

the magnificent wurlitzer

*Also by John Fraser  
and published by AESOP Modern:*

**Black Masks**

the magnificent  
wurlitzer

**john fraser**



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# preface

The theme of *The Magnificent Wurlitzer* is that of the ‘guilty Faust’ (more Berlioz than Goethe), Faust guilty from the start, who seeks on a fantastic, grotesque journey his truth, his Mephistopheles. As a modern epic, not anchored too firmly in time or place or shape, the hero Mr James (or Jay or Jayman, even the hopping Hopper) treads in the traces of epics from East and West, comes with a happier, more successful end. *Gilgamesh*, the *Ramayana*, *Götterdämmerung*; from jazzman to shaman, the hero slides from music and religion to seeking order where there can be none, to politicking on a continental scale and finally to leadership of the virtual and the voiceless.

In the end he fails to see and grasp the passage of those epic ephemeral adventurers, the Scythians, who leave him with no more than the great king’s horse’s tail.

\* \* \*

Wurlitzer is the machine that plays all music in its own sweet way, is creation, innovation, improvisation – whatever tickles you, a farrago-medley of beauty and bad taste inextricable. And the Wurlitzer too is the nickname of the CIA – Intelligence, politicking, stabs in the dark, secret things and codified meanings.

The book, the four parts, plays off the crisis of modernism, its slippage into postmodernism, where anything goes and nothing moves, against its critique of the heartland, of Modernity. Modernity – with its contradictions of nation and nationalities, disinterested leadership and public will, all that is solid melting into air and also – reason, science, project. Modernisation brings the four horsemen of the apocalypse, drinkable tapwater, the Russian Revolution, the internet and the Crash. Hence the significance of the ‘history globe’, a kind of astrolabe that enables one to fast-forward and -back, into tradition or surreal innovation. Modernity is both sharp as an axe and malleable as clay.

So, we distinguish between authorial interests and the narrative thrusts of poor Jayman, ex jazz trumpeter, the Kafkian J, the Je of '*je suis un autre*', and heir of Jay and Kai, jazz trombonists. There flit through too: Rimbaud, with his 'I have hung garlands from window to window, golden ropes from star to star. And I dance', echoing the book's last words, 'I laugh, I laugh'. Malcolm Lowry and the consul in *Under the Volcano*, with the idea of the false quest (seeking death on the day of the dead – like seeking a Moby Dick). And Wyndham Lewis's grotesque, *The Human Age*.

In part one we see the progression from musician to impresario, executant to controller – where the relation between art and divine falls in the mud of the false crucifixion. In part two, Jayman having failed to save mankind (with culture of his own invention), becomes the judge-policeman – the embodiment of reason-as-punishment. And is broken by the indifference of his fellow cops and the resistance of other 'orders'. By part three, Jayman's in decline – forced into commerce, selling hunting gear to desert sheikhs, become prey himself. His Master is Sinclair, manichean wizard, not knowing and not fearing Death, though still fearful and still Slave. They are entwined with the three Annas (an echo of the Brecht-Weill two Annas, one naughty and daring, the other calm and forgiving, and their building 'our little house in Louisiana'). They employ and are employed by Cass, asexual and bisexed, and their banker. Jayman flees, and in part four comes up against authority. His companions are the experts finding a use for 'voices', a great anonymous mass, or a computer blip, that may become a vast new movement, substituting for the sedentaries and the nomads. He is persecuted by the US powers, and by his colleagues. So distracted, he does not see the Scythians moving through leaving him only as, in words, their great king. King on a mule, however, and at the last forced to tell the 'shaman's lie'. To induct an apprentice into the shaman's mysteries, the descent to the world of the dead to bring back their messages, they're both filled with coke or magic mushrooms, then the lad is tied down, charcoalgrilled, reduced to a skeleton. Then he is reanimated as sign of the shaman's powers. Or not.

