Reading and Reacting to Cambodia
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The assassination of Allende quickly covered over the memory of the Russian invasion of Bohemia, the bloody massacre in Bangladesh caused Allende to be forgotten, the din of war in the Sinai Desert drowned out the groans of Bangladesh, the massacres in Cambodia caused the Sinai to be forgotten, and so on, and on and on, until everyone has completely forgotten everything.

-Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Milan Kundera's often-repeated sentence questions the capacity of second-hand witnesses – all of us – to maintain focus on the myriad troubles and tragedies in the world. In common with many other writers and commentators, Kundera might lead us to reflect that individual or community concern is finite, transient and, in the west, often driven by the media or by popular culture. Two related but distinct levels of complexity result. First, we do not, will not and never can give our attention to every crisis and imbroglio; we cannot know, nor attempt to know, everything. This indicates not apathy (or not necessarily), not merely the inevitable inability to grasp all issues, but also the obscured difficulties in beginning to address the layered and usually tangled contexts that might make us 'informed' on any given issue. We rely on the summaries of others, hoping they are 'neutral' and 'comprehensive', even 'universal', when they cannot be. This becomes more critical, I suggest, when we engage with writing that appears – through profound observation or intricate reasoning, or through luminous language – to overcome, on our behalf, these difficulties of context. For while Kundera's statement is stark and thought-provoking in isolation, it is more powerful when returned to the novel from which it came, and to the context and the detail of the Czech malaise that inspired his anguished reaction.

As with Kundera's novel, François Bizot's memoir traverses the ground between local and international anguish. In a short review of *The Gate*, the English journalist William Shawcross states, 'It reads like a novel and it sears both the conscience and the heart. If you only ever read one book on Cambodia, make sure it is this one'. While *The Gate* is an extraordinary addition to western writing about modern Cambodia, I suggest a different though no less enthusiastic endorsement than that of Shawcross; I want to offer a glimpse of some of the literary and political contexts of *The Gate*, not to challenge Bizot, but to challenge us as readers.

The book is extraordinary in part because of Bizot's own unique history. A scholar of Buddhism, fluent in Khmer, he was captured by the Khmer Rouge near Oudong in 1971 and held for three months in a prison-village in the foothills of the Cardomom Mountains. His chief captor then, a young communist called Douch (Kang Kech Ieu), came to believe Bizot's pleas that he was a scholar, not a CIA Agent. Remarkably, almost inexplicably, Douch secured Bizot's release. But his two Khmer colleagues, Lay and Son, remained at the camp; shortly after Bizot's release the Khmer Rouge killed them. Later, when the Khmer Rouge controlled all of Cambodia (Democratic Kampuchea, 1975-1979), Douch ran S-21, the Khmer Rouge centre of interrogation and torture in Phnom Penh. Of the approximately 14,000 people who entered S-21, there were seven confirmed survivors.

In April 1975, the chaotic time when the Khmer Rouge claimed Phnom Penh and ordered the city's evacuation, Bizot, along with many foreigners and Cambodians, retreated to the French embassy. In the days that followed, Bizot acted as an interpreter and go-between as French and Khmer Rouge authorities negotiated the evacuation of foreigners and argued over the status of Cambodians seeking refuge within the embassy. He also – uniquely – gained regular permission to leave the embassy compound to search for food and stray foreigners, and so witnessed the emptying of Phnom Penh.

While Bizot directly and uniquely engaged with the Khmer Rouge in 1971 and 1975, *The Gate* is also extraordinary because the writer has, years later, summoned from himself a narrative as luminous as it is disturbing. He has created painfully beautiful and spare prose, at odds
with the awful, misconstructed ideology and methods of the Khmer Rouge. And Bizot's descriptions of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge often extend to observations on the human condition: 'The Khmers Rouges instinctively knew the age-old law without trying to understand it: a man is killed more easily than an animal. Is it a tragic result of his intellectual development? How many crimes might have been brought to an abrupt halt if he had been able to bite to the very end, as cats or pigs do?'

