

SEOUL STORY (Faiths and Fantasies). P.1 of 20

by Paul O’Kane. May 2008 (4,200 words)

The local photography club will open their show tonight. 30 pairs of scissors and 30 pairs of white gloves are stacked waiting on a tray for the many dignitaries who must *all* cut the ribbon for fear of prioritising any one.

A man hauls his Saturday morning cardboard collection along the pavement by the new municipal water feature whose spectacular jets and falls sparkle in the sun.

In Saturday morning Seoul the swimming pool attendant preens his hairstyle before checking the lockers, whose large number and grey machinic uniformity are eased by the local custom of hanging some colorful hair band or sponge from the padlock as an aid to locating your own.

I hope that the sun has warmed the early morning by the time I leave the pool, I’ve swam, showered and changed and now sit thinking about my ailing mother, recently confined to a wheelchair in a nursing home back on the other side of the world. The thought saddens me. Years of wonderful memories are being obliterated by that one image of her new helplessness.

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I wait for my partner to emerge from the changing rooms and wish that life and aging were not so inevitable and cruel, but weak attempts to count my blessings are the best I can do to wheedle out some justice from the grim big picture set before me.

Walking home from the pool we stop in at a new ‘French Style’ patisserie, brimming with incongruous Latte’s and pastry concoctions that simulate the lifestyle of the *haute bourgeoisie*. Sipping pricey coffees we watch a trendy young dad offer his wide-eyed child a tray and tongs with which to pick from the sugary cornucopia.

We pass a site at the top of a hill at which heavy machinery is making mincemeat of an outcrop of rock. The plan seems to be to make enough space to plant a new building there. The rock is laid bare, invoking unpleasant memories of dentistry while showing that beneath Seoul’s aggressively modernising facades, the sacred mountains that originally attracted society to evolve here are no obstacle to the developer’s vision and may be changed as easily as any other factor on the way to profitable building and expansion. The bare grey rock, split open by power chisels, reflects daylight for the first time in millions of years and seems to wince at the harsh and sudden exposure.

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Seoul is a city built in and around mountains. The number must run into hundreds or thousands and from almost anywhere at any time in the city you can glimpse their musical ridges; sometimes as crisp dark lines, sometimes as soft grey forms almost indivisible from the sky.

As Seoul has proliferated with exceptional speed, 50% of the country’s population has gravitated from other cities, towns and rural villages to occupy a capital which thus seems on the way to becoming the nation itself. But this trend is only beginning; everywhere you go in Seoul you see either new congregations of 30-storey uniform apartment blocks or building sites the size of boroughs cleared for development. The bus sings along past kilometers of fencing festooned with slogans and bright images of what is going to be. Digital simulations of the projected buildings are sprayed up and interwoven with their comic book names - ‘Happyland’ or ‘Highvill’.

The more modest two-storey houses of an earlier phase of expansion, with their lanes, yards and flat roofs, in and around which people can gather, chat, rest from hilly walks and attend to their earthenware storage pots, are all rapidly giving way to the uniform

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apartments fitted with huge Samsung storage refrigerators and narrow balconies sometimes decorated with vivid plastic grass and flowers. Lateral expansion of the city is forced between the mountains and spills over them into previously unexploited plains so that this river of habitation is not only growing 30 floors deeper but also wider, in a flooding lake of modernization.

If you go out to the edge of Seoul and climb a mountain you meet many residents who maintain an ancient love for the landscape –albeit now dressed in bright sportswear and clip-on acetate sunshades. You find Buddhist shrines and temples on the mountains, near springs and rivers, oriented to welcome the sunrise, but near the peaks you also encounter large aerials boosting the communications signals of a city reputed to use more mobile phones than any in the world. When you reach the peak you can look over much of the city and see something very like the computer-simulated images you saw earlier pasted up on fences by developers. Now the city lays before you as a jostling crowd of newly built cream coloured columns filling most of the space between tree-covered slopes. The computer has of course designed the buildings too, so the digital image you saw earlier - with its eerie efficiency and slightly tainted virtual colours- was not a sci-fi fantasy after

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all but worryingly accurate.

Returning home from the pool we find aging in-laws stripping away at the ceiling paper in their 2-storey house -now split into rented apartments to ease their retirement years.

