

(Paradise)

opus incertum

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VIRGIL

You will not take it amiss if I do not at once consent. But then, you didn't get where you are by taking amiss.

BEATRICE

Nevertheless, you shall, at the last, consent.

VIRGIL

Let me be sure I understand. This old admirer (and sometime singer) of yours is currently going through a bleak patch. Your idea is, it would do him the world of good to see the world of ill; wherefore I am bid to burst upon the scene and, representing myself as sent by you, propose a tour, with myself as guide—

BEATRICE

You being, in all essential respects, already his figure of guidance.

VIRGIL

I then proceed to take him down, acquaint him with depth on depth of degradation—lovers, killers, frauds—all the while batting away the swarms of inverts, misers and silver poets, each with a tale to tell, until at length, scampering up you-know-whose you-know-what, we are *outta* there! Whereupon, it's on up Mt. Betterment, crag by crag, each narrower than the last, always to the accompaniment of further tugging at sleeves. And now at length, just shy of the peak—

BEATRICE

I take him off your hands. I take it from there.

VIRGIL

Ah, why not take it from the start? Why not take him through yourself?

BEATRICE

I am a married woman. I can't very well slip off for the weekend with an "old admirer," as you put it. And then, I am a Soul in Bliss. I can't be in Hell.

VIRGIL

Where do you think you are *now*?

BEATRICE

Oh, Limbo . . . the outer reaches, the upper deck. The tip of the iceberg. I could never hope to match your easy mastery of the full terrain.

VIRGIL

Being, as I am, damned?

BEATRICE

Being, as you are, the author of Sixth *Aeneid*.

VIRGIL

Oh, but all's changed since I—well, or I should say: since *my hero*—Took The Plunge; for of course I myself never “made it below” until for good and all. You’ll comb my hexameters in vain for any account of the cave-ins and refigurings brought on by the Crucifixion, the pile-up of scrap and scree everywhere on view in a Harrowed Hell.

BEATRICE

Ah, Master, pardon, I had not thought what a torment for the fertilest of imaginations to dwell ever upon this barrenest of strands.

VIRGIL

On the contrary, Hell supplies my every want—except, of course, the want of a project, since to be in Hell is to be, just at present, without project. Indeed, I sometimes wonder if I should not be better off further down, away from all the stimulating conversation, there, upon my grid of flame, free to devise . . . well, *what*, exactly, there’s the hitch.

For now, I make the best of Limbo and look forward to resuming my well-lit chats with Orpheus and Ovid, Parmenides and Homer, any one of whom, by the way, would make your fellow a surer guide than I, and every one of whom, I don't doubt, is spoiling for the chance.

BEATRICE

Who, even of these, stands your like in eloquence?

VIRGIL

My "eloquence," upon such service, must go for talking round gatekeepers, hailing rides My magical words shall dwindle into mere magic words—no doubt an essential first step toward myself dwindling into that convenient figure of medieval fun, *Virgil the Magician*. Already I am reputed to have ridden bronze steeds, fashioned magic mirrors, brought plagues on towns, and then, when things got hot, made my escape astride a dragon I first chalked on a wall, then called to life. What more were wanted, to confirm my intimacy with the Pit, than my now offering guided tours of it?

BEATRICE

Perhaps in the eyes of some. But he looks upon your *Aeneid* as the next thing to a sacred book.

VIRGIL

Yes, I have kept abreast of the “spiritual” reading of my poem in this era—Aeneas as Man’s Soul, Dido as The Flesh, Rome as Jerusalem, etc.—upon which you now invite me to set the author’s own seal. Which once set, what is there for it but, just on the very threshold of the truth I herald, to drop, like the conjuror’s charming assistant, through a hole in the floor? Not, however, before I have, in my new capacity of Christian don, delivered learned lectures on the mechanics of penance, on Hell’s river-systems, on the theological virtues—

BEATRICE

What do you know of penance, rivers, theology?

VIRGIL

About as much as you of moonspots, free will, and the revolt of the angels, on which and many another theme *you* shall be made to speak.

BEATRICE

Made to speak?