While I disagree that The Gate reads like a novel (and Shawcross probably only meant to infer that it is a wonderful read), it is a narrative of recalled events. Bizot is himself explicitly aware of having dramatised his story. In the acknowledgements he explains that he has written The Gate from his wife's viewpoint: 'Although I did not have to invent any of the events, characters, feelings, conversations, or landscapes that I describe here, I had to make them come alive through writing and imagination and in so doing create an optical instrument whose effects on the reader eluded me' (285-86). In particular, Bizot resorts, with fine effect, to storytelling techniques such as metaphor and dialogue. He also uses individuals – himself, Douch, others – as a means of presenting a convoluted and violent Cambodian, regional and Cold War story.

Because The Gate is so resonant, so haunting, as it is accessible while making no concession to simplification, and with a strong moral voice underpinning the narrative, we are tempted to conclude that it is 'definitive'. We are left with a conundrum, difficult to resolve, that stems from Kundera's observation of our forgetfulness. If we decide that The Gate explains Cambodia like a manual, we mislead ourselves, and we misread and diminish Bizot's considerable achievement. But if we commit to (or submit to) contextualisation, we complicate matters so considerably that we might invent new ways of forgetting. We might forget that Bizot's focus is, albeit through the prism of his own inner world, the inexplicably cruel and incompetent society the Khmer Rouge inflicted on Cambodians. Or as Tom Engelhardt says, 'When the disaggregation of memory has reached a certain point, an emphasis on the complexity of history can itself become part of a larger kind of denial'.

The two sections that follow offer, in much abbreviated form, a glimpse of the complexity of the modern history of Cambodia, and of Cambodia in the world. As with every book about Cambodia, The Gate sits uncomfortably within this contested, evolving history.

The gate

Consider Bizot's metaphor of the gate:

From among my memories there comes up today the image of a gate. It appears before me and I recognise the pathetic hinge which was both a beginning and an end in my life. It is made of two swinging panels, which haunt my dreams, and wire mesh welded on to a tubular frame. It closed off the main entrance to the French Embassy when the Khmer Rouge entered Phnom Penh in April 1975.

The gate separates the world, and the foreigner's privileged capacity to evacuate, from the enclosed and secretive Democratic Kampuchea regime, its radical, inflexible and violent communist-Utopian ideology. Some of the most harrowing passages of the book occur when, in 1975, French embassy officials – with Bizot as a deeply and directly involved translator and intermediary – could no longer resist Khmer Rouge demands that Cambodians, eminent and otherwise, leave the embassy grounds:

Several hundred people were gathered here, opposite the Cultural Department in front of the parked cars. They stood in a column, their bundles at their feet. Then this most terrible of processions got under way, everyone doing his or her best to smile. But it was an affected smile, the sort we give while biting our lips, when we are seriously ill, for example, and don't want to worry our loved ones. For those who stayed behind, the worst thing was having to conceal our own sadness from those who were leaving. Surrounding the Khmers, hordes of men who had not wept for many a year were pressing up against them, spluttering, coughing, sniffing and turning round to take deep breaths. (199)

Bizot's gate finds a companion in The Gates of Ivory, Margaret Drabble's novel that begins on a bridge linking Thailand and Cambodia:
Many are drawn to stare across this bridge. They come, and stare, and turn back. What else can they do? A desultory, ragged band of witnesses, silently, attentively, one after another, they come, and take up the position, and then turn back… Good Time and Bad Time coexist. We in Good Time receive messengers who stumble across the bridge or through the river, maimed and bleeding, shocked and starving. They try to tell us what it is like over there, and we try to listen.

