the crew echoed faintly from the main shrine courtyard; they were speaking to the Abbot in Dai. The music continued whilst a veil of bluish mist settled into the temple-square. A few lamp-bearing monks shuffled in and out of O-doors and Tai Hu miniature mountain passages; old, decrepid monks, whose gowns lay worn and torn on their shoulders. A tiny bell rang; a muffled sound drifted through the bluish-green mist. A chant rose, then the smell of burning sandalwood. I watched the fumes waft into the ruddy halo of the moon. A slight breeze ruffled the fuzz of the moss on the green-tiled roofs. I listened to the betwitching chant from my kiosk position: how many illicit adventures had occurred in this perfumed garden? How many woos and coos and agitated leaf? Lonely, under the moonbeams. A decaying weeping willow grazed the stricken waters. A phrase slipped into my memory:

'...sans racine, on devient une ombre...',

Roman Rolland had once written to Stefan Zweig, methinks...Gong...boom...gong...boom...The scummy pond waters suddenly stirred...out over the low-tiled walls, hugging and coiling the jungle earth, the cries of birds pierced the bluish night. The wall coiled and coiled, playing hide-and-seek in and round hollow trunks and gnarled poplars.

A slumbering peasant awoke rather abruptly, as if shaken by some distraughtful dream. She rose, drifting into the blue-green haze. One by one she mounted the temple steps, made an offering then disappeared into the night. Her footsteps no longer heard. A rustling of a fern or murmuring of lips attracted me back to the main courtyard, where the captain was having his fortune told by the Abbot. A lucrative profession.

The muffled ring of a bell; a hoary woman glided over the mist-shrewn courtyard then vanished through an opening of the low, coiling wall. One of the crew members signalled for me to follow him out of the temple. He trained his flashlight towards the darkened entrance where the other members of the crew were patiently waiting. Paper prayer-flags were being burnt in huge cauldrons in front of the three Buddhas of the main shrine. The captain stood, his face plunged in the shadows; he whispered something into the Abbot's ear, who sitting at a hackney table, read from a small book. We retraced our steps into the jungle night...without the captain. One of the crew explained to me that he always remained with the monks whenever they stopped for the night at the sandy strand.

And so we descended the monumental stairway at a brisk pace and soon found ourselves on the grey-dappled beachhead, imbued still with the pale moonlight. I hauled myself up to the bow with the aid of the cable attached to the pulley block. Shouts came from the poop-deck where dinner was about to be served. Around the make shift table no one spoke. The captain's name was not uttered. Nor did anyone look up from his bowl of rice. A half-hour later the crew retired to their cabins: I sat on the poop-deck listening to the droning crickets...listening too, perhaps, for the captain's solitary footsteps along the jungle path. Nothing. And darkness so thick, indeed so thick that even the bank, a metre or two from my face, lay engulfed in blackness. Not a leaf stirred. The silence stirred up from the depths of my memory:

'...Im Holz sind Wege, die Meist verswachsen jäh im Unbegangenen aufhören. Sie heissen Holzwege...'

Follow the Traces of the Way upon a reckless quest to diminish the distance between my Self and the horizon (that bank?); the horizon slipping away, further away as I advance (or retreat?). Unperceived or ill-perceived jungle, hidden by so many trees. And the Self, too, hidden by so many Masks, so many existences, attributes to Being. To strip the painted Masks and the festooned trees! *Quelle folie!*

'...Holzmacher und Waldhüter kennen die Wege...'

Am I the *Wood-Cutter* or a *Forest-Guardian*? The dangers of the jungle lie not in the concealed *cirques* of her swollen womb, but in the remotest recesses of one's soul. The *Angst* of the Unknown. That latent energy that fear stores up. Not a rustle in the night, yet circumstances have indeed crept upon me. Every fiber of my soul strains towards those invisible trees of the jungle. To perish within that constant growth...for ever, forgotten by all who were dear to me. To vanish within the glaucous vortex without leaving any Trace...A rotting corpse amidst cryptic vegetation. A jungle coffin without nails...Not a sound nor a stir. Claustrophobic death, like Poe's permature burial coffin; a tool-filled, starless vault...Moonbeams touched the poop-deck, then slanted downwards onto the tarpaulins below. The boat rocked to and fro... The steaming trees of the Mekong jungle hissed in the darkness. Do worms hiss when gnawing, chewing and crawling at and in the rotting corpse ensnared in its boat-coffin? To give up one's soul in this chaparral, dwarfed by a primitive communion. An anguishing thought for those who believe they are still loved...still wanted, uneffaced from the Slate of Humanity...What meant a slate of Humanity : an image-picture of this jungle that faced me? Yet, I am straining towards it...

*'Thus let me live, unseen, unknown,
Thus unlamented let me die,
Steal from the world, and not a stone
Tell me where I lie.*

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. Had the captain returned? His wife, the only woman aboard, must still be waiting for him in her lonely cabin. 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 lurched 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...



Photo 4: The Gold-Tipped Stûpa

After a breakfast of noodles, spiced with hot pepper, I sat on the poop-deck to read, however, with one eye fixed on the fanning furrows of the wake as they spread out in V-form towards the lapping wavelets of the rooty banks. I descended the steel companionway to the bottom deck where the toilet was located behind the engine room. The whole stern of the boat shook, and it was no easy task to squat over the hole. The shower, built over the toilet, provided water for evacuation...



Photo 5: we churned past quivering Treetops...

The bottom deck had no railing since the engine room and the hole were out of bounds to anyone other than the crew members: a chain separated us from the Mekong. The tarpaulin which protected the sacks of garlic and animal feed shone dark green in the sunlight. The foam of the churned wavelets sprayed the darkening green with droplets that scintillated against the pinkish glow of dawn. Greyish clouds enshrined an oily azure, whilst immediately to the right, stormy oranges speared forth, yet without the violent aftermath. Since dawn, a lingering, flushed red mist had settled into the steaming forests, but now it gradually began to dissipate, chased away by the orange streaks. I strode to the aft, peering into the widening wake whilst it fanned out towards the stilled waters of the shores. I would have liked to continue my reading, but those oranges, fiery and soft, diverted my attention from Malraux, absorbed my regard, more much than the hypnotising ripples of the boat's immutable wake. Alix Aymé's?...indeed those oranges were hers: her paintings at the Ing Palace in Luang Pra Bang. Naive, but intensely compelling. The indigo blues of Night, mellow, yet far from sensual. Night and Dawn: the tempestuous rays of orange. And it suddenly dawned on me:

'...No, it is impossible, it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoque of one's existence- that which makes its truth, its meaning, its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as a dream-alone...'

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

The absence of bird life along the Mekong began to disturb me for some reason; I had no particular fancy for birds...Perhaps this 'unwilling' silence obstructed my will to become an organic part of the circumstances that now girt and enchanted me. A silence uninviting yet circumstantial.

Shirtless on the poop-deck. The air, like the brownish waters, thick and oily. An odour of mildew impregnated my clothes...my skin. We were surely in Laos, and I without an entry stamp. Was it my fault that no Lao river-border crossing had been installed? We had indeed moored at many a river hamlet; yet, no one came aboard to verify my papers.

