

## AN INTERVIEW WITH U SAM OEUR

KEN McCULLOUGH

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U SAM OEUR AND I were classmates at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop from 1966 to 1968. These were particularly chaotic years at Iowa, or anywhere else for that matter, and Sam's pacific nature was one of my primary anchors to sanity during those days. He returned to Cambodia in 1968. We had become close friends, and it was my intention to travel to Cambodia to help him translate Cambodian folk literature into English and English classics into Khmer. Part of my reason for wanting to go there was that I had come to believe Cambodians were a people who placed great importance on beauty in their lives, and I wasn't experiencing much of that otherwise. But events in Cambodia "militated" against such a venture; some time in 1970 Sam indicated that there was no point in corresponding anymore—all the mail to and from Cambodia was being censored.

I did not hear from or about Sam again until 1984, when Iowa's English Department received a request from him for a copy of his thesis, which he'd had to destroy (along with another 80-poem manuscript) at the outset of the Pol Pot regime. I had written a poem to Sam in 1981, not knowing whether or not he was still alive, but praying that he was; this was one prayer that was answered.

I began to correspond with him again through an Australian N.G.O. and started investigating ways to get him out of Cambodia. I learned that before Pol Pot, Sam had worked in a number of managerial positions in Cambodian industry, was a member of Parliament, and had served as a United Nations delegate. After surviving six concentration camps during the Pol Pot regime by feigning illiteracy (the Khmer Rouge were ferreting out and exterminating intellectuals), he had worked under the Vietnamese-backed government in the Ministry of Industry until his outspoken support of democracy had gotten him into trouble and the Party had forced him to sign a letter of resignation from his position. He had reached an impasse. I began working with Clark Blaise, director of Iowa's International Writing Program, to bring Sam back to Iowa as a participant in that program. Clark had trouble getting funding because Sam was not an established writer. Of course, if he *had* been a major literary figure, he would have been dead, for Pol Pot would have

had him exterminated immediately! Finally, the Lillian Hellman-Dashiell Hammett Fund for Free Expression agreed to sponsor Sam, and he arrived in the United States in September of 1992. We began translating his poetry, mostly from scratch, and to date we have about 170 pages. Our first selection of Khmer versions of Whitman's poems was published in 1995 (*Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," Parts 1-8, and "I Hear America Singing"*) [Iowa City: Zephyr Limited Edition Chapbook].

It has become clear to me, in working with Sam on his own poems and in translating Whitman into Khmer, that he regards Whitman as the key to liberating Cambodian poets, both philosophically and stylistically. What follows is a transcription of a discussion I had with Sam on December 21, 1993.

*McCullough:* When did you first encounter Whitman's work?

*U Sam Oeur:* It goes back to my early days of ESL [English as a Second Language] studies at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in the fall of 1961. The teacher assigned me to recite, by heart, "O Captain! My Captain!" I understand that many people feel that this is not one of Whitman's best poems. Nevertheless, that recitation made me feel very released—the poem captured me, I didn't capture the poem. And, as a matter of fact, to this day, whenever I find a U.S. penny on the ground, I feel the magic in Lincoln's image: it acts as a reassuring talisman, confirming my commitment to bring democracy and freedom to my country. Anyway, shortly after that, Dr. Owen, my professor of English composition, assigned the students to write an essay about anything. So I wrote about nature—the sea, the shore, the wind, the trees, the mountains along the seashore in Cambodia where the rocks sing, etc. When I handed it in, he put a note on my paper which said "You are influenced by Walt Whitman. Please write more." At that time I had no understanding of Whitman, not enough background in English to read his work. I got an "A" in the course, and this encouraged me—it's what I needed.

*McCullough:* How did you end up coming to the Iowa Writers' Workshop?

*U Sam Oeur:* I studied Industrial Arts at Cal State Los Angeles, and someone there discovered that I was writing poetry (unbeknownst to me) which was pastoral, but had nothing to do with Walt Whitman. Miss Mary Gray, of the Asia Foundation, arranged with Paul Engle [then director of the Writers Workshop] to have me enrolled in the M.F.A. program at Iowa in the Poetry Workshop.

*McCullough:* Did you read Whitman's poems while you were at the Workshop?

