

THE OBSERVATORY

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THE
OBSERVATORY

JOHN FRASER



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PREFACE

The Observatory (1967) is a book about political commitment and liberation. Perhaps the political commitment of intellectuals is always full of anomalies and contradictions, a streaking ahead, or a sideline scepticism. This novel, written as the year 1968 was in view and gathering brightly on the horizon, reflects the high season of Guevara in Bolivia, and the attempts to insert a revolutionary ‘foco’ in places where objective conditions were politically ripe, but where the subjective element, and the most rudimentary organisation, were absent.

The subjective factor, it seemed, could be supplied by the guerrilla intellectual, expansively supplied with visionary enthusiasm – entering the scene like a space traveller, able to ignite the revolutionary straw and engage armies, but also too respectful to damage the traditions and culture of those who were to be liberated.

This, like the book, was a fantasy, but a fantasy of the real. *The Observatory* exaggerates only in the emphasis it gives to the incongruous aspects of this inspiration, where the would-be, self-transforming saviour pays with his life (and that of his comrades) in a situation where rectitude is on his side but the situation quite beyond his reach. Instead of violence, this political fable presents organisation, as against *movimentismo*, as a possible vehicle for the chiliastic transformation.

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If the theme is now read as wishful thinking or escapism, it might be more respectful to consider the recent history and the present, of the territories that lie from Eastern Turkey through Iran, Afghanistan, and into Middle Asia. The ‘peasant Marxism’ inspiring the narrative is as distant now as when the book was written, but one may ask if the ‘revolutions’ and repressions in the area, under their many different banners, have advanced the cause of political and cultural liberation outlined here. Certainly what is now absent is the commitment, however incongruous, of the analytical intellectual, who came from afar, and found a willing audience.

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‘Are they willing to lose all the comforts and charms of our existence, to have barbarian youth rather than civilized senility, untilled soil and virgin forests instead of exhausted fields and artificial parkland? Will they demolish their ancestral castle for the sole pleasure of helping lay the foundations of a new house which will be built, no doubt, long after our day?’

A. Herzen,
From the Other Shore.
Year lvii of the Republic.

ONE

SOMEONE HAD LEFT a tumbler of gin on the bedroom floor, and its insistent smell woke him up. He could see in red neon across the street ‘Fly to Isfahan – for roses and nightingales.’ Some stray burghers were hammering on the railings which had closed the mouth of the underground. Three policemen going off duty let their conversation float upwards:

‘I only ever beat up one old man – for pleasure that is.’

‘One must give and take a few blows in the new social war: even a dying empire must suppress its neo-proletarian element.’

‘What do you mean, exactly?’

Their voices wandered away down the cold night streets.

He groped over for the gin. It smelt of tall blue porcelain. It made a cool infrangible column as he drank it. The leaping figures in the panopticon stopped their capering as the gin called for order and boldness.

‘Negate my negation’ said a handwritten sign on the wall – the end of some festive game, he now saw, had filled his room with merry thoughts. ‘For a General Strike of Generals’, ‘Lions, be sure your foxes are Earthed.’

It had not been a good party: but if he became drunk again, he could postpone his hangover – perhaps indefinitely. The distorted gibber of a century and a half of empire swashed and

gurgled like ethereal waves. He pulled the notices down.

He thought of yesterday's drinking: swanning through the Strand's bars like an unruffled old queen – 'Recessional' he would call it. A cheesy row of faces, men rearing up against the rampart of the counter, studying themselves for ever in the mirror behind the whiskies – the companionship of the bottle waited to be scourged to death. Then he had lunch in the 'City of Nets' – the table pitched like a roof tossing wine out of the glass and food off the plate. Finally, a drink at twilight in a pub snug as a sitting room, full of gay metropolitans in vicuna suits – beautiful unsmudged loungers with vivid laughs. He had admired the splendid girl who served him – her contempt for him surging freely from a millennial vindictiveness. She treated the other customers gently and with humour, but for him she had the face of the ancien régime, forced to keep open house for conscript revolutionaries.

At his party, he had been forced to listen to a friend urging him, for his own good, to give up a girl who had in fact refused to see him for months. He felt himself shrinking. A friend said, 'We opened our old Christmas pudding – the one reputed to have been sent by Marx: but it couldn't have been more than thirty years old, at the most.'