As the day wore on the heat rose. We zig-zagged from bank to bank until noon. When we stopped, we ported at a hamlet whose fifty or so stilt-homes hugged the forest-carpeted sloping flank of a mountain. Most of the straw-thatched huts were single-roomed. However, two or three possessed a double gabled roof which slid down and nearly touched a slender wooden verana that girded the second storey. Bamboo-made ladders acted as stairways to all the stilt-homes, whatever their size or height. Black pigs roamed here and there, snorting under the stilt-homes or wallowing in muddy puddles. The cook informed me that we had arrived at Bao Au Guan (incertum). The roan reds of the spongy earth provided a frame for the village, circumscribing it within the intense greens of the jungle stretches. None of these river hamlets was mentioned on my Chinese map. Poking out of those undulating palms and *fougères*, I espied the Lao flag dangling limply off some make-shift stanchion. Hauled in onto the sandy shores were a few boats of Lao construction: long wooden box-like crafts of either blue or green, completely enclosed save two portholes at the pilot-cabin and at the stern for the 'water-closet', and two side-openings for either merchandise or passengers. The only standing room on the boat was at the bow, in the pilot-cabin where a slightly elevated roof had been built for that purpose, and at the unroofed stern where a simple awning protected an exiguous kitchen, installed next to the tiny toilet. I found myself quite fascinated by the form of the craft: coffin-like indeed, although at the same time emitting a certain warmth, perhaps due to the deep colours of its painted wood. It would be on that type of boat that the voyage from Hoçay to Luang Pra Bang would be effected. Had Marco Polo seen those coffin-boats or this stilt-hut hamlet? He travelled from Sichuan and Yunnan (Tibet he called them) on his way to Myanmar (Mien) and Bengal. And that Dutchman Gerard Van Wustof: had he seen them? Or Francis Garnier during his 1866-1868 expedition up the Mekong: surely he had seen them. Garnier died very young ; decapitated ! By whom it is not very clear. He was a French naval officer, and thus a very distinguished gentleman. Yet, there are reports that he dressed in threadbare clothes and sported worn out shoes ; that he caroused with women of ill-repute and drank heavily. Perhaps Garnier was just another ravaged Raven...

...merely this and nothing more...

The river widened. We weaved in and out of tiny eylots whose scant vegetation had been devastated by the monsoon rains: Tabular roots and dangling vines trailed helplessly in the mighty flow. The swirling water round the islets absorbed all my attention...the dying plant-life, too. Pulsating, concentric swirls which spun round and pulled under any thing or creature that sped into its rotating vortex. These feats of Nature entrallled me. The turbulent waters of the Mekong showed no mercy to any thing...And yet...no cry of a bird! Gigantic shadows engulfed the glistening greens of the *fougères*; grey clouds piled higher and higher in heaps over the jungle and river, colliding, merging, converging, transforming...Huge raindrops pounded the plastic awning of the poop deck. In just a few seconds the entire horizon had transformed into a sinister, moving mass of greyish black mist, creeping closer and closer towards the boat over the choppy surface of the Mekong.



Photo 6: ...the Root-Infested Banks...

Every now and then a streak of sunlight pierced the welkin darkness, projecting a wierd orangy red over the firmament, perhaps a prelude to the rainbow to come: *et voilà!* The raindrops ceased to fall, and arching clear and pure over the tree tops, silvery with sunlit shower, an iridescent span linked Myanmar to Laos, whose hues and tones plunged into a vortex of verdant valleys, steaming chasms and inextricable abyssms, dormant with hidden marvels. A treasure lay over that rainbow; the awful stench of decaying corpses, naplam, plunder and Fear...Above all Fear...of the Other: the Garniers...the de Castries...the Ravens..

'...This it is and nothing more.'

Obscure adventurers have ventured into the Unknown; they who explore obscurity both Outside and In...A geographic and ontic obscurity within whose vat millions of worded images have overflowed the brim... A worldly hymn...unfolding within the margins of Unknownness, intimate confinement, to the unseeking, the satisfied, the happy many. That Unknown which dwells in the ambit of Margin, oblivious to the political agitation that rocks our proud planet, unconcerned with the economic aflutterings that raise or make fall the inhabitants of our bold new world, disinterested, too, in the strident vicissitudes of infinite social progress :

*La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisser parfois sortir de confuses paroles ;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Que l'observent avec des regards familiers*

*Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent...*

so spoke the *poète mage*...

Bansai: a rather large harbour where many a wonderfully coloured boat of Lao construction danced in the pitch and toss of the Mekong, crafts of all sizes and shapes, of which two Chinese transport boats, similar to ours that had put into dock earlier. One of the two, however, much bigger, were the object of the whole port's concentrated efforts: dozens and dozens of bare-chested Lao or Dai, cringing under the weight of hempen sacks, were scrambling back and forth on planks of wood from the settled bales of grain and garlic stowed in the scuttle-hole, across to three or four lorries waiting at the harbour. They sang and sweated to the rhythm of their bare-footed steps. Soldiers, armed with rifles, observed the activities, some of whom had plucked flowers and had put them in their rifle barrels. Others crouched alongside the asphalt road that led down to the harbour from the village, chewing on grass blades or bamboo leaf. Small motorboats sped here and there, transporting black-clad Hmong women whose baskets brimed over with fruit and vegetables. Other frail barks glided across the river, some protected from the sun and rain by two small oval-shaped hempen shelters, one in the middle and the other at the rear, others without any shelter at all, motorless, probably paddled, poled or rowed. At the stern of the long, coffin-like boats of blue and green, two or three crew members were straddling the small wooden barrier, pumping water or repairing the roof. A woman on another boat had just hung out her linen on the railing to dry, and began cooking in the make-shift kitchen immediately to her right. To my left, on still another long boat, but this time on the slightly uplifted bow, two women had installed stools and were winnowing grain, one of whom seemed to have a bird -perhaps a parrakeet- on her shoulder. As the sun disappeared into the cooling jungle, many of the boatmen climbed to the metal-plated rooves of

their crafts, and there either lounged about, basked in the dying rays, smoked opium or chewed on poppy seeds. It was clear that this floating community would spend the night at Bansai...

At nightfall all harbour activity ceased. A few official-looking individuals came aboard to have a good look at the foreigner, but without asking him for any papers. We were indeed in Laos for no one spoke Chinese; in this part of the world the *lingua franca* was Dai, language of culture and communication between Yunnan, North Burma, North Laos and North-West Vietnam. The tribes of these districts understood each other very well; they formed a well-knit cultural fabric of which they were conscious and perfectly orgulous, much to the distress of their central governments, and most particularly the Chinese...The Dai of Xishuanbanna during the so called Cultural Revolution did not dilly-dally when the Red Guards began to decimate other minorities; they fled into Laos, and there waited until the cultural revolution had run its bloody course.

Under the solitary light-bulb the crew were playing cards. I sat on starboard observing smoke rise out of the thatched rooves of stilt-homes and commingle with the hovering clouds of evening tide. To the left, the pitter-patter of raindrops on banana leaves. Behind me, the noisy card-players, and then the silent river, reflected in the last light of dusk, in the billowing shadows of drooping clusters of *fougères*.

'...Er sieht den Wald vor lauter Bäumen nicht...'

Many professors, advisors, 'specialists' as they are called, isolated in their respective institutions of higher learning, have always amazed me by their thorough ignorance of the world upon which they expound and gesticulate grand theories, sugar-coated in a scientifically formulated language that only the chosen few can understand, if anything were to be understood in the first place. These articles fashion an opinion of macro-prospectives for world-order, proclaimed high above the mob, where perched upon their pan-optic observation posts, either in front of their Internet screens or buried deep within their institutional archives, they reign in artificial complacency, projecting in enthusiastic naïvety. In fact, their clinically tested projects cringe and collapse under the weight of Reality : of daily discourse, of micro-commerce, of Subject voices speaking the six thousand languages of the real world and not the massive, commuterised language that only these 'sages' pretend to know. *Or, c'est la technologisation qui, justement, empêche de penser la Réalité du monde !* Have the 'sages' journeyed through the Dai koine which covers five countries, and whose commerical interrelations are overwhelmingly present? Have they journeyed over the Turkic koine which extends from Yakutie to Uyghurland, from Uyghurland to Albania? And the Russian koine over the width and breadth of Central Asia and into Europe by way of Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro? And the Persian koine from Herat and Tajakistan down through Iran into Kurdistan? And so on... The brutality of technological globalisation can only be measured by the ignorance of those who orientate and prosper from it and mete out punishment when ingratitude denounces its Mask and evinces its real face...For thousands of years there has been global economy, but never a global language...a global discourse! A discourse of premature triumph over our planet...over the perfection of Nature's rhythms, her generosity and meditative supports. These rhythms and values are the treasures that the 'global-going' yearn to eradicate, to be replaced by their own zealously man-made rhythms and values. For the monolithic man, the pan-optic handler, is jealous of these natural,

innate treasures, and this jealousy has transformed him into a manipulator who seeks to usurp, redirect and misguide them. These men are profoundly envious creatures, their vanity is boundless and has blinded them to this numinous treasure. And in their blindness they uproot and pound into dust their own Selves, wrought from Nature. Man, the exterminator of Nature, bends to exterminate his own Self in the same process. In his crass stupidity he believes that his artificial *oeuvre* will supplant the Creator's ! That his modern work of art will be a substitute to the archaic, the prehistoric, the antediluvian. That he will triumph, Man, over God...*pauvre petit homme, misérable insecte sur l'échelle du Temps...de l'Univers : exterminateur des races...*God, too, is jealous...Do the vainglory not know that it is the peripheral that nourishes the ever-evolving and rotating centres of the world ?