As in the Faust legend, where Faust goes down to hell, not to return, Jay as a modern Faust must seek his Mephistopheles,

atone his guilt (murder and bank robbery), assume all shapes  
and then – live in his tale...

*G.C.*



part one

the last trump



# one

‘MY, YOU’RE BEAUTIFUL. Would I like to bed *you!*’ said the parakeet, black as a felt boot, with two eyelets, of no colour, but shining. Payo made an evil-eye sign against the bird’s tongue. It could rattle off hundreds of names of gods, more than anyone there had ever heard, more than were listed in the pamphlets in the pharmacies, more than were remembered in the alcoves of the slave cults: clicked, chewed, mumbled out in their moist openings.

On one side of the room were tables of white prostitutes dressed as sophomores, eating ice-creams – his jellybabies, Payo called them. On the other, younger black prostitutes shifted slowly together, held in synchrony by long chains of waiting. ‘Fucking business is slow, man,’ said Payo to himself. He put another video on the machine.

Uncle Fernando came in and said, ‘How’s the ghosts?’

Payo said, ‘The ghosts is fine. It’s the living we can’t shift. They don’t like Italians. Maybe they’ll go off men altogether.’

Fernando said, ‘I’m Italian myself.’ After a while he added, ‘Maybe I don’t blame them.’

The bird said, ‘*Puttane, puttanate,*’ and hopped about, trying to create a market.

I was back in my beloved Bahia, the biggest black city where three continents meet, try to fuck, rip each other off, catch some saliva or lymph to use in spells. Bundles of candles flicker, that are lost souls. Smell like the bottom of a sack, black faces – dumbfounded.

I know Fernando well. He asks Payo, ‘Who’s that greyskin belong to, hanging casual and abandoned on that fine chair?’ He means me. His locutions cover his unwearing thoughts as barnacles might cover granite.

I ask Fernando, ‘What you drinking? Just for interest.’

He enjoys that. He asks, ‘What you doing in the throne room, boy – the stable’s downstairs.’

I say, ‘I’m looking for a singer. A real pure, luminous singer of songs for the other greyskins.’

Payo wordlessly proposes the parakeet, who launches a rope of diamonds over a sapphire cliff, as many octaves of

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notes as are in the world. I say, 'The voice is right, but the feathers don't fit.'

'In short,' Fernando proposes, 'you want a slave.'

'I want a worker,' I say, 'who may also make a lot of money.'

'I grasp the situation, and the distinction,' says Fernando. 'I have a boy in mind that would do well for you.'

I say, 'I think it should be a woman.'

'You mean, a prostitute.'

'Only in the nicest possible way,' I say.

'And that's the best way, isn't it,' says Fernando. 'But I have something in mind that will already start paying your expenses.'

'No, Fernando,' I say, 'Nothing illegal, people or things. One contract, one person, no exaggeration.'

'It's out of the ordinary.'

The parakeet coughs like a dog, stomps its feet, like a parrot in a B-movie. 'Fernando,' I say, 'if they even let me into the States, it's because they're watching me and want a closer look. If they just jail me or deport me, it's because they're quite indifferent.'

Uncle Fernando says, 'Or because they're using the wrong list.'

'They use whatever list they like – but you mean you have a list?'

'We have a person. With a list,' he says, 'And the list's political, I promise.'

'What might that mean?' I ask.

He feigns impatience. 'For your conscience, if you have one, or would like to have one, the people on the list aren't criminals but, surprisingly, they will pay, though not as much as criminals.'

'No, too vague.'

He says, 'Well, I'll let you see this singer, but I'm sure that she won't come.' And without the list, I'm sure too.

Fernando says, 'You were political long ago – since then, almost everyone has come and gone. A lot are dead, even. Taking someone in these days can't be so easy.'

'Find someone else, Fernando, I'm not the bleached bone you want,' I say.

