

The Woman on the Treadmill: A Recollective Pastiche on Cambodia, 1964

Introductory Note

When I was invited to write a piece on south-east Asia, I decided to make my subject Cambodia, which I visited in 1964, almost thirty years ago, before war and its aftermath of social chaos overwhelmed much of the region, and made the great and now deteriorating monuments of Angkor virtually inaccessible. I had written about my experiences in a variety of genres, personal journals, poems, articles in American and Canadian magazines (*Arts of New York* and *Saturday Night*), and finally in a chapter of a travel book, *Asia, Gods and Cities: Aden to Tokyo*.

What I imagined I might be writing now was a kind of palimpsest, a brisk contemporary account of the past overlying the old material. But when I re-read that old material, I found it had a relevance against the background of coming mass tragedy (the war *and* Pol Pot), and a brightness of outline and colour that no revamping could rival. So I ended with a pastiche, a combination of the various genres that memorialized, more vividly than any recollections called up a generation later might do, an experience as a free wanderer in a land where no kind of freedom has existed for a long time.

I have concentrated on the descriptive writing evoking the countryside and its Khmer people, and especially the great jungle-infested monuments, and I have left out one theme that seemed important then but which events were quickly to make obsolete. In those days the United Nations was promoting a great scheme to harness the Mekong River and provide power and irrigation on an unprecedented scale in South-east Asia, turning a one-crop-a-year economy into a three-crop-a-year one. Work had already

begun; I visited a dam being built under the supervision of Australian engineers. But the situation was already politically tense, though real warfare had not yet begun, and my hope of gathering material for what I knew would be an interesting CBC documentary was ruined when the Cambodian officials, at first co-operative, suddenly began to shut their doors on me; a week later Prince Sihanouk gave a fierce anti-American speech and rioters sacked the buildings of US agencies in Pnom Penh; we had left by then. In a day my small radio project and the Mekong River Plan itself became irrelevant. We felt we had been playing in a minefield, and indeed we had.

I arrange the material more or less sequentially, beginning with the flight to Cambodia, continuing with our expedition into the countryside outside Pnom Penh, centering on the little town of Kampong Chhnang, and going on to the great complex of ruins near the little town of Siem Reap, of which Angkor Wat is only the most famous of many extraordinary structures.

JOURNAL Cambodia and Thailand are not at present on speaking terms owing to a flareup in their centuries-old border dispute. But there are means of travelling between them. You quietly obtain a Cambodian visa at the Indonesian consulate in Bangkok, and though officially there is no air communication between the two countries, one of Air Vietnam's flights from Bangkok to Saigon does in fact put down on the way to Phnom Penh, and on the way back to pick up passengers, under the polite fiction that they have come all the way from Saigon.

BOOK The Vietnamese plane, a decrepit DC 3, bumped reluctantly off the runway and swayed and tottered in the eccentric currents of air that rose off the paddies of eastern Thailand. Already we sensed the flavour of a different life, the special tang which generations of French occupation had given to Indo-China. French speech wove itself into a quick pattern over the drone of the engines; the sharp, tinny French of the Vietnamese, the coarse almost Provençal accent of French colonials returning to Pnom Penh and Saigon. The very beer we drank with our sandwiches had a thin pissy flavour that evoked the cheap bistros of the Paris suburbs.

JOURNAL Close to Pnom Penh [on our way to Kampong Chhnang], there are small hills with the sharp edges of pagodas rising from their summits, the relics of Cudong, former capital of Cambodia after the flight from Angkor, half-buried in the hill forest. The pagodas are dark and sombre, with none of the gilded glitter of similar structures in Thailand, and drabness, darkness is what characterises human settlement here. The houses are undecorated

and unpainted boxes on stilts, their wood faded by the monsoons, their roofs silvery—weathered palm thatch—among the palms and the kapok trees—stark candelabra hung with bursting green purses of tree cotton. Even the dress of the people is dark, mostly black and the only human touches of colour in a Khmer village are the orange robes of the monks at the weather-beaten wooden temples, and the red and gold festival decorations on the Chinese stores. The people are darker, more robust than other south-east Asians, the women very grave in expression; one has the sense of a frustrated and powerful anger, the power that may once have built the Khmer empire. It has a kind of outlet in the ball games—mainly basketball—that the boys and young men play vigorously, clad in ragged shorts or tattered bits of cloth worn kiltwise.

