

Chapter 14: Grave e Mesto from October the First is too Late

by
Sir Fred Hoyle

To the Reader

The 'science' in this book is mostly scaffolding for the story, story-telling in the traditional sense. However, the discussions of the significance of time and of the meaning of consciousness are intended to be quite serious, as also are the contents of chapter fourteen.

Fred Hoyle, 14 July 1965

14 Grave e Mesto

The following morning the party had quite dissolved. When Melea and I appeared for breakfast we found John talking to a white-haired man of about sixty. Melea instantly became serious. She said:

'This morning it has to be different. It is about the film we stopped you from seeing the other afternoon. You will soon understand why it was better left until the end.'

This made me uneasy

'What do you mean, by there being an end?'

'I think you must see first. After that you must hear what we have to say. Then we can decide.'

The two girls and the man left us. The beginning of the film appeared. Evidently the others didn't want to watch it.

The showing took upward of four hours. It was the longest documentary film I had ever seen, naturally enough for it dealt with a time span of six thousand years. We covered time at an average rate of a century to each four minutes. There was no place here for intricate involvements, or for the niceties of politics. Yet it was all too easy to follow. The black record of the human species swept remorselessly on as the minutes and hours ticked away.

It was a shock at the beginning to be very quickly out of both the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. The first quick point was a transition from poverty to affluence in the undeveloped continents of the twentieth century, Africa and Asia. A homogeneous civilization swept with incredible speed over the whole Earth. There were brief flashes of the people, of their machines, their customs, their political leaders. It was all done visually. We sat in silence watching, our ears free of the cacophonous uproar of the usual sound track. It was easy to comment to each other on what we saw, not that we had much to say beyond the occasional exclamation.

Earth teemed with people. Cities spread out farther and farther until they became joined to each other. Urban populations covered an increasing fraction of the land surface. At first it was only one per cent, then five per cent, then twenty-five per cent. The technological drive went irresistibly on. Land became of more and more value. There was no room any longer for any animal save man. So we watched the gradual extinction of the whole animal world. Even the bird population declined and withered away.

We saw something of domestic life. We saw the standardized little boxes in which almost everybody

was now living. The insistent question formed in your mind, what was it all good for? What conceivable reason could there be to prefer a thousand little boxes to one dignified house? The same of course for the people. What was the advantage of this appalling fecundity of the human species?

Soon we were in the twenty-fifth century. Angry voices began to be heard. The pressures were mounting, competing with the technology. The technology itself was kept going by the most rigorous demands on individual freedom. It was indeed a veritable ant-heap. The average person became restricted to a life that lay somewhere between the freedom of the twentieth century and the lack of freedom of a man serving a life sentence in prison. Nobody travelled now, except on official business - I mean travelled to distant parts. Everything was provided in one's own locality, food, amusements, work. The work itself demanded little initiative. The people were leading what can only be described as a punched-card life.

The technology wasn't working too well any more. Food was mostly of poor quality, mostly factory produced. At that stage, in the twenty-fifth century, the seas were essentially swept clean of fish. The land animals had been the first to go, then the birds, now last the fish.

The first disaster happened with amazing suddenness. What had seemed a more or less homogeneous civilization split into two, like the division of an amoeba.

'It's a point of instability,' whispered John. 'Look, the whole thing's going to grow exponentially.'

Whatever he meant, this vast gargantuan, sprawling, tasteless, in every way appalling, civilization exploded in a flash. It started with bombs and rockets, with fire. The film, so far silent, now came alive, not with any synthetic sound track, but with the crackling of the actual fire, with the shriek, instantly cut short, of a woman enveloped in a cloud of burning petrol. Then it was all over. It was quiet everywhere. Death and decay swept at an incredible speed, like some monstrous fungus, everywhere over the Earth. There was no movement, no transport, no food distribution. The intricate organization which had itself fed on the efforts of a large fraction of the whole population was dead. Everything which had depended on it, including the lives of the people, now died too. We could hear the whine of infants, the despairing cries of children. The abomination came at last to an end. It seemed as if the human species, having wiped everything else from the face of the planet, had now itself become extinct.

