



FAR OFF PLACES



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Found in Translation
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Staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Annie Rutherford
Editors: Jessica Johannesson Gaitán, Adam Ley-Lange
Digital Publisher: Trevor Fountain
Art Director: Beth Barnett

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The Red Canals of Mars, The Amber Spokes of Venus
Notes from the Early Twentieth Century
Anatoly Kudryavitsky, translated by Carol Ermakova

From a lofty mountain peak we see a distant star, from the heights in far off lands we see our native shores. Gazing into the unseen is not wearisome, gazing with the aid of mechanical devices piques our curiosity, yet a glance into the mirror brings us back into our nauseatingly familiar reflected world.

From here, from this microstate of San Marino, Italy seemed a boundless mega-land. The air there kept me afloat, not because of its density, but, on the contrary, because of its rarefication. A true holiday for my asthmatic lungs...

A certain Professor Percival was staying at the same hotel as I was. A philosopher and a naturalist, he existed within the aura of his own unusual astronomic theories, and this aura preceded him like a small but elegant cloud. Percival was approaching sixty, streaks of grey had confidently captured his coiffure, but his moustache stood proud like ears of wheat in a windless field; or maybe despite the wind. His eyes looked out trustingly, even guiltily—was he ashamed of his knowledge? Was he a modest man? Well, he was obviously a high society man, a man of the world—in the sense that the light of the world lived in him, and not the other way around.

I was introduced to him. I didn't ask where he was from; he spoke English with an American accent which gave him away as a native of New England.

The professor was in the early stages of scientific enthusiasm—a trait particular to all those who come to the exact sciences from another discipline: he had trained as a social anthropologist. Musings about the cognoscibility of the world—or even of other worlds—would occasionally trickle down from his little cloud.

'Riddles have a nice, untroubled life in this world, Professor. Better

than people,' I told him.

'Well, we sometimes trouble them,' Percival smiled. 'Riddles stir up our imagination.'

'And imagination is the mother of new riddles,' I said with a shrug.

The sun's rays folded themselves into a little prism-house. Something ungainly, like a tongue-twister, could be read in its windows: from crucial to excruciating, from vital to vile, from meticulous to metaphysical. The spiral of perception laid out its loops, as in a shop front, improper and imperishable.

Meanwhile, the professor switched topics with the agility of a leaping grasshopper.

'We should build an observatory here,' he announced. 'There is an unparalleled view of Venus from up here. Mars is best observed from the Arizona desert. And that's precisely what I was doing last year...'

'Build an observatory? Where?'

'On Monte Titano. The higher the better.'

He fell silent. For two days.

Then his verbal spring gushed forth once more, and there followed a second attempt to spark my interest. Cozying up to me at dinner, the professor announced:

'I must confess something to you. I have already set up a make-shift observatory. In the old fortress on the hilltop.... Well, they call it a mountain here... The facility is no great shakes of course, but it's better than nothing. I have set up a telescope there. Tomorrow Mars will go into opposition. I can take you with me, if you like.'

'Yes, that would be intriguing,' I replied.

'By the way, you can help me with the telescope. It's rather complicated to set up, a second pair of hands always comes in handy.'

I examined San Marino's medieval architecture that day, and it examined me. In the evening the professor delicately clawed at my door.

‘Time to set off.’

Since I had already completed several mountaineering expeditions in the Apennines that year, my equipment was at the ready. But to head into the mountains in the dark—well, there was something oddly unnecessary about that.

However, the professor announced no equipment would be needed since we would be following a path as wide as a farm track most of the way. He fetched two powerful torches from his room.

‘They may come in handy up there,’ he said. ‘Though the brightest nightlight has already been lit, of course—the moon!’

Indeed, the moon was full. She led herself along the long lane out of the town into the darkness, into the bushes’ dark clouds. The quiet evening noiselessly crooned the lingering strains of an Italian ballad. The smell of strong tobacco and cheap food dogged us like a nagging companion.

The hotel completed the town and, from there, a stream spun itself out into the valley. The moon turned the olive branches silver and poured her whiteness into the stream. The path rolled itself into a ball, unravelled itself again, rolled under some bushes and imperceptibly rolled out onto the foot of a low mountain.

We were walking straight up to the moon herself, but she was running away from us, darting behind trees, silvering our hair. Ah, now we were already high up. The path, previously as broad as a country lane, narrowed; somewhere there, above our heads, the summit hung.

When he came level with a huge boulder split off from the cliff and blocking the road, its jagged point jabbing skywards, the professor stopped.

‘Seems there has been a landslide here. Not long ago,’ he remarked. ‘We’ll have to go around.’

A few trees grew by the boulder, ringed by some brushwood. The professor pushed a branch aside and disappeared; but he

reappeared again in next to no time.

‘It’s fine, there’s a way through.’

A cavern yawned open beyond the brushwood. We strode ahead, the torches lighting our way. We were trying not to make a sound as even an echo could call down another landslide. At last the moonlight shone out in the distance.

We emerged from the cavern and stopped. The mountain’s slope seemed lifeless over here. The professor informed me there was no other way to reach this place and that he himself had only been here once.

‘You can get to the old fortress from this side, too. Let’s go up. But don’t stray off the path.’

The path was quite narrow, the light from the torches grew ever more feeble, and I was already regretting Percival had roped me into this. We were still clambering up the slope when the professor suddenly stopped me.

‘There’s a mountain lake below us. Well worth a look,’ he said, sounding like an Italian *cicerone*.