An electrician has fitted a light and left an ugly tear, so dad pulls away at layer after layer of old papers, each more modest and pale than the one that covered it, as if the world of his lifetime had grown increasingly bold and bright leaving subtle shades of youth looking meek and dull by comparison.

When they first built this house, the surrounding hills were all fields of flowers, orchards and vegetables, but that was before a gas line was laid which attracted the rapid proliferation in the 1970s of the crowded mesh of tiny streets and two storey homes that is now the neighborhood. Today, dad is often irritated by pushy young men who visit, call, leave cards or stickers offering to buy-up the area’s houses in the hope that this too might soon become cleared for the building of yet more, lucrative 30-storey apartment blocks.

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A bus stop or two away in the same borough this has already happened, so that, wandering through a long-established and thriving market you suddenly encounter dust in the air and mud on the road, then the sight of trucks and rubble. What really grabs attention though is a banner of white cotton tied between lampposts and featuring blood-red handprints around an emotive slogan which translates as: “If you want to kill me, do it quickly”. It is a sign of the feelings of those inhabitants who resist the development and desperately want to hold on to their neighborhood and way of life against the overwhelming odds of approaching blocks. These have already reached the end of the street, and shine down, like a hesitating tidal wave, from glittering windows onto the construction site below. One or two houses remain, along with a few camper vans and shacks in which those who object desperately try to hang-on.

But these objectors don’t seem to have learned to organise and attract publicity the way they might in a Western country. They seem like unsupported mavericks, self-conscious that they are an embarrassment to a rather conservative and dutiful society mostly

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embracing the gloss and opportunity its new world offers. One man, who refuses to leave his unofficial shanty residence, tells us that when a fire broke out in his ramshackle buildings the fire brigade arrived, but seeing ‘what he was’ left his buildings to burn. Another woman shows us her large, two storey home standing alone among the rubble and dirt threatened by a nearby digging machine. She also points to the little van in which she has been living for several months while protesting that it is grossly unfair to give up her house in exchange for a one-bedroom high rise apartment which she feels will be less valuable, smaller and less pleasant to live in.

Back at the family house where dad is patiently peeling ceiling papers, you can step up onto the roof where mum dries her washing and stores food in pots. The handy flat surface of the roof is painted bright green while traditional protective tiles fan out from the parapet in bright blue. When you look over the city from here you again see mountains as a backdrop to areas full of apartment blocks but the immediate neighbourhood you look down upon repeats the style of the house on which you are standing so that a colourful pattern made of more green roofs, blue tiles and dark earthenware pots, tumbles about the hilly streets, while each roof also supports a large yellow water tank.

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If you stay up here until sunset you will also witness the gradual illumination across the city of an enormous number of red neon crucifixes. I count 56 just within sight of my mother-in-law’s roof. The new American-style Christianity which proliferates in Seoul, tends to favour large, striking churches which raise their sign as high as possible and sometimes re-orient whole neighbourhoods by their intrusion.

Buddhist temples also pervade the city but usually in a less visible way. In a market street or residential block you suddenly glimpse the temple’s red wheeling cross (which was reversed to become the Nazi Swastika) and a colourful lantern or two, telling you that Buddhism is not only found in beautiful places but is everywhere available to the older generation who tend to favour its ideas. The new Christians, like new Christians everywhere, seem driven by the narrower certainties of youth and are eager to recruit.

They ask me the same questions with which they once troubled my mother when she was a housebound housewife; regularly door-stepping her, interrupting her routines and grilling her with leading questions such as ‘are you satisfied with your life?’ or ‘have you done anything about your death?’ It’s dangerous to get involved in these debates as the interrogators are so persistent and

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evangelically convinced that you cannot dint their armour even with your favourite Nietzschean aphorisms, and so I try to keep my mouth shut (while inwardly increasing loyalty to Buddha) fearing that they might penetrate my hard-won faith in critical scepticism.