Miraculously this did not happen. A dozen or more specially favoured, especially lucky, small centres of population managed to survive. They were already beginning their recovery by the time we saw them, I suppose because no camera had been there to record the worst moments. Indeed the technique of photography suddenly became very crude, almost the way it had been when photography was first invented.

We saw the slow steady expansion of one centre after another. The population increased, the technology improved. We saw the people happy and smiling again. We heard them talking in a new language. We saw them attempting to recover the relics and treasures of the past, particularly books and manuscripts. We saw how they made every effort as they improved to absorb the culture of the past. Amazingly, a great deal survived.

By now we were almost a thousand years on. The new civilization was becoming exuberant. There was nothing of the deathly, machine-like quality of the situation before the first upheaval, the Great Disaster as it came to be known. People were individuals again. There was hope for the future once more.

The different centres were by now overlapping each other. They were in argument. There was a period of war, astonishingly short it seemed to us on this kaleidoscopic record. The war turned out to be no more than a kind of lubricant that allowed the hitherto separate regions to join up with each other into a coherent whole. With a growing sense of horror I realized it was all going to happen again. There was going to be a second disaster. It became so completely inevitable as one watched. Century after

century went by. Each brought its contribution to the elephantine growth. Gone was the zip and zest of the first pioneers of this new civilization. We were back again in a punched-card era. It all happened with horrible predictability. The first and second catastrophes might have been interchanged and you couldn't have told the difference.

So it was with the reconstruction. We saw it all beginning again. There was a longish sequence belonging to North America, in what used to be the United States. It had a vaguely familiar look about it. John burst out loudly, in contrast to our previous whispers:

'That's it, look, that's it! That's what we saw, when we flew across America from Hawaii!'

So it was. What we had seen was not the America of the eighteenth century. It was the America of the fourth millennium.

The record was relentless. I could see now why the girls and the white-haired man had not wanted to stay. Added to horror of intimate detail, I had the feeling of a whole species in some monstrous, unclean cycle from which it could never escape. Each cycle was occupying a little less than a thousand years. Always during the reconstruction phase we could see the same bland confidence that this time it would be different. Because these phases were reasonably long drawn out, over three centuries or so, it always seemed as if the disease had been cured. Then quite suddenly, almost in a flash, the monstrous expansion started again. It was a kind of shocking social cancer. Then came the major surgery of flame and death, and so back to endeavour, to a temporary happiness, and to unrequited hope.

Yet at last something different did happen. At last, when it seemed as if extinction had finally come, just two centres managed to survive. They grew to a reasonable and moderate size, and at that they stopped, or almost stopped, for nearly a thousand years. The film became quite detailed. An important point had evidently been reached.

Always when a centre of population expanded from a small beginning the people were far less heterogeneous than the kind of human population we were used to. Now we had a rather uniform situation'. Yet there were still the two population centres.

There was no suggestion of war, however. The people, looking much like the people of the future, were restrained and reasonable, they had learnt the lesson of the past. The two centres maintained, a quite friendly rivalry, with the aspects of a favourable situation about it. The rivalry seemed to prevent complacency, it seemed to provide an incentive to achievement. Yet as time went by I could detect a slow steady growth in both population groups, caused apparently by the friendly competition between them.

Both groups were quite well aware of what was happening. They noted the growth, yet they decided after considerable thought that the situation could be kept within bounds. So it was for a long time. Quite suddenly, however, control seemed to be lost. There was a stage beyond which expansion simply could not be prevented. This stage was reached before anybody expected it. From then on we watched a wretched society being forced along a road down which it did not wish to travel. It seemed as if everybody knew what was going to happen, yet nobody could prevent it.

'They've got beyond a point of instability. It's inherent in the organization. They can't get back.'

John's prognostication was right. The controlled rivalry disappeared. In its place came an unrestrained rivalry. The groups grew, merged together, after the usual momentary outburst, and so the disease spread to its inevitable conclusion.

At the next re-expansion phase there were three groups. When they reached a very moderate size, about a million people each, discussions took place between them. The outcome was that all three groups merged voluntarily, not to cover the whole Earth, but to contain themselves in a small portion of it. So the people of the future at last appeared. I saw clearly now why they lived in only one place.