The cloud which had temporarily hidden the moon was drowning in the lake’s dark waters. The surface was perfectly smooth, unruffled.

And finally, here she is! The moon came out in all her glory, glanced at the lake, preened herself in its mirror and then hid herself in the cloud again as it swam up.

‘The summit is beyond that crag,’ said the professor, finally coming to and remembering the reason behind our nocturnal promenade.

The mountain, Monte Titano, had several summits; this one was flattish, and not the highest. Above the summit’s sandy yellow hat loomed the fortress, not so imposing as the famous Guaita, but quite grand nevertheless. Percival unlocked the unpainted door.

Cold, dank air threw itself at us as though it had long been gathering its strength, readying itself for this moment. The telescope

turned out to be relatively small. We uncovered it and wheeled it over to the inner courtyard.

‘I had wanted to bring better equipment here, but I didn’t have time for it. The landslide could be dismantled, by the way, or even blown up if need be, and then the track would be passable again.’

The evening generously poured its cool, airy streams down from on high, holding nothing back, but it was easier to breathe outside than in the crypt-like air of the fortress. The telescope’s shaft was soon straining skywards and the professor plumped himself down on the metal seat. Having fiddled with the telescope for a long time, he finally pulled a notebook from his pocket and set about painstakingly drawing what he saw.

‘Hmm, they change their contours each time, but the structure is always the same,’ he muttered. ‘Must depend on the angle you view them from...’

Then, finally, he lowered himself down to my level and began to explain:

‘I’m talking about the canals on Mars, the ones which Schiaparelli described all those years back. I’m trying to map them...’

Some fireflies arrived and created their own map of the universe, a constantly shifting world swaying with a mysteriously phosphorescent green glow.

The drawing complete, the professor leaned back with a flop, all but losing his balance.

‘Would you like to take a peek at Mars?’ he asked me.

I did not need to be asked twice; in the blink of a few swift movements I was already peering into the oblique cloud.

‘Adjust the focus with this screw here...’ came the advice.

And everything became clear. A reddish, cloudy ball floated into the viewfinder, its dark streaks faintly discernible.

‘Can you see the canals?’ the professor asked impatiently.

‘I can see some kind of lines...’

‘Here, take this sheet of paper. Draw. Then we’ll compare.’

I transferred what I saw onto the sheet of paper.

Percival took both sketches, gazed at them for a few moments, shook his head in amazement and asked:

‘Did you really see what you have depicted here?’

I nodded.

‘Take a look for yourself,’ he said, handing me the sketches.

They bore some resemblance to each other, but the lines connected at different angles, and the alignment within the viewfinder was different, too.

‘Mmm, strange, most strange... I would like to keep your drawing, if I may, I need to mull it over... I’m planning to publish an atlas of Martian canals.’

I didn’t object, but now I in my turn had a request: would he show me Venus? A spider-like web of lines was visible on her amber sphere, too, reminiscent of some elaborate hieroglyph. Were these canals, too?

‘Yes, the structure is similar,’ said the professor. ‘It all has to be studied. That’s why it’s essential to build an observatory.’

I don’t know what became of that project since I returned to Rome the following day.

But the professor did indeed publish an atlas—I came across it six months later lying on an optician’s table in Rome. I had paid the optician a visit to replace a cracked lens in my glasses. He was an Italian who had practised in London at some point and acquired a passable knowledge of English.

‘What do you make of this?’ I asked him, pointing at the book.

‘Very interesting. Now everyone will start writing about the ancient Martian civilization.’

‘And do you believe it existed?’

‘I believe one thing: I believe Percival did indeed see what he drew.’

'So it's true, then?'

'That's not what I said.'

'But if he observed it...'

'The question is: what did he really observe?'

I told him that I myself had recently looked down Percival's telescope, but had seen a somewhat different network of canals.

'Precisely!' said the optician. 'It all depends on the observer.'

'But what about objective reality?!'

'Well, of course, objective reality exists. But the question is, how can one distinguish the objective from the subjective? Or in other words, distinguish what the observer sees from what really exists? Percival used a twenty-four inch telescope. In his book he writes that he made his best observations of Venus' network of spokes when the ocular aperture was less than half a millimetre. Do you know what that reminded me of? We opticians use that adjustment when we study the characteristics of a patient's eye, or the pattern of the blood vessels on the retina: with a narrow ocular aperture, the shadows of the blood vessels become visible.'

'You mean...'

'No, no, I don't mean anything. I just gave you the facts, you can draw your conclusions yourself.'

I sat on a bench in the park by Piazza Vittorio Emanuele opposite a picturesque ruin. The children on the neighbouring bench were diligently licking *gelato*, not forgetting to leave their mark on the sound palette of that pre-evening hour, too. My thoughts ran thus: could it be that Percival had been studying shadows cast by the blood vessels in his very own eyes for all those years, supposing they were canals on Mars and Venus? All those sketches, the atlas of the two 'planets'... nothing but a celebration of wasted labour... Even if he himself realised what had happened, he would banish the thought, just as we banish the thought of death. But what will the next generation think of him? What will be said of his labours at the

voiceless court of time where the future is our arrogant prosecutor and the past our timid, absent-minded public defender? Besides, aren't we all sent to fetch time from somewhere or other sooner or later? And so we go in search of it, scooping up as much as we can carry, only to lose it along the way as it slips from our watches like plums plopping through a net bag. 'The quest of your life...'

And what if we try to find some higher meaning to this tale? Well, what is there to be found? Nothing, except, of course, the blatantly obvious: no matter what we look at, we are always looking inside ourselves.