Some of Drabble's witnesses relay the stories of 'Bad Times' to their distant compatriots: 'The dead and the dying travel fast these days. We can devour thousands at breakfast with out toast and coffee, and thousands more on the evening news' (4). But the 'stumbling' messengers cross the bridge not to bring information, as if filing a story, but to live; the people inside Cambodia, in the space and time between Bizot's gate and Drabble's bridge, work too hard and eat too little, and die from hunger or illness or ideology.

Drabble's reference to 'Good Time and Bad Time' itself has a history. One of her witnesses – 'That young man with curly hair is the son of the British Chief Prosecutor at Nuremberg' (3) – is William Shawcross. His book, The Quality of Mercy, which Drabble identifies as a key source, is a work of political journalism on the food crisis in Cambodia in 1979-80, following the Vietnamese invasion that pushed the Khmer Rouge to the country's far west.

Shawcross's book is also burdened with the subtitle, Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience. In the prologue, he bemoans the modern thirst for information and the corresponding dissipation of knowledge and perceptiveness. Shawcross quotes George Steiner, who wrote that while Jews 'were being done to death' in Treblinka,

> the overwhelming plurality of human beings, two miles away on the Polish farms, 5,000 miles away in New York, were sleeping or eating or going to a film or making love or worrying about the dentist. This is where my imagination balks. The two orders of simultaneous experience are so different, so irreconcilable to any common norm of human values, their coexistence is so hideous a paradox – Treblinka is both because some men have built it and almost all other men let it be – that I puzzle over time. Are there, as science-fiction and Gnostic speculation imply, different species of time in the same world, 'good times' and enveloping folds of inhuman time, in which men fall into the slow hands of living damnation? [...] On the fake station platform at Treblinka, cheerfully painted and provided with window-boxes so as not to alert the new arrivals to the gas-ovens half a mile further, the painted clock pointed to three. Always.

From this moment, we might travel in any number of political, moral or literary directions. We might, for example, note that Shawcross uses Steiner to reinforce Kundera's complaint against our forgetfulness. Shawcross quotes the same sentence that begins this review essay, and continues: 'But memory is being destroyed in democratic societies as well. Our sense of impotence seems to grow in direct proportion to the spread of our knowledge. And so, in self-protection, does our sense of indifference, or at least our ability to recall, to identify'. We might empathise with, and expand on, Shawcross's concern, and we might also bemoan our reliance on journalists – prime amongst Drabble's 'witnesses' – to deliver us this information which so befuddles us. We might then apply our concerns to, for example, Shawcross's The Quality of Mercy, which mixes, often in confusing ways, reportage and research, philosophising, the narrative of a reporter pursuing a story, and political observation.

Or we might return to Steiner. In the essay Shawcross quotes, taken from a discussion of Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw Diary and Jean-François Steiner's reconstruction, Treblinka, George Steiner concludes:

> But enough of the debate. These books and the documents that have survived are not for 'review'. Not unless 'review' signifies, as perhaps it should in these instances, a 'seeing-again', over and over. As in some Borges fable, the only completely decent 'review' of the Warsaw Diary or of Elie Wiesel's Night would be to re-copy the book, line by line, pausing at the names of the dead and the names of the children as the orthodox scribe pauses, when recopying the Bible, at the hallowed name of God.

I conclude what has been a deliberate exercise in convolution by returning to The Gate. One of Bizot's achievements – in a literary as well as political sense – is that he never feigns objectivity. On America, for example, he writes:

> But their irresponsibility, their colossal tactlessness, their inexcusable naivety, even their cynicism, frequently aroused more fury and outrage in me than did the lies of the Communists. Throughout those years of war, as I frantically scoured the hinterland for the old manuscripts that the heads of
monasteries had secreted in lacquered chests, I witnessed the Americans' imperviousness to the realities of Cambodia. Yet today I do not know what I reproach them for more, their intervention or their withdrawal.

Bizot's political stance here is clearly connected to his melancholy over Cambodia's fate. He tells us what is true for him; as readers, we might follow his example by not assuming that all he tells us is all we need to know.