'I hear they have an attested specimen in Amsterdam.'

'That's most unlikely.'

'He's very witty and he sells dogs.'

'We don't *need* to smash the unions now – and we've such a technological start'

'Sure it fell down, but we'd sold it by then.'

Somewhere in Montenegro hay was being sledged out to

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grateful sheep: in England, though it was midway to dawn, trucks still bothered the late and early hares. If only he could find someone who could touch him – not for nostalgic reasons, to cure an illness, or to reawaken their own youth. But someone new, to whom his opinions staled by so much swashing around in his head seemed affronting and delightful. Those washers and jetons from the dark – perhaps these were really sovereigns? Would some young girl, fresh and exultant from her struggles with the Lincolnshire squirearchy, love him for his verbal coinage, as one loves the man in the next cell who taps ‘Comrade’ on the wall? Much more likely his evening (or morning) would be taken up with considering when to change from beer to doubles, and whether he had been asleep at the bar.

‘All Englishmen are tired,’ said the inscription over the staff college gateway – or was it a motto on the wall of that imperial banting-house where the tired servants of the queen went to sweat off their colonial surplus?

‘Having lost the empire,’ said another policeman, ‘can’t we have a bit of leave?’ The gin was over now – but here was the girl!

‘I’m so sorry, Curzon, I’ve been locked out, and I’ve no coat. This policeman wants to go home – can I sleep here?’ Arching his nose for more gin, Curzon left his sea-swollen bed and unslept dreams, setting out for a brisk five hours on the run in London.

‘Yes, naturally: do sleep here. It’s no trouble.’

He sat for a while on the stone step of the pub Tom Mann had kept: a jungular mist was rolling in from the suburbs, and

at times obscured notices to visiting Americans telling them how to elect their president.

‘Got no work?’ asked a street cleaner.

‘If I had, I’d not be doing it yet. It’s only five o’clock.’

‘I’ve crossed the river twice this morning already. Some people always win—’

‘I’m a teacher anyway, so whoever loses, I win.’

‘I’ve always wanted to teach.’

‘Perhaps you will, one day.’

‘I doubt it.’

‘I wouldn’t know how to start cleaning a street.’

The other’s whimsy turned easily back to contempt. ‘Better move then, squire: the rubbish you’re perched on belongs to my council.’

Suddenly, he was riding a midden – no, in fact just a heap of whitish earth. It was rushing backwards, pressing him clumsily against a wired wall. A hard edge of moon came in sight, occluded in the lower horn by a small photograph of Ravachol. A long way away someone was shouting, ‘Get on out of there ... Get the hell out of there!’

His stomach went dead and he thought: ‘I think I must be going to be nothing.’ If he stayed quiet, he would soon outpace the man who was shouting – no doubt that had been a Chagall refugee, prowling in urban lanes after lovers and chickens. Bump bump went Curzon’s body as it thrashed about on the earth bank. In his head was a crude gyroscope, undoubtedly manipulated from outside, which looked like two large dice. Even as he watched, the Ravachol face flipped over, and on the fresh face, he counted eight spots; eight sides? No, for the next

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face was blank, and he had forgotten to allow for Ravachol. The next blow of the dice turned him hazardously on to his back.

‘Get him out of my garden.’

But there really was no one there. The next throw of the dice produced a brochure. ‘The only way to approach is from the North. Or you might try, as we did, the over-ice route from October to May.’

‘If only I could get back to Ravachol.’

‘Here, this bloke’ll take him. Careful now, don’t spill him.’

The taxi left him in his flat. Someone had broken in to leave there some broken chairs and a firestick. He tried to find some coins for the firestick, but the door had been bolted on the inside, and if he were not careful he would be unable to find his way back. The bed seemed very full of other people. A guslar began to sing softly outside. Only Curzon slept untroubled as the governments of friendly and unfriendly states began to unload new groups of citizens at the abattoirs, or to intern them.

When he woke up, the girl – Elizabeth, wasn’t it – she said: ‘I sent the police away. They wanted to know about the chairs. This used to be a proconsular suite, you know.’

‘Let’s go to Isfahan when I’m well again. Roses. Nightingales. Whatever can a firestick be? I was convinced I had one in here. How odd to get so ill when there’s no need – I’ve to be in Tienen today.’