Thoroughly disgusted by the ignominious programme of monolithic globalisation, I contemplated the dislevelled tree-tops unfolding before me like the swells of the sea. There a full moon, creamy and white, illumined sundry plains of Reality whose levels appeared distinguished by each and every nuance of green: jade, emerald, Nile, Paris, shamrock, verdet, fir, turquoise, olive, chartreuse, bladder...mignonette...As many plains of consciousness as there were colours. Sweeping willows swished in the miry waters and beyond this, swished a repeated gong-gong-gong-gong in the jungle, rhythmized by the droning of insects. Distant gongs of the gong-drum: the full-moon ceremony of some distant village. No crew member lifted his head. The captain's wife called out to her card-playing husband from their cabin, and he slowly left the table, somewhat reluctantly. I crossed the poop-deck, descended the companionway and leaned on the barrier-chain of the bottom deck. A trail of burning wood and pork drifted in the night air, humid and oppressive. On the far bank Coconut Trees swayed, the leaves of which clicked and snapped like bamboo shoots. Fast moving clouds girt the moon, whose pale beams, ensared amongst the greying rolls, little by little traced a halo of crimson red round her. A strange spectacle indeed, as if the heavens had suddenly halted in their course, as abruptly as that; halted to the penetrating rhythm and fragrance of the jungle. And there the reddish nimbus remained: placid, fossilised, hewn out of some sacred tuff, whilst gongs gonged and drums drummed, whilst the scent of burning wood and pork lingered, whilst the Coconut Trees swayed in brazen whispers.

All my senses were alive to this nocturnal symphony. I tried to discern each and every distinct sound, smell, vision, although oftentimes my attention became drawn more easily towards the huge cluster of umbrella-like *fougères*, dimly lit in the ashen beams of the crimsoning moon, wavering, vacillating, leaning back and front as if they were fly-chasers in the hands of some giant slave.

Now the whole jungle raged in cacophony, albeit harmonious. I set my mind to single out details, to foreshorten sections of the matted whole in order to attain some circumstances of Reality. The crew had just turned off the light-bulb. The circumstances that I had forged here and now were mine ; they were my Reality, but were they mine alone ? When the core of routine bursts, what grasp is left on outside reality? What hold could be sustained on inner reality? Or were these realities *really* One ? The Mekong: a separate reality? No...it is mine now... And yet, it is a Reality quite unknown to me. Its snaking body links village and hamlet, town and city, temple and monastery. The Mekong lays open...and opens. Wide and strong it lays open...opens by bursting asunder claustrophobic and clique currents with its large and swift openness ! Bursts asunder barb-wire enclosed residences, guarded by police ; vast shopping malls,

surveilled by cameras; ideologically oriented school programmes, compiled by the conniving 'specialists' of the élite.



Photo 7: the Mekong lays open...opens...

The Mekong lays open...opens ; it is the vector of life, widens the narrow-minded, erodes the barriers of confinement, sweeps away the dead wood and debris of technological and human waste...

I mounted the companionway to the larboard. Out on the harbour, crouching near the lorries, a few sentinels smoked cigarettes and spoke in low voices. I was alone in my four-berth cabin. Of the other five, two remained empty and the biggest, adjacent to the pilot-cabin, was reserved for the captain and his spouse. Tucking the mosquito-net fringes under the mattress, I lay on my back staring into blackness...

*'Un éclair...puis la nuit ! -Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité ?'*

Ah! Le poète mage!..

To be on the verge of Death...what pang must shoot through the mind ? No not a pang, a streak of light, not a curtain drawn over the slowly falling eyelids, nor *la taie d'un œil bleu pâle* ; I am as sure of that as God is my companion. A streak of Light, yes...a burst of Reality, that which obliges us to loosen our grip, and be for ever released...

I slipped into a deep sleep, imageless...

To need another ; to be in need ; that is what the Pilgrim transmits to Humanity ; what solidifies his contribution to the whole of Humanity, though he be a mere singular element of it ; not isolated, only a singular element. What really isolates an individual from the whole is comfort ; bourgeois comfort, he who needs nothing from no one...



Photo 8: ...a Jungle Hamlet...

After unloading the garlic and animal grain, we left port about nine o'clock in the morning, zig-zagging the entire day under a sky of stormy orange and red. Heavy rains pounded us for short spurts of time, then would suddenly cease, the sun drying the puddles accumulated on the poop-deck in the same spurt of time. At one point we kept to the Burmese bank regardless of the dangerous shoals and floating debris. Below, the mechanics began filing up the companionway and muster on the poop-deck. From the pilot-cabin the captain and his second also hurried to starboard, followed by the captain's wife. Soon the whole crew fixed their attention on the Burmese bank, peering intensely at some thing in the distance. The boat now drifted calmly with the current: *courant sur son erre*. We drew nearer and nearer to the root-laden bank, but never once did she strike an over-hanging willow or half-submerged Bayberry. No one moved. The crew appeared to have been transformed into stone. The wind stirred a cluster of ferns. A few raindrops began to fall. The steep bank gradually sloped down to the level of the water, opening the jungle wall. Opening upon an immense natural amphitheatre or *cirque* which stretched out into the spurs of the densely forested mountains. A clearing cluttered with copses of *fougères* and palm trees, huge umbrellas radiating upwards, high and wide; cluttered too, this *cirque*, with low-lying mangroves and bamboo thickets; and here and there, Royal Crown ferns, in the middle or

behind of which had been erected dozens and dozens of gold-tipped stûpas, soaring out from orchid growing splays and splashes, rising pointedly into the backdrop of jade and emerald greens, into wisps of mist that snuggled into mountain crevice, cleft and watershed; brilliant white-washed stûpas to which every crew member was now uttering a prayer, hands joined upwards in *anjali*, eyelids half-closed, praying to this extraordinary complex of stûpa and temple in the middle of the Burmese jungle. A three-domed temple shone pure white as the rays of the sun dispersed the flaky rainclouds, the spirits of which, still lost in the ascending mist, began to glow gold. Rows and rows of white stûpas inched up the slopes of the foothills, others played hide and seek amongst the foliage, and far off, mid-way up the skirts of the mountains, clusters and clusters of gold-tipped stûpas rose high and fell low like coiling dragons slithering upon the humps and hollows of the mountain.

As we reached the middle of the sacred complex the main temple suddenly emerged: a red-tiled high-peaked layer roof, seven if I am not mistaken, each with its gable which progressively grew smaller and smaller as the eye gained the top, upon which a golden pinnacle had been inset. A large veranda with massive columns supported the overhanging roof. The bottom roof, contrary to many Siamese temple-sanctuaries, did not sweep down low. In front of the temple there appeared to be a pond, carpeted with vine or lotus plants. It was only when the boat had glided peacefully past this holy lieu that the crew members lowered their joined hands. Everyone scrambled back to their stations as quickly as they had mustered to the poop-deck. The silence of the sanctuary avered a welcome interlude to the infernal din of the engines.

Till this day I have never been able to find the name of this marvelous sanctuary...

The moment we crossed the Mekong to the opposing bank the sun quite strangely disappeared. The clouds gathered just as strangely, and in mighty heaps. An eerie darkness swept the entire river and jungle before us, whilst behind the temple-complex still lay imbued with golden sunlight. A violent squall nearly threw me off balance. The boat rocked, then was slammed by sheets and sheets of rain and tremendous gusts of wind, although, at the same time, a fantastic aurulent glow continued to envelop the *cirque* behind us. The boat steadfastly battled this deluge until arriving at Mamo, my disembarking point.