Douch

At the heart of The Gate is the complex relationship that developed in 1971 between Bizot and his Khmer Rouge captor, Douch. Nic Dunlop and Nate Thayer reported in 1999 in the Far Eastern Economic Review that Douch was alive. A convert to Christianity, he expressed regret for the Khmer Rouge atrocities. For one former prisoner he had a message: 'My friend Bizot will be happy to know that I have changed my ideas, my ideology'. Douch now sits in prison, as the Cambodian government and the United Nations haggle over the terms of a trial that may or may not occur:

In the depths of his prison, my one-time persecutor awaits trial for crimes against humanity. He can brood over that period of his youth when murder, pillage and lies were not only permitted but commendable. Setting off with a flower in his rifle and a heart filled with hope, he had thrown himself into a primitive world filled with horror. Here, the dangers of war were slight in comparison to the dangers of revolution; in the most demanding confrontations, the warrior never stopped being wary of his neighbour. He was a child venturing among wolves: to survive, he had drunk their milk, and learned to howl like them, and let instinct take over. Terror, from that moment, became all-powerful. It seduced him by putting on the face of morality and order.

Bizot reconstructs numerous conversations between the two men. The most memorable of these is a debate in which Bizot, emboldened by impending freedom, questions the creation of Khmer Rouge ways: 'Is there some ideologist among you, constructing a revolutionary theory based upon the myths and rules of the Buddhist religion?' (110). Later, he asks Douch if prisoners in the camp are beaten. Douch explains that the prisoners were mostly spies: 'Just one of these traitors could jeopardise our whole struggle. Do you think they're going to reveal what they know of their own free will?'

'But who does the beating? It.'

'Ah!' he cut in. 'I can't stand their duplicity! The only way is to terrorize them, isolate them and starve them. It's very tough. I have to force myself. You cannot imagine how much their lying infuriates me! When I cross-examine them and they resort to every ruse to avoid talking, denying our senior officers potentially vital information, then I beat them! I beat until I'm out of breath.' (114-15)

Two paragraphs later Bizot writes of his feelings of affection towards Douch. More tellingly, Bizot recalls stumbling while walking, blindfolded, to freedom:

But it was clear from his shock and the anxious way he helped me up and enquired about the bump on my head that Douch had, in our relationship, gone beyond the bounds of basic courtesy, and was holding out a connection from soul to soul, a wider friendship, larger than the circumstantial fellowship that had arisen between us. (131).

Douch comes to life in The Gate as a person, rather than as a name synonymous with atrocity. This is due to Bizot's use of dialogue, which must be, so long after the event, a combination of what Douch said and what Bizot remembers – and then rendered suitable for a literary memoir (and converted from Khmer to French and then, for us, translated into English). It is also due to the complexity Bizot recounts of a young man with an apparent sense of honour, an inquisitive mind, and a sense of humour, who is committed absolutely to an extreme ideology.

But Bizot's version of Douch, however finely realised, owes added resonance to Douch's subsequent role as head of S-21, as does the burdensome irony of this observation: 'My freedom, obtained after a hard struggle, had become a sort of personal success for him, spurring on his career as a revolutionary' (130). It is precisely because Douch is not a character but a man with a life that is independent of his time as Bizot's captor – a life dominated by his brutal, fatal extraction of 'confessions' in the service of the Khmer Rouge - that Bizot's descriptions of him form the core of the book. Perhaps Bizot has defined Douch
accurately; perhaps not. In the end, it is his – Bizot's – story, his narrative, his interpretation of Douch's actions and possible inner world. It is a powerful, intense, essential story, but not a complete story.