He considered how every journey requires a theory of aesthetics, how every journey should constitute a dislocation of conventional perceptions of historical continuity ... Could

mere travel revive his flat, his two-dimensional fortunes? Sliding – half drunk – from continent to century, until some concern caught at him, stopped his slither—

‘We’ll follow our noses across Europe—’

‘And in Tienen, what?’

‘If you come, Elizabeth? I know you so slightly, I don’t think we’d be unhappy, out of very terror. Let’s pack some sets of dice, to play for drinks. Tiny monarchical worlds of hazard – offering false chances where only the tequila is not random but darts to the gut like a tiger. In Tienen we will perhaps find a tedious man, an acquaintance: he is to give a lecture tomorrow.’

‘?’

‘Imagine the written part of Marx – the plans not only of a universal city, but the plans for an architecture, a drastically restructured personality to inhabit this projected civilisation, plans in fact of present and future. Marx himself doing some building and from these efforts extrapolating more plans – even building on the basis of meticulously scaled and detailed plans themselves derived from the general plan. In Belgium we can start looking for this general plan – it may be Marx’s, or another’s or indeed a plan of a kind no one has seen before. We shall be moving with one foot in sociocultural time, and one in sociocultural space. You’ll soon learn to hobble along the like the rest of us. We won’t be sticking to one century or one social system. People will glide in and out – pacemakers, laggards – indeed, poets and peasants, peasant poets, poets exploiting their peasants and peasants conscripted to gun down their poets. I promise you that the fantasy will be the fantasy of

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the real world, and that however much the people jigger about like parboiled ninnies, they'll be cast-iron real.'

'I think you're looking for a universal theory of misery and disappointment. I certainly shan't come.'

He wanted her to come with him.

One does not mind writing in only two dimensions, and watching these flat concepts sidling about from page to page and flowing on to the tablecloth. Perhaps conjurers are adventurers in the fourth dimension, their tricks the everyday life of the booming well-rounded fourth-dimensional bullies who plod and trample around us. But by acting in the few dimensions we have, we override the limitations of our own two-dimensional scribbles. He hoped that, just as the problem of the firestick was subsiding, the problem of Elizabeth might grow to overshadow his isolation – and, who knows, on the top branch a (probably mechanical) nightingale?

'I want you to come with me. Why not be the problem to overshadow my isolation? Don't you fancy an adventure in the dialectic? Let me at least run through a reel or two: I won't spoil the ending – and do feel free to improvise!'

'I am deeply drawn to your mind: I even like the silence it makes when it is not working.'

'That seems very coy, though, I suppose, flattering. Watch you don't become just a figment of what you admire. When we go off to the mountains to synthesise our concept once more, you may find you've been dematerialised.'

Curzon believed so deeply himself in the value of mental interconnections and was accordingly so ineffective in managing the physical and factual ones – especially with girls

like this – that he found it easy to expand his consciousness without the attrition or erosion involved with other people.

They arrived in Tienen after some pleasant enough arguments over the hospitality offered by some gothic old sports in the ship’s bar. Rolling the dice for rounds of Chartreuse, timing the waves with their stopwatches, the sports had been a breath of old England straight from the gated roads of the stone-blind midlands.

Curzon thought that he would obtain useful proprietorial skills by steering Elizabeth round the system factors and brokers of the West – ingratiating himself in a manner not wholly amatory, but still the interesting side of busyboding. Calculated practice – with the child’s self-mazing self-conceit – and self-deceit – so that perhaps he *would* let himself fall for real. At the Iron Gates, possibly, hearing them clank shut as he and Elizabeth scuttled deeper into the warm heart of socialism.

‘What I like about Belgium is that the Whitbread frontier stretches nearly into Germany. I owe Whitbread’s more enthusiasm and patriotism than any other British institution – except possibly Worthington.’

‘These people in the bar were sweet. One cried when you told him a sailor had been snapped in half by a hawser as we sailed.’

‘Muddled oaf. That was a lie. He’d already said he could have beaten their strike, so I threw that in to make him ashamed. No credit to him, it made him maudlin. I was only concerned lest a small error I made should have swamped the boat. The washroom had a saltwater tap which I turned on and couldn’t extinguish. It seemed we were lower in the water

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when we docked.’

