

HERCULES BELABORED

Instructions to the Engraver

*For the Theatre—But How?**With a Preface by the Dramatist-Friend*

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Introduction: For the Theatre—But How?

by
the Dramatist-Friend

Unlike the author of this introduction, the Author of these *Instructions* never thinks—or at least till recently scarcely thought—of the theatre. So that, when I first put it to him that the text he had brought forth was, no less than one of my own, a *dramatic* one, he was frankly incredulous: How, he demanded, could he have all this while been “writing a play” yet oblivious of doing so? “No, in fact,” he countered, “what I have ‘brought forth’ is, first of all, a tale—a recasting of the Hercules-story, in which the hero must devise his own Last Labor—followed in brief space by some words of instruction to my engraver regarding illustration of that tale. Now at length I have resolved to publish the instructions and withhold the tale. What is there in all this to set anyone’s thoughts running on theatre?”

Actually, theatre is never very far from my friend’s thoughts in these pages and may even be said to emerge as, increasingly, the subject of them. He recounts attending plays (Plate 8), likens his hero’s manner of reading to a player’s (Plate 10) and more than once prescribes, as a spur to his illustrator’s imagination, what can only be described as “rehearsal exercises” (Plate 4 and Plate 10).

At one point he exhorts his engraver to depict a certain moment as might the stage (Final Plate). And if, on other occasions, he no less vehemently cautions *against* such a practice (Plate 1, Plate 8, Afterword), the warnings against, no less than the commendations of, theatre bespeak a preoccupation with it.

Toward the close of his Instructions, my friend himself puts forward certain parallels between platemaking and playmaking, between the incised plate and the dramatic text (On the Final Plate). Indeed, at one point, he even goes so far as to liken himself to the dramatic author whom, I would argue, over the course of these Instructions we

watch him become. And if he does so only on the admittedly minor point of feeling no more able than his theatrical compeer *to specify a face* (To the Engraver), this is, I can tell you, a sorrow under which actual dramatic authors also labor.

But perhaps not even in the aggregate may this long train of allusions to theatre in my friend's work be deemed sufficient to establish the theatrical resonances of his project. In that case, let me invite you to turn your attention to the tale he tells:

An executant (Hercules) is entrusted
by their deviser (the King) with
a series of tasks (the Labors)
which he may bring to completion
only by re-enacting. (For his
Twelfth-and-Last Labor, Hercules
replays his First Eleven.)

Is there not something about this account that speaks of theatre—and especially of the transaction between playwright and actor?

Now consider the “tale” of our Author's dealings with his illustrator that emerges from these Instructions:

An executant (the Engraver) is entrusted
by their deviser (our Author) with
a series of tasks (the Plates)
which he may bring to completion
only by (partially) re-enacting. (For his
Twelfth-and-Last Plate, the Engraver
cuts an image of his own Last-Plate-But-
One.)

Is there not something about this account, too, that speaks of theatre—and especially of the transaction between playwright and actor?

But above all it is our Author's (hard-won!) decision to substitute the latter of these texts for the former—to publish the *Instructions* and suppress the tale—that marks his project as “of the theatre.” For to put forward a set of instructions regarding illustration of a work as, itself, the work—what is this but to put forward a script?

Theatre, it may be said, is *written all over* my friend's undertaking—and nowhere more clearly than in the relation between the two texts that comprise it. How, then, you may wonder, did he for so long, almost to the very end, manage to remain oblivious to the theatrical character of his venture?

Ah, but surely, rather than upbraid our Author for his obliviousness, we would do well to join him in it. For the truth is, in nothing more surely than in this obliviousness to theatre does he approach it.

For what is this “dramatic text” my friend was only at the very last persuaded to understand himself as having produced? A dramatic text is not a certain kind of text but a certain measure of forgetfulness on the part of any text. A script is writing that has, for the moment, forgotten its true destiny, forgotten to be an event, forgotten that it is needed elsewhere—forgotten, in short, that it is, or one day shall be, instructions to an executant. If my friend seems oblivious that he is writing a dramatic text, what is a dramatic text but even such obliviousness on the part of writing? His fable of illustration

belongs to the theatre not because it “turns out to be a script,” but because it presents *turning out to be a script* as the fate that awaits *any* fable on the way to illustration.

To all this sort of speculation my friend had, or believed he had, an unanswerable objection. That his Instructions might speak *of* or even *to* the theatre—so much he was prepared to concede. But how they should ever come to be spoken *in* or *by* the theatre . . . on this point he drew a blank—and will no doubt readily be joined in his blankness by the theatre itself. *What is here for me?* cries the stage (its invariable cry), when confronted with the unlooked-for bounty of the present pages. *What transaction do these Instructions prescribe, or even envision, between themselves and myself?*

Ah, I am tempted to exclaim (my own invariable cry, as a playwright, to the theatre), *that is YOUR problem; I “hand it on”* (as so often my fabulist-friend to *his* executant, and with as little scruple) *to YOU*. And *a problem for theatre* it must no doubt remain; indeed, I do not know what remains to the theatre if not this problem. Yet so much by way of direction (for what is the art I practice if not the giving-in-writing of direction to the theatre?):

The dramatic text, if it is to be a player in the theatre and not merely the site of play, *must already have instigated, should itself be well launched upon*, the work of impersonation which it now invites others, its players, to join.

And what is it for a text, to be “already launched upon the work of impersonation”? We all know instances of texts that play at being some other kind of text. “A Modest Proposal” is a satire that plays at being a policy paper; *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is a novel that plays at being an edited correspondence; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is a philosophy book that plays at being scripture. *Instructions to the Engraver* may perhaps best be understood in such terms as these. It is (or shall we say, nothing prevents its being taken for) an experimental theatre piece that *plays at being* a set of author’s directives to an illustrator—and it herewith invites *actors* to join in this play already in progress within itself, to join it at play, to join the play.

It is to those actors—to *you*, O my Undreamt-of!—that my friend, all unwittingly and in unaccustomed wise, speaks in these *Instructions*. And it is *that you may hear yourself as addressed*—by him, by these—that I come to speak before him. The introduction with which I have undertaken to provide my friend’s work is—to the theatre!

To the Engraver

O my Undreamt-of—I can’t say I envy you!

Had you been bid devise twelve engravings of the familiar story in its familiar form—for having slaughtered his family, Hercules is condemned by the Delphic Oracle to perform any twelve Labors his cousin, King Eurystheus, may prescribe—your course were plain. Plate 1, Labor #1; Plate 2, Labor # . . . the thing practically storyboards itself!

But alas, to *your* hand has fallen the imaging of *Hercules Belabored*, my (Heaven help us!) “experimental treatment” of the motif, nothing about which (how to say this politely?) exactly seems, even to its author, to cry out for illustration. *His first eleven labors behind him, Hercules is now set the task of contriving Number Twelve for himself. There follow brainstorming sessions with his Archivist–Charioteer, long hours of tortured musing in his studio, climaxing in the inevitable, frame-shattering realization that—*

Bless us! The lion-slayer with an “Archivist”? The welkin-shoulderer in a “studio”? Than this, it may seem, the potatoes can’t get much smaller. Although, when one factors in the scale of the triggering offense *My Hercules*, you will recall, is heaped high for having laid hands on his music teacher (no more than laid hands? no more than a music teacher?), a pretext so slender that one is hard-put to conceive these eleven vast epyllia as having been laid on in response. (Far more readily one imagines them as freely entered upon in a spirit of, say, heroic self-portrayal.)

But what is there about any of this to call a querying burin into play? To be candid, I wonder how far my doubts on this score concern the illustrability of my Hercules-fable or if what I really cannot get comfortable with is the practice of illustration as such, that officious furnishing of others with images that their own imaginations have neglected to supply. For it is in that light, I am afraid, that your craft presents itself. It is not that I fear to find my own efforts pre-empted. “Ah, how ever shall another capture just that tilt of brow, glint of gaze, which in my thought I”—how many a time from how many a scribbler must an old hand like yourself have heard such words? You shall not hear them from me! That I, their deviser, do not glimpse plain the features of every Labor in the Chorus (Plate 6) need occasion no wonder; their lineaments are, after all, choric. But no more clearly do I make out . . . oh, say, the crafty gleam with which, in his moment of first seizing upon Alcides’ Twelfth-and-Last, my King’s face fills—nor, indeed, my King’s face itself. Neither does the wrestle between “Reference Librarian” and “Driver” for the demeanor of Iolaus, Hercules’ Archivist–Charioteer, go forward in my sight.

As for Hercules himself, sometimes I see him with my uncle Jürgen’s cheekbones, sometimes under arms. (Ah, now, *there* glimmers a Last Labor worthy the Laborer! Is it possible to conceive a more quintessentially heroic, or at any rate more *theatrical*, project than *to envisage one’s own face*?) Really, at times I think one had as well have written for the stage (as my dramatist-friend would persuade me I have done; but another time for that) where we get the look of whoever shows up that morning, bush eyebrows or none, Miss Cree or Miss Craw

Yet if all illustration misgives me, I shall not attempt to conceal the special mistrust I harbor toward this medium of yours. No doubt this is, in part, the product of ignorance: I know little of “states” or “counterproofs,” could not readily say what it is to “stop out,” “needle in” or “lay a line,” would be hard-pressed to distinguish, at fifty paces, a *rocked* plate from a *grounded* one; “scriber,” “mordaunt,” “spirit-ground” . . . all these terms of art you toss about so casually are Greek to me. Still, all allowances made, how this fretful accumulation of tiny nicks at the matter which is your craft should ever come near to capturing the world To look no further, I am dismayed by engraving’s apparent readiness to forgo any and all color, the more so as, to scene after scene of mine, want of hue would seem fatal. How, for example, shall you hope to convey the fresh-torn Hesperidean gold of Plate 1, absent some recourse to hand-coloring or overprinting—both, I am told, technically feasible, but I suspect you would regard any such superaddition as compromising the austerity of your medium. Certainly I, as a writer, could not easily be persuaded to work in more “color,” seek out the merely “colorful,” if the parallel holds, if parallel there be: one sets about to imagine another art and finds oneself merely (merely!) reimagining one’s own.

Well, this is all by way of locking the barn door. I have many times approached The House concerning possible alternatives to engraving—doctored photographs and marginal drôleries, for two—and have ever found their commitment to burin and plate to be matched only by their fervor for illustration as such. Etched plates they must have—*twelve* of them, no more, no less—as if the number of *your* labors, my Undreamt-of, must catch up the tally of him you scrive. Only on the point of *which* twelve moments of the tale to show does The House accord me some leeway. I had almost said: “accord *us*.” For I must confess that, like the King of my tale, I am sorely tempted to “pass along” such freedom as falls my way to, my executant, you, the more so as I am aware that the question of *which twelve to show?* is one to which you have devoted much thought. Before me as I write lies the “Canon of Glimpses” (as you call it): your own proposed list of moments suitable for illustration, *not a one* of which, remarkably, picks up choice of mine. Who would have supposed that a text to all appearances so barren of picturable instants should in fact have brought forth two distinct sets?

Of your proposed *scènes-à-faire*, several are ingenious—I particularly like “Hercules Envisions a Life Without Labors” and “Zeus Ponders Which of the Current Twelfefold Pantheon He Must Cut Out So As to Cut Hercules In”—and all bespeak a sharp eye for the main chance. I would encourage you to work up sketches for some or all of these vignettes; my own work, I know, has profited immeasurably from such efforts as I have made to rough out episodes that, I well knew, could find no place in the finished work.