How long had they been in their present state? It turned out, upward of a thousand years. In that

time strikingly little change had taken place. They believed a genuine stability had at last been achieved, and their belief had more substance to it than the facile, arrogant claims we had seen so often in the earlier parts of the film.

We sat for a long time in silence. There did not seem very much to say. Maybe an hour later, the girls and the white-haired man returned.

'I think the time has come for us to speak seriously,' said the man.

I could see something of the appalling predicament that he and his people were in. It was clear the Earth, with its different centres of population, might already be beyond all control. John was evidently thinking along the same lines, for he asked:

'What plans have you made, about how you're going to organize the Earth?'

The white-haired man answered simply: 'We have no such plans, because none are possible.'

The horror of the situation was at last becoming clear to me. It wasn't so much that we, the remnants of the twentieth century world, were inevitably condemned to a catastrophic future, with its rhythmic disasters, but that these people, the people of the future, were condemned to return to the agony of the past.

I could see the hopelessness of trying to impose any kind of control. It might last for a few years, even for a few generations, but from what we had seen there could be no permanent stability. Sooner or later the same grotesque swings, from arrogant expansion to pitiful collapse, would occur. It could only be prevented through the gross annihilation of the whole of the past. I had no doubt the technology of these people would enable them to carry through such an annihilation. Yet this was just as impossible as any attempt at control. It would destroy, psychologically, the annihilators. It would be a complete negation of all that these people stood for.

John had been silent for a while, evidently in perturbed thought. Now he asked, surprisingly, 'Have you seen the situation in Africa and in the southern hemisphere?'

'Yes, we have made a survey.'

'What did you find?'

'Nothing, the same as you.'

'Isn't that a bit odd? I know you have elected to live here in this part of the world. But surely some of your people, if only small expeditions, must have explored other parts of the world fairly frequently?'

'You are wondering why neither you nor we have run into any of our expeditions. The point has not escaped us.'

'What's your explanation?'

'We know of nothing definite.'

John was pacing about restlessly. He was evidently much agitated. Dramatically he turned. 'You know what I think, I think both Africa and the southern hemisphere belong to the future, like the great Plain of Glass. I don't think they're your contemporary world at all. Otherwise there would be unmistakable traces of your people somewhere.'

The white-haired man smiled a little sadly.

'You are very intelligent, Dr Sinclair. There seems to be little that has escaped you. Yes, it is possible that those regions may represent the future, the future even to us.'

'You realize the implication?'

'Naturally.'

I could contain myself no longer. 'For heaven's sake what does it mean?'

John turned on me. 'It means that in the future, in the time belonging to those lands, the human race has become extinct. It has all come to nothing, the great experiment of animal life on this planet. Nothing has survived except a few insects.'

'I do not see why you should be so perturbed, Dr Sinclair,'

'It is a confession of failure.'

'I cannot see why. In that sense, failure must come in any case, quite inevitably. You yourself have stood on the great Plain of Glass. You know what the whole Earth will come to in the end. The only question is whether it comes later, or sooner.'

I turned incredulously. 'Extinction! It doesn't worry you?'

'In the sense of a serious critical problem, no. It will be hard for you to understand our point of view. In your time, everything of importance always lay in the future. You worked for the future, you were dominated by a sense of progress. The path along which you walked was always less important than the view around the next corner. Our philosophy is quite different. We have strong ideas of how life should be lived. If the conditions we believe to be necessary can no longer be met we would prefer there to be no future. You see, we do not believe in time as an ever-rolling stream. We believe all times are equally important, the past is not lost.'

I looked quizzically at John, for this was much what he himself had said one afternoon back in England. I remembered his argument about consciousness and about rows of pigeon holes, except I couldn't remember the details. Whether because he actually agreed with the white-haired man, or because he thought I had detected him in some inconsistency, John now took a different line.

