

# A coup d'etat in Korea and much theological noise

By RICHARD M. ELMAN

Talk about good and evil is the subject of Richard E. Kim's second novel, "The Innocent." If you care to know what some alleged South Korean Army officers have to say about this most theologically eloquent question, I recommend that you read his book.

Mr. Kim writes in English; so did Milton. There the comparison ends. His novel seems to be about events surrounding a coup d'état in his unhappy birthplace, but it carries the standard auctorial disclaimer that it's not about any actual events that have taken place in Seoul. Indeed, it seems not to be, and therein lies the trouble. Not only has Kim reduced his debaters to a set of not-too-eloquent majors, colonels and generals, but he has confused his narrative with pages of expository dialogue about the working out of the coup and the past histories of the various actors. Whatever hard-won moral ambiguities he is able to achieve through occasional pieces of narrative recall, whatever scenes of dramatic confrontation, are soon dissipated by boredom and a general confusion of names, events, deeds and personalities which even his

## The Innocent

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characters seem to share, as witnessed by this exchange:

"... Your responsibility? I can make neither head nor tail of anything any longer."

"Ah, you've said that to me before, Major Lee. But we've got to pull ourselves together."

Pulling myself together as best I could, I seemed to discern that Kim's fictional enterprise centers chiefly around a debate between a somewhat activist colonel, who has been forced to do many things in the interests of exterminating evil, and a subordinate major of easy scruples who stands back and is made to seem passive, a sentimentalist, a dogooder. Each is busily engaged in the days leading up to the coup in judging the reliability of the other, and in fending off the other's judg-

ments. Both come to learn that to be moral is to be forced to commit evils. The coup succeeds, but the colonel—its leader—is "absurdly" murdered. The major is to go into exile, presumably to reflect and perhaps to compose this novel which he, all too standoffishly, narrates. If it seems summary to dismiss such a work of serious high abstraction with a plot summary, I must confess that I felt all along as if I were the victim of Kim's summaries of the moral issues presumably at stake.

Lost was any sense of the particularities of Korean landscape, mood, national or individual character. Of the passions that moved such men I learned next to nothing. Of the grievances that divided such men and their nation I gained no insights. The streets neither reeked nor echoed. If there were no pleasures evoked, there was also no pain insinuated. The atmosphere was never more than dark with patches of "light fog."

My own suspicion is that Kim is engaged in grafting some by-now-standard allegories of Protestant despair onto some unlikely Asiatic soil. God knows evil abounds in our world and it is difficult to remain unsoiled if one is to act. Clearly, too, murder is an evil and the man who

can afford the luxury of his scruples is very often equally evil, if he procrastinates, fails to act. What any of this has to do with the existential condition of the Korean military is, however, a very dubious question. It's as if one were to set an allegory of the Trinity around the figures of Henry Cabot Lodge, General Ky and President Johnson.

That soldiers must sometimes murder is, after all, a tautological statement. That they are occasionally morally sensitive to their occupation is something to be hoped for. That Korea has had more than its share of murders, whether political or venal, is certainly unarguable. None of which suggests that any particular reverberations are to be rung from such a set of sounding brasses in isolation. If one wishes to make theological noises any empty lot won't do; one has to invest one's theology with a sense of a particular moral world inhabited by morally possible men, unless, of course, one wishes to seem blind and sententious about that evil which is said to compromise one's subject.

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