In the end, though, I am afraid that the choice of which twelve moments to lay in must rest with me, not that I doubt your ability to make it wisely, but because the making of it appears to me the inevitable final stage of my own work on the tale—one’s own “Last Labor,” as it were.

[Here follow instructions
for each of the twelve
demanded plates.]

Plate 1.

*Hercules, by way of performing his (as he supposes)
last labor, plucks the Golden Apple of the Hesperides.*

We are looking down from the top of the tree into Hercules’ face, as he, with (violently foreshortened) left arm, reaches up to “seize the fruit” of his labors. It is the moment of the plucking of the Golden Apple of the Hesperides, seen from the point of view of the apple—which, however, we *also* view, high on the topmost branch, with Hercules’ immense paw closing round it.

Far below, at the foot of the tree, the body of the but-now-slain serpent-guard that barred ascent lies twisted as nothing living could twist.

Everything about the image—posture, gesture, sheen of fruit—suggests consummation. Yet the hero’s face—thrust out at us from the very heart of the composition—could not more plainly be asking: “No more but so?” You must bring him before us waiting on a sensation of finality *which does not come*.

Now this is strange. Each of the first eleven labors (the Hind, the Hydra, the Boar, etc.) and no small fraction of the “deeds by the way” (the unshackling of Prometheus, the fetching-forth of Alcestis), none of which was, in fact, final, had each, at the time, seemed so. Whereas now . . . here he stands at the actual end of the line—the crowning moment of his utmost labor—and all he can muster is a distinct impression of *not having seen the last of something, of there being, surely, more than this*. Performed, his “conclusive effort” seems to look forward to, feels like nothing so much as, a rehearsal for the re-enactment it shall only receive on the Final Plate.

Ah, but . . . *what line am I to pursue?* queries the burin; *flick in*, ponders the graver, *shadows where?* Just how is this quality of *things not being over by a long shot* to be produced?

Only do not go about it as would the theatre!—with no more guidance than so I am tempted to hand it on to you, my executant—or would be tempted, did I not suspect that it is even by such a “handing on to the executant” that theatre would go about it.

Plate 2.

*The Assigning King, hunkered down in his urn,
struggles to come up with a Twelfth-and-Last
Labor for Hercules.*

To every sky, dimly glimpsed trophies of the “First Eleven”—a hydra-neck here, a gilt antler there—which, in his current perplexity, the enured King looks back and forth among, as who should say: *Speak! what completes you?* From the urn protrude only a head, a hand, and, in the hand, a pen raised to set down Number Twelve the instant it may advene.

Stay, though. That pen-in-hand misleads. The King, to be sure, is some kind of “author.” And who knows but that he dreams, one day, of fixing in prose or rhyme the “drama” of his dealings with Hercules; perhaps, indeed, he is only dreaming up labors *now* that he may write them down *then*. But for the present, his “medium” is *the deed*—“Author of Deeds,” I should style him, even while conceding that the epithet far more nearly suits Hercules himself. The only epopee upon which His Majesty currently labors is the canon of labors, the Twelvefold Stint, itself.

So, here, let me just snatch away that pen. You must give us no more than, thrusting up out of the urn, a visage over which play and pass expressions of . . .

But *of what?* You are not, recall, being asked to render the actual moment of the King’s first seizing upon #12, but rather the moment *before*. Any second now it will dawn on him that . . . of course! for a Last Labor Hercules must devise one of his own; any other solution would be only *more of the same*.

But at present the features you must make us glimpse are those of one on whom, not only has The Answer not yet broken but, for all their possessor knows, may never break. We need to see eyes that, everywhere they look, look on questions: *Have I achieved a balance of live captures (the Hind, the Mares) and slayings (the Lion, the Boar)? Was he often enough sent below (Cerberus) as compared with sent West (those Apples at present in the pipeline)? And now . . . just this one poor, this last, to make it all come right. But has any choice of mine, at this juncture, power to make all come right? To say nothing of: seem right to HIM, seem consummative, cry finale—always assuming that he is*

not (as, most probably, he is) contemptuous of the entire March-Past to now as—what?—insufficiently taxing? indifferently varied?

All this and more you must work into the troubled eyes that peer forth at us over the top of the *pithōs* or *peliké* or whatever make vessel you deem best continues the contours of that face as yet at sea.

Not, of course, that your choice of urn-type here may proceed entirely along compositional lines. It is, after all, upon this very store-jar, inverted, that Iolaus, Hercules' Archivist-Charioteer, will later (Plate 8) sit *composing* the Delphic presage he has been sent to *fetch*. Which means that the receptacle you choose now must be selected with a view toward its eventually bearing the weight of an author-figure far removed from—indeed, in some ways, the exact inverse of—the Assigning King.

At this point you may well be wondering whether this isn't all rather a heavy freight of symbolism to pin on a pot. In fact (let me voice your thought here) wouldn't the King be altogether a bolder, a more *freestanding* conception—wouldn't, in every sense, *more of him emerge*—if he might but step free of so confining a vehicle? In other words, what say we lose the urn?

True, it's a standard iconographic feature. A *metopé* on the temple of Zeus at Olympia, to say nothing of innumerable vase-paintings, shows us the Assigning King diving into a clay or brass store-jar any time Hercules shows up back from a labor with fresh spoil in tow. But the stock *explanation* of this detail—that the "Author of Deeds" must needs go in fear of an executant on whom he is conscious of having heaped so much—makes no sense. Against a paladin who has pierced Hell, hefted the sky, etc., how sure a refuge might an earthenware, or even a brazen, vessel afford? No, this familiar understanding of the figure cannot be right—which is not to say that *some* plausible reading of it may not be teased forth. The enurnment of the royal "author" as an image of *solitude*, of *withdrawal*, of *self-curtailment*—even (given the eventual "handing off" to an executant of his own labor of invention) of *imaginative abdication* (though as plausibly might it be urged that to accord one's hero his moment of self-invention is only now first to have imagined the heroic)—none of this can be dismissed out of hand. Allow me, however, to point your gaze in a less familiar direction.

You know that to accomplish his last and greatest voyage (to the Hesperidean west), Hercules availed himself of the "Sun's Cup," that vast bronze urn in which Apollo, his day's shining shone, makes his way back home east every night. What if the Assigning King has elected to spend his days in a brass jar, not as looking to *withdraw* or *curtail* himself, but so that he may play at being "Hercules At Sea In the Sun's Cup"; for this, he has found, helps him like nothing else to arrive at his hero's next toil. "What am I driving at now?" the enurned fabler has but to wonder—and immediately he finds that he has *turned the next corner* of the tale.

Thus it appears that our apparently urn-locked "Author of Deeds" has, at every turn, *been out before* his executant, is himself already well launched upon the voyage which his hero has yet to undertake.

(Does such a work-method sound unlikely? Well—I use it. True! Your collaborator composed much of the present work crouched over in a huge store-jar—with what results I leave others to judge.)

You will doubtless have observed that little or none of this "backstory" finds a place in the tale. Nor have I shared it with my dramatist-friend. To you alone, my Undreamt-of,

is the Sun's Cup extended. In it may you find, as has your co-laborer, such a vessel as may bear you far over the deep waters of our project.

Plate 3.

*Before the King, Iolaus tells the tale, while
Hercules displays the fruits, of his supposed
last labor.*

At left, Iolaus, Hercules' Archivist–Charioteer, holds forth upon his master's latest venture: the theft of the Golden Apples of the Hesperides.

At right, Hercules holds forth the apples themselves.

At the bottom of the plate, in the extreme foreground (“down-center”), the Assigning King, caught from behind in deep silhouette, regards the two-man show with, to judge by the doubtful tilt of his head, some perplexity. Over the King's shoulder, you must make us see what he sees.

Iolaus has come to the point in the tale where his master, having gulled the nymphs and smote the snake, is even now about to reach forth his hand and pluck the fruit. Hercules, however, shows no sign of making the tale's next move for it; doggedly he persists in his posture of *holding forth*.

Neither Master nor Man, it seems, goes very cheerfully about his task. In Hercules' case, at least, this is surprising. For after all, this one small post-labor labor of demonstration past, shall he not belong to himself once more? An exhilarating prospect, one might think; yet Hercules looks stricken. Does it perhaps grieve him that the golden rondure now briefly within his grasp must presently disappear forever into the King's trophy cabinet? Or possibly that, as he cannot fail to have noticed, the apple itself is losing lustre fast since being plucked on Plate 1?

Nor that nor this. I am afraid that what Hercules cannot abide is *the spectacle of Iolaus telling his tale*. Not that he tells it ill! On the contrary, in Iolaus's redaction the skills of the Charioteer stand the Archivist in good stead. He drives, this driver, by whatever vehicle, straight for the finish in a style that seems at every moment to be springing aside out of its own path.

No, it is not the manner of Iolaus's telling that daunts Hercules but the way that, told over, his labors appear so, well . . . *over*, an achieved corpus, to which now their achiever, trophy-in-hand, can himself but *serve as an illustration*. How far preferable, as *writing sent his way*, does Hercules deem the King's *laying down* of tasks to Iolaus's *setting down* of them. How he wishes his Archivist felt free to compose in those heady imperatives that seem to rise so readily to the lips of the King (“Hercules, go now and . . .”) or, failing that, to compose, as is also the King's way, in the future (“Hero, next you shall . . .”). For, few and spare as these royal rescripts might be, at least they left one a role other than to be written about—left, in fact, *everything in one's own hands, all yet to do*.

Thus, in Hercules' mind, the question of *who*—as between a King who sets me tasks but sets down nothing and a Scribe who no more than sets me down—*is my true author?* (a real “Choice of Hercules,” it might appear) is in fact no sooner posed than answered: our hero gives judgment for the Author of his Deeds.

(And to which of these categories, I wonder, would Hercules assign these directives of mine to thee, my Undreamt-of, which, for all they proclaim themselves “Instructions,”

more nearly resemble descriptions of an already engraved plate than prescriptions for engraving one.)

So that if here in Plate 3 Iolaus, holding forth upon the apples Hercules holds forth, spins out his tale with darkened cheer, might this not well be explained by his having caught in his master's eye a preference for the rival mode of "authorship" practiced by the King, over his own?

For make no mistake: a rivalry it is, and one destined some day, in another quarter of the tale, to break forth into open violence between Driver and Prince. If it fails to do so now, this is not, or not solely, because the conflict remains as yet a purely aesthetic one, but also because, even as between the warring aesthetics—authorship as *setting tasks* versus authorship as *setting down*—Iolaus's sympathies do not lie all on one side of the question. Yes, he laments, deplores, rages against Hercules' open partiality for the King's sort of writing, the King's kind of writer. At the same time, though, he secretly cherishes a resolve *to write more like the King*. For is it not even such a resolve that comes to light on Plate 8 when Iolaus, forging the Delphic prophecy he was sent to fetch, transforms himself from a *fetcher* to a *forger*, from a *trans-* to a *pre-scriber* of the Herculean fact—in a word, to *a writer more like the King*?

And what train of reflections is set going in the King himself (over whose shoulder we see it all) by the spectacle of his two executants vying for the status of "most crestfallen"? His back, as noted, is toward us, yet so drawn as to make plain he broods: "How odious to my hero this footing of *a tale told*, to which his minion would consign him. How gladly must he greet the opportunity to compose himself, the occasion of self-authoring, which I am about to send his way."

Plate 4.