As The Gate highlights, any single narrative or interpretation of the events it describes, no matter how persuasive – in a moral, political or artistic sense – is inevitably overwhelmed by the complexities of Cambodian-world history, or any world history. In turn, western readers, listeners and viewers of facts, opinions, rhetoric, ideologies and soundbites might accept that the Cambodia we learn about is bound by the limits set by, and set upon, the collector-interpreter of any research we choose to engage with, as well as its mode of communication. We might also recognise that we bring assumptions of our own to any conclusions we then make. We will, ideally, welcome a nagging doubt when we consider Bizot's version of Cambodia (or Kundera’s version of Czechoslovakia), even if we cannot fathom with precision the details of that doubt. The Gate does stand alone, it does speak for itself, it can and should be read without the need for an attendant library; but it is also nothing more than an evocative and brilliant glimpse of Cambodia.

Notes
Bizot, The Gate 9. Further references included in the text.
Note, however, that Shawcross quotes from Michael Henry Heim’s translation from the Czech, whereas (see Fn 1) I quote from Aaron Asher’s 1996 translation from the French.
Shawcross, The Quality of Mercy 12.
Steiner, ‘Postscript’ 193.
Bizot, The Gate 5.
Bizot, The Gate 288. Further references included in the text.

Patrick Allington, Reading and Reacting to Cambodia, Altitude vol 3, 2003.
Cambodia's Difficult Past. Cambodia, home to the once-powerful Khmer Empire, has literally taken a beating in the last 500 years. Despite being the most dominant power in the region for centuries, Cambodia fell to Ayutthaya (modern-day Thailand) in the 15th century. Since then, a number of conflicts were fought in or around Cambodia, leaving far too many orphans, land mines, and unexploded ordinance behind. Cambodia was made a protectorate of France between 1863 and 1953; further suffering was brought on by the Vietnam War. Pol Pot and his bloody Khmer Rouge are attributed with the deaths Whether it’s fact or fiction that tickles your fancy, we’ve got it covered with a list of some top reads to get you ready for your trip to Cambodia. Elizabeth Becker was one of two Western journalists allowed into Cambodia during the Khmer Rouge era, going on to become a leading scholar in the country’s modern history. In this book, she spans the French colonial period, Cambodian nationalism, the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge, though to regime leader Pol Pot’s death in 1998. An informative and factual read into the country’s recent history and beyond.

To Cook A Spider by Mark Bibby Jackson. Many flock to Cambodia for the prospect of witnessing its spectacular temples, timeless ruins, undisturbed beaches, and for experiencing its rich, cultural heritage. But not many people know that Cambodia has as much an incredible range of activities for visitors as it has scenic attractions to bewitch travelers. Be it a kid, a teenager, an adult, a couple, a family, or just friends, the city of Cambodia has many surprises that caters to the needs of all types of travelers across all age groups. From cruising, indulging in watersports, swimming with elephants, riding through temples on bikes, to cooking a spider, Cambodia has it all.

You’re thinking about moving to Cambodia (or are already here), reading up on the country will help you gain a better understanding of its history, its people, and its culture. Here are some of the best that are still widely available. History. Cambodia’s Curse: The Modern History of a Troubled Land by Joel Brinkley. Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Joel Brinkley writes about Cambodia’s modern history and the problems that Cambodia faces a generation after the Khmer Rouge. The book covers the culture of corruption in Cambodia (which is nothing new, Brinkley claims), the U.N. protectorate debacle, Cambodia’s powerful dictator, Hun Sen, and exactly how NGOs are destroying the fragile country. Read about itineraries, activities, places to stay and travel essentials and get inspiration from the blog in the best guide to Cambodia. The Cambodia Travel Guide will help you discover one of Southeast Asia’s most enjoyable destinations. Visit Cambodia, and you’ll find plentiful attractions ranging from unspoilt beaches and colonial townscapes through to dense forests and majestic rivers and lakes. The legendary temples of Angkor continue to attract millions of visitors each year. Away from the temples, Cambodia is refreshingly untouristy. Cambodia remains largely unexplored in many places. New roads now bring once remote destinations within easy reach. Continue reading to find out more about Cambodia travel facts. Where to