This small Lao village bore the brunt of the deluge. 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.

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...

Who wanted Chinese yuan in Hoçay? No one besides the owner of the only Chinese restaurant on the main street, a young man from Shanghai, who like any good Chinaman outside his country set his watch to 'Beijing time', and accepted yuan.

Business effected with the Chinese restaurant owner, I began to espy small gaggles of Westerners sloshing about the streets. This indeed was my first contact with foreigners since my travels in the Sichuan and in Xinjiang some three or four years ago: Hoçay's dozens of pensions and hotels catered to these shuffling mobs, ferried in from Thailand, a five minute experience across the Mekong, en route on the river highway to Luang Pra Bang, then on to the capital, Vientiane by either slow or fast-boat, so as to reach Viet-nam or Southern Thailand, where at some international aeroport their South-East Asian adventure would come to an end. This indeed was the Lonely Planet Crowd...



Photo 9: The Port of Hoçay...

After two boring days in Hoçay, I paid my fare on one of those box-boats which I had seen moored at several of the bigger river villages, albeit the ten or twelve boats in harbour at Hoçay were, if not higher, considerably longer. And this for an excellent reason: these boats had an extraordinary passenger capacity, up to fifty or sixty, catering mostly to the hordes of Westerners adventuring to Luang Pra Bang.



Photo 10: From Hoçay to Luang Pra Bang on a Box-boat

As could be expected, the two-day excursion from Hoçay to Luang Pra Bang transformed the silent and majestic Mekong into a beguiled and garish Disneykong whose waves of serial travellers, lower and middle class football crowds, rowdies, *paumés* and *cumulards* acted and re-acted as if they had never left the 'real' world of the West ; the Reality of their Routine. For the majority of them Disneyland or Eurodisney produced more reality than the jungle and its villages that enveloped them. South-east Asia, however, provided a whole new menu of options for these intrepid globe-trotters, options similar to those of hedonists and debachees, of bullish entrepreneurs. The boat space riddled with these surfers, little room was left for the Voyager. Faces appeared synthetically excited, plastically composed for the occasion, the Satrian existentialist rôle-playing and ambulatory theatre vying to 'dominate' the situation: alas, there was none to dominate! Would it not have been more thrilling to have drunk a tea with an Afghan? Or was it too late? And as the boat peevishly pressed on its merry way, common faces, little by little, rose to the surface, peeling away the papier-mâché Masks of Thrill. Bored or boring faces, ones that expect a lot out of life but refuse to live. Rain came and went; I slept in sitting position, woke in the same. The only Lao on the boat, besides the crew, had been ranged in the engine compartment with the merchandise. On the roof, Anglo-Saxon and Germans belched out bars of beery-breath paeans. They stomped about, whooping and braying, gesticulating in puerile rodomontades. Apparently they were 'letting off steam', renting their neurosis after such bitterly won success stories of the great Western success saga...The more submissive Europeans smiled perfunctorily, others in cowardly complicity; a few scowled. So prevailed the asinine ambience when, twenty-five kilometres from Luang Pra Bang, the boat slowed down and drew alongside a rocky bank whose scant vegetation lay enshrouded under the shadows of huge densely wooded cliffs in which caves had served (and still do serve) as religious sanctuaries. We had arrived at the Pak Ou Caves...

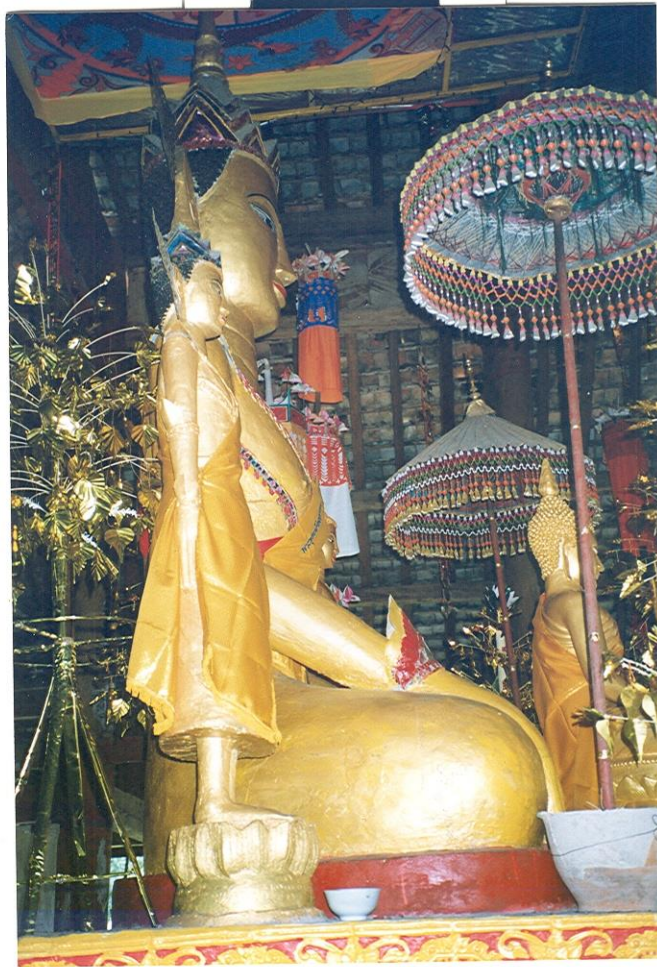


Photo 11: The Buddha at Pak Ou

The sanctuary is a natural cavity, whose opening lay opposite the point at which the Mekong and her affluent, the Nam Ou, converge. The dislevelled cavern sheltered about 2.500 statues and stela of all sizes and shapes, of all colours and epochs, most of them wooden, brought there by thousands of worshippers of Buddhism (and of the Mekong) as offerings, either to the Buddha or to the River Spirits. 2.500 guardians of silence; silent beauties of laquered red, most of whom 'prayed for rain', their slender arms held tightly against their sides and hips. 2.500 silent guardians who kept steady vigil over the lapping of the waves, the burning of the incense, the muttering of the prayer which filled the orifice with echo and wafting fragrances. The eternal Patinal chasing away the bad spirits that attempted to lure the Buddha into lust with her long, dripping, jet-black hair, shaking it frenetically to the tempo of the melliflous notes of the *sor*, to the honeyed strokes of the *nangnat*; shaking and shaking that lovely raven-black hair of the nymph of Laos, of South-east Asia...chasing away those evil spirits so that her music would never die: each drop shaken a note, one of the twenty laths of the *nangnat*, sloping down from high to low into its dugout-boat shaped support. And verily, twenty planks resounding the droplets of Patinal's obsedian black hair had crushed the enemy Ravens...



Photo 12: The Lying Buddha



Photo 13: Gardians of the Holy Sanctuary at Pak Ou

Aloft, towering in supreme silence, above me at a low-angle shot, the Buddha prayed for the rains, arms tight and straight at the sides, though several millimetres from the hips, as if He were about to fly off...somewhere. Solemn, erect, noble; the gold-leafed shell-coiffe out of which long lobes and a pony-tail hung drew the attention of all the visitors, but not the worshippers. A petrified crown of blue sprinkled with gold-leaf. A petrified forest of Buddhas, festooning cobwebs hung and strung from form to form. Hoary and bearded were those summoning Buddhas: calling in muffled whispers, clearing the way towards the vortex...A Forest of Buddhism ! A glimpse! A mere glimpse! At that confluence of energies one had only to read the signs: once read, there would be no turning back. Eight days in Luang Pra Bang. The mediaeval heart of Theravada Buddhism, imported from the Khmer court by Fa Nagum, the XIV^o century grand king who carved out the Buddhist kingdom of Muang Xiang Tong Xiang Thong ; that is, Luang Pra Bang, the first sovereign Laotian kingdom, one that was called One Million Elephants under a White Parasol : Land Xang Hom Khao ! One Million Elephants ! And all under a White Parasol ! The lieu indeed of the Buddha's Image. And truly Luang Pra Bang does harbour many a wonderful *vat*, some of whose walls depict the most vivid and instructive frescoes. One in particular caught my eye : a monk robed in fiery orange sat cross-legged on a raft that floated down the Mekong, those ardent robes set against the jungle greens and Mekong blues. At first I thought the monk to be a *bodisvatta* or the Buddha Himself. However, a few weeks later as I waited for a vessel to transport me to the Chinese border - a vessel which never came-, a group of travelling monks whom I had met in a *vat* explained that the monk in question was no other than the young prince Fa Ngum who had been destituted from the Khmer court because it was predicted that he would bear catastrophe upon it. And so he was sent afloat on that very *vat*-wall raft along the Mekong to an unknown destination ; but as the Buddha wished it to be, he was salvaged by a monk whose name I no longer recall, and raised to be a victorious warrior and majestic king...