*Hercules, stunned by the King's insistence
that one labor yet remains, is on his feet to
object—but, then, from moment to moment holds off. . . .*

"Still one to go!"—Hercules, under the impression that he has not only accomplished #12 but even now laid the fruits of it (the Golden Apple) at his Master's feet, can scarcely credit these words of the King (shown, as on the previous plate, in deep silhouette). As His Majesty expatiates, Hercules feels an overpowering impulse to break in and clear things up—an impulse, however, which he cannot quite bring himself to act upon.

"Cannot quite bring himself" . . . what, then, prevents? Well, for one thing, let's be frank, on some level the hero *likes what he is hearing*. To be, for once, thought of in connection with an incorporeal striving—"this final labor: to contrive a labor"—is music to his ears. So that, while there are several key points he might wish clarified—*Did I drop a stitch? Was one (or more) disallowed? Invent AND perform or (as I am inclined to suspect) perform BY inventing?*—the longer the King runs on, the less inclined Hercules feels to interpose.

In the end, of course, he *will* interpose, urge doubts, voice qualms; the moment of his doing so is plainly marked in the galleys you hold. This is not, however, the moment I require from your hand. I need you to strike me off a Hercules brought almost—but not quite—to the point of raising his difficulty, a hero with lips already parted to bring forth an objection which, after all, for the moment, he swallows down.

And just what moment would *that* be? In response to—or rather, in *declining* to respond to—which words of the King does Hercules only just fall short of coming into play? Can he already scarcely contain himself during the King’s preliminary enumeration of “Last Tasks Pondered and Rejected”: *fling a causeway over the Hellespont! snatch Prometheus from his rock!* (both, incidentally, feats which Hercules was later to bring off on his own time, unasked)? Or does he keep himself in check until the King starts in on how, the imagining of a hero’s crowning work being itself heroic work. . . . Or wait, no, perhaps not even then, perhaps only now first at the instant when—

Plainly, if you are going to render this moment, you are going to need a moment to render, but I’m afraid I can’t supply it. All I can do is, like my King, pass along my own uncertainty to my executant—with, however (and this is more than our hero receives from *his* “author”) a suggestion for resolving it.

What if you were to get someone to read aloud to you the King’s entire “Still One to Go!” outburst, including the following lines dropped from the final version and so not appearing in the galleys now before you:

KING: O my Undreamt-of! When first
 you fetched up here, you possessed—*no*
least were hard, but surely *no very*
firm—conception of an heroic act.
 To dispose of the next unpleasantness
 up the road was about your limit.
 I like to think these little devisings
 of mine—not some one or other of them
 but the full zodiac, the *completed*
canon—have taught you better.
 Make that: “the *all-but-completed* canon.”
 For lo! By this last contrivance,
 no less your work than my own, I would
 give you to see *by how much better*
than you know, Hero—

. . . And so on. The labor of him who reads this aloud to you will soon be at an end. For who can listen long to such stuff without succumbing to the “Herculean” impulse to *break in and set things right*? Now, if you will but mark the moment—and your own bearing in, and of, the moment—when that “overpowering” impulse can still only just be borne—why, there is everything you need to picture the prescribed scene.

(Assuming, always, that, in prescribing such a scene, one is still asking the possible of a burin; assuming that portrayal of the “not quite in play,” of an action from moment to moment deferred, must not in the end defeat the engraver’s hand. . . .)

Plate 5.

*Iolaus and the Assigning King compare their
 discrepant labor lists. Hercules plunged in
 thought the while.*

To the left, the King’s, to the right, Iolaus’s hand, both clutching tally-sheets. Each flourishes his page at the other over the head of Hercules, given up to his own reflections.

The tallies, of course, differ. Iolaus's list shows the canon of labors complete; for the King, we know, there is "still one to go": that Twelfth-and-Last with which Hercules has even now (Plate 4) been "hit." Angry hands brandish incompatibles; each seeks only to discount the count of the other.

It is Iolaus, not the King—certainly it is not the bemused-looking Hercules, somewhere off apart in a world of his own—whom you must make us feel has sought this quarrel. Perhaps merely the threat which the King, as "the other kind of writer" (Plate 3), poses to Iolaus's manner of *telling deeds* has sufficed to bring the Archivist to his feet. But further: in the King's challenge to his count, he cannot but hear a challenge to his very status as an Archivist, i.e., one who renders accurate accounts—as if one's recounting were in the end no more than a *re-counting*, one's telling a mere *telling o'er*.

To this controversy swirling round his head, Hercules pays small heed. Every now and then, perhaps, some claim or counterclaim strikes his ear:

—*The enthronement of Priam?*
Surely that finds its place
in the Trojan corpus, rather
than here with—

—*And why NOT the Lion of*
Cithaeron,
as well as him of Nemea?
So many lions, so many labors!

Long exposure to such exchanges (Iolaus and the King have been going at it for some time) might seem certain to oppress the stoutest heart. Yet Hercules' expression in this moment you are being asked to put the best face on can only be described as won-through-to joy. *How won*, and *through what*, may be clearer if I now lay before you the many twists of Hercules' thinking (in the tale, no more than hinted at) over the long course of his servant's haggle with the King.

—*You're asking for the Sangrian*
Serpent? I didn't even assign
the Sangrian Serpent, that was
one of Omphale's—to say nothing
of the whole episode being
no more than a change rung
on the Hydra, itself of no very
fundamental—

As the horse-trading heats up, Hercules remembers why he had always so much preferred tagging along on the adventures of others: *with Jason*, on the track of the Fleece; *by Theseus*, in the pit of Hell. Those times, one simply *up and did* with no thought given to whether or how this might figure in the canon of one's acts—a painful subject even before this present cutting down of each by last bade fair to tarnish all.

—*Antaeus? Who told him*
to take off after Antaeus?
Antaeus simply lay along
his path to the Western Isles.

For was it not all too plain that certain of his “side-ventures”—the holding fast to a wavering Proteus through changes, the flinging down of those lonely pillars in the Western main—made far stronger candidates-for-inclusion than some, perhaps than *all*, of the Appointed Twelve.

*—But he only freed Prometheus
en route to the encounter
with Atlas, himself no more
than a mere encounter-by-the-way,
by the way.*

Is it, he wonders, too late—might this not rather be the ideal moment—to *re-open the entire question*? Might one, for example, encouraged by the flat-out aphysicality of the Recently Urged Twelfth, seek to slot in a couple, perhaps even a preponderance, of, for want of a better word, *cognitive toils*, of a piece with this last: *Hercules Resolves a Central Muddle of Ionic Philosophy* might well unseat Geryon’s Cattle to small outcry or *Hercules Unsnarls a Famous Crux in the Homeric Text* bump out the Mares of Dionysus and no harm done.

Ah, but . . . “*Listen to me, I sound like them!*” (meaning: his Prince and Driver, all the while haggling away overhead), wails our hero, on whom it has but now broke that al such tinkering around the edges of the Current Dozen as he here contemplates can only end by casting doubt on each and every one of the present claimants, of whom it now only *may* be composed. Plainly, what is wanted is a *whole new collection, an Entire Other Bunch*.

*—Don’t think I’m not tempted
to scratch the Augeian Stables
as mere services rendered . . .*

*— . . . but could no doubt be
persuaded to think again,
were any and all claims arising
from the bail-out of Alcestis
to be set by.*

*—Which, really, you got to admit,
bears far more the stamp of
a favor to a friend*

But alas! why any more than the current crop should a Tonier Twelve transcend the chaffer?

*—The Hydra is TWO—Deed A:
strike off Heads 1-11; Deed B:
inter the immortal Twelfth—that’s
non-negotiable!*

*—The Hydra is OUT, seeing that
(as who knows better than yourself,
scribbler, having furnished it?)*

*there your master had outside
help—final offer, take or leave!*

What use was it wishing for a Fresh Start on Higher Ground? Much as one might prefer a Loftier Crowd, one was, by this, too deep in with (meaning: too straitly defined by) the Familiar Eleven to walk away from them now.

And yet!—we come up now on that air of won-through-to joy, declared above to be brightening Alcides' features but not much in evidence since—this Last of a Bad Lot's having been sent one's way might, it is suddenly borne in on him, make all right in the end. For surely a Well-Enough #12 had power to . . . how say this?, *reset the valences* among all the rest.

It is this sudden, joyous conviction of having been—at last, by Hercules!—*handed one's chance* that, Graver, you must show even now suffusing the features of him you grave—always, however, in such wise that the whole dark course of his stumble to this moment, as but now traced, may also be read off there.

But no more than the train of ill thoughts it severs does the hero's present joy manage to win the notice of the King's and Driver's list-brandishing hands, ever at strife overhead, whose sole thought is of their clash.

And speaking of those hands Some, I know, will dismiss it as a mere private joke, but I wonder if you may not join me in feeling the profound appropriateness of your hand and mine, O my Undreamt-of, serving as models for, respectively, Iolaus's and the Prince's hands thrusting forth their tally-sheets in the present plate.

As for what system of marks might serve as model for the wisps of writing you must make appear on those clutched tally-sheets in "our" hands . . . here I confess I do not know what to ask for. *Greek letters or ours* is already a puzzle. But further (mark me, now!): whatever trail of nicks you lay down to represent writing here will itself, no less than the writing it represents, have the character of a marking, an incising, a "script." How shall one rain of dints thus stand, stand surety, stand in, for another? Can writing represent other writing with the same appalling facility that, in the theatre, the left cheek of Miss Tandy personates the left cheek of Miss DuBois?

Before you seek refuge in the commonsense reply that, after all, one's instructions were not *to write* but *to engrave writing*, allow me to set before you the following cautionary tale, which I am far from persuaded you and I run no risk of re-enacting.

One day a certain draftsman, grown weary of all the stippling-in he must do for his engraver's benefit, broke off mid-page and simply scrawled "Etc." across the still-to-be-stippled tract (meaning, of course, by this that the engraver was to continue his waves of stipple to the plate's edge). O my Undreamt-of! Ought it really have astonished this sluggard, upon receiving back his first proofs, to find the *word* "Etc.," in his own hand, faithfully incised at the very point in the design where himself had written it?

Plate 6.

*Hercules hears from a delegation of his
First Eleven Labors on the subject of his Last.*

The scene is Hercules' studio, of which unlikely premises ("a *hero* with a *studio*?") I shall not say much here, seeing that, in the present plate (unlike Plates 9 and 10, also

set there), setting is scarcely to the fore. Furnish it after the manner of your own graving-place and you and I shall part friends.

The First Eleven Labors, whom word of the King's teaser has somehow reached, have popped round to let Hercules have their views on his choice of a Last.

When I say, "The First Eleven," you must understand I do not mean *all* of them; no, rather, a *delegation*—say, ##2, 5 and 7-through-9 or -10 (these last in the person of a single guy)—headed up by Well, I don't make out straight off who might emerge as spokesman; suppose we come back to that.