As I count the red neon crucifixes appearing across the evening skyline, I sometimes confuse them with the more symmetrical red neon pharmacy signs; which is appropriate because something about the crucifixes makes me nauseous. The audacity of this intrusive red neon seems to go arm in arm with the neon-promoted consumerism that covers entire blocks and junctions in Seoul, suggesting that wherever global capitalism ventures in the world Christianity marches with it -an old story which connects profitable colonialism with missionary zeal and links the evangelist to the salesman. Indeed, the billboards for soap operas, cars, and mobile phones ask that same door-stepper’s question: ‘Are you satisfied with your life’ -a question which truly never needs to be asked by anyone other than the self. Meanwhile, it is the banking and insurance adverts that ask the alternative leading question: ‘Have you done anything about your death?’

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On Buddha’s birthday water comes to my eyes as I witness the decoration of one of the largest city temples. Myriad brightly coloured lanterns form a rainbow roof around its courtyards, pierced by the resilient old Yew trees that stand venerably maintaining the association between Buddhism and nature, earth and sky. My emotion is not only caused by this colourful spectacle but by the crowd that has emerged from within the folds and crevices of this highly technologised, hyper-consumerist society to show their respects today for an ancient belief system. All the streets between the underground station and the temple are packed and difficult to negotiate; ancient men and women in their finest clothes, many with backs bent double so that their height is halved, make their way nervously through a crowd which features every generation and which is here and there broken like a river around a rock by lowly beggars with amputated legs, pulling themselves along on small carts, playing chants on portable music systems and accepting coins from the crowd breaking around them.

Later that day we ask teenage nieces to show us *their* idea of Seoul and end up in a café in a cheap fashion street –something like London’s Carnaby Street. But this café is like nothing I’ve seen before, it’s filled with and designed for teenage girls, chatting, adjusting their hair, text-messaging or photographing themselves with mobile phones.

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The menu is all weak coffees and exuberant looking deserts made with fluffy synthetic cream so that everything is sugary but light as air. There’s a slightly ‘school-dinners’ atmosphere as everyone has to collect and return their trays guided by numbers called through a microphone. But what really makes the place bizarre is that all the seating is padded with vivid pink flowery chintz material fitted over cast iron frames which are caricatures of grandmotherly rocking chairs -and which really do rock. The result is that you’re surrounded by the gently undulating female future of Korea ironically referencing English Victoriana and inhabiting a strange fantasy of their own decrepit futures, which, in their teenage minds will of course never *really* come to pass. As I sit chatting there with my Latte *lite* and oxygenated cheesecake my mind turns again to my mother, on the other side of the world, who is *truly* gravitating, or rather descending, to the *real* English, senile chintzerama that these girls are gaily, innocently mocking.

The faiths and fantasies of children form a significant part of the experience of Seoul if only because children are everywhere you go in the city. The museums, which in Europe remain reverent, still and quiet, here teem with school after school of restless and exuberant children. Walking around a residential neighbourhood you repeatedly pass

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through effervescent clouds of cheery noise drifting from crowded playgrounds or tumbling from nursery windows. Most backstreets are busy with children who confidently wander, unsupervised -though often hand in hand- dodging cars, motorbikes and buses well used-to their presence. They buy from shops and stalls specifically attuned to their taste, their budget, and their height, or crouch around little arcade games installed on streets near schools. Older children, taking part in the county’s rigorous education drive, can be seen carrying rucksacks of books from 7 a.m, until 10 p.m., walking to State school or home from the extra, private schools that many also attend. And in some narrow street, lined with shops, cafes and hairdressers you often hear a Korean child learning to perform some complex European masterpiece on the piano of a second floor music school.

Children not only live an idyllic fantasy relative to a certain adult realism, but also provide us with the best examples of faith. Crossing a bridge over one of the city’s many small rivers, whose banks are tamed with concrete to provide space for jogging tracks and fitness equipment, we see a confidently rollerblading 10 year-old take a sudden turn off the broad riverside path and, without pausing to consider her footwear,

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negotiate a series of stepping stones across the water in nerve-wracking leaps and stammers using only the thin blades to regain balance on each small, uneven rock before lunging to the next in a magical display of the powers of youthful naivety.