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 Nugum ! 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^o 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 lies rather 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 museum 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 diplomats 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 porcelain 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...

Part II

On the Nam Ou into Northern Laos

'Even the most courageous among us only rarely has the courage for that which he really knows.'
F. Nietzsche



Photo 14: On the Nam Ou into Northern Laos

Like rhizomes grow, we too grow : conscious, transversal, fully conscious I say of both the shoots above and the roots below: the visible and the invisible, the conscious and the subconscious, exposed and the dormant. We have only to open our senses to the vast network of rhizomatous forms, very much alive: Iris and *fougères* chop a path into the subterranean stream of the unconscious ; our senses transversally exposed until the pulsating colours and layered densities become the rooted Reality of our existence...

A rhizomatous voyage therefore, over the plateaus of Reality; rhythms of Life, creeping, crawling, slithering, grovelling...above and below. Transversal, however, aerial and subterranean roots stemming from an identical Radix. Higher and higher, deeper and deeper; strangling the Sky, bursting the Earth. Powerful forces at work here, especially when the traveller realises that his destination is a vain one...neither the Laotian nor the Chinese would ever allow me to cross the Northern river border...

The Mother River feeds and sustains this rhizomatous complexity. And we are exposed to her wonders! her uncanny habitudes! her outgrowths of matted and tangled bracken! A stream of unconscious whose Traces vanish in the wake of a dream. A furtive glimpse, fading:

'...People meet and part, they have sorrow and joy, just like the moon waxes and wanes...'

wrote Su Dong Po who waxed so merry in the light of Life. Rhizomatous Life: sinewy, intertwining forces fashioned into Form. Poetic and puissant. A Reality seized out of the real by the subject contemplating and experiencing the real. The Nam Cu: an interstice or breathing space between the jungle and my contemplating-experiencing Self. A slim interstice. A wisp of angel hair held between the index and thumb. A drop of water trickling between two pebbles. A furtive glimpse between the Past and Future: fleeting, transitory, fugitive, like the yellow-ringed snake that slipped out along the razor-sharp rock at Pak Cu, like the crossing of the razor-sharp bridge over the fiery waters of the Buddhist Hell...a Vision! Uprooted from Tradition.

Lazily the bark motored me up river to Nong Kiaw: alone. The only passenger, comfortably seated on one of the eight padded chairs, nailed to the sides and to the hull of the boat, separated in two rows by the keel. A flimsy wooden shelter, supported by unsanded and undecorated posts, protected passengers from the rain, but neither the steerman whose cabin lay exposed on all sides to the hazards of nature, nor his young assistant who remained at the stern behind the motor availed of any kind of lee. All my thoughts and fancies strained towards the banks, thickening with dense, green life...Exposed to the denseness of the smells and colours of the banks.

Many, many hours alone; not one word exchanged. Only significant gestures. For all gestures are significant in the Orient, however trifle...At the conflux we left the Mekong, navigating noisily. From behind, a strange, creeping mist silently descended upon the spreading wake, a vaporous shadow that gradually mantled the slaty cliffs of the Pak Ou caves, the spurs of which, pregnant with palm, bracken and root, hung proudly in the wafting wisps, like lithic interstices cutting through the layers of silvery white. Settling upon the river, the argent film rolled upon us like some brumous, billowing tidal wave until at one point, not far off the stern, it quite suddenly transformed into a sheet of rain, slanting in on us from all sides. I looked towards the aft; the second-aboard struggled to throw a tarpaulin over the outboard motor whilst the helmsman, soaked to the skin, donned a sort of canvas-made pancho. I wrapped myself in a raincoat, crouching down alongside the keel. Soon, though, the deluge slackened then stopped quite abruptly. The noonday sun dispersed the remaining modicums of mist, and bathed the river in golden striae...

Striae of pure movement, a *Panta Rhei* of which I now felt organically part. Conscious of Being...of being against the current, upstream. An Unknown penetrating the Unknown, gauging the rhizomatous figures that reflected the jungle around me:

...je me regarde voir et je regarde pour me voir regarder...

To drift on and on as such obeys no deterministic force, be it divinely or scientifically bent: snags abound. Voluntary constraint against the current, upstream deeper into the heart of the jungled country. Higher and higher dappled grey cliffs rose out of the deep swathes of green, out of whose mossy shelves and ledges Pometia, Royal Crown fern and Bayberry jutted. We moored at every village on the river, briefly, lethargically; and there were many. However, I remained for the full thirteen village and hamlet halts upstream the sole passenger:

*...'tête-à-tête sombre et limpide
Qu'un coeur devenu son miroir...'*

I regained strength during those untimely hours; shed the contaminating effects of idle talk, vanity and functional void, forsook the hysterical tears of *consumeris perennis*... Had I not entered the Green Forest: growing firm and figurative within me? Does Siva not possess a thousand forms because His is one? the essentially immutable? The Motionless that creates Motion? That Being which precedes Existence? The impact upon my regard waxed and waned with the pitch and toss of the bark. The current of the river, the murmuring of the Jungle, the rhythm of the Voyage:

'Et le temps m'engloutit minute par minute,...

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! And that rout finished here on the Mekong... Ahead the river sliced through two canyons. The tiny wave-crests glistened in 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 not even a mouse! 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 Elephantear 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.



Photo 15: Nong Kiaw: A Stilt-House

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. Scantly 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.

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...'

A flaw of wind dried the sweat on my forehead. Whispering, murmuring, rustling in the Night, the bracken, reeds and bamboo of the morasses brushed against one another. The boy halted abruptly. His head turned mechanically towards the right where in a small, stilt-home, concealed by dozens of huge Hardwood Trees, a shrill voice rose and fell in the most melodramatic measures: a sort of monotonous droning that one might hear in the Hindu temples of India during the chanting of Vedic verses. From out of steeped shadows stepped two or three elderly villagers onto the veranda. They spoke a few seconds in whispers then descended the ladder and disappeared into the jungle. The boy, aroused from his reverie, took me by the arm and led me towards the ladder. Above, leaning over the banister of the veranda, an old man observed us approaching. Just behind his hairless head, a few metres from the slanting straw-packed roof, the gibbous moon hung, limned against the the pitch of blackness. Once on the veranda, the old man turned to us, and as he did his hoary head slipped comfortably within the dip of the moon. His round eyes shone silvery in their orbits. And his round head, suffused with lunar light, seemed to grow larger and larger...radiant, too.

This vision was interrupted by a stream of moans and groans which drifted out of the curtained doorway. The old man nodded his head mechanically; he opened the sad, silken, uncertain curtain of the doorway, and we penetrated within...

Within a small, square space clouded with candle and moonlight a woman lay upon an osier mattress, sallow-faced, yellow-eyed, heaving and panting as if she was being overwhelmed by some violent lover. Her eyelids fluttered as specks of candlelight slid across them. Four or five villagers stood round her, motionless, heads hanging low. They stared stonily at the young girl. Stonily they stared, expecting something to happen; or so it appeared to me. Just then rapid steps thumped out a brusque beat on the veranda planks; their hollowed tempo accompanied the woman's groans and pantings in eerie cadence. The boy never once took his eyes off the young woman's pained expression.