And when I say: "popped round" . . . this would be on their own initiative; Hercules has *not* convened them—*oh*, no! Too well he recalls how, on those earlier occasions when he had brought "The Boys" (as he always thinks of and names them) together, their complaints filled the air: Oh, if only they might be *someone else's Labors!* Or, failing that, *something other than Labors.* Or, as a last resort, *each other.*

Still, now they're here, he's glad they're here. For one thing, it is really only in their society that he can "kick back," as is evidenced in this speech from an early draft:

HERCULES: Boys! Where but ye lads
among . . . ? A doer and his doings.
An actor and his acts. A consciousness
and its expression

And especially now, fresh off his illumination that a Well-Enough #12 might make all come right (meaning, first of all, right *for them*), he leaps at the chance to ask: "Boys! What caps us?" Yet even as they clamor round to reply, his heart sinks. To a man, each of them is concerned only that the "new boy" shall play well off—or at least not upstage—*him*. It is as if (a long-ago comment of Iolaus here recurring to him) the Labors looked upon themselves as volumes in his "Collected Works," with no question for the newcomer but "Must you, in the end, displace me? Shall I henceforth be viewed as a mere step on the way to you?" None of them—with the possible exception of Hippolyta's (claspless) Girdle, who would like it somehow to involve the turning up of a clasp—actually has a suggestion; what they're lavish of is . . . *strictures*. The Erymanthian Boar is adamantly opposed to additional swine-episodes; the Hydra doesn't want to see any more snakes brought on board; while Cerberus has set his faces against all further runs on the underworld, even though perhaps nothing so much conduces to a hero's fame as these

And now I think of it, surely it can only be Fetched Cerberus, as, plainly, the most negative and self-regarding of the lot, whose showdown with the hero you must give us here: who but the hellhound may speak for so dark-thoughted a crowd? With Puppy the plate must fill, the rest of the "Boys" being no more than glimpsed, "upstage," in various postures of rejection and dismay.

(The unfailing negativity of the Labors, Hercules has often thought, can only come of their *being*, in effect, all negatives—fell this! disperse those!—and he now scans the delegation one last time to see whether one of his more upbuilding side-ventures—Paid-in-Kind Atlas, Sprung Prometheus—may not have slipped in among the soreheads; but in vain.)

Then, too, this focus on Cerberus has the advantage of diverting attention away from the limitations of your medium. The Pooch of Shades may well be capturable

in that tumble of grey-on-grey at which (I am tempted to say: “at which *alone*”) the burin excels. Whereas, a dwelt-upon Hydra could only underscore the unavailability of iridescence; a homed-in-on Hind’s Horn, the absent play of nacre on gilt; a thrust-forward Cretan Bull . . . Well, let’s just say there is scarce a one of them does not cry out for his proper tint.

But then, where the present scene is concerned, you may well regard your medium’s power or lack of it to represent *color* as the least of your problems. I would not be surprised to learn, O my Undreamt-of, that from plate to plate (and we ain’t done yet!) you may increasingly have felt called upon to *picture the unpicturable*; that the whole course of your work with me thus far has represented, if anything, a “drama” of mounting difficulties about representation, of which this present plateful—these “Boys”—represents only the extremest case yet.

For, of course, it will not do to show the labors as a mere boisterous pack, somewhat on the order of, say, Hercules’ old foemen, the Centaurs (of whose freefloating, all-weather pugnacity, by the way, they often reminded him). No, the labors are, and must somehow (but how?) be portrayed as, at the same time “guys” and “acts”—and *one* of the guys (him I have designated “Labors 7-through-9 or -10”) must somehow (but how?) do service for three or four of the acts.

Toward the resolution of this dilemma allow me to contribute—precisely nothing. I hand the problem on to you not merely unsolved but essentially untouched, no farther along than at first.

Nor is this the “abdication” it may appear. On the contrary! Never shall I prove to have been, my executant, more “there” for you than now! In these, my efforts to, as it must seem, bury you beneath material you can do nothing with, you must learn to recognize my profoundest impulse toward you, the best I have to give. For to have been set wrestling with the undepictable, you shall find, will waken your powers of depiction like nothing else.

Should your labors along these lines meet with success (of which success no small part must be to have hit on a pertinent definition of “succeed”), you will have outstripped your subject, for whom, it soon appears, the greatness of the Deeds and the slightness of the Doers will not conjoin in a single thought. For see! at the very next turning of the tale—that is to say, one moment past the present plate (check your galleys!)—Hercules will send the “Boys” about their business, dismissing, one might say, his own finest achievements with a wave. The next time we catch a glimpse of him among his Labors, it will be among *prints* of these (Plate 9), on which occasion you shall find yourself engraving neither “guys” nor “deeds” nor “guys-somehow-also-deeds” but—engravings; shall find yourself picturing depictions; shall find yourself representing representation.

Plate 7.

*Hercules sends Iolaus to the Delphic Oracle
to inquire what his Last Labor must be.*

We are still in Hercules’ studio, of which, however, we still do not see much, because, as in Plate 6, the focus is all on the figures:

“Up-right,” Hercules appears to be brandishing a heavy bronze tripod at Iolaus.

“Down-left,” Iolaus appears to shrink from the blow.

But nothing here is as it seems, and your aim in the present Plate must be to bring forth an image with power to correct the initial false impression it has itself produced. What, then, is the eventual “true view” which this Plate at first obscures, at last imparts?

Worn down by the flurry of self-serving suggestions he has had to endure from “The Boys” in Plate 6, Hercules is resolved to pass on to the Delphic Oracle the whole question of what his Final Labor must be. The tripod he seems to brandish at Iolaus formerly *belonged* to the Oracle—from it, she was used to speak forth Apollo’s will—and Hercules is even now charging Iolaus to return it to her, on condition that she furnish him with a plausible Labor 12.

That she—Apollo’s priestess—will in fact furnish one, he makes no doubt: Was it not, after all, Apollo, speaking through her, who *imposed* the Twelfefold Stint (even while leaving the choice of individual labors to the Assigning King)? Surely the god who enjoined them must feel a stake in their harmonious closing-out! The more so as he and Hercules are *brothers*—well, yes, all right, strictly speaking *half*-brothers, but spawn of heaven the pair of them, Zeus’s boys each alike. True, they have often enough found themselves at odds. How many a summer afternoon has Hercules been obliged to fire off an arrow into the blue as his little way of prodding Helios to turn down the heat. But when the . . . er, heat is on, Apollo has—I will not say “always,” but, Lord knows, time and again—come through for his mortal sib. Did we not even now (Plate 2) see an instance of this in the god’s making available to Hercules, for his traverse of the western wave, the so-called “Sun’s Cup,” that brazen *pithōs* or *peliké* wherein a gone-down Helios hops the drink back home east every night?

And then, quite apart from how well- or ill-disposed may be the god toward his brother personally, the problem on which Apollo’s input (*via* his Priestess) is here being sought cannot fail to interest him. As a question not simply of art but of artistic ordering, *What, given the rest, crowns it all?* could not, it seems, fall more squarely within the Apollonian purview.

But the chief reason Hercules believes the Oracle will help him to a Final Labor is that she wants her (which is to say, Apollo wants his) tripod back.

For, of course, Hercules has *stolen* the thing—snatched it away in exasperation at the outsized sentence by her (that is, by Apollo) handed down. What! A Dozen Toils, at a stranger’s bidding, to be slogged through without comment or query—and all this for no more than the mere cuffing of a mere music teacher? So incensed was Hercules on learning his doom that he had yanked the girl’s seat out from under her and trundled it off home.

(And now Iolaus, laying eyes on the object for the first time since that hour, recalls the strange answer Hercules had given when asked what he planned to do with his unlikely booty: “I don’t know, maybe start up *an oracle of one’s own*”—the phrase, for some reason, had lodged itself in the Archivist’s brain.)

By this, Hercules imagines, the Oracle must, Apollo must, be regretting his verdict. After all, as the hero has more than once remarked to his driver, the god can scarcely be all that taken with the calibre of the Labors dreamt up thus far by the Assigning King. Probably he has been tempted to intervene ere now. Certainly he will jump at the present chance to “upgrade the canon” with a last-minute insertion of his own.

To all this running-down of his royal rival, Iolaus (as Hercules knew he must) hearkens greedily. Indeed, Hercules is rather banking on the old antagonism to spark his driver’s zeal for an embassy likely, if nothing else, to cast discredit on the Author of

Deeds—though of how far Iolaus means to press things Hercules can have, at this stage, small conception (see Plate 8).

By now it must be clear how wide of the mark was our initial impression of what is on this plate; indeed, *how wide of the mark a first impression may be* is what this illustration may be said to be an illustration of. For one thing, the tripod-wielding Hercules is not making a threat but an emphasis: “Be sure and get the Labor out of her *before* you hand it back.” Nor is the turned-aside Iolaus “shrinking from the blow”; he has gone apart to think: *how shall I make this Delphic turn serve my turn?* And the lines we may imagine his thoughts, all unsuspected of Hercules, as going out along, must run something like this:

“‘An oracle of one’s own’ . . . How if one did not faithfully transmit but cunningly composed the sought-for prophecy? My Master is already persuaded that heaven’s verdict on my rival must needs fall harsh. Am I not thereby free to offer *my* harshest verdict on him *as heaven’s own?*”

In this moment we catch our first glimpse of The Executant’s Betrayal, a theme of which you will soon be furnishing additional illustrations. For the present, it may suffice if, from off the tripod formed of your first two fingers and burin’s edge, there issue now a presage, an intimation, of this motif still aborning, all those plates yet to come.

Plate 8.

*Seated atop the King’s overturned urn, Iolaus
forges the Delphic prophecy he was sent to fetch.*

How came Iolaus thus resolved to *compose his own* rather than *transmit the actual* Delphic prophecy prescribing his master’s Final Toil? One detail of the present plate must supply the answer and you must supply the detail.

The inverted urn upon which Iolaus here sits devising his word is the very *pithōs* or *peliké* the Assigning King was earlier shown hunkering down in as he labored over Hercules’ #12—and *must be instantly recognizable as such* (a consideration that will already have played some role in your initial choice of urn-type back in Plate 2). For only if—“the reader,” I was about to say; I mean, of course, *the viewer*—has registered this inversion, this *turning upside down* of the King’s vehicle, will he or she be in any position to grasp the true contours of Iolaus’s project, namely, *to unseat, to depose, to put myself in the place of* the Assigning King as “author” of the Herculean fact. That is, if Iolaus now sits framing (in the formulation of Hercules he earlier found so striking) “an oracle of one’s own,” it is not Delphi but his royal rival in authorship whom, by supplying Delphi’s utterance, he looks to supplant. Nay, and not merely *to supplant* but—surely a further implication of his perch atop the upturned urn—*to surpass*.

For see! (that is: make *us* see) how he takes his stand—well, all right, takes his seat—where, earlier, the other merely cowered within. And note how, whereas the urn served the King as a “Sun’s Cup” by which he might journey in thought to his next illumination, Iolaus is of a mind to let the light dawn on *him*.

(Of course, one might easily see—you will give us to see—a certain irony in Iolaus’s having upturned the urn to convey his supplanting/surpassing of the King. For did not the Archivist’s *prior* fashion of authoring (to set down deeds done) *already* stand the King’s way (to lay down deeds to do) on its head? But then, Iolaus’s is scarcely the first uprising to preserve, in the manner of its overturning, the structure it overturns.)