At the child-inundated ‘Traditional Korean Village’, ancient buildings, tools, cooking, heating and agricultural processes are laid out in petrified museological form, and demonstrated by elderly couples who have been living here as museum artefacts themselves for up to 30 years. Here, upon seeing some dried fish shaman-ically crossed, tied, and pinned above an ancient doorway, a well-educated 12 year-old nephew confidently pushes away its supernatural implications, stating with conviction: ‘There are no such thing as ghosts, Science has proved that they do not and cannot exist’. But somehow, in the automatic confidence of this refutation, you hear not only this boy’s deepest childhood fear but the deepest fear of Science itself, adamantly keeping at bay all that it does not want to be and cannot allow to be. Ironically, a few minutes later we are ushered into a (‘Traditional Korean’) haunted house where crudely-made and clumsily animated ghouls, ghosts and skeletons ensure that the swift journey through dark, shifting passages is attended by screams and laughter.

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Shamanism is encountered in Korea in baffling ways and unexpected places, looking like eccentric art installations in which old plastic bottles might be tied with ribbons and draped across a roof, or where candles are found sheltering from the wind by the sea. Confucianism also appears, often alluding to academic figures –teachers, composers, or the inventor of Korean writing whose statue appears in school playgrounds. But it is Buddhism that eventually takes us up and leads us through a series of coincidental encounters leading away from the capital to the coast. An artist friend recommends us to liaise with a ‘Buddhist policeman’ who turns out to be very generous, kind and serious about his faith, and who assures us that *every* Korean policeman is just like him. (This welcome vision of a country patrolled by Buddhist police seems to explain why we haven’t witnessed a single speeding car or noisy siren since leaving London). The policeman drives us into the mountains and introduces us to a monk who has recently built a lavishly decorated temple there. We are invited to stay in exchange for nothing more than conversation, after which we sleep and are woken at sunrise by the monk calling us to worship, meditation and discussion. He gives us new names according to our character and welcomes us to remain his students, to correspond, and to return.

The idyllic escapism of this scenario is however laced with facts that tie it down to the

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place and time of the ‘real’ world. The family who own ‘Hite’; the biggest selling beer in Korea and one of its richest companies, paid for the temple and its beautiful location. Meanwhile, the monk –who leads quite a solitary life discouraging the kind of tourism promoted by some temples, as a result seems to live indulgently, as if hoarding the splendour he has brought into the world. He also seems to be compensating for loneliness when showing us photo albums recalling trips to Europe and England, while taking many more digital photos and immediately printing them on a neat portable Samsung printer. At night, as a backdrop to moonlit debate, he plays his favourite CDs through the temple’s PA system (designed to transmit the sound of dawn and evening prayer to the surrounding mountains) so that we find ourselves discussing ‘hierarchy’, ‘patriarchy’, or ‘Zen’ while songs from the musical ‘CATS’ sound out through the dark trees. Though this seems comic and incongruous, one of the things that attracts me to Buddhism and perhaps makes it appropriate to my relativist post-modern experience is what Nietzsche might have called its ‘transvaluation of values’ according to which ‘incongruity’ becomes incongruous and laughter is taken seriously.

The last episode of this Seoul story concerns the faiths and fantasies of consumerism and its apotheosis in fashion. Seoul’s population appears mostly affluent as high

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standards of personal appearance are maintained against a backdrop of polished state-of-the-art public services to such a degree that returning to London -seeing through economy-class-exhausted eyes- the British environment seems comparatively shabby. People in Seoul are generally spotlessly elegant and stylish, seeming to emulate (or perhaps inspire) the rather pure images maintained by Korean soap operas and advertising. This only goes wrong at the cheapest end of the market where, on Saturday afternoons in residential neighbourhoods girls wear T-shirts whose bold English statements are (probably unknown to the wearer) grammatically incorrect, so that an English reader can enjoy a parade of word salads like: ‘Macaroni Sorbet Onehug’, or ‘Hippy Style Urban Girlsloo’, ‘Mixing Vintage So Warm, So Energy’, or simply ‘Cash For Slang’. I imagine the slogans are created by well-meaning but impatient entrepreneurial designers making word-for-word dictionary translations of originally cool and motivational sentences, but the clumsy results seem appropriate to the text and email epoch where so many words are too-hurriedly written, mis-spelled and misinterpreted.