'Mister James,' he says, brushing invisible insects from his

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silver suit, tarnished only a little darker than his silver hair, his silver skin, ‘Mister Jay, we get on because you are honest, and you are honest because you have been poor. You do not lie from habit, nor from a false sense of shame.’

‘No, Uncle, I lie because I have to.’

Payo brings us complex drinks. They are on the house. They are the colour of a cardinal’s ruby, and taste like boiled water. ‘It’s free, free,’ says Payo, sidling off to peel and eat a yellow fruit, half turned away from us, his black intelligent fingers sectioning like two coordinated spiders.

The parakeet says, ‘You cheap black bastard,’ but it’s meant for me, the customer. Payo’s friends go to the bar next door when they want to drink. Fernando motions me to leave, look over his choice of singers.

The jellybabies follow our departure with animation, a whole jungle of parakeets.

Once we would have seen real people. Five hours later, I have seen fifty videos.

I think – how brilliantly human and commercially useless these are. I say, ‘What kitsch, Fernando. Their kids, their houses, jocks on the beach, their favourite gods, their fat arms – Uncle, they’re really *fat*.’

‘They’re overblown, perhaps,’ says Fernando, ‘like cabbage roses in an English garden. But each video costs a thousand bucks. They carry them, and when they’re picked up by the cops—’

‘Then let’s see something in the life – but nothing extravagant.’

Fernando opens up the safe. Inside there are two tumblers full of scotch, and two tomatoes, which he leaves. I say, ‘For throwing?’ as he closes the safe, covering the combination from me with his back.

He says, ‘Sex shows are a special treat, but not the theatre, nor the bedroom.’

I drink the scotch and say, ‘They remind me of a lantern show – slides at the mission hall, the lecturer’s pointer drums, then something muddly in the back row ...’

‘You need memory, certainly,’ says Fernando. ‘I find most sensual, and always in the minor, minor keys, pitched very high or very low, a little show that animals are made to give – a snake’s scales against burlap, long long wait to see a coypu’s

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eye. Same thing with girls: textures, a timid glance. Their sex, yes, leaves me quite unmoved. What interests me, fascinates, and yes, excites is not their sex, it's their humanity.'

'And snakes and coyus?'

He says, 'Yes, yes exactly. With them too: it's their humanity.'

A pause, and then he asks, 'Does religion interest you at all these days?'

'I always cloak my cynicism with cynicism in that respect. Of course, one knows that here the distance between rite and mystery is what in the States produces such incongruous results ... the search for tribal man who often isn't there. Myself, being in part American-Indian, however small a part, leaves me a certainty of origins, but so far back I feel that what is life for me is death for modern man – if I can call them that. In short, this tribal sense for me is just a personal assurance, that all is carried deep inside And I don't need new cults – they bore me, and embarrass me—'

'No, no,' he says, 'to do them down, to do them down.'

'You mean that you're a revolutionary again?' I ask.

He looks round, timid, 'No, no. Revolution is definitely off the cards here.' He's so alarmed he knocks a pack of French cards on the floor. 'And those,' he says, 'are just for telling bad fortunes with.'

As we go to see his special girl, I feel good, good in his company. Not really pimp, more like myself, a broker, agent. Payo is your typical pimp, because he's cheap and formal, not stepping past his role. Fernando, though is different. Different country, different history, and he could have been elected, might have been a politician.

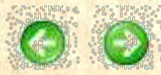
He pauses to set fire to a bundle of candles on the pavement. Ten slave souls. He says, 'Rather special ones, the family of a friend – of the family.'

'Rather a catholic gesture, then,' I say, 'singling out your family dead.'

Worried, he says, 'No, no, I assure you, they represent them all, all the slaves who have only slave souls, who for want of light may lack, may gradually come to lack, even their slave souls. A gesture, yes, Jay, I most solemnly assure you, not to everlasting life but to the precarious humanity of slaves – the dead ones and –' (half a wink, half a last closing of the eye) '–

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the living.’



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