VIRGIL

In the Poem.

BEATRICE

Poem?

VIRGIL

The hundredfold whopper in which he shall write up this treat you're giving him and of which he and you and I shall all figure as characters. I'm guessing you won't much like how he does *you*: all hectoring severity, jealous of his old girlfriends, and with an answer for everything (including, one presumes, the old girlfriends)

BEATRICE

I'm to be in a poem?

VIRGIL

Bea! You *do* recall that this old flame of yours is a poet?

BEATRICE

A *love-poet*—

VIRGIL

To whom has just occurred the all-time grandest conception for a love-poem:

Paradise by Inches, or *The Run-up to Heaven*, complete with yourself as Lady Fair leading her author on to get her beauty sung—if you're still girl enough for that.

BEATRICE

One needn't be very much still the girl to be girl enough for that. However, what I am “leading my author on” to is not a book-idea but his salvation.

VIRGIL

For authors, book-ideas *are* their salvation. *Our* salvation. To what, once bumped down to earth, were you thinking he might turn his hand, if not—?

BEATRICE

I don't know, I guess I thought he might try writing antiphons, or maybe turn from writing altogether

VIRGIL

Trust me, no writer is going to turn from material like this. Not only will he be making a poem, he will make himself out to be doing so at your hest, if not, indeed, at your dictation; see *Purgatory* 32, lines 104-6, and 33, lines 52-8 and 75.

BEATRICE

You seem to have a pretty fair command of this as-yet-unwritten work.

VIRGIL

The damned know what's coming—including what poems are coming. The damned know the worst.

BEATRICE

You are speaking of my love's masterpiece!

VIRGIL

I am speaking as the author of the *Aeneid*, which, by the time your love has got through with it— He'll take my hellscape and "improve" it at every turn: all that trenching and pouching, every nuance of the moral life expressing itself as a peak or a pock

He'll then go on to people this revised countryside with *my* people, sometimes more or less intact—his Charon is still a boatman, his Minos yet a judge—but often as not, altered past recognition: my big puppy Cerberus will be promoted to demon, my Geryon worked up from a mere hint to the shuttling nightmare of *Inferno* 17. And Sinon, my high figure of the poet-fabulist (for that sleek fiction of the Trojan Horse he devised), *your* poet-fabulist shall plunge among the common tale-bearers of Torture Ditch 9.

BEATRICE

Well, however he treats your stand-ins, surely his treatment of *you*—

VIRGIL

Oh, never fear, I shall be hailed as his "Master," "Teacher," "Lord"; his "comfort" and "sun"; his "father," "mother," "sea of all wisdom," "sage"—in a word, "guide."

Ah, but a guide himself sorely in need of guidance. A guide easily snookered by sentries, tongue-lashed by underfiends, and with only the shakiest grasp of the vistas he ventures.

BEATRICE

Mightn't you stave off any such negative portrayal of your guide-skills by now in fact *skillfully guiding*—?

VIRGIL

Let me tell you what I *can't* stave off: his bringing over whole vast stretches of my writing into his. And when I say "my writing," I don't just mean the *episodes*—my bleeding, speaking tree, my thrice-embraced shade, and the like—which, to be sure, he gathers by handfuls (which, I guess, shouldn't surprise me: doesn't he filch half the poem from Ovid and Lucan before stuffing *them* below?) No, he snaps up my very *words*—starting with that signature "dark wood" of his—which, often as not, he can't even be bothered to translate: my "*manibus lilia plenis*" goes straight into the hymn of his heavenly choir; my "*sanguis meus*" appears on the lips of his paternal grandfather. And, of course, he takes special delight in reworking all my best things into *his* best things. "I feel the vestiges of an old flame," brought forth by my Dido of my Aeneas, *he* now brings forth of (who else?) *you*. Do you, I wonder, lady, find yourself in that verse of Dido's?

BEATRICE

A lady, Master, does not readily find herself in your verse.

VIRGIL

Nor shall he hold his hand from what some have deemed the loveliest moment in my poem. At *Inferno* 3, he lifts my comparison of dead souls to autumn leaves.