In short, I am ordering up an image of Iolaus in the act of coming upon his word. *And what act is that?*, I readily imagine you countering. *One is, you say, to show a writer (or such a writer as Iolaus sets up to be) writing. Pray, what does one show?*

Oh! Not such a figure of the Poet as lately shimmered forth at me over the footlights of a theatre—no “tormented” quester clawing the air in search of his next adversative clause. *Keep ye*—it were ever my surest counsel to the picturing mind—*far from the stage!* Neither do not scarp me any You-Know-Who’s “Thinker,” some fellow all but lost in the train of reflections he all but is. I had sooner look upon the moment of coming to speech as a perpending: Iolaus’s pen—for come, shall we not confer on him the quill snatched out of the King’s hand, back on Plate 2, as too flat-out “authorial”?—is raised, trembles He does not, like the King in Plate 2, *yet search*. But no more has he, like the hero in Plate 10, *since found*. Or rather, his having but now hit on the form of every possible solution is the very thing that stands between him and any particular one. To “write like the King,” he must, after the fashion of Delphi, enjoin a toil. But, it seems, *any* instructions he may impart—since all alike *prescribe an action* to Hercules—will serve to mark Iolaus as “a writer like the King,” for by “writer” here is meant no more than *a prescriber of actions*. As well he may pen: “Hercules, sweep the hearth!” as “Hercules, quench the sun!” or, for that matter, “Hercules, depose the King and raise up trusty Iolaus in his stead!”—this last, of course, being more or less the thrust of any action he might enjoin

Amid these boundless, before that “any,” his pen hovers, wavers . . . and then all at once he brings it down upon the shiver of clay (*ostrakon*) he has snapped off the lip of the *pithōs/peliké* whereon he sits perched, and begins to write, as if, even in this very boundlessness, he had suddenly glimpsed the possibility of—

But that glimpsing and that possibility lie without the bounds of the moment you are being called on to represent in the present plate.

Plate 9.

Alone in his studio, Hercules pores over engravings of his first eleven labors in search of a twelfth.

And now, with Iolaus supposedly making for Delphi, our hero is only first free to give his full attention to Labor Twelve. For (he imagines) *the answer is on the way*; and this at once removes all pressure from him to supply one and, at the same time, offers a sure measure of any he may supply, to wit: *am I at one with Delphi—and who got there first?*

And we, only now are we—with our hero alone and slaving away there—free to let our gaze wander over the scene of his labors, that studio of which, in Plates 6 and 7, we no more than caught a glimpse.

You will recall back on Plate 6 I suggested that you give Hercules’ workplace the look of your own, engraver’s premises: neat rows of dabbers and scaupers, here and there an unstoppered phial of mordant, floor dusty with thrown-up burr, pulled proofs and counterproofs hung out to dry. At the time, such a proposal must have seemed little more than a stopgap, but the truth is, I conceive of Hercules—or, at any rate, conceive *my* Hercules—as an engraver. And I conceive his manner of “giving full attention to Labor Twelve” to consist in his putting about, in various arrangements, engravings he has made of the “First Eleven,” in the hope that some one or other of those elevenfolds may evince a Twelfth.

Two questions at once suggest themselves:

- (1) What warrant is there for portraying Hercules as any sort of artist; and, if an artist, why an engraver?
- (2) What grounds has Hercules for supposing that he can infer the “Missing Twelfth” from *any* pattern obtaining among images of his “First Eleven”?

Actually, the second of these questions answers the first: It is *because* Hercules queries his own images for what might complete them that he must be portrayed as an artist. (As to why he should be portrayed as an *engraver* . . . will you permit me to hold off on that for a bit?)

Let us, therefore, begin with the second question, namely, What makes Hercules think he can arrive at his Twelfth Labor by pushing around images of his Prior Eleven?

Actually, his first instinct had been to work on #12 *in isolation* from its forerunners. Ah, those celebrated forerunners! World-bettering they may have been, no doubt were, and yet . . . so arbitrary, so re-deployable, so laid on from without . . . ! He had some marvelous ideas for a Twelfth that didn’t hark back to *them* at all.

What, for example, should prevent his offering *my future madness* (no strangers, heroes, to their futures) as his Final Labor: was not madness as black a monster as any yet dispatched? Or, if madness be deemed more ordeal than attainment, what about *my achievement of heroic self-consciousness* as his crowning work? Or, listen, why not go the whole hog: could anything more surely bear the marks of finality than a final agony, *my own death*?

But all these, while seemingly of another order than the journeys and the horrors, only apparently stand free of them, in fact *presuppose* them. What *drove* to the madness?, *conferred* the consciousness?; *of what life*, the death?—in these inevitable questions the dismissed First Eleven inexorably reappear, as how should they not? Impossible to think a Final Effort apart from what it finalizes! One might dream of a Last Labor that should wipe the slate clean, but, like many dreams, this one contained a contradiction: a Last Labor could only be *Last of All*, its lastness consisting, precisely, in what, at last, it made clear about all the rest. He must, he was only now coming to see, supply not merely what was wanting but an awareness that something had been wanting the while.

Now (our other question) if anywhere is to be sought the model for such an inquiry—*Pattern-Thus-Far, speak! what completes thee?*—surely it must be in the explorations of the artist, forever musing what to try next, in the light (mild expression!) of all he has tried, and that has tried him, in the past.

The Collected Works, the Achieved Oeuvre—only along such lines might one conceive the effort to complete a set not, prior to its completion, recognizable as a set, never mind *which* set, never mind set of *what*.

(Scarcely less an artist’s—another *kind* of artist, to be sure—is the impulse Hercules (only briefly) entertains to put forward *my laboring upon a Final Labor* as itself, as already, the Final Labor—a freak, if you will, but a freak that actually brings him within hail, and perhaps even plants the seed, of his eventual #12.)

And yet, and still . . . *An engraver, say you? Pray, why, of all manner makers—?* Come, my Unthought-of, do I not hit off your trouble?—in which, however, I must ask you to bide yet a while.

But yet know this: Graver though he be, at the present juncture our hero's first instinct is *not* to reach for his portfolio. No, initially, what he seeks to juxtapose are the purely *mental* images of the First Eleven he carries around in his head. Trouble is, all these built-up patterns and tied-down connections prove extraordinarily difficult to keep straight. (*You try retaining which "Captures: Live" overlap with which "Fauna: Mammalian" even while excluding all "Journeys: Marine."*)

Wherefore he entreats that all the trophies he has brought the King back from Labors ##1–11 and from each of the principal "deeds by the way" (*parerga*) be now for a time returned to him, reasoning that, with the objects themselves before his eyes, any gathering motifs—and, for each such, its Truant Acmé—must, in the end, stand forth.

His boon is granted, and presently the hero finds himself gazing out over a sea of animal parts, produce, garb Now here, now there, his touch lights. At first the sheer heft of each thing—be it tusk, mare's tooth, or bronze beak—once more taken in hand for the first time since "that day," seems full of promise. But the moment he actually essays setting out the bulky metonyms in one-star-shy constellations . . . well, *you* try portioning out a single Nemean lionskin between "Kills: Animal" and "Mainland: Greek."

Back go the mementos (to the immense relief of the King, who has once more sought refuge in his *pithōs/peliké* against the likelihood that Hercules means to reclaim his fetchings for good and all), and in their place

But please mark: *in their place!* It is only now—*his mind's images of things* and, indeed, *the things themselves* having proved powerless to assume such a pattern as might reveal (in the words of Hercules' own earlier query to his "Boys") "*what caps us*"—that the hero first whips out the cycle of delicately scarped engravings he has made of Labors ##1–11 together with the principal *parerga*, and begins to move them around the drafting-table, seeking (as a last resort!) inspiration in the work of his own hand.

(That he includes the *parerga* bespeaks, perhaps, some measure of heroic wishful thinking. How clear it seemed, in retrospect, that these side-feats contained the best of him! How he wishes he'd saved one out—Alcestis, maybe, or maybe the Titan on the Rock—to be his Last Labor now! Or, failing that, if only he could get one of them retroactively bumped up to #12—how cheerfully would he labor for its elevation!)

But why—and now, really, the question can no longer decently be deferred—need this be the work of an *engraver's* hand? For conceiving Hercules as *some* kind of artist there is—quite apart from the specific emphases of my fable—ample precedent. Disposed as we may be to view Alcides as mere—as the very *type* of mere—Bodily Man, this is, in fact, but one of many turns that, over the centuries, the figure has been given. Page through the tradition and you shall also light upon Hercules the Seer, Hercules the Mystagogue, Hercules the Philosopher—and, yes, Hercules the Elegiac Poet and Vase-Painter. What you shall not, elsewhere than here, light upon is Hercules the Puller of Proofs, Hercules the Dabber of Grounds Why, of all artists, have I made my hero an *engraver*?

I shall not maintain that some profound narrative logic or depth symbolism dictated such a course. No, my friend, the plain truth is, *I did it for you*, have had,

my Long-Dreamt-of, you in mind from the start. Back in the time when I was first drafting the pages now in your hands, I already pondered what I should in the end lay before you; and already one thing was clear. To the extent that this tale of mine labors to image itself, it must—I must—*cut you in on the self-imagining*. So that if I now, in the season of our co-labors, ask you for an image of Hercules deep in contemplation of his own images, it is first of all that you may have occasion *to image your own*.

But (it somehow only now occurs to me to ask) just how feasible a project is this I enjoin? How plausible a representation may engraving hope to make of engraving? The few attempts along such lines with which I am familiar may rather be said to shy from the attempt. Abraham Bosse's print "The Making of an Etching" (Paris, 1758) depicts every stage of the etching process—the waxing and warming of the plate, the needling-in of the design, the acid bath, the pulling of proofs—with the significant exception of the completed etching. Plate IX of Rousseau's *Julie: Sujets d'Estampes* (Geneva, 1761), an engraving of a small boy leafing through a book of engravings, does indeed show the leafed-through plates but on so tiny a scale as to scarcely more than gesture toward their representation.

Perhaps in all such cases the difficulty is being skirted because it has already been recognized as insoluble. For consider: if one sets about to incise a print-within-a-print, the scale of the touches lavished on the print-within must be dramatically smaller and less detailed than those of the print proper; yet to lay them in, one has only the same sized burins, rockers, etc., with which one is cutting the plate itself.

In light of this quandary, how inadequate—nay, incomprehensible—now seems to me my own earlier-expressed indifference (or worse) to the practice of your art, *precisely in view of what were to emerge as my own eventual demands on it!*

Yet urgent as these questions may appear, I am afraid that, in dwelling upon them, we merely postpone consideration of the true difficulty that now confronts—"me," I was about to write (meaning "you"); perhaps best write: "that now confronts *us*."

For alas! the real puzzle about Plate 9 is not *how to represent engraving's moment of self-representation once fixed on* but rather *how to fix on ONE such moment to represent*, i.e., Hercules amid *what* jumble of *which* plates goes on your plate? For, of course, the likelihood is that our hero must deploy (and, in fact, my tale portrays him deploying) many, or at least several, such groupings of his engraved "First Eleven" before hitting on one that shall . . . evoke? imply? entail? a Completing Twelfth. So, for example, in my pages devoted to this episode you may read how, over against a column of "Slays: Ruminant" (the Hind, the Cattle, the Bull), he lays out another of "Slays: Ferine" (the Boar, the Lion, the Snake) to see whether one or the other tally shall fetch up short. Or how, on a world map unfurled before him, he now pins each labor to its site, so that it may appear which, if any, corner of the globe as yet lacks feat. Etc., etc.

Now, since Plate 9 can portray but *one* of these vignettes, you and I have some decisions to make. Shall we surround the hero with prints of the "Courtship Labors"—his offerings (Girdle, Apple, Horn) to the King's daughter—as if he mused: *what now, where, till now, none?* Or perhaps we must set him down among plates likely, since they involve gods (the Bull, the Apple, the Hound), to prompt the query: *what altar as yet unserved?*

But why go on? Clearly, the problem is not *which* of these myriad possibilities to seize on, but that some one or other must, and no one more than another need, be seized on.

