THE LITTLE
BUDDHIST MONK

César Aira

Translated by
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A little Buddhist monk was anxious to emigrate from his native land, which was none other than Korea. He wanted to go to Europe or America. The project had been incubating in his brain from his youth, almost since infancy, and had coloured his entire life. At the age when other children were exploring the world about them, he was discovering a longing for distant worlds, and what he saw around him seemed like the misleading image of a reality that awaited on the other side of the planet. He didn’t really remember, but he could have sworn that even before he knew of Europe or America, he already wanted to go, as if he had been programmed within to receive the calls of faraway places. At any rate, his ignorance, if that is what it was, did not last long, because his earliest reading was geographical; later on, studying the cultures of the countries he dreamed of took up more of his time than his religious training, which in the order he belonged
to was extremely demanding. Intelligent and obstinate despite his diminutive size, he enjoyed a distinguished career as a monk while at night he studied languages, history, philosophy, politics and psychoanalysis, in addition to reading Shakespeare, Balzac, Kafka and anything else worthwhile. Our little Buddhist monk was living proof of the saying: ‘Knowledge takes up no space.’

Of course, this intellectual preparation only solved half the problem, and the second half at that; the first part, that of practicalities, remained unresolved. To start with, there was no real possibility of saving the money he needed for the airfare. And over there, in the dreamt-of First World, he didn’t know anyone who could find him a job to support himself. More seriously still, he had no idea of what kind of work this might be. He was not equipped for any kind of profession, at least not a conventional one. He was not unaware that every so often Buddhism became fashionable in one or other of the western countries, or in all of them at once; and he knew that the people in those countries most likely to follow these fashions were members of the well-heeled classes. They would pay handsomely for a genuine article like the little Buddhist monk. In fact, he knew of quite a few compatriots who had successfully exploited that seam. But they had done so as part of institutions that organised the journey,
accompained them, installed them and lent them legitimacy. Unfortunately, the order he belonged to was extremely localised; it did nothing to promote itself, was against teaching outside the group and detested all institutional organisations. So much so that it was a misuse of language to say that he 'belonged' to the order, since once they had completed their studies, its members were left to their own devices, without teachers, monasteries or rules. They were wandering mendicant monks or, if they so wished, they were sedentary, public preachers of independent means; in short, they could be whatever they wished without anyone holding them to account. They had no way of recognising one another. It was possible that they were all equally determined to emigrate but didn’t know it, and each believed he was the only one. It was possible they were all equally reduced in stature like the little Buddhist monk, but didn’t know that either.

To have a project can help make life liveable, and it doesn’t matter how madcap and unattainable it might be; quite the opposite, in fact, because if that is the case, its influence will be all the more absorbing and prolonged. Practical people say that dreams serve no purpose; but they can’t deny that at least they allow one to dream. The dream of a journey had endowed the little Buddhist’s life with meaning. Without it, his existence would have been lost in the capricious inconsequentiality.
of contemporary Korean history and, tiny as he was, his efforts would have been wasted. Thanks to the project, all his studies and readings complemented one another; none was wasted. Someone might ask: what do studying Hegel, reading Truman Capote, poring over the plans of the châteaux of the Loire and delving into the struggles for power between Guelphs and Ghibellines, Tories and Whigs, Republicans and Democrats have in common? These might seem fragments of disparate areas of knowledge, and in anybody else they would indeed have simply fed a pointless curiosity. In him, they were all directed towards a common goal. Practically no leap of his agile mind, whatever discipline he applied it to, failed to contribute to his ultimate goal. In a word, the project had given his life its orientation, and if it seems unnecessary for someone in the Orient to find orientation in this way, just imagine that if the Orient exists, it is because on the other side there is the Occident, and it was precisely this that caused the little Buddhist monk so many sleepless nights.