'I could sympathize with your point of view if you could be sure extinction will come quickly. Do you think that will be the way of it? Surely there will be a long slow downward trend, at any rate to begin with. The degeneration will occur by slow creeping degrees. Things will go just a little wrong at first, then more wrong, then catastrophically wrong. We have seen enough today to be sure our species will not die easily. Extinction will be a long-drawn-out, agonizing affair. Surely you can't maintain that living through such an experience would be in any way pleasant? Surely it is to be avoided, if it possibly can be?'

The white-haired man fell silent. I could see John's point had great force with him. The girl Neria took up the argument:

'These are exactly the questions we have been occupied with during the past months. We have only come to a decision after much discussion.'

The white-haired man continued. 'It is only fair to tell you that what we are now saying is being heard by all our people.'

He pointed to the walls of the room. as if to signify their qualities as receiving and transmission systems, qualities that were really obvious from the translations we were receiving.

He went on, 'I tell you this to make it clear that I am not giving just a personal opinion. These are the considered views of our whole community.'

'So what it comes down to,' said John, 'is that you're not going to do anything definite. You're going to continue in the same way as before?'

'You are correct. We have weighed the likelihood of extinction against all the other factors. We see that a general mixing of ourselves with the people of Europe might be said to give the human species another chance. But it would only be a blind chance.'

'It may be better to take even a blind chance.'

'With the certainty of a repetition of what you have just seen?'

We were back at the dilemma.

'Is there no way of proceeding slowly, of making experiments as you go?' I asked. For answer, the white-haired man went on:

'It is necessary for me to tell you something further, which I do not think you have yet appreciated. This strange world, this world with different ages living side by side, is not going to last permanently.'

Soon we shall revert to where we were before, or very nearly to where we were before.'

John nodded. 'Yes, I've been having suspicions in that direction. The question is, whose world is it going to be?'

'There can be no doubt at all about that. It will be ours. The play is already complete so far as you are concerned. There is no possibility of changing your society. It is we who are balanced on the knife edge.'

Deep within me I had the concept of there being some sort of plan.

When I said so, the white-haired man answered, 'The concept of a plan involves the idea of working to a specified end. You have in mind an ultimate El Dorado, which some day you may attain. Yet there can be no such El Dorado for the Earth. You have seen the final state of the Earth, out there in the great Plain of Glass. Perhaps you may think we could escape to some other planet moving around some other star. Yet that star too will die. So it will be for our whole galaxy. Ultimate continuity, in a physical, material respect is impossible.

'It is possible that gradually, inevitably, a huge intellect is being built from the creatures evolving on trillions of planets, everywhere throughout the universe. What in these circumstances you wonder would be our personal contribution? Perhaps if we were lucky we might contribute some small fragment to the sum total'. More likely, we should contribute nothing. In all respects duplication occurs on an enormous scale, galaxies, stars, planets, living creatures, all in vast numbers. Stars like each other, living creatures like each other, all doing more or less the same thing, many indeed following almost exactly the same course of evolution. Yet, like the occasional mutation, something a little different may happen in exceptional cases. Perhaps in one case in a thousand a new facet may emerge. The question we have asked ourselves is whether this small chance is worth all the agony. Is it worth even the few thousand years you have observed this morning? Was the long process of evolution, lasting hundreds of millions of years, perhaps still to go on for hundreds of millions of years, worth the eventual small chance of life here on the Earth making a fragmentary contribution to some higher level of attainment, of which we can barely conceive? To an imaginary planner, the answer would of course be yes, because the planner would be interested only in the higher levels being built from the lower, just as we ourselves are pleased to have evolved from more primitive creatures. Yet to the creatures themselves the answer may be no.'

I saw now where the argument was leading. 'Your answer I take it is no?'

'Our answer is no. If we hold firmly with the utmost determination to our present point of balance we may hope to deny what we believe to be the normal course of evolution.'

John was walking up and down. 'Can we come back now to the how and the why of it?'

'There are several interpretations. It could be an opportunity to repair some biological defect in our heredity. We may have lost some essential component which your population has still within it. It could be a punishment, by showing us our own extinction, to cause us distress. It could even be an experiment to see how we react in the face of both these things.'

'Surely we're faced now with a situation that doesn't concern you alone? Your technology is naturally better than ours, but there are now at least twenty times as many people in our world as there are in yours.'