There were several phalanxes of fascists in the square at Tienen. They wore carnival heads or fibre helmets, painted to resemble iron, to avoid recognition by the police. Chattering through the chubby heads of baby-bland festive politicians, through the long snouts of cool-eyed carnivores, to their comrades-in-arms, the iron-headed crocus-shoots, they seemed to welcome the violence their absurdity encouraged. The police practised the slash and the lunge with their long truncheons, happy enough to have heads of a new consistency to pound away at on an afternoon of political excitement.

‘Ours is the other group,’ said Curzon, ‘the party of the angels. Over there – on the other side of the dialectic.’ He pointed to it – a cable for the television crews. Elizabeth realised that he must have divided his time on the boat between her and the tourist bar, and the first class bar upstairs.

Softly, sweetly, gently, they strolled through the kite-strings of troupes of children in smocks. Street musicians with pottery tambours, dyudyuks and dragon-headed lutes, scrambled among the kites and the cables, sneering and spitting. ‘Shades of the charnel house,’ said Curzon, noticing the slivers of goose and turkey membranes used to pluck and patch the instruments.

Far over the fields flew a scarlet balloon, carrying the president of an association of anarchist – or at least *anarchisant* – civil servants. They could see him waving and hugely laughing as he neared the town, but local warm air wafted him away – racked with glee, nearly tumbling from the gondola. Elizabeth and Curzon joined their procession – a

genius of sublation had allotted banners each with a single word – which read sensible from front, or rear, of the procession – but which was its own walking, singing, chanting negation.

‘Red or black, it’s all the same to me,’ said a woman in front of them. ‘They’ll none of them stop the cows giving milk.’

She said this with such satisfaction that Curzon asked, ‘What’s all the same?’ but Elizabeth hurried him along. At the head of the procession a motorcycle policeman was weeping, but he put on his goggles and outstared the stare.

In Brussels a television producer gave the word to his crew, and the processions began. Curzon galloped forward with his advance guard towards the fascists, but mobile police separated them. ‘Why did I do that?’ wondered Curzon.

Under the tall candles of sticky scented trees, the children played with their kites. The balloon rolled back and nestled down among them. The popular front procession was in full flight, gloomily negating itself as the bearers turned tail, gradually shedding concepts and sense, as the longer words were thrown away to assist the retreat, and the shorter words prodded into police and nationalists.

‘Quick, into the gondola!’

‘Christ, he’s gone mad,’ thought Elizabeth, who did not put all she saw into as many sets of words and synonyms as Curzon, and had in any case not noticed that the balloon, snared by a fish kite, had drifted into the square.

As they rose above Tienen, they could see fighting in the streets. The television cameras burst like glass furnaces. The

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friendly fringe of suburban streets was filling with men from artisan tenements, the fires of the factories had been scattered over the shop floors. Harrows were dragged over the mosaic floors of the town hall. ‘We shall win because we are the stronger’ floated up to them, but they could not tell from which side. The first heavy camions and the hard black noses of tanks were ploughing through the fields towards Tienen.

‘Since we are clearly not to have the chance of hearing my friend talk on the future of future, or whatever, I shall have to deliver the address myself,’ said Curzon.

‘Quick, then,’ said the anarchist. ‘Believe me, I’d not miss this for green smoke. But those kids in the square sew razor blades in the kites’ tails to rip what they may. I thought if I laughed they’d reel their machines in – but they didn’t. Red as little foxes, I hope?’ he asked them.

The collapse and destruction of social harmony in Tienen, which had as its first victim some sociologists on fieldwork, martyrs to the trade, carried on below them. Feathers of burnt paper quivered up towards them.

‘I have been trying these many years,’ Curzon began, ‘these many necks of these many woods, to run my time backwards. Living a clean and decent faustian life, but in my mind unravelling time as you ravel it. Let’s put it another way: ideas are simple. Let’s have a war, thinks the general manicuring his big proud horse, that should give the workers something to think about. But he doesn’t need to have the idea of Lancer Mroszek sitting in a field full of fever and sloughed limbs eating rye bead in the tenth year of hostilities.