Upon this single plate only a single arrangement of “Hercules Amid His Plates” may be shown. Yet *any* choice one makes gives undue prominence to *that* solution, which is not (since none is) Hercules’ own (for which, see Final Plate). No one of the (only available) candidates for representation may in fact be represented without seeming to confer on it, *simply by virtue of its selection*, an ultimacy to which neither it nor any of its competitors may lay claim.

It is, of course, possible to imagine ways around this dilemma, dispositions of the plates-within that should, so to speak, signal their provisionality over the head of their selection. You might, for example, lay in a “trptych” of Hercules before three successive orderings of labor-plates (e.g., the “courtship group,” the “god-affined,” the “map”), each of which would thus be taken down in importance by the presence of the other two. Or you could show the hero with his engravings faced round toward *him* (and so away from *us*). Or you might depict Hercules hastily snatching up his outspread prints at the moment of Iolaus’s return from Delphi, your subject’s nervous act of concealment thus doing duty for your own.

Yet if by any such device as these the effect of unwanted finality is countered, or at least muted, it comes at a price; for by every such solution, the clarity of the prints-within—i.e., of your own art’s self-images—is degraded. The “trptych,” since one plate must now portray three scenes, portrays everything in them, including the miniature engravings, at one-third scale. The arrangement that gives the prints-within faced round toward Hercules gives them to *us* upside down. And when shown hidden away from prying Iolaus, the in-plate plates no less elude our pry.

In short, it seems as if, if one hopes to prevent art’s self-images from assuming an unwished-for finality, one must be prepared to accept limitations on their power to image art.

All unlooked-for outcome! Even now, when these elements have leapt into alignment, I can scarcely so much as credit their correlation.

Here is a difficulty I should be only too glad to “hand along” to you—the undreamt-of to the Undreamt-of—did I feel I possessed even the slightest confidence as to what, at this juncture, might conceivably be meant by “handing along.”

Plate 10.

Hercules shatters the prophecy that Iolaus has brought him “from Delphi,” unread: he’s got it!

In the studio, Hercules and Iolaus. Hercules is exultant, having just this moment grasped what his Last Labor must be.

In his hand he clutches the *ostrakon* (pottery fragment) on which (he supposes) Iolaus has set down the Delphic Oracle’s prescription of a final toil.

(Actually, of course, Iolaus has never left town and has composed the “Delphic” prophecy himself, scratching it, in the red ink of loss (of which, I know, your medium can offer no adequate account) upon the bit of clay he has snapped off the rim of the King’s *pithōs* or *peliké*, perched atop which he dreamt it first.)

It is not, however, what Hercules reads upon the *ostrakon* that glads his heart here. Indeed, he has crumbled the potsherd unread—we must glimpse the fine rain of dust and

chips pouring from his hand—and in that instant, *by that action*, seems to know how to go on.

Thus, all in a moment, he has not only solved his present difficulty but achieved his longstanding ambition *to be my own oracle, the prescriber of every least action I take, the author of myself*. What wonder, then, if Hercules appears to exult!

Iolaus, by contrast, you might presume to be as “shattered” as the *ostrakon* which Hercules crumbles unread. For, after all, never now shall the words he set down there direct the actions of an heroic executant; never may he hope to supplant the Assigning King as prescriber of Herculean acts.

Indeed, not even as *chronicler* of Hercules’ deeds would Iolaus seem to be any longer much in demand. Henceforth the hero shall prove keeper of his own flame, archivist of his own fact, no less archivist than hero, no less hero for archivist. It is as if, in this suddenly grasped solution, the archival has been “taken up” into the heroic—or is it, rather, that heroism stands revealed as a mere mode of the archival? One way or the other, the scribe-charioteer, as much in his character of scribe as charioteer, would seem to have been left in the dust, *written out*.

And yet . . . only swing your eyes rightward across the plate and you shall see (then bring *us* to see) how the unread, disregarded Iolaus no less exults.

What is really going on here? How has Hercules come upon his Last Labor with never so much as an eye lowered to the “page” (*ostrakon*) that, he has every reason to believe, contains it? And how comes Iolaus to exult in the spectacle of his words being, to all appearances, dismissed out of hand? The answers to these questions lie in the moments immediately preceding the present plate.

His efforts to arrive at #12 by constellating and reconstellating images of the “First Eleven” having ended in impasse (Plate 9), Hercules strikes out in a fresh (though, one may feel, not entirely unanticipated) direction. Returning to their portfolio his engravings of The Labors Thus Far, he now sets about “walking through”—i.e., *re-enacting*—##1-11, in the hope that *what he feels like doing next* may give him his last act—an exercise, by the way, which I have no hesitation in recommending to you, my Undreamt-of, should you ever be in doubt what image the tale next requires of you; often enough it has led *me* to the next turning of the tale itself.

In this walkthrough of The Sequence to Date, the hero has got as far as the climactic moment of Labor 11—his hand is out, in the very gesture shown on Plate 1, to pluck the Golden Apple—when suddenly Iolaus rushes in “from Delphi” and, seeing his master’s outstretched hand, triumphantly drops the *ostrakon* into it.

Hercules, furious at the obtruding of this merely outward solution upon his own, shivers the overwritten fragment he finds in his hand—and in that moment suddenly grasps what he must do now (i.e., do last).

Thus, Hercules’ shattering of the word Iolaus has so proudly laid before him is not, or is not merely, the contemptuous dismissal out of hand it may appear; Hercules also *draws strength* from what he dismisses. Yes, he crumbles the clay as propounding a merely external solution, but this mere solution-from-without has its part to play in his arriving at a solution-from-within. It is his *firm grasp of the externals* that now enables him to . . . seize upon his own, go forward on his own—however you like to put it.

In the moment of shattering the oracle, he hits on the solution—does this mean “he hits on the solution *while* shattering the oracle” or perhaps “he shatters the oracle *because* he

has hit on the solution”? Ah, but you must understand that “to shatter the oracle” and “to hit on the solution” are but two descriptions of the same moment. The hand that splinters the word draws from it the strength to do so; and that is why, in representing the sift of clay dust issuing from his hand, you must shoot for the effect of, not merely so many chips and flakes but, *an aftermath*. The life Hercules has crushed out of the thing is the life he goes on to live—or shall we say, *goes on to play*.

And now at last we are in a position to see why Iolaus, no less than his master, exults—and must be portrayed as exulting—in the present moment. Hercules’ crushing disregard of his scribe’s composition would seem to spell the end of all Iolaus’s ambitions *to prescribe actions to Hercules, author Herculanea* . . . in a word, to “write like the King.” Yet see! how even this very disregard of his hopes realizes them. For it is on the word of Iolaus that Hercules now takes action—and what has Iolaus ever sought but that Hercules should *act upon his words*?

The Archivist, in short—and here I must avail myself of language I have hitherto avoided like the plague, but, really, what help?—has himself “scripted” this scene of reading that casts him aside unread, a transaction that, however little one likes hearing oneself say it, resembles nothing more surely than the dealings (as my dramatist-friend portrays them) between a playwright, a player and a play.

For in this moment Hercules can neither be said simply to read nor simply to refrain from reading Iolaus’s “page.” Rather, he gives it the kind of reading an actor gives a script: he gives it a performance, which is to say, he gives a performance of it.

What exactly it is that Hercules, acting upon the shattered word of Iolaus, now goes on to perform—what, that is, will turn out to have been his Final Labor—we shall see in the last plate, where he performs it. But what of the word he shatters, the now-never-to-be-essayed Would-be Twelfth, which Iolaus gives out as Delphi’s but has in fact composed himself, scratching it onto the *ostrakon* in the red ink of loss? Earlier (Plate 8) the curtain was rung down on the scene of its composition before we had a chance to peruse it; now Hercules shatters it, unread. Do we never get to read what the author wrote?

Ah, this is what you must not ask! The shattered word will have played its role in the drama of its shattering, and you are cordially invited to take in the show—on condition of your never seeking to know how it reads apart from the enactment you witness.

I am sure you appreciate it is not I but the nature of the enactment which imposes this condition. That it is no easier of compliance for that, I grant you. But if their own author can endure that his words shall now never see the light of the very day they herald, so, my Undreamt-of, must you.

Final Plate.

Hercules performs his Last Labor for the King.

We are looking down from the top of the tree into Hercules’ face, as he, with (violently foreshortened) left arm, reaches up to “seize the fruit” of his labors. It is the moment of the plucking of the Golden Apple of the Hesperides, seen from the point of view of the apple—which, however, we *also* view, high on the topmost branch, with Hercules’ immense paw closing round it

“But—stay!” (shall I speak you here?) “Surely this is but— Do I not find myself reading my Plate 1 instructions over again?”

It is true: the present directives (virtually) repeat those of Plate 1 for the excellent reason that the present plate, showing as it does a (near-)re-enactment of the scene Plate 1 depicts, (practically) reproduces Plate 1.

There are, of course, differences. The Golden Apples, already in Plate 3 much declined from their Hesperidean apex, here show dry and brown (whatever the burin may have to say about “brown”). Where then a serpent-guard, now Iolaus lies twisted at the tree’s foot. And off to one side, hunkered down in his urn (its lip now lacking the potsherd/*ostrakon* which Iolaus broke off in Plate 8 to scribe his truth upon), the King, wide-eyed, looks on.

From these three small changes alone, it were possible to infer that what we have here is not the Plate 1 event—the “moment itself”—over again, but rather *a re-enactment* of the scene in Plate 1 on some later occasion (that withered apple!), this time with Iolaus in the role of “Slain Serpent” and with the enurned King providing the “house.”

Why is our hero now thus re-enacting his Eleventh Labor under the royal gaze? Actually, in the moment just prior to this, he has re-enacted the entire Sequence to Date. Once before, back in his studio, we came upon him engaged in a “run-through” of the “First Eleven” (see Plate 10). Then his aim was to evoke, or at least build toward, a #12. But why does he now run through them all *again*, this time in the presence of the Assigning King? For answer, we must return to the culminating moment of that earlier re-enactment, when Hercules, “reaching for the Golden Apple” of Labor 11, was instead handed the inscribed *ostrakon* by Iolaus and thereby suddenly sees—

“What he must do now” is how I put it at the time. But this was not strictly accurate. In the moment of crumbling the *ostrakon*, no “next move”—*nothing further*—suggested itself to Hercules; and it was precisely in this *nothing further* that he glimpsed his solution. For if, after replaying Labors ##1–11, he felt no impetus to go on to #12, this can only mean that his re-enactment of ##1–11, originally undertaken merely in the hope of *evoking* #12, has itself *been* the #12 it supposed itself to be merely laboring toward. No “last act following from all the rest” follows upon all the rest. Nothing, it seems, but a re-performance of the canon-thus-far completes it. In this moment, with this perception, Hercules has his Last Labor and is ready to perform it for the King.

And it is this very (re-)performance which Hercules is even now about: a labor-by-labor recap of ##1–11, with Iolaus standing in for each fetch or slay as needed (he is now the draped lionskin, now a shooed bird), culminating in this farewell cameo as “the Speared Dragon of Labor #11” in the present plate.

The current blank (as opposed to: *customary terrified*) expression which you must bestow upon the urn-locked King is explained by the hero’s *simply stopping there*. That Hercules should reprise his First Eleven by way of *prologue* to #12 seems fitting to the King, who in fact avails himself of this unlooked-for opportunity to update his (mental) notes for an eventual Hercules-poem.