Furthermore, if consumerism can be called a philosophy it is one which thrives on the progressive ridicule of meaning itself, and so, these innocent blasphemies against what Nietzsche called the ‘god of grammar’ promise an increasingly liberated future for

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consumers while laying down a gauntlet for thinkers and writers struggling to maintain a position of critique and reflection. Again, in the midst of these interpretations, the image of my ailing mother reappears, chiming-in with her own newly-muddled speech, each surprising outburst of which culminates in one of her characteristic smiles or comic expressions as she continues to transmit joy despite loss of the ability to master worded meaning. The exponentially increasing elderly in the world’s wealthiest countries bring with them a rise in the number of occasions on which words do not make sense. Babies and grandmothers, everywhere increasing, are turning life into a brief opportunity to form meaning between periods of incoherent babble; and here in Seoul, the teenagers too are championing nonsense.

We spend a day with a friend who shows us all the biggest, most luxuriant department stores in Seoul and then a wide road where designer-wear is collected in special malls or ‘galleries’. We make our way to the store’s designer booths, each plying its own fantasy as Alexander McQueen and his competitors heroically struggle to re-invent themselves and their clients for each year’s creative retail collection. These enclosures are each attended by women whose role is to keep everything looking perfectly desirable while maintaining the designer’s annual fantasy within a microcosmic world a few square

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meters in size. The result is like a refined and delicate Art fair. The attendants, who only expect and need to sell a few highly-priced pieces per week, must be specially skilled at waiting and posing patiently without expectation that anything is likely to happen on any given day. Instead of customers, video displays animate the environments, showing recordings of each designer’s latest show. Here models hoof up and down catwalks looking like they’ve been fooled by a promise of glamour into joining a cult of would-be clones. You see shots of celebrities arriving in very carefully chosen outfits. Victoria Beckham steps from a limo in a mermaid wrap of shining cloth and immediately falls into professional posturing, leaning passively back and dropping a shoulder while assaulted by the shock and awe of a hundred paparazzi who ejaculate white light over her machine-tanned skin, wet-look lips, and enormous sunglasses.

In these ‘galleries’ almost anyone can wander, dream and even increase their credit problems by buying something, but a little further down the road you find a strip of imposing designer mansions set aside for the biggest names of all -Vuillton, Gucci, Prada. Here, the ostentatious edifices have been influenced by a kind of ‘post-terrorism-chic’ that allows cool brutalism to repress the uncalled-for generousities of now passé post-modernism. These buildings attain their style through fine surfaces and subtle pigments which enhance the otherwise militaristic simplicity of bare stone and concrete.

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Large planes might be covered in robust grilles seemingly inspired by 1970s Belfast checkpoints but recently made cool by architects echoing the tensions of 21st century city centres. Bunker-style entrances are visible only from certain severe angles, revealing themselves as sudden slits cut deep into each faceless block. Most poignant and daring of all is the fact that *windows* are reduced to an absolute minimum in a haughty challenge to the gawping, acquisitive and avaricious reputation of this profession, so that these pill-box mansions, signed with the coolest of names, do *not* invite us to linger, look, or enter but suggest instead that we would be welcome only by way of appointment, and only if having travelled far on a kind of humbling pilgrimage.

Seoul is a city overflowing with Faiths and Fantasies. Today one continues to wander, exercising an eye informed by writers like Walter Benjamin who have encouraged us to seek the significant, divine or messianic in quotidian details. But increasingly we are overwhelmed and disoriented by the complexity of objects and events in the world’s fastest evolving cities. One well-known designer brand is called simply ‘Theory’, their logo fleetingly appears in a crowd borne on a crisp white carrier bag of the kind consumers brandish as a status symbol and use repeatedly. Such events leave any would-be ‘theorist’ choking on the froth of adjectives the city draws out while wondering if the legacy built around Walter Benjamin’s experiments maintains any

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purchase today as we are moved to inhabit a rather un-theoretical, un-critical form of travel writing while surrendering faith in our own fantasy of having a particular and critical perspective. To help justify myself I recall the philosopher Leibniz stating: ‘god is the substance that has no point of view’ and, though I might try to convince my new Buddhist master of this sentiment, leave Seoul suspecting it is equally applicable to the ironic cocoon of a teenage girl’s café; to the department and designer stores; to the multiple faiths and contiguity of tradition and modernity one finds here; and I end up wondering; how can I get Leibniz’s phrase translated into the ungrammatical lingo of a Seoul T-shirt?

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