'That is quite incorrect I am afraid. Your people exist only in a ghost world. For a little while your world may have a vivid reality, but very soon now, now that we have made our decision, it will be gone. It will go in a brief flash, just as it arrived.'

I found it difficult to conceive of myself as a 'ghost. 'I would not have said there was anything ghostlike about the two of us.'

'Not in the least, you are real enough.'

Melea spoke for the first time. 'The different zones of the Earth will change back to what they were

before. The Greece in which we met, the temple, will be gone. It will be gone far more completely than even the ruined remains of your own time. It will be gone almost without trace. It will be gone, except for the records in our libraries. Europe too will be gone, so will the great Plain of Glass. It will only be this zone here that will remain.'

The man nodded and went on, 'So you must decide. For the people of your country there is no decision to make. For us, we have made our decision. But for you it will be difficult. If you leave here you will disappear, into oblivion. If you stay, you will continue to live out your lives among us. The decision you will take must depend on your own thoughts and emotions. We cannot guide you further. Between you there is both reason and emotion. You must find where your balance lies.'

Before they left, Melea came to me and said, 'I will not stay with you tonight, because I do not want to influence the way you will decide.'

The three of them, the two girls and the white-haired man, looking almost infinitely sad, left us to our thoughts and deliberations.

My first reaction was to question what had been said. 'Is there any possibility of it not turning out the way they think? I mean about Britain and Europe simply disappearing. It seems preposterous.'

'Well, it's only the inverse of what happened before. If it was possible to go one way, it must be possible to go the other.'

'But everything back home, John, it was real enough. Those weren't ghost people, they were people with real feelings.'

'Of course they had real feelings, but they were apparitions nevertheless. For us it's different. We shall live out a perfectly real life if we stay here, but only if we stay here.'

'Well, there can't be any doubt about it. Going back - to oblivion I mean.'

'That was the way I felt until I began to think about it. What you must realize is, you really wouldn't be going back to oblivion, you'd be going back to one life not two.'

'I don't understand, even faintly.'

'Surely you could see from the film we've just watched that we've already lived our proper lives. Our lives exist - you remember the pigeon hole business - lives in which we quitted Los Angeles for Hawaii. Somewhere in Hawaii there was a forking point. Instead of a single set of pigeon holes, suddenly, there became two sets. One of them went along perfectly normal lines.'

'You mean the lines we expected, a life in which we returned to the Los Angeles of the twentieth century?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Why don't we know anything about it?'

'Because the two have separated, they've forked apart. There's no connexion between them. You're either in the one or the other. It's the sequence all over again. Whichever you're in you never know of the other. In this sequence you can never know what happened when you returned to Los Angeles. In that other sequence you can never know even a single thing about this one. The two are utterly separated. In the other sequence, neither you nor I will know about the future, about the film we saw this morning.'

'Then what does it come down to? What's the decision?' 'The decision is whether we want this particular sequence to end in a kind of cul-de-sac. We can either prolong it out into the usual lifetime or we can simply chop it off.'

'What would be the sense of chopping it off?'

'Because we might find this sequence intensely painful. Let me put it to you this way. You know you've got two lives to live. One life is perfectly normal and pleasant, but in the other you commit some serious offence, an offence which carries either the death penalty or a penalty of life imprisonment. You

have the choice of which it shall be. If you only had One single life you might well choose imprisonment, in order to be able to go on. But with two lives do you really make that choice? There would be a lot to be said for avoiding the continual agony of being cooped up in prison, without any possibility of escape, year after year for several decades. You might well say to yourself - remembering you know about the other more or less pleasant life - let's make an end of this one let's make it into a cul-de-sac. You see my point?

'Except I don't see any parallel between being in prison and being here.'

'That's exactly the thing we've got' to decide. That's exactly what our friend meant by saying we've got a difficult decision. I'm going to argue in favour of us both leaving. You take the other line. Then we must sleep on it and each make up his own mind about it.'

So we started. It was a long talk, very long, so I will give only a condensed version of what John said.