But when now the hero, having re-enacted the Saga Thus Far, simply *stands down*, His Majesty is at a loss. Like many a newcomer to the stage, Hercules has assumed that the breathtaking rightness of his solution—*re-performing ##1–11, I perform #12*—must inevitably dazzle his public no less surely than, some while since, himself. The King, meanwhile, *is waiting for the show to begin*, and it is his mounting puzzlement at the show’s failure to do so that now leads him to initiate the following cross-purposeful exchange—

Here I was on the point—after the fashion of Rousseau’s instructions to *his* engraver—of copying in, or perhaps simply referring you to, the conversation between Hercules and the King that appears on page (64) of the galleys you hold. But how if, instead, I were to let you have the scene in the (as I now regard it) over-schematic, speech-tagged format from which I worked up the final version.

There is, I recognize, some danger that the script-like look of this excerpt may encourage you to do here what, earlier in these Instructions, I so fervently warned you against: portray scenes upon these plates as they would be portrayed onstage, i.e., as scenes from a play. But, of course, the present plate, showing as it does a re-enactment, *does*, in effect, portray a “scene from a play”; where better seek its visual rhythms than in the rhythms of exchange between those who play it? For the present, then, please consider my earlier caution suspended, if not withdrawn.

KING: And this you mean for . . .
 what? A refresher? Context?
 The proverbial “second chance”?

HERCULES: Mean for #12.

KING: That was *it*? Wait a minute.
What was?

HERCULES: *In this, my First Eleven
 over again, you have seen the last of me.*

KING: Am I to understand that you
 seek to represent yourself as—?

HERCULES: Even so. You are to
 understand that I seek to represent
 myself.

KING: Oh, Cerberus, Cerberus, lookin’
 better all the—! In fact, right now,
 the entire Traditional Twelve seem
 bathed in something of a golden—

HERCULES: And at whose hest but thine—?

KING: I never looked for anything
 like this from your hand!

HERCULES: Even by its otherness from
 your own, know the conception mine.

KING: Yes, but . . . I had conceived
 the situation altogether more in terms
 of—

HERCULES: Ah, well, now, just there
 To have ‘conceived’ a ‘situation’
 in ‘terms’—there twangs *its author*,
 not *its hero*.

KING: Say, Hero: was ever Author
 took more plainly for his own
 the labor of—? No, my Undreamt-of,
 I am afraid that for this
 metalaborious turn of things, we
 have no one to thank but—

But I cannot rehearse even so much of this exchange without reflecting how little it resembles mine with thee, my Undreamt-of, how blessedly free has been *our* “dialogue” of the cross-purposes that dog this “author” and *his* executant. Could anything be more plainly marked, more clearly laid down, than what must be the course of your own “last labor” upon this final plate, the most exact and exacting directives for which you now hold in your hand. Of them, of all, I await a full realization on your part.

On the Final Plate

I am now in receipt of your responses to my Instructions. And first off let me say: when I consider the scale of the humiliation that only your vigilance has spared me . . . well, *I am grateful* doesn’t begin to cover it.

For, yes, unbelievably, you are right. How, I cannot imagine, but somehow I have fetched up one shy. The packet you had of me contains directives for only 11 of the 12 plates demanded by The House and, it might seem, by the very nature of the material.

Can the omission, you ask (in the nicest possible way), have been intentional—meant, perhaps, as some kind of test or lesson, meant to bring home . . . ? And, in view of the many and blatant parallels certain to suggest themselves—here, after all, is yet another “executant” left on his own as regards yet another Toil 12—who could fault you for raising the question? I only wish I knew how to answer it! Of anything approaching a conscious intent to put you through all the same hoops as your subject I think I may acquit myself. On the other hand, that one should simply have *lost count* does indeed, as you (with pardonable vehemence) put it, “beggar belief”

But speculation is fruitless. We are plain men facing a plain difficulty: *Plate 12 remains unspecified; what now?* In your letter you ask whether it might not be possible to bypass the entire issue by simply “stopping at eleven”? Would that it were! To my ear, at least, *no* further moment of the tale cries out for illustration—else I had not left off where I did. But on this point, The House, as noted earlier, is adamant: twelve plates they would look upon, no more, no less. So, in deference to that hope, and in gratitude for having been spared the humiliation of dashing it, I hereby prescribe as the subject of Plate 12—“prescribe,” for nothing could be less my style than, in the manner of the Assigning King, to “hand on” to a toiler the devising of his own utmost toil—the *Executant of Plates 1–11*. Which is as much as to say: Engraver, in this your final image, *show yourself at last!*

I am not, of course, commissioning a self-portrait amid domestic scenes. We shall want to see you in your studio (already familiar to the viewer from Plates 6, 7 and 9 as the model for Hercules'), at your bench, intent, perhaps, upon . . . oh, dabbing a ground, hand-wiping a plate—whatever strikes you as a characteristic or merely vivid moment of your art, practitioner's choice. Only, the print must show why, for all its evident limitations, no art but this of thine, Engraver, may (as, to do them justice, The House has held from the start) image forth this tale of mine—a tale, let us not forget, *whose hero is an engraver*.

Now I think of it, though, I guess if your plate is to convey all this, it cannot pick you up at just any “vivid” or “characteristic” point along your path, but must give you out laying a line, throwing up burr—in short, *wielding the burin*. For does not your art essentially consist in (and must not this image of its essential moment therefore depict) the artificer, burin-in-hand, moving over the face of the copper, working down into the metal, working up the design, working from dark to light

But stay! *Burin-in-hand* Would anything crucial be sacrificed—would not, rather, much, *much* be gained—if, perhaps taking as your model Fathorne's delicate treatment of this motif in his *Art of Graving and Sketching* (London, 1662), you were to confine your act of self-portrayal here to a portrait of your *hand*, rendered in all its particularity, bringing your most cherished of burins (rendered same) down onto the as-yet-unnicked plate

I say “confine,” but surely the aim of such a curtailment would be, not to excise the “self” from your self-portrait but, rather, to abode that self where, in a craftsman, it is most surely to be met: in the difficult union of hand and tool.

Although, bring it to that, *why the hand?* Has not the artisanal hand already *spoke its fill* in its very choice of instrument? Well, then: why not give over Plate 12 entirely to the—to *your*—chosen instrument? “*Seul mon burin*” (“my graver alone”)—shall not this fierce *impresa* dictate the true, the sole, the inevitable matter of our Final Plate?

By now, you are certain to have noted, possibly with mounting dismay, a tendency in my successive proposals for this plate toward the, shall we say, ever more self-pertaining—from *engraver graves engraving* to *engraving hand engraves engraving hand to graving tool graves graving tool*—with the consequence of there being always less and less to depict. That this poses a challenge to, or (as I suspect you are more likely to feel) places a constraint upon, your ardor of depiction, I make no doubt. But then, the challenge or constraint is one that you have faced and met before. Indeed, far from only now coming into play here on Plate 12, *picture me the unpicturable!* has—I will not say “increasingly” but *often enough* over the course of these “first eleven”—proved to be the gist of the task imposed. In Plates 2 (“King in urn”) and 8 (“Scribe on same”) you were asked to show *writing caught in the act*; in Plate 10 (“Hercules shatters”), *a reading that reads not*. Plate 4 (“Hercules stunned”) modestly orders up the portrait of a “*had*” realization. Plate 6 (the “Labor Chorus”) would gaze on *chores somehow also chaps*. And in what now stands revealed as Plate 11 (“Hercules re-enacts”), you were put to catch a representation of there being *nothing further to represent*, the scene on the plate being itself *already* a representation, its “moment” no more but some earlier moment *taken again*. (You will do me the justice to recall that I have queried the illustrability of this material from the first.)

Viewed in this light, my present call for a *graved graving tool* (“*seul mon burin*”) begins to look positively down-to-earth, the more so as I ask that you let us have the thing in its full particularity: the tape-wound, half-mushroom-shaped handle, from which protrudes the abrupt, rhomboid blade, all along whose trued belly, as far as the lozenge tip, may be read off many a former owner’s nicks and scrapes.

Stay, though! What truly speaks the “personality” of this as distinct from all other gravers (to say nothing of innumerable scarpers, dabbers, spitstickers and the like) if not *the marks it lays down*: by their marks ye shall know them! So, then, why not just . . . *lay down some marks*? That is, rather than the burin’s self, would not the faithfullest likeness of its wielder—that is, my Undreamt-of, *you*—be a plateful of dabs and stipples by it—by you—incised? Than this, what more incisive portrait of the artist might be ventured, unless it were—?

Hold everything! Stop the presses! Could anything (suddenly) be clearer than that this final illustration, this “self-portrait” I am requiring of you to cap the set, must in the end assume no other form than that of *a print portraying the plate from which itself has been printed*. Let me explain, “working back” (as I believe you engravers say) “toward the lighter values.”

For this, your “final labor,” you have been bid perform an act of self-representation. No doubt, like most artists, you believe yourself to be most adequately represented by “the work”—only, where, in this instance, seek the work? Well (it is tempting to reply), we are talking about an engraver; of what work can it be a question but his engravings, his prints?

But how if the engraver were no more surely to be made out in the print-run of one of his plates than . . . oh, say, than my dramatist-friend in the stage-run of one of his scripts? The comparison—given all the obloquy you have heard me heap on theatre—may startle but is not, I assure you, pulled from air, nor is it rooted in the suggestive but, after all, incidental circumstance of its having been a playwright (one Alois Senefelder of Prague) who invented lithography. Let’s just say that, as between your art and my theatrical colleague’s, I find myself, of late, far more powerfully struck by certain similarities than differences and, if not necessarily happy or easy about being so . . . still, struck is struck.

For all that, I would not be heard as *asserting the truth* but merely (inveterate tale-bearer that I am) *rehearsing the tale* of a certain parallel—better make that “certain parallels”—between fashioners of incised plates and dramatic texts. As, for example:

Like the playwright, the engraver produces an ass-backwards structure of marks that is not itself the work aimed at—for one, the staged performance, for the other, the pulled print—but is at most a necessary first step toward producing it. Like the playwright, the engraver must be forever imagining the impact of his every touch when *turned over* to others and *turned round* into another medium—stage action in one case, inked paper in the other—where alone the effects sought from the first can first occur.

I suppose it might be urged that, if one is bent on comparing *some* form of incised surface to the dramatic text, a nearer analogue might be the ancient Minoan cylinder seal, in that these little objects, like scripts, cannot be taken in all at once but, if they are to produce their full impact, must be *unrolled in time*. I would point out, however, that in several key respects incised plates, too, only produce their full impression over time. You engravers are accustomed, are you not, to scratch some lines on a plate, pull a proof

of the image-thus-far (called, I believe, a “state”)—and then, on the basis of what you see there, to revise and refine the plate, each “state” in turn suggesting what must be tried next. Does not this process bear more than a passing resemblance to a series of rehearsal sessions on a script, over the course of which, and in response to which, new “lines” will be gone out along, cut, laid down in the play/plate itself?

Its print-run once complete, the engraved plate may be kept on hand to serve as the basis for new editions in time to come. Likewise the text of a once-staged play may be “kept on hand” as the basis for future productions. Care, in each instance, must be exercised. The old play, if it is to be performed again at a later date, will have to be archived, edited, stripped of accretions, etc. The old plate, if it is to be printed from again at a later date, will have to be disinked (do you personally favor benzene or caustic soda for this purpose?), secured against corrosion by a layer of varnish or grease, etc. But assuming such precautions have been taken, nothing prevents someone’s reviving Shakespeare hundreds of years after Shakespeare first “laid in” his scripts, any more than (an actual example) someone’s running off, in Paris in 1898, a “second edition” of a steel-faced copper plate originally cut in Darmstadt in 1632.