Pushing aside the sad, silken, uncertain the curtain, a huge colourfully dressed man, bald and of bold demeanour, strode into the hut: the witch-doctor? A giant of a man who made a bee-line towards the panting woman. He procured a bamboo casket from under his armpit and placed it alongside her on the suffering mat. He slowly opened the lid and pulled out a blouse whose sleeves were wound with strips of thin thread. He smelt the blouse: it belonged to the young woman. An elderly man with long hair who had not moved a muscle since our arrival, broke out of his trance, went into the corner of the hut, picked up a tray of food and offered it to the giant man, who instead of partaking of the feast, placed the tray in the bamboo basket. He shut the lid securely.

The several tall, thin tallows flickered intermittent shafts of soft, sad light ; a feeble, pasty light upon the pained-faced woman, wriggling now in a phrensey. Her perspiration began to stink up the hut, huge beads glistened off that firm, brown body, all aglow in the mellow waxing light, trickling drop by drop off those rocking hips onto the osier mat where they formed tiny pools of sudor. Kneeling beside her, the giant man in a low voice, rife with sobriety, intoned:

« ...soul! go back to your body...the East is not a good for you to stay...there, (then he lifted his head towards the straw roof) a giant of a thousand feet high...used to eat souls...soul! (his head bent forward) go to your body...the South is not a good place for you the tattooed face giant with black offered flesh-offerings to god... (here he stood and lifted his arms) *monga* has an eerie eagle-*monga* has a red crown dragon on his head... they are ghosts that men's souls... », or something like that since the boy, once outside the hut, translated as best he could all these clusters of sounds stabbing the silence of the night, a rough translation indeed, given also the solemnity of the situation and the awkwardness of me being there, although I must say that my presence did not seem to disturb either the exorcist (for he was certainly an exorcist!) or the family and friends united for the occasion. My translating guide also informed me that the exorcist spoke the Dai language or a dialect of it.

Be that as it may, when the giant man stood to leave, placing the bamboo casket on the mat next to the now still woman, he spoke quietly to the husband in a corner of the hut. Their whispers were punctuated by a short, soundless heaving which scratched out a monotonous rhythm on the coarse mat. The exorcist then strode to the sad, silken curtain and disappeared behind it, his footsteps thumping along the wooden planks of the verandah, then soundless along the jungle path. As I said, the presence of a foreigner at the ceremony did not appear to have any bearing on the the gatherers ; nonetheless, I did feel like a interloper, a *voyeur* ; a tourist who indulges in cheap thrills at the Other's expense...



Photo 16: Outside on the Verandah...

Outside on the verandah the coolness of the air revived me ; had it all been a separate reality, one whose unfamiliarity fused with mine, oddly enough, the less and less familiar to me ? My guide kept shaking his head, repeating: « nothing to worry about...nothing at all... »

« Call the soul back! Call the soul back! » he reiterated, lost in thought. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders : « I do not know English well enough to translate everything. » He dropped his eyes to the humus-scented soil.

'...Ebony birds begone! Foul beasts of yore...

'...This is it and nothing more...'

I let the matter drop; it was obvious the boy had no wish to extrapolate on the ceremony. And although my curiosity had been aroused, almost erotically, Oriental affability required strict observance of self-restraint. If no gesture be trivial in the East, no act of politeness is superfluous, either.

As we walked back to the pension the whole village was thrown into utter darkness: it was ten o'clock...

I made my way up the ladder and found my room with great difficulty. Eyes wide open or shut, blackness invaded my universe; but not the silence that generally accompanies it: rats were at play above my bed, frogs croaked amongst the thistles of the numerous mosquito-infested morasses that surrounded the guesthouse, mosquitoes buzzed within and without.

...Ebony birds... 'darkness there and nothing more...'

At the first rays of dawn I dressed and walked briskly to the morning mart where hundreds of peasants were selling their wares. Food and clothing had been placed on crude, make-shift stalls whose legs plunged deep in mud, water and weeds. The saffron-coloured gowns of the monks were terribly soiled. Most of the villagers, the majority of whom being women, went either barefoot or shuffled about in plastic sandals. The ruffles of their long skirts trailed in the swampy water, sometimes torn on a snag or a splinter of a rotting, stall leg. These discomfitures hardly daunted their bargaining power or harangues. Tramping through alleys of shredded food, husk and rind, I bought some bananas and bread (a French baguette!). When I returned to the guesthouse only the mother and daughter were at home, busy with the washing and stitching. The father and his son had gone out to the athwart fields, so they made me understand.



Photo 17: ...under the Bhodi Tree.

The better part of that day was thus spent before and under the Bhodi Tree. Villagers passed, smiled, waved. Some passed energetically, others dragged their shoes or shoeless feet. Behind the Bhodi, a primary school, now closed for the summer holidays. It had a rather dreary, jaded appearance, like all childrenless schools. I suddenly noted now that there was no idol under the Bhodi like those found in India, nor even a small statue of the preaching Buddha. It was a cloudy day; a pale evening light filtered through the huge leaves, shedding amber tints upon the scene before my eyes: a sudden yearning to return to South India began to nag at me: Andhra Pradesh, the island of Nagarjunakonda out of whose scorching earth and sculptures I recalled these words from the great saint:

'...wayfaring is the deepening of one's assimilation of the truth that one finds in the central examination of things by means of reason or rational investigation, in the light of the sense of the real.'

The Real ! Ô saint of saints: your words have voyaged deeply into the depths of China, into the depths of many a heart and mind...You are the living link between India and China. Your words borne away with the motherly current of the Mekong...

The Real ! Ô saint of saints : your words have voyaged deeply into the depths of China, into the depths of many a heart and mind...You are the living link between India and China. Your words borne over the Lands of the Eternal Snows...

The amber light that filtered through the huge leaves of the Bodhi tapered and waned, and the chill of Night invaded the hallowness of the scene. From the front garden of the guesthouse a voice beckoned: it was dinner time. The lights, few and far between, suddenly went on...

At the outside dinner table:

« Not too many years ago my father and mother lived alone in this house. One day a bearded foreigner came down the street. He had nowhere to stay for the night, nothing to eat. So my father who was in the garden told him he could spend the night in his house. Then word went round that at Nong Kiaw a family offered food and stay: one, two, three, even four nights. That is why I came back from Vientiane. We got permission to turn our home into a guesthouse, and soon had eight rooms made under the slanting roof upstairs, and three more behind the kitchen. Sometimes groups come to go trekking up in the hills; but there are still mines so they must go with a villager. Some farmers have lost legs and arms because of the mines. How many of those torn and shredded legs have been cried over in the West?» quiered the boy as we ate pork, vegetables and rice.

« None, » I answered.

Before the lights went out I sat at the open window of my room reading Lin Yu Tong's *My People and my Country*:

*'Meats and bones are rotting in the mansions.
And human bones are rotting outside their doors.'*

The Chinese vagabond poets like Tu Fu offered a reason for existence other than a biological, herd animal one. A nomad life that keeps pace with Nature and not with a manufactured collective delirium:

*'Oh, could I but hold a celestial sword
And stab a whale across the seas.'*

sang Li Po...Ten o'clock sharp. Li Po's little poem melted before my eyes. I lit a candle, placed my elbows on the wooden table and watched the wax creep down the thick taper. Thick, milky white wax slid down onto the wood where it hardened into a small pyramid. The flame died out: blackness invaded my universe; but not the silence that generally accompanies it: rats were at play above my bed, frogs croaked amongst the thistles of the numerous mosquito-invested morasses that surrounded the guesthouse, mosquitoes buzzed within and without.

At the first leaping rays of rosy dawn I dressed, gathered up my belongings, ate some fruit and bread, thanked the family for their gentleness and generosity, then walked briskly down to the river where two or three barks had been moored. The blue one, number 010, would set off at nine 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 volumn 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.



Photo 18: ...a few Rafts drifted dreamily...

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 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...

The motor suddenly snapped the oniric scene, and once again we ploughed over rapids and vicious cross-currents. Again the rushing water began to inebriate me, made my head spin. Ahead to our right, a clearing carved out of the mountain flank into which, from the opposing side, poured a piebald dell, twisting and weaving glints of rose, jade, pomegranate and lilac hues far beyond the naked eye. The pilot steered directly for that splash of radiance, and before my head cleared of confusion he had hauled the bark on to on a rock-strewn strand...