But one day his dream would come true, he thought, as he raised his eyes to the sky in which he glimpsed the distant reflection of the skies awaiting him. 'It costs nothing to dream,' he told himself. And if reality was defined by its identification with itself, he glimpsed in that inverted overlap of antipodean skies the triumphant congruence of dreams and life.
The escape route presented itself unexpectedly one day in the shape of a French photographer who was visiting Korea. As well as being unexpected, it was extraordinarily casual, as the vagaries of fate tend to be. Lost in his daydreams outside a luxury hotel, the little Buddhist monk was almost knocked over by a couple who were suddenly spat out by the revolving door. With a rapid manoeuvre – a leap to one side and two or three hasty steps – he managed to avoid being trampled on. He was accustomed to this kind of dodge: a sixth sense warned him of the danger, while his strolls through the busiest parts of the city produced such a plethora of these incidents that they became a constant weaving from one side to another. His tiny stature meant that not everyone saw him, but even if they did, it wasn’t easy for them to calculate the consequences of their respective movements, since one step for a pedestrian of normal size was equivalent to five from the little Buddhist monk.
The man and woman who emerged from the hotel were extra large. He was fat and as tall as a basketball player. He was weighed down by a capacious backpack, climber’s boots, trousers patched with a multitude of stuffed pockets, and a jacket that gave away his profession. She was scarcely less big, with ash-blonde hair, horsey features, red hands and thin lips that failed completely to conceal the braces on her protruding teeth. She was wearing an elegant man’s suit. From the summit of their corpulence they did not even spot the presence of the little being they had been on the point of crushing, and they would have left him behind in a second if they hadn’t altered course and headed for the kerb. From their gestures it was plain they wished to hail a taxi. Had it not been for this change of direction, which obliged the little Buddhist monk to take evasive action a second time, he would have returned at once to his daydreams and continued on his way, further repeating his jumps and accelerations through the crowds. And he would have done so anyway, if at that very moment one of the couple had not uttered part of a sentence in a language he knew. The words were, I quote: ‘quelqu’un qui parle français’, which doubtless referred to their debate about which taxi to take. They must have wanted (how naïve!) to be driven by someone who spoke their language.
Then, before the story could resume its fluid course of events, there was one final moment when chance had to choose between what did happen and what might have happened. If the little Buddhist monk had thought about it for an instant, if his mind had even fleetingly taken into account his timidity, his insignificance, or the general pointlessness of everything, he would not have opened his mouth. But as this was not the case, he pronounced the words that complemented what he had heard: ‘Moi, je parle français.’ He failed to realise that what he had heard might only be part of the proposition. ‘Someone who speaks French’ could be the conclusion of a phrase along the lines of: ‘Let’s hope we don’t have the misfortune to bump into someone who speaks French.’ Which only goes to prove that sometimes it’s better not to think.

When the French couple heard this unexpected but fitting reply, they were taken aback. They must have thought for a moment that they were faced with a supernatural phenomenon, which they could have put down to the immanent magic of Korea. It is only natural that tourists, especially when they travel really far, lose all sense of proportion in their expectations, or are content to set out with a delicious, tantalising vagueness, as if to allow the possibility that the strangest things could happen. And to a European, the furthest East is naturally a world of enchantment. This moment
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lasted rather longer than it should have, because when they peered around, they could not see a soul. Had the voice come from somewhere inside themselves, from the mystery of their marriage? The lack of an accent added to their doubts. When they finally spotted the little Buddhist monk they smiled and greeted him, still rather shocked.

This tiny incident was the beginning of a mutually beneficial relationship. The little Buddhist monk immediately sensed that his opportunity had arrived. But the opportunity for what? In a flash, as if he were about to be hit by a train, he saw it all. A rich French traveller (it was a luxury hotel), for whom he could act as a guide, show him his worth, become his irreplaceable assistant, and by means of subtle diplomacy, win the favour of being taken with him . . . Beyond that, which was no more than a spark of his imagination, was the life he would lead in Paris, the fire this spark would ignite. He was astonished. It was as though it was only at this moment that the project to emigrate was born, and it exploded with such force that it gave a retrospective glow to all his previous life, endowing it with a meaning that until now it had lacked.