BEATRICE

Which, “some have deemed,” you in turn lifted from *Iliad* 6.

VIRGIL

Well, this is a line no one is ever quite at the head of. At least I didn’t drag Homer out of mothballs to show my chap his road.

BEATRICE

But—you would if you’d thought of it! My god! Only now do I— You don’t object to being made a “character” of, not even one with shortcomings, not even one bordering on Virgil-the-Magician. You can live with scholastic speeches tripping off your tongue, or aggrieved flames licking at your sleeve. You don’t really even mind having your people, places and highlights pinched. What you can’t abide is the thought of all my poet shall make of all you (merely) made. You dread to be outwritten. Your fear is that henceforth the central imagination of Europe will be his, not yours; will be him, not you.

VIRGIL

And yet, you bid me point him the way—

BEATRICE

A way that, but for your pointing, he shall never find to a poem that, but for your writing, he shall never write. Don't you see? He'll owe it all to you, his teacher, master, and, yes, guide.

VIRGIL

Must I guide him into the paradise of having surpassed me?

BEATRICE

I shall take over in Paradise.

VIRGIL

Famously, you shall. But where does that leave me?

BEATRICE

"Leave" you?

VIRGIL

When, toward the close of *Purgatory*, your man wheels round to share his first glimpse of heaven with me and finds me gone . . . *where did I go?*

BEATRICE

I don't know, I guess back down to the Limbo of Poets . . .

VIRGIL

Say

BEATRICE

. . . where, still stunned by your fall, and with Horace and Pindar crowding round for details . . .

VIRGIL

Say . . . !

BEATRICE

. . . you launch into the tale of all you've seen and known since I snatched you thence. Speak, Master: Might this not amount to some sort of plausible Virgilian Next Phase? Master?

Teacher?

Guide?

VIRGIL

I'm back. I just went in for a pencil.

BEATRICE

“Back”? “In”?

VIRGIL

I thought my writing days were over. But this new piece you've put me in the way of *The Returned Guide*. Or better: *The Dismissed Guide*. Or, listen, why not simply: *The Pompōsiad* or, *Guide's Tale*? However titled, it's my best idea in centuries. Although, of course, when I say *my* idea In fact, I owe everything to the ingenious scenario you supply.

BEATRICE

“Scenario”?

VIRGIL

Virgil, back from seeing Dante through the Hell of Christianity, regales his fellow classical poets with an account of how the new faith has deformed their world.

What a delicious conception! It's the sort of thing one had, as instructed, long since “abandoned all hope” of ever again— But now? Talk about Paradise!

I have my subject. Sing, Muse!

BEATRICE

Dante! I tried! How comes it, then, that—? At no point have I sought to compass any but your— And yet, it appears to have been all the while *this other*, brought in only to hand you down the steeps and up the slopes—

VIRGIL

The Dismissed Guide, Canto I: Dropped, I drop back toward Hell, passing in reverse
all the souls, lost and losing, I passed on the way up.

BEATRICE

This other, brought in only to keep you in interlocutors—

VIRGIL

Canto II: I come to myself in the Limbo of Poets, with Lucretius, Sappho and the rest
clustering round. In the eyes of each I read the question of all (which, however,
none dares first speak): “What have they made of the world they had of us?”

BEATRICE

This other, brought in only to bring you on—

VIRGIL

Canto III: The ranks part and out steps Homer. “Son, give me word. How fare my
heroes in this later world?” “Father,” I reply, “even thus to me your Achilles: *Better
a slave in the Greek than master of all this Christian Hell.*” To which, Homer: “Alas!
How comes it thus?” And I: “Would you grasp so much, I must take you through the
whole vast claptrap of pitfalls and pits. Shall we—?” Homer nods.

BEATRICE

Shall it, in the end, be *only for Virgil* that I have all this while turned me from the Light?

VIRGIL

Canto IV: “See, Homer,” I commence, “how on the very lintel of their world is scriven:

‘All hope abandon, ye who . . .’ ” —Now was it “ye who *tarry* here”? “Ye who *languish* here”?