'Try to see what we're in,' began John. 'We're in a fossilized society. They've decided, completely as a matter of policy, that they're not going to change. They're not going to seek after progress. They're satisfied with the way life is. For them this may be fine but to us it would be a living death. We have a drive that forces us towards further achievement. Of course it may be quite illusory, probably it is. But being the way we are I think we would find it very much an imprisonment'

'I don't see there's anything to stop us from going on doing the things we want to do.'

'I see plenty. I've got several thousand years of scientific development to learn before I could possibly get down to any really useful work. Of course it would be interesting enough to begin with. There'd be the solution to the problems that I know about. In a way it would be marvellous to read about it all. But just think of the years of grind and drudgery that would be needed before I could do anything at all creative. It's likely I'd never succeed. You've got to begin as a child, with a child's ability to learn, if you're to break through the wall of an entirely new civilization. I'm afraid I should be reduced to a useless potterer.

'You yourself may be a little better off. The kind of music you know of has some validity. In fact you've got more or less a completely open field. Yet even your position wouldn't be too good. These people may have a liking for music, they may be able to compose it, but none of them can actually play. You can see for yourself that everything is done electronically. Perhaps you would get them to sing but that would be about all. You would never hear a real orchestra again.

'These are the bigger issues but think of the smaller ones. There are a million and one simple things these people take for granted. Yet they'd all be strange to us. It's fine enough for a few days, but think how it'd be for a whole lifetime. We'd never really belong. We'd never again hear our own language spoken, except through an artificial electronic device. Remember Art Clementi and his bop. Remember the night you were first in La Jolla. It was all very wild and woolly maybe compared to these people. But wouldn't you come to ache for some of the zip and zest of that old life? In a way it was very squalid, but it had a vigour we should miss terribly. Remember we're not just walking out into nothingness. We're simply saying that this is a life we don't want to live, just as these people themselves have refused to follow a life of what we are pleased to call progress. Logically I can go along with them, but emotionally I'm not conditioned to their sort of existence.'

This is the main substance of what he said. I lay awake a long time that night. Even when I did get to sleep it was a troubled sleep. It was clear to me that John had already made up his mind to leave. If I stayed I'd be entirely alone. The point about never again hearing my own language hit me heavily, more than some of the logical arguments. It was true that within a few months or a year I would learn the language of these people, just as I had learnt to get along in Greek. But obviously there would always be a hankering back to the language of my youth;

I saw I would make pilgrimages back to my old home. There would be nothing but wild country.

The glens of the Highlands would be much the same as I had known them. The shape of the hills would be the same. There would still be the hidden valley down which John and I had walked, apparently only a few months ago. But there would be no people, anywhere. I would make one or two such pilgrimages. Then I would go no longer, for the sadness of it all, the knowledge of what had happened, would be borne in on me too heavily. If I stayed here I would be in a kind of psychological no man's land. On the one side there would be a civilization which I liked but which I was not really a part of, on the other side there would be the vivid memories of my own people, and the knowledge of what they had come to suffer.

The following morning Melea and her friend were there. John told them we had decided to leave. Melea said that transportation arrangements had already been made. It was a sad little breakfast we had together. The time for departure came. We all agreed that delay would be bad. I took one last look around. There was the electronic box, the thing I had come to think of as a piano, looking now strangely pathetic. I had a strong urge to play on it for one last time. I told the others, saying I would prefer to be alone, that I would follow in a few minutes. Melea answered:

'Don't be too long. There isn't much time.'

I began to play. I realized that only in music could I find the answer I was seeking to the questions of the previous evening. Argument I could follow, it weighed with me, yet I could decide nothing from it. I did not know exactly what the music was, it was an improvisation not so much on a musical theme as on the agony of the destiny of man. I continued to play on and on, aware at last that I had made my commitment. I was playing the Schubert Andantino when Melea returned.

End of Chapter 14

October the First is Too Late, Sir Fred Hoyle, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1968:158-172

*Sir Fred Hoyle, eminent astronomer and writer was born on June 24 1915.
He passed away on August 20 2001, three weeks before the awful and tragic
events that occurred in New York City on September 11, 2001.*

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