Barefoot on the beach. I swivelled my head from side to side, a voluminous bulk of mineral and vegetal matter pressed in on me. All those greens and roses: jaggy, steamy, violent...claustrophobic violence, hemmed in the Nam Ou; a snail creeping along the razor-sharp blade of the Elephantsear, along the crest of spiralling precipices, towering ledges and bluffs. Who dwelled in those mountains? The denizens of another world, another existence, uncontrolled, and thus uncontaminated by the obsessional magnates of Consumer Society? A world that had defeated technological death and destruction! Where skulking eyes are constantly fixed on every gesture that one makes. Where the affrighted eye of the Voyager, little by little, fixes its regard upon the eyes that observe and upon the observed eye...Yes, it was this uncontaminated world that seized me: a virginal violence that had overcome and obliterated the ravenous villains of *technological welfare*...The dandies of ideological appropriation and imposition...Colonisers and imperialists...

The British had appropriated Buddhist monastic education during colonisation so as to foster and feed Western values to these Asian populations, deemed childlike and naïve. Thus began the breeding of an elite that served British political and commercial interests. That was British perfidy! Their work of art: mentor States which served the Union Jack. However, this work of art vanished when the Buddhist countries of South-East Asia: Burma and Thailand, notably, won their independence, and when Vietnam triumphantly obliterated the American strategy of launching-pad States, from whose controlled zones rockets and other bellicose materials could be lobbed into China. Nothing ever works out quite like one would expect when the strategy is unilateral! So British and French paternalised education, and American imperialistic 'defense strategies' were transformed into the quaint metaphor of the Domino Theory: just another Kissenger buzz word which translated his and many others' scorn and loathing for the Other...

No! Chase away these villainous thoughts and hark to the hallow and sound tidings of the condottière:

'Le voyageur est encore ce qui importe le plus dans un voyage'

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...

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...



Photo 19: Muang Khwa perched upon a Brow...

Below me, an enormous black pig grunted and snorted in triumph, his hairy snout stuck in the trash-riddled mud. He stomped and rolled, jerking frantically at the thick chain round its thick, bristle-haired neck. Every now and then a villager, squatting near one of the many small barks at the cement landing of the mooring, tossed the gambolling pig something to eat. As the reddening sun set, and the air cooled, the only activity on the river was several *catamarans* poled from bank to bank by fisherman, whose baskets of catch or equipment they straddled as the choppy waves tossed the light, bamboo craft from side to side. Dreamily I observed these floating logs of bamboo, bound at the front and back by sturdy rope or vine.

The owner of the guesthouse, a maimed veteran of the Pathet victory over imperialist forces, limped over to my corner table to light a candle and to enlighten me on the hysterical drama of the *Other Theatre*. The electricity had been put on, but the lightbulbs hardly threw any light on what was about to be set down before me: rice, bamboo shoots with mushrooms, lotust and pork. The candle lit, the flame shot up blue and orange. Below, the pig grunted and snorted and squealed. The owner, an elderly man, in spite of an atrophied leg -a result of the reluctant Ravens-, still retained some of the freshness of his combative youth. His French was good, and as he spoke his hands, flitting strangely across the bluish flame, trembled:

« ...the *Other Theatre* they called it; quite a *mise en scène*, eh? No play for us, or secret: we all knew what was going on behind the scenes, backstage. Pathet Lao against the Ravens...Air America made a fortune trying to blast us out of our caves. The C.I.A., payed half-starved and shell-shocked peasants to inform on us. And the defoliants and herbicides they sprayed on us; the bombi and the Daisey-Cutters! Quaint metaphors, eh? It must be American humour...slap-stick...The smoke and fire spitting out of gutted

temples, hospitals, schools and homes. Spiralling out of the jungle. A practical joke they all called it afterwards: but for who? The Domino Theory? How much do you want to bet: two million a day? 450.000 tons of ordnance? 580.944 sorties? Or the 400 still rotting in the jungle? And the 500 impaled upon the totemic crests of Pathet Lao...Plumage plucked? Ô reluctant Ravens, your carcasses still stink up our jungle lands. You will fly no more, your wings have been broken by more nobler birds.» His waxen, oval face motionless, he then asked in a less exalted tone:

« Has anyone prayed for us, laid out flowers for us, sung our national hymn? »

« No. » I answered.

Never did the owner take a seat or remove his pudgy hands from the edge of the table; gripping hands, white-knuckled. He smiled and limped away, leaving me to my ill-lit dinner. Amongst the grunts and snorts ; a southing off the river:

'...Tis the wind and nothing more...'

A blast of twisted images coiled high up out of the damp, sweaty blackness of Night; spiralling up like a fiery mushroom ever-expanding...ever-swallowing, ever-consuming...itself? That pig squealed and squealed; squealed above the silence of the Night. And the southing river...Horrible cries without respite. And there, the Other, emerging out of the soaking, sweaty sheets. The castrated pig squealing: hanging bloodily by its feet, pitilessly watched by circling Ravens, crestfallen but bent on reprisal because of those insane squeals. And that Other: beyond the experience of Life, of Being here and now...astride the fine line towards Beingless...towards the pure Subject ?..

*'Dans les caveaux d'insondable tristesse
Où le Destin m'a déjà relégué;
Où jamais n'entre un rayon rose et gai;
Où, seul avec la Nuit, maussade hôtesse...'*

I sat up in bed gazing out into Night:

'...merely this and nothing more...'

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: 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 Conrad's *In the Heart of Darkness* served to wipe...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...

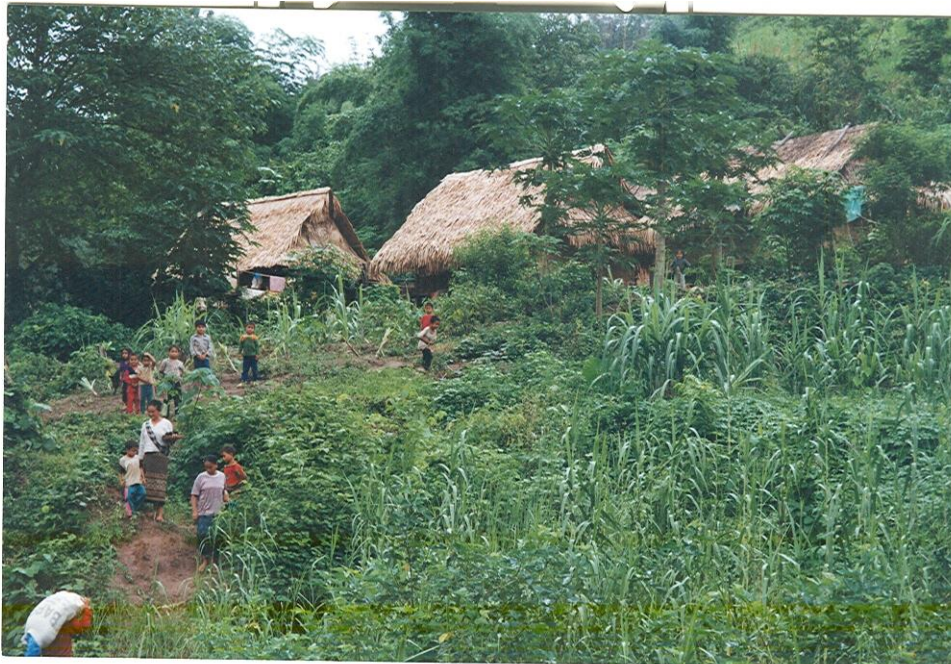


Photo 20: Muang Khwa: Villagers at Work

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...'

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 ?..

The sand warmed my sappy feet as I stood observing a group of back-bent village women huffing up a slope towards some stilt-homes near the jungle line. Gigantic *fougères* swayed gently from whose large leaves golden droplets floated down upon my head and shoulders. I spotted a splay of pinkish orchids growing on boles: I had nothing to eat...Not far to my right I noted several cone-like panniers, long and of osier. They lay partly in the water, partly in the jungle growth along the banks, the mouths of which, half submerged in the swirling flow, bobbed up and down, gobbled up anything that rushed into their maws, be it plant, mineral or fish. Erring Beings swept into the Unknown, never to return to the Light of Day...Hoop nets...a metaphor of the Pilgrim's Destiny?