As the afternoon heats up, the people gather around the village wells, the men in sarongs and bare-torsoed, the women draping cloths over their breasts, and swill buckets of water over their bodies and garments for coolness. Burdens are always carried on the head, perched on a scarf tied into a kind of turban, and this I suppose is why the women walk so splendidly.

Already, at Kampon Chhnang, the swamps and lagoons of the Great Lake begin to encroach...

POEM

Kampong Chhnang
 where the hills end
 and the marshes begin.
 The sky burning blue
 and beyond the town
 a blue lagoon among
 buffalo meadows.

A woman treads a
 watermill; conical
 mushroom of hat,
 dirty black sampot
 down to her heels,
 she holds her bar
 and tramps in the noon
 sun, and the water
 rises in bamboo
 buckets and spills
 in diamond flashes
 into her paddy.

We see her
and are gone,
but I know her
image will stay
in my mind. I
shall remember
as I do now
the image
of a land.

BOOK The plane for Siem Reap, which was the last to go, did not take to the air until 2 p.m. instead of noon. It was packed to the last seat, owing to the arrival in Cambodia of a large party of camera-garlanded Japanese tourists, and as soon as the doors were closed the air-conditioning apparatus went out of order. Riding under the afternoon sun, the plane became a flying oven, and we felt we were melting into our clothes like the wax victims of warlocks as we flew over the brown-parched paddies, and the above the waters of the Great Lake over which the fishing vessels were scattered like toothpicks, until the green roof of the jungle lay beneath us. It was relief we felt as much as anticipation as the plane last circled low over the vast glistening square of the moat surrounding Angkor Wat, and the towers of the great temple pierced up towards us in their pinnacled man-made mountain of grey-purple stone.

MAGAZINE One rides out from Siem Reap along the straight jungle road, with the metallic chorus of insects dinning in one's ears, until the broad moat of Angkor Wat comes into sight, silvered by the lowering sunlight, with buffaloes wallowing ecstatically near the banks, and wild duck feeding among the blossoming lotus. Reflected in it shimmers the high wall of reddish-purple laterite that encloses the temple precinct, and above the wall, among the mopheads of sugar palms, the tall conical towers rear up, touched with gold by the luminous glow from the afternoon sun.

MAGAZINE The harmonious grandeur of Angkor Wat becomes evident as soon as one steps onto the wide-flagged causeway that leads from the west towards the outer gate of Angkor Wat. With its three towers, this is a fore-shortened miniature of the temple itself. The original stands fully revealed as one passes through the great gate to the second causeway.

This is undoubtedly the finest vista of all Angkor. Between its serpent balustrades the wide grey causeway flows almost two hundred yards to the facade of the temple, where the long wings of the first terrace, sweeping out laterally for a hundred yards on either side of the entrance portico, form a wide base above which the

inner terraces rise in successive flights, linked on every side by broad, steep stairways. The third terrace serves as foundation for the five towers, of which the central and highest rises to more than two hundred feet, the height of Notre Dame. The effect, massive, yet irresistibly soaring, is precisely that of the peaks of the Holy Hindu Mount Meru, far off in the Himalayas, that Angkor Wat was meant to represent.

JOURNAL We climb the final flights of steps, as steep as those of a Mexican pyramid, to the uppermost platform, and look down over the complex pattern of steep-edged roofs, their grey mottled with dark lichens, a mandala in stone.