One might be tempted to object that, unlike the centuries-later staging (by a new *director*, in another *milieu*, etc.), the centuries-later print-run must, in all essential respects, be identical with its predecessor—tempted, that is, had one not read, in Jules Heller’s classic chapter on “The Intaglio Process,” that “if a number of printmakers are invited to pull a print from someone else’s plate, each must inevitably leave the stamp of his own personality upon it.”

Of course, as you know better than I, even the best cared-for plate becomes, with each use, a little blurrier, a little less capable of producing a sharp-edged print. Does the script of *Cymbeline* likewise, each time it is used to “produce a run” of *Cymbeline*, become a little less capable of producing another? I confess to some uncertainty on this score.

But if the *play/plate* comparison appears slightly shaky in this regard, on another and far more central point it would seem to break down entirely. Dramatic texts, subsequent to their production in the theatre, are (or at least may be) read, studied, commented upon—in a word, *cherished as artifacts in their own right*. Engraved plates, on the other hand, are customarily (like Iolaus’s potsherd) *shattered* or at least *bent out of shape* to prevent future use. The etching, drypoint or mezzotint once run off, who ever “cherished as an artifact in its own right” the etched, drypointed or mezzotinted plate?

Well, the Emperor Maximilian, for one, who, several impressions of Dürer’s *Small Crucifixion* having been taken, carried ever thereafter, set in the pommel of his sword, the engraved gold plate from which the prints had been pulled. Indeed, I recall you yourself once pronouncing a certain *cliché verre* plate handsomer than any print possible to be made from it (just as the Romantics believed Shakespeare’s plays to be diminished by even the finest stagings of them). You meant this, I think, for disparagement. But knowing as I do your fondness for *niello*, that “closet drama” of intaglio processes (where a silver plate is engraved but never inked or printed; rather, its grooves are packed with a dark paste that bakes up shiny, and the resulting black-on-silver plaque is then offered as the finished work) . . . well, let’s just say that your open partiality, in this instance, for the *plate itself* as the thing to see encourages me in the hope that you

may not be entirely out of sympathy with the analogy I am urging—nor with the approach to self-portraiture it would seem to dictate, namely:

Even as we most surely come upon the playwright in the dramatic text, which instigates the very process (production) destined to supersede it, so we may most surely glimpse the engraver in the incised plate, which likewise sets in motion the very process (printing) by which itself shall be displaced.

This being how things are, I know you will understand if I hereby retract all my own earlier suggestions for the final plate. The engraver at his bench, the engraver's hand wielding its tool, the tool alone, the marks the tool leaves—away with 'em! As much as ever do I desire that a self-portrait of my engraver should crown his labors but only now grasp what might amount to an act of self-portrayal on engraving's part. You must pull me a print of a plate from your hand—of the *plate itself*, shown not yet inked or perhaps wiped clean. For consider what must be the relation between a print depicting such a plate and the plate from which that print itself is pulled. In order to produce an engraving that shows a plate, you will have to cut an actual plate resembling one of the prints to be eventually lifted from the plate you show: its every swell, a hollow; for all its darks, brights; “let the paper work” is how I think you engravers put it. It is almost as if (to speak in the language of my recent *play/plate* comparison) in such a case the “script” (i.e., the plate), containing as it must all the desired effects in the desired order, *were already the performance*, which the *actual* “performance” (i.e., the print) can only “get backwards,” much in the way a *counterproof*—is it not thus one terms an impression taken not off a plate but off an earlier, still-damp impression?—must systematically reverse everything about the plate one first set out to show.

Say, Executant: How but by such a play of reversals might engraving hope to represent itself; where but in such a “transfer process” seek an image of its own face? Plainly, for your Twelfth-and-Last picture, *you must picture the plate itself*.

Yes, but . . . *which* plate itself?

Here your fellow-intaglist, by his ingenious solution to the King's poser, points you a path. For *his* Twelfth-and-Last, Hercules chose to re-enact his Prior Eleven; and your eleventh plate captured him at the climactic moment of this re-enactment, once more “reaching for the golden fruit.” Shall you not, then, in solidarity with your co-executant, portray upon your Twelfth Plate *the plate from which was printed your own #11*, itself already a picture of even such an act of self-portrayal as you now essay. In such wise you may, no less surely than Hercules, achieve in the imaging of your own last-labor-but-one, your own Last Labor. For to put forward the act of Herculean self-imaging as the very image of one's own—what is this but to portray oneself in the plainest possible terms?

Which done, your labors are at an end; and I shall look forward to receiving the Full Complement, the entire Twelfefold Stint, from your hand.

Afterword: Once More to the Engraver

The Full Complement, the entire Twelfefold Stint, lie, at this moment, spread out before me. To describe these engravings as *everything I could have hoped* is scant praise; for what, after all, have I allowed myself to hope? I have doubted your medium, doubted the

illustrability of my tale, doubted the validity and, were it valid, the wisdom of illustration as such. But now I look upon your plates, I look upon matters in a whole fresh light.

Your images return me to the hour when first my own imaginings rose—nay, sprang—into view. You appear to have relived my own season of *first glimpsing* and thereby enabled me to glimpse again as at first. It is the possibility of standing once more at that juncture, and not merely *this* or *this other* of the tale's events, that your work seems to me to illustrate.

Occasionally, your hand—or more truly, your *conception*—falters. The climbed tree of Plate 11 is, even at first glance, the mere stage-prop it will in the end prove to be—but I should prefer some initial uncertainty on this score. The urn of Plates 2 and 8 has not already the very *form* of the refuge to be, at length, taken in it. And to have represented “The Labors” of Plate 6—those *efforts somehow also guys*—as guys in T-shirts silkscreened with their labors is a facile, if ingenious, solution.

But even as I turn through these pages of directives, cross-checking prescription against execution, I find myself entertaining a strange fancy. How if my Hercules-story had been lost—lost in a fire, lost in the mail, or “lost” simply in the sense of *lost to the world*, i.e., *never written*—and all that remained of it were these Instructions for its eventual illustration? To my surprise I note that this extremely dismaying prospect does not dismay; in fact, exhilarates; in fact, whispers itself to be, in some sense, the outcome sought from the start, the final form of a project one had merely had a go at in the tale. . . . What beckons here? What work is this that now comes to stand in place of the work itself?

Time and again over the course of our exchanges, it has seemed, O my Undreamt-of, as if some feature of the transaction between Hercules and the King was reappearing between you and me: my just now fetching up, like His Highness, one “labor” shy would be only the most recent example. Formerly, I should have described this as your and my work together “echoing the tale.”

But it is, I now see, *just the other way round*. The reason the King's dealings with Hercules in my story keeps cropping up between *us* is that it is the story of *our* dealings I have been struggling to tell from the first, *long ere we began to deal*. Of that struggle, *Hercules Belabored* represents a preliminary, *Instructions to the Engraver* the definitive, account.

But to discover the true form of one's work in a set of instructions to another for realizing that work in another form—

“—Is to have written a play,” here interposed my dramatist-friend, to whom I was confiding this breakthrough. “How! A play? Does this look like a play?” I cried, thrusting a copy of these Instructions under his eyes. And he: “Let me show you what a play looks like.”

“You conceive yourself to have authored a tale, not a script, and you do not well see how you can be mistaken on this point. Yet if by some chance you *were* to prove mistaken on this point, nothing would more surely mark you as a playwright, a play being nothing more or less than *a mistake on this very point*. Hear me out.

“When you say you have ‘entertained the fancy’ of your tale's surviving only in the form of instructions to an executant, I ask: *whose is this fancy?* When you characterize yourself as ‘exhilarated’ by such an outcome, I ask: *with the exhilaration of whom?* Where, in even such a momentary favoring of Instructions over Tale, has one bestowed one's favor? What manner text not only prescribes its own supersession—the plates once cut,

what need more of the directions for cutting them—but professes to find its own best prospect of survival in doing so?

“In a word—know thyself! The ‘fancy’ of the storyteller that his tale has been lost (or never written) but survives only in the form of instructions to an illustrator is the fancy of the storyteller to be a playwright, of fiction to be drama. Another name for this ‘fancy’ is the dramatic text, that tale told in advance of our dealings with it—which the dealings themselves then seem to no more than re-enact.”

Well! I scarcely know what to make of all this. Me, a playwright? Who knows better than yourself, my Undreamt-of, with what asperity (to be sure, a little muted of late) I have from the first expressed myself upon “the stage.” How, then, my dramatist-friend should ever have arrived at a view of me as all the while engaged about, or even so much as an aspirant to—Ah, but now really, isn’t that the theatre all over for you: so confident of all the factors *breaking its way*, every author a dramatist-in-the-making, every fiction a drama-waiting-in-the-wings

But then, I suspect all this worry about *theatre or no?* is mere distraction, a sideshow. The real challenge posed by my friend’s comments lies elsewhere, to wit:

Were I to acknowledge these Instructions as the true form of my work, wherein is achieved all I merely strove after in the tale—that is, as *themselves the text* (dramatic or otherwise) *I wished to offer*—should I not then be bound to *withdraw the tale*, already set up in type (you hold the galleys), and in its stead to lay before the public this (for want of a better word) “play”—in other words, *to publish these instructions*—

“—Which I should be only too happy to provide with an introduction,” interjects my dramatist-friend. And I: “You mean, to all the wealth of themes and motifs sounded over the course of—” “I mean,” quoth he, “to the theatre, where you may come to find the ‘executant’ you have addressed from the first.”

“But,” says I, “were I ever to bring out these ‘Instructions’ between boards, how many in The House and in the public might conclude *that it had all been a pretext*, that there never was a Hercules-story in need of illustration, that the instruction-format was simply how I had elected to tell my tale all along.”

“Ah,” says he, “let them think what they like! You and I know the truth. Why should it concern us?”

I don’t say I’m not tempted. But where, my Undreamt-of, would such a recasting leave *you*? What becomes of the plates you have produced for my work if I now put forward the directives for producing those plates as themselves the work?

The question, it may be felt, answers itself—or rather, amounts to no true question. Did the “Instructions” engender the plates? Well, then, what more natural than to print, along with the “Instructions,” the plates they engendered?

Ah, but these plates of yours do not illustrate—if anything, they *supersede*—the text that prescribes them and, in so doing, prescribes its own supersession *by those very plates*. Or perhaps it is *the plates* that are superseded, in the sense that, having once made visible the true character of these “Instructions” *as themselves the work*, they need scarce be vouchsafed another glance. How should these warring supersessions—of word by image, of image by word—lie down peacefully together between the covers of a book?

No, if you and I were to make a joint appearance, I should have to ask of you a whole new run of engravings, even such an “Other Twelve” as, you may recall, at one point my

Hercules dreams of exchanging for *his* Designated Dozen (yet another marker of how this tale of Hero and King was really always ours).

The trouble is, I should not know what to ask for. For all the urgings of my dramatist-friend, I am far from certain what manner of text I should have produced in determining to regard these “Instructions” as one, much less what might illustrate, or be illustrated by, such a production; so that, if you were to attempt to draw what is in my mind on this subject, I am afraid you must draw a blank.

Perhaps, as so often in the past, my dramatist-friend may have some suggestions. But, speaking for myself, that such a page as this cries out for, or might even endure, illustration is by no means clear to me at this stage . . .