‘If only we could have ideas as involved and fantastic as

real conditions, we fantasists would have to carry less criticism. No one says that it is absurd to have had the First World War – or that it is absurd to think that another war will break out. Yet if our idea of the First World War covers what happened to some real – or imaginary – people or places or things for four years, or our idea of the next war includes a projected index of Austrian industrial production, one is accounted a fool. Why is this?

The President thought rapidly as they drifted towards the ground in some country, ‘Why do they put anarchists in prison? To confirm their faith? How pleasant if every state decided it did not want its anarchists, and would give them an island, pineapples at the heart of every bush, a lemur hooked on every branch, where they could renounce the rewards of citizen obligations and discover whether they were an historical moment or a society out of time.

‘In my last prison, there were no rats. So we used to feed the warders, call them pet names, be sad when they went away or died. You could say in fact that we socialised them. Angry at first, they let themselves come to depend on our largesse – we could not love each other, so we loved them. Up to a point. The point where we were let out. No one wants to walk back into the world with a pocketful of prison rats.

‘Unlucky Tienen. Sad to see two groups who are deprived, fighting each other. However incongruous an alliance between them, better inconsistency of this kind than to shout to the first tank from Brussels, “Liberate me!” and receive the 80 mm shell in your throat.

‘I feel like an early barbarian showing later folk-waves the

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best places to loot, those women who are not rather jaded by the whole business of conquest, saying, “Of course, don’t make too much mess. We’ve all got to live here, and it is more comfortable if you leave the roofs on the buildings and the grain in the granaries. And please don’t throw anything unpleasant in the wells.”

‘But of course, off they strut, to poison all the water. It is satisfactory enough to see them lying about a week later, faces shrunken and sneaky like mink and fox in their shrouds. But by that time one is alongside them oneself. If I could only construct a Bokhara of the mind – a militia waving gladioli, peasants in green hats carrying scarecrows in national costume out to the fields. Wooden walls to keep out the wolves, naturally, and some teams of camels to help out with the road work. Tall birds among the reeds, cows in the rice fields, half submerged in deep summer. Mausolea full of dried grass and pinks – the rose mosque bursting through with foliage at the top, like a neglected onion. And I shall live there, and no one will talk to me, nor I to them, since I shall have invented for this city a language which only I understand. I need only leave there when I’m hungry or cold.

‘And then someone else will have to fuss round me and do what I tell them.’

‘We are still living in the folds of your literary outer garments,’ said Elizabeth.

‘Listen to what this man has to say,’ said Curzon, as they recovered from the shock of the casual destruction of Tienen.

‘I drove a truck in the Soviet Union for two years. Up the mountain and down the mountain ten times a day. Little fox

faces hoping for twenty hungry miles that I'd miss a corner. In the evenings, cards, drink, talking of the sweet future with our faces the faces of the damned. One of us came from Kronstadt – and he used to have nightmares of the troops coming towards him across the ice in their white parkas, great squares of rotten ice cracking and rearing, short, calling shells throwing spouts of yellow and grey water into the air. He'd such a torment from the double aspect of things that he used to sit all night on a huge rock, awaiting who knows what comeuppance.

'There was a man too who had been in the defence of Madrid – a Mexican – who had left his post out of fear, or boredom or whatever. It had seemed so easy, he said, just to walk away: and there were in any case so many people anxious to take over his machine gun that he did not consider that he was giving up what he later referred to as "his historic role".

"How can I get it back," he would ask, "when I've missed it all?"

'And I would tell him the role he played was historic all right – he had just helped along the losing of a war – and that was history.'

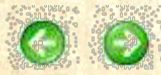
Try again, thought Curzon. Fasten the memories together and you invent a new causal chain. Invent a new memory and you gain something on the unknown. Try another drink, another country ... and yet this is all wrong.

Playing endlessly by the stream in Silesia, waiting for the field grey or the white parkas, depending on the season and the direction of the wind: crying 'Momma, is that the fire brigade?' As they come with hoses that can pour fire, and momma is skeetering up the road thinking, 'They'll get him,

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anyway.’

Even the squirrels, who expect to avoid this sort of thing and even to keep a few caches of nuts through the campaign, realise that it is better to pull out. Loading the drunks into police wagons in Boston of a weekend – now, instead, the broken pieces are in Tienen.



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