*U Sam Oeur:* No, I still did not read much Whitman. I bought a thin edition of *Leaves of Grass*, which I brought home with me to Cambodia, and I intended to translate it. It was tough—I didn't understand a thing. Very hard. Now that I am back in the U.S. again, at this point in time, I still have not seen many poems by other poets which I think I'd be able to translate into the Khmer language so that they would be meaningful to the Khmer people. Whitman's work remains the only poetry which I believe they would be able to grasp; it contains universal thinking and is written in a universal language, like the teachings of Buddha. When I recite the first few lines of "I Hear America Singing," it sounds so free, and it's about the ordinary daily life of the people—it is about them, it is related to their lives.

*McCullough:* What other qualities draw you to Whitman's work and make you believe that it is important to translate *Leaves* into Khmer?

*U Sam Oeur:* In addition to the language of Whitman's poems, they carry a spirit which is essential for the Khmer people at this time—the lines are infused with freedom and democracy. We have existed, for almost an entire millenium, in bondage of one kind or another. If I can publish a book of Whitman's work for the younger generation of poets, it will liberate them. They are all still writing in classical styles. While I myself am adept at writing in these forms and realize the beauty of them and the importance of preserving them, I also see that it is time to evolve. There are forty-nine traditional forms in Khmer poetry, including "the creeping snake," "the hopping crow," the three-syllable line, six-syllable, seven-, eight-, nine-, and eleven-syllable lines. The new poets are fed up with the old style; it's as if two magnetic poles, south and north, have come up against each other—they are repelled by these restrictions. They want to express themselves freely; having access to Whitman's poetry would give them a way to do this. They wouldn't have to waste space and time looking for throwaway or sometimes even nonsense rhymes to conform to the classical style. You see this even in the epic poem *Tom-Teav*, where meaningless sounds are thrown in on occasion when the poet can't come up with a rhyme which works—the younger poets are tired of this convention! This old-hat philosophy is reflected in the politics of Cambodia—they do the same old things over and over, permutations of the same mistakes. If a regime is installed by Vietnam, they conform to Vietnamese practices and standards; if a Thai-backed regime is in power, they conform to the Thai model. There has been no free expression in Cambodia; it's like living in custody. For the poets, regularized end-rhyme and internal rhyme are part of this trap. They are frustrated. Freeing the poets is my main goal in translating Whitman.

*McCullough:* It's clear that there are many differences between Whitman's poetry and Khmer poetry. Are there any similarities?

*U Sam Oeur:* One way in which Cambodian poets have an affinity for Whitman is that some Khmer poetry is chanted in very dramatic style; it is almost operatic. Whitman's poetry was informed by the sweep and drama of opera and the *recitative* passages of his work will appeal automatically to Cambodian poets. The older Cambodian styles, by contrast, are very monotonous.

*McCullough:* How do you imagine your Khmer translation of Whitman will be used in Cambodia? Would it be possible to teach Whitman in Cambodian schools, for example?

*U Sam Oeur:* If I were to approach the universities in Cambodia with Whitman, they would welcome it. They are looking for something new and something free; it is time to break the bonds of custody. We will publish a bilingual edition. And we will have a cassette with the poetry read in both Khmer and English. We'll give the students pencils and notebooks. They will understand Whitman immediately because everything in Whitman is there in our country, or some close approximation. In the old days, when we had to recite Ronsard's "La Rose," we couldn't imagine, in my province of Svay Rieng, what a rose was. Victor Hugo gave us the details of life in France, but it had nothing to do with us—it was an alien world for the most part. To me, Whitman transcends this. If we just gave students notebooks and pencils, and no books, or vice versa, they would get lost.

Right now is the time to open a department of creative writing in a Cambodian university. Whitman is the ideal starting point, because the work is so expansive, so inexpensive. In my generation, we had French classes with no books—nothing, just empty space. We'd listen to the French teacher the same way a water buffalo looks at a locomotive—with no concept of what we were hearing. Then there were the Moger readers, which were used throughout the country because someone had cut a deal with the French government and had a monopoly—a ten-line poem by Ronsard, one by Voltaire, one by Hugo, one by Baudelaire. We'd memorize this stuff, but it was meaningless to us. Whitman says "I too am untranslatable," but, to me, he seems to be the most translatable of poets for the time and situation in my country. He also says, "after we start we never lie by again." That is how I feel about the possibility of his influence on Cambodian thought; once they hear his words they will embrace his work absolutely, and the deadening cycle, in so many areas of our life, will be broken forever.