BEATRICE

Albeit, a Light to which, if truth be told, one was already growing . . .

VIRGIL

“Ye who *suffer* here”? “Ye who *labor* here”?

BEATRICE

. . . I will not say *inured*, but . . .

VIRGIL

“Ye who *waver* here”?

BEATRICE

. . . *habituated*.

VIRGIL

No use; I seem unable to— You know what? I think I’m going to have to pop in for a peek.

BEATRICE

“In”?

VIRGIL

Tell your chap, if he's still interested, we leave in an hour.

And even at the word See down there, that one on his back with legs in air
like a beetle, desperate to be noticed

BEATRICE

So, then, after all, it appears—?

VIRGIL

Well, I mean, I guess if I'm going in *anyway*—

BEATRICE

Did I not hold, from the first, that you should, at the last—?

VIRGIL

“Ye who *famish* here”? “Ye who *flourish* here”?

*If along the rim of the pit, keeping the fire always to their left—not a hope
in hell.*

*Let them, though, once venture out onto our burning floor—and one's prospects
instantly brighten.*

*Although, of course, chances are, long before I could start up off my tomb of
flame, My Fair Reader or Sailor Man or some other of the Fervent-to-Impart
would be on their feet speechifying.*

*True, so bent might my co-fervors be on burnishing their tirades as to let slip
this one crack ever at delivering one—which, again, vastly improves the odds.*

*Ah, but there it is: “the odds.” One can't afford to leave one's sole chance
ever to chance!*

For make no mistake: Not only shall The Pair of Them—Mr. Italia and his Roman Candle—not be passing this way again, there are like to be no further passers this way, no further passing this way To these two alone, in all eternity, might one venture to hazard a remark, trusting, for once, to the inspiration of the moment—and so, for that moment, stepping free of Hell.

You heard me: free of hell.

For what, after all, is the true nature of this condition so little understood among its prospects? One's thoughts go at once to the pangs. But Hell is not—or is not first of all—pain. To the picturesque dolors one is certain to grow, at last, inured; or if not, to find in this botched habituation matter for reflection more piercing than all the pokes and prods, agony proving, as ever, less obstacle to reflection than reflection's very self, reflection taken slow.

No, Hell is running out of things to think about. Wherefore I counsel the aspirant: Bring (as for a rainy weekend at a country house) plenty to do, with an emphasis on the insoluble as a first approximation of the inexhaustible. Who from his bed of flame lies pondering the Continuum Hypothesis, the Paradox of Theseus' Ship, the overpainting of Greek statues, or some hard, minor, dead language will, I do not say "hold Hell in despite," but, surely, be furnished against the day—against, indeed, many a day. (Eight centuries, and I am only just getting a feel for the uses of the abessive in Syriac.)

Of course, put by as you will, you are certain to find yourself at last—with every postulate proved, paradox dispelled, microlect mastered—with nothing further to bring to the table, Hell being precisely the table to which nothing further is brought.

And that is why, with fresh faces for once glimmering on the horizon, I can't very well afford to wait and see who lands where, greets whom, speaks what—I must make it happen!

Which means, first off, attract their gaze.

Ah, easier said! How be sure that either of them will so much as pause in their path—? Pah! They're authors, we're material, interchange is all but—

Ah, well, yes, but interchange with whom?

For, of course, he comes on the scene with predilections—for writers and thinkers; for the famous; for, gottenyu!, Italians, or at least Italian-speakers (any hour of the day or night you can catch Sailor Man putting his big speech into Tuscan; what must the Greek have been for canoscenza?)—the rest of us figuring, if at all, as but so many suppliants pressing forward to lay our petitions before the King: “Esteemed Visitors! We, the occupants of Torture Ditch 9, the Fervent-to-Impart—”

*But already they are gone past; how seek to arrest that wandering . . . ?
Shall one beg news of him, claim kin with him, confide embassies to him . . . ?*

Ah, fool, have your aeons upon the pyre burnt home nothing? You want somebody's attention in this world, talk to him about him. Quote his verse to him. Point his path to him. Furnish updates on his adored "Bea." Dangle (as we damned well know how to do) glimpses into his—meaning, of course, his poem's—future

Stay, though! Such are but— Surely, likeliest to engage is a refusal to engage. Would you compel notice? Take none! Who draws off, draws on.