BOOK Beyond the green moat there was a village of palm-leaf huts embowered in a grove of jagged-leaved breadfruit trees and surrounded by gardens of egg plants and yams; a gong was sounding inside its little modern temple, and the parakeets screeched harshly as they flew between the trees like green arrows. Below us the inner courts of Angkor Wat were already becoming tanks of gathering darkness in which the orange robes of the Buddhist monks floated like glowing flowers.

JOURNAL This is the best time for Angkor Wat, all the time the light changing and more deeply gilding the grey stone, and the patterns of light and shadow moving over the sculptured walls, until, as we return across the causeway, we look back and see the last patch of sunlight fading off the facade and leaving the great building standing as a dark but somehow still glowing mass against the brilliant sky. As we drive back, the sides of the moat are filled with people taking their evening bath, naked boys glistening with moisture running shouting beside us, and looking back we see the richness of the afterglow concentrated in the robes of a group of monks standing on the causeway.

MAGAZINE Angkor Wat is only one of at least a hundred sacred buildings that lie scattered in the deep jungles around Siem Reap, representing more than four centuries of high artistic and architectural activity. Conditions have changed a great deal since the French naturalist Henri Mouhot stumbled on Angkor just over a century ago, in 1863, and brought out to the western world the first fascinating accounts of dead cities and temples enveloped in the Cambodian rain forests and forgotten by the Khmer themselves.

BOOK The Bayon, the great temple to [the Bodhisattva] Akalokiteshvara on which the life of Angkor Thom had centred, was an even more ambitious structure than Angkor Wat, which it resembled in its general plan—a pyramidal structure forming the pedestal for the stone peaks that represent Mount Meru. But King Jayavarman's desire to commemorate his [newly acquired Buddhist] beliefs led him to rear on the terraces of the Bayon more than fifty towers, from which two hundred gigantic enig-

matically smiling Buddha faces looked out in the cardinal directions; their bland faces suggest a secret and boundless knowledge. The mountain image has changed to that of a complex range and each peak in that range has become identified with the deity inhabiting it.

MAGAZINE The tawny sandstone towers of Bayon are veined with silver and viridian lichens, and in the pearly light of the jungle morning the whole structure has the insubstantial beauty of a mythical temple materializing out of light. At this moment the great faces, eroded by five centuries of monsoon and destructive vegetation, do not seem to be disintegrating so much as emerging from the stone in an enigmatic mutability.

BOOK The introduction of Mahayanist Buddhism under Jayavarman not merely broadened the iconography of his artists, but also changed the subjects of their sculpture in a quite radical manner. The great bas-reliefs of Bayon subordinate the earlier Angkor Wat themes of the ancient Hindu epics to the recording of contemporary history, of the land and lake battles of the Khmer and the Thais, and of the life of ordinary people in their homes and gardens and fishing on the Great Lake. When I looked at them I was reminded of the genre carvings of the Indian sculptors of Bharhut in the early days of Buddhist art; there was the same sharp impact of observation and the same apparent spontaneity of observation. In Angkor Thom, as in every place where Buddhism first makes its appearance, the condition of man had become as important a subject as the dances of the cosmos.

MAGAZINE Only the sacred monuments of Angkor were built in enduring stone. The kings' palaces, where they administered temporal justice, and the houses of their subjects, were built of wood or palm leaf. They perished long ago, leaving here and there a stone terrace as sole relic, and what we see now of the vanished kingdom of Angkor are mainly the half-filled waterways that ensured its physical life and the temples that placed it under the aegis of divine help.