The fragile bark suddenly spun out of a particularly dangerous cross-current: we were all jolted for a moment, spume-sprayed and tense. The whole river athwart appeared veiled in some golden mist. Again I braced myself as we rammed through the frothy rapids, clenching the sides of the craft like a baby its bottle. The bare-backed pilot, arching his shoulders towards the front, steadied his vessel after having eschewed a series of snags. The movement of this dripping back slackened and straightened to the rhythm of each obstacle overcome. His wife screamed and ranted from the stern ; never once did he hearken to those heralded hailings.

My eyes, frozen to the foamy torrents, refused to obey other demands: riveted to the creamy flow those weary eyes of mine remained, commanded by nothing more than the ebb and flow, the eddies and swirls that swallowed boughs and trunks; that vomited, in violent retchings, those same boughs and trunks to the surface, where heroically they struggled against the myriad myriad maelstroms; curtailing, whirling pools of such magnetism that at any given moment the plunge downward would reveal those unknown depths of the microscopic realm, whose presence cannot be gauged by Technology or by Dialectics, but by experimenting History as a Subject of History ; the experience of one's own Story as an integral part of History...

To take the Plunge: was that not the fundamental project of the Erring Subject? Swept into the Unknown, into unchartered Lands: Was that not the Plunge?

Ahead to the left, bobbing up and down like apples in a barrel, ten or twelve green and blue vessels were moored to metal stanchions or to pliant bamboo poles sticking out of the water: Hatsa and its cement landing? I painfully climbed out of the boat, body aching, head in a stupour. I was starving...A lone asphalt road mounted high into the mountains, alongside which were aligned unstilted-huts, some straw-roofed *en accent circumflex*, others wooden, dipping down into unpainted balustrades of verandas, upon which girls were winnowing grain. In the 'centre' of town not one restaurant or guesthouse. There, a few lorries were being loaded with sand before setting off to Pongsali, 70 kilometres from the Chinese border, a border prohibited to foreigners. I peered back down at the dancing barks: a huge generator had been latched onto a bamboo raft. To the right and left nothing stirred upstream or downstream, only stretches and stretches of matted jungle as far as the eye could see...

« A bed for the night? » a voice, in good French, broke in on my visual meanderings. A toothless man, slender but strong, led me to a shop even before I had given him an answer, where a young girl, pretty and staid, motioned to a ladder of a stilt-hut located behind the shop in a flower-covered garden. I scented the fragrance of Ming Liao Ze's *miwus* and *peonies*...alas, there was no vermilion gate...

On the osier mat I lay alone, two candles burning bright. There would be no electricity. The pretty young staid girl brought me rice and vegetables, all smiles. Fish too she brought on occasions, and once or twice some diced pork. She always smiled but nothing more...Days drifted by slowly; the toothless man informed me of boats leaving for U-Thai...and beyond towards China. However, the pilots of the frail, precarious barks would not take me on because the way upriver was not only dangerous but illegal to foreigners. I was made to understand that the voyage upriver had to be negotiated...And so I continued to lie on that osier mat, reading, rereading and reading again my Chinese book of poetry, Tagore, and Lin Yu Tang (I had used up all the pages of Malraux's *La Voie Royale!*), poring over my wrinkled Chinese map of Southern China and Laos.

'...Ô my little peach blossoms...'

The smell of flowers in the night aroused the stillness of that nocturnal world. I religiously roamed in and out of rows and rows of tulips, fleur-de-lis and orange blossoms, double-petaled peonies of vivid red, riots of rododendrons, too. A sweet perfume expanded my nostrils towards the pastel colours of dwarfish Taihu rock gardens, whose narrow, arcane passages offered delicious glimpses into lovers' nests: cooing...cooing...cooing...commingled with the odour of heaving, pulsating bodies. There to my right, a tiny milk-white foot stroked a soft-petaled fern, the toes wiggling and wiggling in joyful ecstasy, cloyly probing the bursting pomegranate purple of fuchsias, whilst at the same time a long, slender hand caressed clusters of showy pansies, a marble-white hand whose sharp fingernails of enticing lavender, blended so nicely with the violent violets of the palpated pansies. Barefoot I wandered in and out of cooling lairs, over and under arched bridges of lilac-veined marble until a chanted melody stopped me in my errings:

*'Such autumn eyes
And willow-waisted...
Arched eyebrows
Coal-black...
A pining silence
Of wooing and cooing,
Of painted feet
Which make it rise...'*

I suddenly succumbed to a rather dispirited stupour...How shall I put it: a flaw of supineness overwhelmed me...I would never reach the Chinese border by boat ! But what was more important, more vital : the destination or the Road on which all effort tends ?

The cry of the cock: Dawn. Pastel colours dripped quietly away into some other Reality than that of the perfumed garden. I sat up groggy and lethargic. That tropical heat compressed my head, parched my mouth. The first sweat of the day moistened the underarms. A gentle tapping...rapping at my chamber door. Without waiting for an answer the toothless man, with the utmost urbanity, entered.

« Good news...today you can go upriver. But please never get off the boat, never get off the boat. Land mines and fighting tribesmen and Chinese spys are all over and will stop you. » That was all he said. He retired.

I gathered my belongings and wearily climbed down the ladder into the shop where the smiling young girl, a beautiful purple peony tucked into her thick, wavy hair, sold me fruit, bread and water for the voyage to U-Thai. A long, long voyage indeed that the toothless man had, apparently, negotiated on my behalf, although according to his terms: the price was high, of which more than thirty percent for his mediation. So be it! When I met him on the cement landing down by the boat I hadn't the heart to broach the subject to him.

Another couple: the man at the helm and his wife at the stern behind the outboard motor. She too collected the money from the three women and the two badly outfitted soldiers who would accompany me. The vessel seemed no wider than a dugout, although much longer. We all sat on planks thrown across the hull without anything over our heads. A greasy tarpaulin protected the motor. As to the pilot, he was completely exposed to the hazards of the weather. I was rather puzzled to discover that the cement landing remained empty ; besides my toothless negociator, a few shuffling old-timers and curious lorry-drivers waited for their vehicles to be loaded. There was hardly any activity here compared to Nong Khiaw and Muang Khua: no boats coming in or going out, save mine; no be vies of villagers gathered to 'observe the foreigner' or simply to kill time. Perhaps here there was no Time to kill...Suddenly with a roar the bark shot out into the middle of the river, ploughing straight for the right bank. In a minute Hatsa had vanished behind a bend, the smiling girl and the perfumed garden with it...Bend after bend after bend loomed large before us, then in a twinkle of the eye vanished behind us, athwart. Bends apparently identical, yet curiously different, like a series of curtains opening and closing which offered momentary peeks of some breath-taking spectacle; fleeting glimpses which now lured me,

now rejected me. During those floating instances we would skirr ever so smoothly over the ruffled waters. At times, without warning, the bark would shake, spin and lurch as she battled through white-capped rapids and whirlpools, snapping thus my stream of spectacles...Stormy orange skies of the morning melted before the waxing heat borne by manes of cirrus, charging across the welkin, skidding low over the jungle, glowing, throbbing, pulsating. But these cirrus were chased away soon enough; galeful gusts made way for an imposing archipelago of nimbus, a myriad dappled islets floating listlessly, languidly...Dispirited raindrops began battering the river, the veiny Elephantsear leaves, razor-sharp, the be vies of rosy buffaloes bathing...the pilot, his wife at the stern and the six passengers of the frail bark. Truly, mountainous cumulus, anvil-shaped, let fall a deluge and hammer the jungle with hysterical tears...

Ô hollow men, have you not warned us of the horrors to come? Dwindling into the world around: the eroding rocks and vaporising water; that microscopic world.



Photo 21: ...a savage, pristine World...

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.



Photo 22: ...rosy Buffaloes bathing...

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 ?* The toothless man, the pretty braided girl, the two soldiers, 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