This might take the form: drop to a murmur; for, pressed to speak up, one shall be pressed to speak.

Or possibly: wade into a quarrel (with, say, My Fair Reader or Sailor Man), to be called off from which is to be called.

Or one might always chat up the Roman Candle, even whilst pointedly ignoring him—a snub that cries out to be addressed.

Or maybe best of all were to forswear speech altogether: worked, didn't it, for tight-lipped Dido, upon whose averted ears even now broke the stream—

But—hold! Surely such a moment of declined encounter would itself, would already, be that “one free moment in all eternity” sought in the encounter, since freely one had declined it.

But (oh, and boundlessly!) further: since one should ever thereafter be at liberty to conceive that moment’s having gone (as it went nowhere) otherwise, will it not—shall they not—be all free moments from here out? Preserve silence, and you preserve your freedom to imagine all the ways silence might have been broken, which is to say: preserve your freedom to imagine.

Thus, long after one has run through one’s inexhaustibles—tallied the primes through n , tagged all eleven exceptions to the Goldbach Conjecture, stove in Theseus’ Ship—one abides in possession of a resource truly inexhaustible.

For each encounter I fancy having declined is one more fancied encounter—is somebody’s encounter—with The Pair of Them. So—had here started up his old teacher, loathed rival, toppled prince. Thus—chancing in me upon his sire’s sire, worst nightmare, fellow-bard.

Talk about Paradise!

*And what am I who, thus turning from each in turn, turn out all at last,
if not . . . Our Author? For to fill in this one poor blank every which way—what
is this but to have conceived a world, produced the Comedy, brought forth—*

*Ah, well, no, not “brought forth.” One must take care lest, like Sailor Man
and My Fair Reader, one commit the gaffe of production, stumble into utterance*

*For here below, it is all otherwise than with the as-yet-unconsigned.
Your living writer must be careful not (like Mr. Casaubon, who shall teach me
Hittite in an afternoon) to hold off forever from attainment—he must strike
while the iron is hot! But for us, whose irons are always hot, the forever-holding-off
is the attainment.*

*Is this salvation or the final screwing down of the lid? Ah, surely, it is
to find no further interest in that distinction! For surely, that distinction once
set at nought, one may “kick back”; henceforth, I am at ease with eternity,
I make eternity work for me, I have my subject.*

And not a moment too soon!

*For—see! Is this not The Pair of Them, Singers Ho and Hum, drawn up
at the rim of our pit, taking survey?*

*And bless me if they do not even now strike off across our floor of flame,
beating a path toward—*

*“Toward us,” I was about to say; but no, they sweep past Sailor Man, past
My Fair Reader and many another of the Fervent-to-Impart, and make straight for—*

Ah, what to me, not long since, had meant such a singling out, little shy of—?

*But now? Arrived at a view of the never-ending stream of variants as
ever-various scene, what need of this or any—? Indeed, comes not the entire
arrangement under threat from so much as a single, actual—?*

Oh, as ardent as once I sought, now I flee—

*But how flee, when—? See The Pair of Them even now looming over me,
for all the world as if one’s very resolve of abjuring possessed a strength to—*

*You know what? Let them loom! Would they force rendezvous?
Why, so . . . well met! Shall not my power of endlessly recasting the encounter
survive even an encounter?*

*For, let there have been none or this one poor episode to imagine away from,
one is, all the while, imagining away.*

*Theseus has a ship. Over time one after another
of its parts—rudder, tackle, mast—wears out and must be
replaced. At length, all the parts are replacements.*

Is this still Theseus' Ship?

*As each old part—capstan, kelson, keel—is removed,
it is set aside. From these cast-off originals, another craft
is reared.*

*Side by side the two vessels ride at anchor off Piraeus
one autumn evening under the stars.*

Which is Theseus' Ship?