BOOK Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom are the tidy, well-visited monuments which have been kept clear of jungle for almost half a century, and to them most of the visitors confine themselves. It is the remoter, less familiar sites that preserve the atmosphere of a city buried under the jungle which the first explorers experienced when they came upon the lost Khmer ruins. To such a place we were taken by a haggard, toothless driver with negroid features and ragged clothes whom we engaged in the village of Siem Reap in preference to the brash youths who waited outside the Grand Hotel. Unlike them, he spoke little French, but we got along with names and maps and signs. He would take us to the site, as far as he could along a jungle path, and we would enter, through the tall gate in the outer wall, a dense

enclosure of thick forest, where the air would be sullen, breathless, but full of restless sound. The insects hummed and trilled, the coppersmith birds tapped with their little hammers, the dry leaves rustled crisply.

These more distant sites were almost deserted. Occasionally we met peasant women gathering gum in bamboo containers, and once a half-naked old man with a broom, whose task was to keep the paths clear of the tib teak leaves as a precaution against lurking snakes, followed us at a distance out of curiosity. But usually we were alone as we crossed the moats choked with blue water-lilies, passed the guardian figures of lions and cobras, half covered with undergrowth and creepers, and entered the recesses of the temple. We would go on and on through mazes of narrow passages and small chambers, separated by little open-air courtyards beyond which the doorways recede like repetitive mirror images until they were lost in the green gloom. The bombax roots clasped the roofs in their crushing grip, flowing in thick tentacles over the walls and scattering the great stone blocks into untidy moss-covered piles of rubble.... Sometimes the civet smell of a wild animal would linger strongly in a courtyard, or the dried skin of a cobra would stir like limp cellophane as we walked by, and more than once, in the dank inner chambers, with the restless bats twittering overhead, we felt solitude magnifying into terror.

P O E M

Ta Promh

This was a temple
 they did not free
 from the jungle.
 The air under the trees
 is sullen, breathless,
 but the forest clatters
 with life, insects
 thrilling, jungle
 cocks crowing, and
 the ficus trees stand
 on the walls and
 send down their roots
 like pythons.
 Gigantic bats
 rustle and shit
 in the empty chambers.
 There is a smell
 of civet. The monkeys
 call in the trees,
 the spiders

sit in great funnels
of gossamer.

Yet in the heart
of the maze
a broken tower
and the sun falling
on a broken
Buddha
and a rusty tin
filled with the burntout
ends of joss-sticks
and newly withered
jasmine.

We search
for that last
hermit
in vain.

JOURNAL Late afternoon. Walk beside the river into the town of Siem Reap. In the river boys are swimming, supported by bundles of green reeds like the *cabellitos de totora* used by surf-riders on the coast of Peru, and great water-wheels elaborately constructed of bamboo, are slowly turning in the stream and feeding the irrigation ditches. The day's market is almost over in the village square, the poor people walking home with little bundles of fish bought cheaply at the end of the day, but the open-air Chinese restaurants are still doing business, and the shops around the square are open; they sell rather beautiful olive-green stoneware and Chinese-style blue-and-white, richly coloured and designed cloths for festival sampots and sarongs, baskets of many kinds; a native apothecary has a stall with such curiosities as a sawfish's sword, cats' furs, gigantic dried fungi, dried starfish, etc. Drink Vermouth Cassis in evening light in little Frenchified Chinese restaurant and walk back to the Grand Hotel as night falls with tropical quickness like a curtain.

Epilogue

POEM

*The Diamond Bowler of the
Khmer Kings, Pnom Penh, 1964*

Sweet sounds of
gongs and strings
over the palace

compound. The
Royal Dancers
are rehearsing in
their gilded crowns.
We are not allowed
to Peer. The
Queen Mother
is observing.

Instead we may gape
at the royal jewels,
at the coronation crowns, one
for the palanquin, one
for horseback, one for
elephant driving;
at the throne and the
bed of state and
the two mats for washing,
gold for the right foot,
silver for the left;
at the funeral chariot
and the golden basket for
washing the royal ashes
in coconut milk;
at the black bowler
bought in Bond Street,
with a ruby knob
set by the palace jeweller
on the crown,
and on the side a
cockade with a
forty-carat diamond
focusing
east with west.